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‘A Place of the *Shekinah*’: Contextualising Isaac of
Nineveh’s Homily on the Cross in the Religious
Cosmography of Late Antique Mesopotamia

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Abstract

Isaac is often portrayed in scholarly literature as a monk who eschewed controversy. However, this thesis explores the polemical themes with which Isaac engaged. His homily on the cross (II. XI) is influenced by a long tradition of anti-pagan and anti-Jewish writing defending cross veneration. He uses these same tropes against the Messalians, reflecting a theological controversy prevalent in his own day. Likewise, II. XI becomes a locus for Isaac's Christological thought, which has been misinterpreted in modern times.

He was from Beth Qatraye, and recent work has highlighted the region's intellectual vibrancy in the seventh century. Isaac's thought on the cross and cross veneration has close parallels with the writings of two contemporaries, Dadisho and Gabriel Qatraya, situating him in this context.

His understanding of the mystical ascent in prayer, for which cross veneration is an important part, is also reflected in the Jewish mystical tradition represented in Apocalyptic literature, and in the Hekhalot texts. Isaac's writing on the cross can also be seen in the context of Christian engagement with Zoroastrian ideas in the late-Sassanian period. His emphasis on divine love for creation and the power of the cross over nature parallel wider Christian challenges to Zoroastrian cosmology.

This thesis demonstrates the ways that Isaac responds to a range of theological currents present in Late Antique Mesopotamia, and identifies him as a significant theological and polemical writer.

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Abbreviations

II. XI	The eleventh homily in the <i>Second Part</i> of Isaac's writings, 'On the contemplation of the mystery of the Cross.'
AAE	<i>Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy</i>
BL	British Library
BO	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana</i>
Bod.	Bodleian Library
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
GEDSH	<i>Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage</i>
JCSSS	<i>Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies</i>
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
PO	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
SP	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
TCH	Transformation of the Classical Heritage

A Note on Citations from Isaac's Corpus

Isaac's work has been transmitted in a number of 'parts.' When citing passages from Isaac, the initial Roman numeral (I, II or III) indicates from which part the quotation comes. In references to the *First Part* (I), the following Arabic numeral refers to the page number in Bedjan's edition of the text. For the *Second Part* and the *Third Part*, the initial Roman numeral is followed by a second Roman numeral indicating the homily number, and an Arabic numeral indicating the section within the homily.

For example,

I. 507 refers to page 507 of Bedjan's edition of the *First Part*.

II. XI, 12 refers to section 12 of the eleventh homily in the *Second Part*.

The first three homilies of the *Second Part* remain unedited, but have been translated into French and Italian. Portions of the text have been translated into English. The third homily is a set of four 'centuries' (*Kephalaia gnostica*). References to these chapters are in the form: *KG*. I. 14. The Roman numeral indicates from which of the four centuries the citation comes, and the Arabic numeral indicates the chapter.

The text and translation of II. XI provided in the appendices comes from S. Brock, ed. and trans., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part.'* Chapters IV-XLI, CSCO 554-555 (Leuven: CSCO, 1995).

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Fig. 1. Mar Isaac

A contemporary postcard from the workshop of the Taizé community, France.

Purchased from the community shop in 2017.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2017, I went on pilgrimage to the Taizé community in France. The brothers support themselves through their work, including pottery and printing. In the community shop, on a stand of cards, I caught sight of the small, but striking, text ‘Mar Isaac.’ The image was a pencil sketch of a familiar figure with a long beard and Persian turban, with vibrant pink concentric circles in the background. With the card were these words of Isaac, in English and French:

‘Merciful people cannot think about or see creatures without their eyes filling up with tears because of the immense compassion which seizes their hearts.’¹

This ‘pop art’ image in the shop of an ecumenical French community testifies to Sebastian Brock’s assertion that Isaac is ‘perhaps more influential [now] than at any other time in history.’²

Isaac’s writings have been widely translated. Two monks of the Chalcedonian Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba, near Jerusalem, translated a portion of Isaac’s work into Greek in the late eighth or early ninth century, and from this translation Isaac’s writings became quickly popular in monastic circles.³ From the Middle Ages

¹ Adapted from I. 507.

² S. Brock, trans., *The Wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1997), iii.

³ Isaac’s homilies circulated as a collection and in monastic anthologies. S. Brock, ‘From Qatar to Tokyo, by way of Mar Saba: The Translations of Isaac of Beth Qatraye (Isaac the Syrian),’ *ARAM* 11/12 (1999-2000), 476-477.

into the Early Modern period, Isaac was read in Georgian, Arabic, Ge'ez, Slavonic and Latin.⁴ These translations were followed by vernacular renderings of Isaac's work, and his inclusion in the Russian edition of the *Philokalia* of 1894 means that Isaac's 'name is known to every monk in Russia,' and that he is today one of the most widely read spiritual writers on Mount Athos.⁵ Modern translations from the Syriac as well as the Greek abound, and Isaac has a wide appeal and authority in the Orthodox world.⁶ Isaac's homilies were known to Dostoyevsky, and clearly influenced episodes in *Crime and Punishment* and in *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁷ Simonetta Salvestroni has shown how Isaac's emphasis on humility and on the love of God, mediated through Dostoyevsky, had a profound significance for Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*, showing Isaac's influence on Protestant thought in the twentieth century and beyond.⁸

This modern popularity, however, is not uncontroversial. St Paisios of Mount Athos (d. 1994) championed Isaac's writings in recent times, keeping a copy of Isaac's

⁴ Brock, 'From Qatar to Tokyo,' 478-479.

⁵ H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 299.

⁶ Brock, 'From Qatar to Tokyo,' 480-483.

⁷ S. Salvestroni, 'Isaac of Nineveh and Dostoyevsky's Work,' in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy: Proceedings of the International Patristics Conference, held at the Sts Cyril and Methodius Institute for Postgraduate Studies, Moscow, October 10-11, 2013* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 250.

⁸ Salvestroni, 'Isaac of Nineveh and Dostoyevsky's Work,' 251-253. Barth acknowledged his debt to Dostoyevsky, whom he names several times in his commentary. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. E. C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 4.

homilies by his pillow, and for one six-year period, made them his only spiritual reading.⁹ However, increased scholarly attention in the West highlighted Isaac's context as a writer belonging to the 'Nestorian,' and therefore 'heretical,' Church of the East.¹⁰ This tension is clearly illustrated in an episode from the biography of St Paisios:

'... the Elder was visiting with pilgrims, among whom was a high school teacher of theology. The theology teacher, repeating a popular Western error, claimed that Abba Isaac the Syrian was a Nestorian. Father Paisios tried to persuade him that Abba Isaac was not only Orthodox but also a saint... But the Elder's words were in vain: the theology teacher stubbornly insisted on his views. The Elder left for his hermitage, praying and so sad that he was in tears.

When he had come to a spot on the path near a large plane tree, something happened to him... He saw in a vision the choir of the holy fathers passing before him, and one of them, stopping, said to him, "I am Isaac the Syrian. I am completely Orthodox. The Nestorian heresy was indeed present in my region, but I fought against it."¹¹

⁹ Hieromonk Isaac, *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos* (Chalkidiki, Greece: The Holy Monastery of Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian, 2012), 225-226.

¹⁰ S. Brock, 'St Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac Spirituality,' *Sobornost* 7/2 (1975), 79-80.

¹¹ Hieromonk Isaac, *Elder Paisios*, 225-226.

Isaac's writings reflect the flowering of East Syrian spiritual writing in the seventh century, but attempts to distance Isaac from his context persist. An extreme form of this tendency can be seen in the seven-part essay, 'Abba Isaac the Syrian, the "Unjustly Accused" Saint,' by Fr John Photopoulos.¹² This polemical work argues for Isaac's (Chalcedonian) orthodoxy and dismisses all recent scholarship as 'irreverent chatter regarding the person of Saint Isaac.'¹³

This thesis attempts to situate Isaac in the context of the world he inhabited. It will use Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* (hereafter, II. XI) to explore questions of Christology, cross veneration, mysticism and ascetic practice, and what they meant for a monk-bishop of the Church of the East in seventh century Mesopotamia. It was a religiously diverse world, in which competing Christian groups sought to establish their respective boundaries of orthodoxy, all the while living alongside Jews, Zoroastrians, Mandaeans and other Gnostic groups. Isaac is often characterised as a monk who actively eschewed controversy.¹⁴ The result of this, as Jason Scully has recently noted in his monograph, is that little work has been done on Isaac as a polemicist, 'and more work needs to be done on the theological

¹² www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2014/09/abba-isaac-syrian-unjustly-accused.html?m=1. Accessed 31/08/20.

¹³ www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2014/09/abba-isaac-syrian-unjustly-accused_30.html?m=1. Accessed 31/08/20.

¹⁴ M. G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 380; A. M. Allchin, ed., *Heart of Compassion: Daily Readings with St Isaac of Syria* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), viii; V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St Isaac of Nineveh*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 51 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 29. See *KG*. I. 14.

currents that Isaac is responding to in his writings.¹⁵ Isaac's homily on the cross provides a way of engaging with such polemical themes in his work. II. XI provides a lens through which to see the ways Isaac addressed questions of Christian orthodoxy, whether in terms of competing Christological positions, or in the right forms of ascetic practice. It also shows the ways in which Isaac engaged the religious traditions around him, drawing on anti-Jewish and anti-pagan (including anti-Zoroastrian) polemic. Far from understanding him simply as an 'unworldly' ascetic who avoided controversial themes, this thesis will reveal Isaac as a profoundly theological and polemical writer.

1.1 Isaac of Nineveh and his Writings

Given his legacy, surprisingly little is known about Isaac of Nineveh's life, and what biography is possible has been well rehearsed in modern scholarship.¹⁶ Two brief biographical sketches give most of what is known. The first is in a series of *vitae* of famous ascetics by the ninth-century East-Syrian historian Isho'denah, Bishop of Basra, called *The Book of Chastity*.¹⁷ This account indicates that Isaac was from the region of Beth Qatraye, along the southern coast of the Persian Gulf, and was consecrated to the episcopacy by the Catholicos, Mar Giwargis, in the monastery of

¹⁵ J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xxiii.

¹⁶ S. Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita: Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Biblioteca della Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 53-63; Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 11-18.

¹⁷ J-B. Chabot, ed. and trans., 'Le Livre de la chasteté, composé par Jésusdenah, Évêque de Basrah,' *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 16 (1896), 277-278.

Beth ‘Abe, about eighty kilometres north-east of Nineveh. After five months, Isaac abdicated as Bishop of Nineveh, the reasons for which are unknown, and left for the mountains in the region of Beth Huzaye. Ultimately, he went on to live in the monastery of Rabban Shabur, where he died and was buried.¹⁸ Isho‘denah’s account indicates his depth of knowledge and wisdom, claiming that Isaac went blind from his reading and asceticism. He also notes that a certain Daniel Bar Tubanitha was scandalised by three particular teachings of Isaac, and there have been attempts in modern times to identify these theological propositions.¹⁹

Isho‘denah’s account offers the only fixable date in Isaac’s chronology. In 676, Mar Giwargis attended a synod in Dayrīn in the region of Beth Qatraye that ended a schism which had begun some twenty years earlier.²⁰ It was probably on this

¹⁸ For this monastery, see F. Jullien, ‘Rabban-Šāpūr. Un monastère au rayonnement exceptionnel: La réforme d’Abraham de Kaškar dans le Bēth-Hūzāyē,’ *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 72 (2007), 333-348.

¹⁹ S. Chialà, ‘Due discorsi ritrovati della *Quinta parte* di Isacco di Ninive?,’ *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 79 (2013), 61-112; S. Chialà, ‘Two discourses of the ‘Fifth Part’ of Isaac the Syrian’s Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?,’ in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 128-131.

²⁰ M. Kozah, ‘Introduction,’ in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murikhi, and Al-Thani, eds., *Syriac Writers of Qatar*, 6; For the correspondence relating to this schism, see M. Kozah, ed. and trans., ‘Isho ‘yahb III of Adiabene’s Letters to the Qataris,’ in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murhiki, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *An Anthology of Syriac Writers from Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 39 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015), 43–88.

occasion that the Catholicos took Isaac back with him to Seleucia-Ctesiphon before consecrating him Bishop of Nineveh.²¹

The second source for Isaac's biography is an anonymous account from a fifteenth century West Syrian text, which adds a little more detail to the account given by Isho'denah.²² For instance, this source indicates that it was Isaac's relation to a certain Gabriel Qatraya, known as the 'Interpreter of the Church,' that lay behind Mar Giwargis' decision to have Isaac join his entourage.²³

Internal evidence from Isaac's homilies supports the information given in these two biographical sketches, but does not add anything new. His allusions to pearl fishing,

²¹ Kozah, 'Introduction,' 8.

²² I. E. Rahmani, ed. and trans., *Studia Syriaca I* (Lebanon: Charfet Seminary, 1904), 32-33. An introduction to these two biographical accounts, a translation, and a table of comparison can be found in S. Maroki, *Les trois étapes de la vie spirituelle chez les Pères syriaques: Jean le Solitaire, Isaac de Ninive et Joseph Hazzaya: Source, doctrine et influence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 44-52.

²³ Kozah, 'Introduction,' 8. ܡܪ ܩܘܪܐܝܢܐ ܕܩܝܣܐ ܕܡܪ ܕܝܘܪܝܐ ܕܩܝܣܐ 'He took him with him to Beth Aramaye because he belonged to the family of Mar Gabriel Qatraya, the exegete of the Church.' Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca I*, 32. There are references to a variety of men named Gabriel connected with Beth Qatrayer in the seventh century, possibly as many as eight. See, S. Brock, 'Syriac Writers from Beth Qatrayer,' ARAM 11/1 (1999), 89. Brock concludes that there are four individual writers named Gabriel: firstly, Gabriel the Interpreter, a relative of Isaac of Nineveh, who wrote biblical commentaries, and was known as 'the Lion;' secondly, Gabriel bar Lipah, who wrote a commentary on the liturgy; thirdly, a Gabriel who collated a manuscript at the School of Nisibis in 615; and finally, Gabriel who wrote a Christological treatise and against whom Babai wrote a book. Brock, 'Syriac Writers from Beth Qatrayer,' 92.

for instance, add colour to the detail of his origins in Beth Qatraye.²⁴ Likewise, in I. 248-249, Isaac refers to the example of a solitary who ‘came near the inhabited world’ and was unable to find the grace and consolation he had previously experienced:

‘He besought God... saying: Perhaps, my Lord, grace has been withdrawn from me on account of my episcopal rank? It was said to him: No. But then, there was the desert, there were no men, but God provided for thee. Now, there is the inhabited world and men provide for thee. – So we say that it is impossible for a man to share in visible as well as in spiritual consolation.’²⁵

This anecdote may well reflect Isaac’s own experience as a monk-bishop and hint at his motivation for leaving Nineveh.

Isaac’s collected works reflect a mixture of discourses, letters and answers to questions, but all his writing is concerned fundamentally with the practicalities of prayer and the ascetic life.²⁶ At least three collections, or ‘parts,’ of Isaac’s work survive. Paul Bedjan edited the Syriac text of the *First Part* in 1909, and it was this collection that circulated in translation throughout the orthodox world.²⁷ A *Second Part* was known to Bedjan, but presumed lost after the First World War.²⁸ It was

²⁴ I. 326; II. XXXIV, 6.

²⁵ I. 248-249.

²⁶ Chialà, *Dall’ascesi eremitica*, 78-79.

²⁷ P. Bedjan, ed., *Mar Isaacus Ninivita: De Perfectione Religiosa* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1909).

²⁸ Chialà, *Dall’ascesi eremitica*, 68.

rediscovered by Brock in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and Brock edited and translated the majority of the text, with the exception of the first three homilies, which includes four centuries of *Kephalaia Gnostica*.²⁹ This is still unedited, and whilst French and Italian translations exist, only selections of this work have been translated into English.³⁰ The *Third Part* of Isaac's work was discovered and edited by Sabino Chialà, with translations available in Italian, French and English.³¹

Syriac sources give different accounts of the number of 'parts' that Isaac wrote: Isho'denah suggests three works; the West Syrian source published by Ignatius

²⁹ Bod. syr.e.7. See, S. Brock, 'Lost and Found: Part II of the Works of St Isaac of Nineveh,' *SP* 18 (1990), 230-233; S. Brock, ed. and trans., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part.'* *Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO 554-555 (Leuven: CSCO, 1995). Grigory Kessel has identified new manuscript witnesses to the *Second Part*, see G. Kessel, 'New Manuscript Witnesses to the "Second Part" of Isaac of Nineveh,' *SP* 64 (2013), 245-257.

³⁰ For selections of the text translated into English, see G. Kessel, trans., 'Isaac of Nineveh's *Chapters on Knowledge*,' in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murhiki, and Al-Thani, eds., *Anthology*, 253-280; for a French translation of the entire text, see A. Louf, trans., *Isaac le Syrien: Œuvres Spirituelles II: 41 Discours récemment découverts*, Spiritualité Orientale 81 (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2003), 126-286. For the Italian, see P. Bettiolo, trans., *Isacco di Ninive: Discorsi spirituali: Capitoli sulla conoscenza, preghiera, contemplazione sull'argomento della Gehenna, altri pouscoli* (2nd edn, Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 1990).

³¹ S. Chialà, ed. and trans., *Isacco di Ninive: Terza Collezione*, CSCO 637-638 (Leuven: CSCO, 2011). For an English translation, see M. Hansbury, trans., *Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 45 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016). For the French, see A. Louf, trans., *Œuvres Spirituelles III: D'après un manuscrit récemment découvert*, Spiritualité Orientale 88 (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2009).

Ephrem Rahmani claims that Isaac wrote five volumes; and Abdisho of Nisibis, writing at the end of the thirteenth century, attributes seven books to Isaac.³² If these volumes are equivalent to the ‘parts’ of Isaac’s work, then more remains to be discovered. Chialà has also edited and translated two discourses of what might come from the *Fifth Part*, and if this is genuinely by Isaac, it suggests there had once been a *Fourth Part* as well.³³ The picture is complicated by a number of Garshuni manuscripts of Isaac’s work divided into four ‘parts:’ scholarly work on this material is only beginning, and it is to be hoped that an examination of the Garshuni corpus might identify new material no longer extant in Syriac.³⁴

1.2 The Modern Study of Isaac

These recent discoveries, combined with good editions and translations of the texts, have contributed to the growth in the scholarship on Isaac. Nevertheless, the scholarly literature is still relatively scant, and does not reflect Isaac’s importance in the mystical and ascetic traditions of those churches in which his writings

³² Chialà, *Dall’ascesi eremitica*, 66; Chabot, ‘Le Livre de la chasteté,’ 277-278; Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca I*, 32-33; J. S. Assemani, ed., *BO*, iii/1 (Rome: Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1725), 104.

³³ Chialà, ‘Due discorsi ritrovati della *Quinta parte* de Isacco di Ninive?,’ 61-112. See also the Russian article, G. Kessel, ‘The Fifth Part of St Isaac of Nineveh: Preliminary Observations on a Recently Discovered Manuscript (olim Diyarbakır / Scher 25),’ *Богословские труды* 47-48 (2018), 239-257.

³⁴ Kozah, ‘Introduction,’ 11-12. See particularly M. Kozah, ‘The Fourth Part of Isaac Qaṭraya’s Ascetical Homilies in Garshuni,’ in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murhiki, and Al-Thani, eds., *Anthology*, 471-691.

circulated.³⁵ Since the year 2000, a handful of monographs on Isaac have been published. The first, Hilarion Alfeyev's *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, provided the first accessible introduction to Isaac's thought.³⁶ In 2002, Chialà published in Italian what remains one of the most thorough treatments of Isaac's context, life and thought, as well as his legacy.³⁷ Following these general surveys, the remaining monographs to date have dealt with specific themes in Isaac's writings. Patrik Hagman's book treated the nature and function of asceticism in Isaac's discourses, and is significant because it introduced to the scholarship on Isaac the theoretical background to the study of asceticism.³⁸ Nestor Kavvadas published *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika: Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext* in 2015.³⁹ Kavvadas is concerned with the relationship between knowledge and the Holy Spirit in Isaac's thought, and drawing on his previous work, he examines Isaac's relationship to Theodore of Mopsuestia and Evagrius.⁴⁰ The centrality of the unedited *Kephalaia Gnostica* to this work adds to its importance because Kavvadas presents the Syriac text and a translation of many of the *kephalaia*. Building on Hagman's work on asceticism in Isaac, Jason Scully's monograph, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology*, explored the particular role Isaac's understanding

³⁵ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, xiv.

³⁶ Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*.

³⁷ Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica*.

³⁸ P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁹ N. Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika: Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 128 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁴⁰ For instance, in N. Kavvadas, 'On the relations between the Eschatological Doctrine of Isaac of Nineveh and Theodore of Mopsuestia,' *SP* 45 (2010), 245-250, and N. Kavvadas, 'Theodore of Mopsuestia as a source of Isaac of Nineveh's Pneumatology,' *Parole de l'Orient* 35 (2010), 1-13.

of the future world has in his conception of prayer and the ascetic life.⁴¹ This book is particularly valuable for its contribution to the study of Isaac's sources, clarifying Isaac's use of Pseudo-Macarius and at the same time broadening the discussion to include the influence of Syriac writers, notably John of Apamea. The most recently published monograph on Isaac is Valentin Vesa's *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St Isaac of Nineveh*.⁴² Whilst this is essentially a study of Isaac's doctrine of knowledge, it helpfully contextualises Isaac's thought in the complex struggles between monks and bishops in the Church of the East in the seventh and eighth centuries. Valentina Duca's doctoral thesis, *'Exploring Finitude': Weakness and Integrity in Isaac of Nineveh*, is due to be published in 2021.⁴³

In addition to these monographs, two collections of essays are of particular note. The first, edited by Alfeyev, brings together the papers of a conference held in Moscow in 2013 on Isaac and his spiritual legacy.⁴⁴ A number of the papers in this volume present significant contributions to the study of Isaac in areas that have otherwise received little attention.⁴⁵ The second collection brings together a number of essays by Paolo Bettiolo under the title, *Testimoni dell'eschaton: Monaci siro-orientali in*

⁴¹ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*.

⁴² Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*.

⁴³ V. Duca, *'Exploring Finitude': Weakness and Integrity in Isaac of Nineveh*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*.

⁴⁵ For instance, S. Seppälä, 'Angelology of St Isaac the Syrian,' in Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 97-114; Eugeny Barsky and Maxim Kalinin make use of the recently edited *Third Part* in their contribution, E. Barsky and M. Kalinin, 'Adam in the Third Volume of Isaac the Syrian,' in Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 115-122.

un'età di torbidi.⁴⁶ The first part of this work contains six essays on various doctrinal themes, which Bettiolo then situates among the tensions that were apparent in the Church of the East between monastics and the hierarchy during the seventh and eighth centuries.

As an appendix to his book on asceticism, Hagman includes a thorough review of the origins and growth of the secondary literature on Isaac, noting particularly Brock's contribution to the field and the growth in literature on Isaac's theory of prayer.⁴⁷ This introduction does not replicate that work, but rather will draw attention to particular developments since Hagman's review was published in 2010.

The first area to note is the study of Isaac's context. Brock published an article in 1999, drawing attention to the flourishing intellectual life of the region of Beth Qatraye in the seventh century.⁴⁸ Some significant work on the archaeology of Christianity in the region subsequently gave rise to an increased scholarly interest in Beth Qatraye, and a research project led by Mario Kozah, *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, has published two volumes, one of essays and the other of texts.⁴⁹ The project intended to present that Beth Qatraye as a vibrant

⁴⁶ P. Bettiolo, ed., *Testimoni dell'eschaton: Monaci sirio-orientali in un'età di torbidi* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019).

⁴⁷ Hagman, *Asceticism*, 223-233. For a summary of the debate on prayer in Isaac, see P. Bettiolo, "'Prigionieri dello Spirito": Libertà creaturale ed *eschaton* in Isacco di Ninive e nelle sue fonti,' *Annali di Scienze Religiose* 4 (1999), 343-363.

⁴⁸ S. Brock, 'Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye,' *ARAM* 11/1 (1999), 85-96.

⁴⁹ Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murhiki, and Al-Thani, eds., *Anthology*. For the archaeological literature, see J. Elders, 'The Lost Churches of the Arabian Gulf: Recent Discoveries on the Islands of Sir Bani

intellectual centre in the seventh century and thus draw attention to the rich heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia.⁵⁰ Another significant area of contextual work has included Isaac's position in relation to the Messalian controversy and the condemnation of his eighth-century successors in the East Syrian mystical tradition.⁵¹

Yas and Marawah, Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates,' *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 31 (2001), 47-57; M-J. Steve, *L'île de Kharg: Une page de l'histoire du golfe Persique et du monachisme oriental* (Neuchâtel: Civilisations du Proche-Orient, 2003); R. Carter, 'Christianity in the Gulf during the First Centuries of Islam,' *AAE* 19 (2008), 71-108; R. Payne, 'Monks, Dinars and Date Palms: Hagiographical Production and the Expansion of Monastic Institutions in the Early Islamic Persian Gulf,' *AAE* 22/1 (2011), 97-111.

⁵⁰ Kozah, 'Introduction,' 2. Following this research project, another was launched to provide a study of *Qaṭrāyīth*, the vernacular Arabic used by Syriac Christians in the region, preserved in Biblical commentaries and the lexicon of Bar Bahlul. M. Kozah, G. Kiraz, A. Abu-Husayn, H. Al-Thani, and S. S. Al-Murikhi, eds., *Beth Qaṭraye: A Lexical and Toponymical Survey*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 58 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2021). Interestingly, this evidence includes *Qaṭrāyīth* words used in the Biblical commentaries of Gabriel Qatraya, to whom Isaac was related. Kozah, Kiraz, Abu-Husayn, Al-Thani, and Al-Murikhi, eds., *Beth Qaṭraye: A Lexical and Toponymical Survey*, 14-18.

⁵¹ P. Hagman, 'St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,' in M. Tamcke, ed., *Mystik – Metapher – Bild. Beiträge des VII. Makarios-Symposiums* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlage, 2008), 55-66; A. Treiger, 'Could Christ's Humanity See His Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,' *JCSSS* 9 (2009), 3-21; N. Kavvadas, 'Beobachtungen zum Verhältnis zwischen ostsyrischem Eremitentum und kirchlicher Liturgie am Beispiel Isaaks von Ninive,' in W. Kinzig, U. Volp, and J. Schmidt, eds., *Liturgie und Ritual in der Alten Kirche: Patristische Beiträge zum Studium der gottesdienstlichen Quellen der Alten Kirche*, Patristic Studies 11 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 177-186; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, "'Neither Beginning nor End": The Messalian Imaginaire and Syriac Asceticism,' *Admantius* 19 (2013), 222-239. For the common themes in the East Syrian mystical writers of this period, see S. Brock, 'Some

Some recent articles have specifically explored themes based on the recently-edited *Third Part*. Notably, Eugeny Barsky and Maksim Kalinin have jointly written on the *Shekinah* and on Adam in the *Third Part*.⁵² Similarly, Mary Hansbury (the text's English translator) has examined the theme of the 'remembrance of God,' drawing on Jewish and early Islamic sources, and also on the idea of theosis.⁵³ Other thematic works of note include Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony's substantial contribution to the scholarship on Isaac's theory of prayer;⁵⁴ Valentina Duca's publications on

Prominent Themes in the Writings of the Syrian Mystics of the 7th and 8th Century AD,' in M. Tamcke, ed., *Gotteserlebnis und Gotteslehre: Christliche und islamische Mystik im Orient*, Göttinger Orientforschungen – Syriaca 38 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2010), 49-59.

⁵² E. Barsky and M. Kalinin, 'Adam in the Third Volume of Isaac the Syrian,' 115-122; M. Kalinin and E. Barsky, 'Понятие Шхины в богословии Исаака Сирина,' [The Concept of Shekhinah (šḵīntā) in the Theology of Isaac the Syrian] in К. Битнер and Л. Лукинцова, eds., *Иудаика и арамеистика: Сборник научных статей на основе материалов Третьей ежегодной конференции по иудаике и востоковедению*, Трудыпоиудаике: Филология и культурология 3 (С.-Петербург: Петербургский институт иудаики, 2014), 262-277.

⁵³ M. Hansbury, 'Remembrance of God and its relation to Scripture in Isaac III including Insights from Islamic and Jewish Traditions,' in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murikhi, and Al-Thani, eds., *Syriac Writers of Qatar*, 93-121; M. Hansbury, 'Theosis in Isaac III,' *The Harp* 31 (2016), 291-304.

⁵⁴ B. Bitton-Ashkelony, 'The Limit of the Mind (ΝΟΥΣ): Pure Prayer according to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,' *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/ Journal of Ancient Christianity* 15/2 (2011), 291-321; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer and the Ship of Stirrings: The Praying Self in Late Antique East Syrian Christianity*, *Late Antique History and Religion* 22 (Leuven: Peeters, 2019).

humility and weakness in Isaac;⁵⁵ and one particularly interesting growth area has been on the medical theme in Isaac's writings.⁵⁶

Finally, the recent identification of passages of Isaac in Sogdian ascetic compilations from Turfan has begun to open up the study of his writings' legacy along the Silk Route.⁵⁷

⁵⁵V. Duca, 'Human Frailty and Vulnerability in Isaac the Syrian,' *SP* 74 (2016), 429-438; V. Duca, 'Human Weakness in Isaac of Nineveh and the Syriac Macarian Corpus: A First Investigation,' *Aramaic Studies* 14/2 (2016), 134-146; V. Duca, 'Pride in the thought of Isaac of Nineveh,' *SP* 92 (2017), 137-147; V. Duca, "'A creaturely Wisdom": Suffering, Compassion, and Grace in Isaac of Nineveh,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* (forthcoming).

⁵⁶G. Kessel, "'Life is Short, the Art is Long": An Interpretation of the First Hippocratic Aphorism by an East Syriac Monk in the 7th Century Iraq (Isaac of Nineveh, *Kephalaia gnostica* 3,62),' *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/ Journal of Ancient Christianity* 19 (2015) 137-148; A. Muravjev, 'Mar Išḥaq Ninevita and Possible Medical Context of Eastern Syriac Asceticism,' *Parole de l'Orient* 40 (2015), 287-301. For the recent developments in the study of Syriac medicine, see G. Kessel, 'Syriac Medicine,' in D. King, ed., *The Syriac World*, Routledge Worlds (London: Routledge, 2019), 438-459.

⁵⁷A. Pirtea, 'St. Isaac of Nineveh's Gnostic Chapters in Sogdian: The Identification of an Anonymous Text from Bulayīq (Turfan),' in M. Toca and D. Batovici, eds., *Caught in Translation: Studies on Versions of Late Antique Christian Literature*, Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 85-103; N. Sims-Williams, *An Ascetic Miscellany: The Christian Sogdian Manuscript E28*, Berliner Turfantexte 42 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); N. Sims-Williams, *From Liturgy to Pharmacology: Christian Sogdian texts from the Turfan Collection*, Berliner Turfantexte 45 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019).

In relation to Isaac's writing on the cross generally, and on II. XI specifically, there are only four works to consider. The first of these is Brock's edition and translation of the text, which include substantial notes, detailing scriptural references and parallels with other Syriac writers.⁵⁸ Brenda Fitch Fairaday published an article, 'Isaac of Nineveh's Biblical Typology of the Cross,' in 2001, but this essay is far from comprehensive as it is based solely on a reading of II. V and II. XI, and largely draws on Brock's footnotes.⁵⁹ Alfeyev's introduction to Isaac, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, includes an account of the cross in relation to Isaac's Christology.⁶⁰ Finally, John Behr published a paper, 'St Isaac of Nineveh and the Cross of Christ,' in the collection edited by Alfeyev in 2015.⁶¹ Like Alfeyev's reading of II. XI in *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, Behr offers a Christological reading of the homily. Both Alfeyev and Behr, whilst clearly very familiar with Isaac's writings, use their readings of II. XI to minimise any hint of dyophysite Christology in Isaac, and thereby downplay his identity as a 'Nestorian' writer of the Church of the East.⁶²

1.3 Methodology

II. XI will be used as a lens through which to investigate the world into which Isaac of Nineveh was born and educated, lived the ascetic life, and died in old age. Isaac's

⁵⁸ Brock, trans., *The Second Part*, 53-62.

⁵⁹ B. Fitch Fairaday, 'Isaac of Nineveh's Biblical Typology of the Cross,' *SP* 35 (2001), 385-390.

⁶⁰ Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, 54-57.

⁶¹ J. Behr, 'St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,' in Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 87-95.

⁶² Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, 55; Behr, 'St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,' 93-94.

homily on the cross sheds light on the complex dynamics of heresy and orthodoxy, the Syriac tradition's multifaceted relationship with Judaism, and the manoeuvring of the Church of the East within the post-Sasanian world. In doing so, this thesis will situate Isaac in this context, and provide a case study exploring what it means for an ascetic writer to be a theologian and polemicist at the moment of the rise of Islam.

As a result, this thesis inevitably owes a great debt to the field of Late Antiquity and the many scholars who have sought to understand the plurality and diversity of the Late Ancient world. Peter Brown's article, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,' and Daniel Caner's monograph, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, have both influenced the contextual way in which this thesis understands monasticism and asceticism.⁶³ Its approach to the religious plurality of Late Antiquity has been shaped by Guy Stroumsa's view that 'one can trace a trajectory of ancient Christianity which leads it from Qumran to Qur'an.'⁶⁴ Likewise, Averil Cameron's book, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*,

⁶³ P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,' *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101; D. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

⁶⁴ G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4. This work reflects the development of Guy Stroumsa's thought over many years.

has provided a model for thinking about the way in which texts can be read to understand better the world in which they were written.⁶⁵

Some important work on Syriac subjects has enhanced the project of contextualisation in the field of Late Antiquity, to which this thesis seeks to contribute. Judith Frishman's unpublished doctoral thesis has been important for this study because of the way in which it situates Narsai's homilies in the exegetical and theological currents of the East Syrian tradition.⁶⁶ More recently, a number of scholars have made important contributions through close reading of texts in their contexts. Particularly influential have been Adam Becker's *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Joel Walker's, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, and Richard Payne's *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*.⁶⁷ These three works acknowledge the Sasanian context of the Church of

⁶⁵ A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁶⁶ J. Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (Leiden University, 1992).

⁶⁷ A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); J. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2006); R. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015). See also, J-N. M. Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories and the Formation of the Syriac Churches*, TCH

the East, and this thesis owes them much. Similarly, Mary Hansbury's conviction over many years that Isaac's thought needs to be studied alongside the contemporary Jewish mystical tradition provided much of the impetus for the development of this thesis.⁶⁸

1.4 Thesis Schema

This thesis will examine the polemical and theological currents to which Isaac responded. Adopting a dual approach, from within and without the Church of the East, the thesis exposes the homily on the cross as a response to the religious environment in which Isaac lived.

The first two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) explore the significant polemical and theological aspects of Isaac's homily on the cross. They will draw on some important works on the establishment of heresy and orthodoxy, particularly in relation to the boundaries between communities.⁶⁹ Chapter 2 will focus Isaac's homily in the light

(Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), and J. Wickes, *Bible and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Ephrem's Hymns on Faith* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

⁶⁸ M. Hansbury, *Evidence of Jewish Influence in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: Translation and Commentary*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation (Temple University, 1987); Hansbury, 'Remembrance of God,'; M. Hansbury, "'Insight without Sight": Wonder as an Aspect of Revelation in the Discourses of Isaac the Syrian,' *JCSSS* 8 (2008), 60-73.

⁶⁹ C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008); A. Cameron, 'Jews and Heretics – A Category Error?' in A. H. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007),

of two Late Antique literary tropes, the power of the Cross in anti-pagan polemic, and the connection between the Ark and the Cross in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition. It will also consider Isaac's writing on the cross in relation to his anti-Messalian polemic, emphasising the outward forms of prayer. These three heresiological themes, picked up in II. XI, allow Isaac to establish the significance of cross veneration for orthodox believers.

Chapter 3 will examine the central Ark-Cross typology of II. XI in relation to Isaac's Christology. It will situate this typology in the context of Antiochene exegesis of the Tabernacle in Exodus, derived from Theodore of Mospuestia's commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews. Isaac's use of this typology positions him within a particular exegetical and Christological tradition. Isaac's Christology in relation to his writing on the cross will also be re-examined.

Chapter 4 reads II. XI alongside other seventh-century Syriac writers from Beth Qatraye to provide a further indication of the flourishing intellectual life of the region at that time. It thus demonstrates the importance of understanding Isaac's writings in the light of those ascetic and theological writers who shared in this

345-360; A. H. Becker, 'Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Lines: Questioning the "Parting of the Ways" Outside the Roman Empire,' in Becker and Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways that Never Parted*, 373-392; D. S. Kalleres, *City of Demons: Violence, Ritual and Power in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014). Two recent works of note have sought to understand Christology in these contextual terms: D. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and P. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

milieu. The idea of the ‘crucifixion of the intellect’ in Isaac and Dadisho Qatraya will be investigated, in addition to examining the theme of cross veneration in both writers. This will situate Isaac’s writings in the reformist movement initiated by Abraham of Kashkar. Finally, this chapter will establish, as a parallel to II. XI, the connection between Christology and cross veneration in Gabriel Qatraya’s commentary on the liturgy.

The final two chapters develop a broader perspective through which to read II. XI, situating Isaac among the diverse religious traditions of Late Antique Mesopotamia. These chapters will draw on comparative methodologies, not least Jonathan Z. Smith’s emphasis on the importance of difference in comparative religion.⁷⁰ Along with some recent work in the field of Irano-Talmudica and the study of Christians in the Sasanian world,⁷¹ Michael Satlow’s idea of ‘deep structures of meaning’ has been influential.⁷² Satlow responds to an ingrained historiographical dichotomy between ‘Jewish’ and ‘non-Jewish’ cultures, and his methodological work shows the porous nature of these boundaries. Similarly, the nuanced understanding of ‘creative

⁷⁰ J. Z. Smith, ‘In Comparison a Magic Dwells,’ in J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19-35; W. E. Paden, ‘Elements of a New Comparativism,’ in K. C. Patton and B. C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 182-192.

⁷¹ M. Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); S. Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

⁷² M. Satlow, ‘Beyond Influence: Towards a New Historiographical Paradigm,’ in A. Norich and Y. Z. Eliav, eds., *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008), 37-53.

symbiosis' developed by Steven Wasserstrom has been significant for understanding the co-existence of different religious communities at the end of Late Antiquity.⁷³

Chapter 5 will explore the theme of mystical ascent in Isaac's writing, including in II. XI, and in the Jewish mystical tradition represented in Apocalyptic literature, and in the Hekhalot texts, which likely flourished in Babylonia in the period roughly contemporary with Isaac. A number of common themes emerge, though there are also some significant differences in the way these were articulated and used. Nevertheless, this chapter will help situate Isaac in the same cultural world as the *yored merkavah*, in which the mysteries of creation are revealed to the mystic as he joins the worship of the angels.

Chapter 6 will illustrate some of the ways that Christians in the Sasanian Empire adopted and adapted the iconography of *xwarrah*, 'glory, fortune,' in relation to the image of the cross. This phenomenon is seen concretely in the production of stucco cross plaques in Southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf; it is highly likely that Isaac would have known such imagery. The final part of this chapter will contextualise Isaac's writing on the cross in this world, suggesting that Isaac's strong emphasis on divine love for all of creation and the power of the cross over nature parallel wider Christian challenges to Zoroastrian cosmology. As with the Christian appropriation

⁷³ S. M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). For the connections and co-existence between Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in Late Antiquity, see the essays in G. Herman, ed., *Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, Judaism in Context 17 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015).

of *xwarrah* in East Syrian hagiography and in the visual imagery of the stucco crosses, Isaac understands the cross to be an essential way in which Christians in the late- and post-Sasanian world could assert themselves over the physical and sacred landscape around them.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to reveal some of the ways in which Isaac of Nineveh can be understood as a polemical and theological writer. Both aspects are neglected in the modern study of Isaac's writings, but they are fundamental to understanding Isaac in the context of the world in which he lived.

2. The Cross and Heresiology in Late Antiquity: the polemical rhetoric of II. XI

2.1 Introduction

Isaac is often described as a monk who actively eschewed controversy, and this is borne out in a number of statements in his writings.⁷⁴ He writes, for instance, ‘do not dispute over the truth with someone who does not know the truth.’⁷⁵ Similarly, he encourages respect, even of criminals and heretics:

‘Therefore deem all people worthy of bounty and honour, be they Jews or miscreants or murderers. Especially if they be thy brothers and comrades who have erred from the truth on account of ignorance.’⁷⁶

However, Isaac specifically writes against the so-called Messalians in a number of homilies, and was clearly embroiled in some form of controversy during his own lifetime.⁷⁷ Isaac’s homily on the cross in the *Second Part* employs three rhetorical

⁷⁴ M. G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 380; A. M. Allchin, ed., *Heart of Compassion: Daily Readings with St Isaac of Syria* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), viii; V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St Isaac of Nineveh*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 51 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 29.

⁷⁵ *KG*. I. 14.

⁷⁶ I. 55

⁷⁷ Isaac names the Messalians in I. 171, 465; *KG*. IV, 31, 34; and II. XIV, 22, 47. P. Hagman, ‘St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,’ in M. Tamcke, ed., *Mystik – Metapher – Bild. Beiträge des VII.*

strategies evident elsewhere in Late Antique polemic that enabled him to build up a defence of cross veneration. The first of these is an appeal to the power of the cross over the natural and supernatural orders, a trope found in much anti-pagan writing in Late Antiquity that has, at its root, a belief in demons haunting human society. Secondly, Isaac uses the Ark of the Covenant in this homily to show that veneration of the cross does not constitute idolatry. This particular argument characterises much of the *Adversus Judaeos* literature of the seventh century. Finally, II. XI can be read in the light of Isaac's anti-Messalian writings to show how the physical veneration of the cross acts as a marker of orthodoxy in Isaac's thought.

Isaac's use of these varied polemical tropes raises the question of the homily's audience.⁷⁸ Recent scholarship on anti-Jewish writing in Syriac has shown that the rhetoric and arguments framed as *adversus Judaeos* in fact reflect internal Christian disputes.⁷⁹ It is certainly the case that Isaac's concerted effort to show the

Makarios-Symposiums (Göttingen: Universitätsverlage, 2008), 55-66. Isho'denah famously records, 'Il écrivit trois propositions qui ne furent point acceptées par beaucoup de gens. Daniel Bar Toubanitha, évêque du Beit Garmai, s'éleva contre lui à cause des choses qu'il avait dites.' J-B. Chabot, 'Le Livre de la chasteté, composé par Jésusdenah, Évêque de Basrah,' *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 16 (1896), 124.

⁷⁸ For a recent discussion of the question of audience in relation to Late Antique homilies, see P. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18.

⁷⁹ S. Brock, *The People and the Peoples: Syriac Dialogue Poems from Late Antiquity*, Journal of Jewish Studies Supplement Series (Oxford: Journal of Jewish Studies, 2019), 18. Christine Shepardson argues persuasively that Ephrem's anti-Jewish writings help solidify Nicene orthodoxy, C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria*

significance of cross veneration cannot be separated from the Christological aspect of the homily: using a characteristic East Syrian Christological image, Isaac describes the cross as ‘Christ’s garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the divinity.’⁸⁰ Whilst the rhetoric Isaac employs is drawn from anti-pagan and anti-Jewish literature, this homily is not addressed to those communities as they existed in his own time and place. The three polemical themes explored in this chapter are woven together to form a coherent theological treatise in defence of the Christian veneration of the cross. For Isaac, the physical act of cross veneration marks the boundaries of orthodoxy in an age where ecclesiastical divisions became fixed and the religious landscape of the Near East changed forever.

2.2 The Power of the Cross and anti-Pagan Polemic

The *Julian Romance* has at its culmination, a scene in which Jovian refuses the crown of Julian the Apostate before it is sanctified by the cross:

‘Far be it from me, that the crown of the pagan who worshipped idols in it should be placed upon my head before it is placed on top of the cross...

(Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008); A. Cameron, ‘Jews and Heretics – A Category Error?’ in A. H. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 345-360; A. H. Becker, ‘Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes: Questioning the "Parting of the Ways" Outside the Roman Empire,’ in Becker and Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways that Never Parted*, 373-392.

⁸⁰ II. XI, 24.

Therefore, approach and place the crown which is in your hands on top of the cross. Come, let us pray to Christ, by the worship of His cross, for the peace and existence of your empire.’⁸¹

By this action, peace and prosperity are restored; Julian’s golden idols are cast into the Tigris and a Christian once more reigns over the Empire.⁸² This text reflects the strong association between the image of the cross and the triumph of Christianity over paganism in a range of Syriac writings.

Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Lauren has shown the importance of royal conversion in Syriac missionary hagiography, beginning with the *Acts of Thomas* and including the *Teaching of Addai* and the *Acts of Mar Mari*.⁸³ The cross also plays a significant role here. The *Teaching of Addai* contains the so-called Protonike legend, which relates

⁸¹ M. Solokoff, ed. and trans., *The Julian Romance: A New English Translation*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 49 (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2017), 406. For a study of the *Julian Romance*, see P. Wood, ‘*We have no King but Christ*’: *Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c. 400-585)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 132-162. For the specific theme of anti-pagan polemic, see J. W. Drijvers, ‘Julian the Apostate and the City of Rome: Pagan-Christian Polemics in the Syriac Julian Romance,’ in W. J. van Bakkum, J. W. Drijvers, and A. C. Klugkist, eds., *Syriac Polemics: Studies in Honour of G. J. Reinink*, *Orientalia Louvaniensia Analecta* 170 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 1-20.

⁸² For the place of religious violence in the *Julian Romance* and its interpretation, see D. L. Schwartz, ‘Religious Violence and Eschatology in the Syriac Julian Romance,’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19/4 (2011), 565-587.

⁸³ J-N. M. Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories and the Formation of the Syriac Churches*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 26.

the finding of the cross in Jerusalem by Protonike, wife of the Emperor Claudius, some two hundred years before the discovery of the cross by Helena, mother of Constantine.⁸⁴ The narration of one royal conversion leads to another as Abgar of Edessa and his household proclaim their newfound faith in the Messiah.⁸⁵ There is a close relationship between the cross and conversion, and throughout the *Teaching of Addai*, the Cross is associated with the toppling of Edessa's pagan idols.⁸⁶ Similarly, a homily of Jacob of Serugh, *On the Fall of Idols*, lists a whole range of pagan cults, the gods and goddesses of which are thrown into confusion as the cross is erected on Golgotha.⁸⁷

Isaac's description of the power of the cross in II. XI makes similarly universal claims for the victory of Christianity over paganism: 'Death which reigns over all has now proved easier, not only for believers, but also for pagans as well.'⁸⁸ Isaac shares with other Syriac writers a rhetoric of triumphalism, but more specifically than this, he also appeals to the power of the cross over the natural world and demonic forces in II. XI. In so doing, Isaac employs a literary trope common to much anti-pagan polemical writing from Late Antiquity.

⁸⁴ G. Howard, trans., *The Teaching of Addai*, SBL Texts and Translations 16 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 21-35.

⁸⁵ *Teaching of Addai*, 35.

⁸⁶ *Teaching of Addai*, 57.

⁸⁷ J. P. P. Martin, 'Discours de Jaques des Saroug sur la chute des idoles,' *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29 (1875), 107-147.

⁸⁸ II. XI, 8.

One of the most striking images in II. XI is that of the divine power, the *Shekinah*, residing in the physical image of the cross.⁸⁹ Isaac is clear that this divine power is active and manifest ‘by means of mighty signs,’ in no lesser a way than when God performed miracles through the Ark of the Covenant.⁹⁰ Drawing on a range of hagiographical literature that was no doubt part of his reading, Isaac then writes,

‘Through the power of the Cross many have restrained wild animals, have acted boldly in the face of fire, have walked on lakes, have raised the dead, have held back plagues, have caused springs to flow in parched and wild terrain, have laid a boundary to the seas, have commanded the surge of mighty rivers to flow after them, have reversed the course of water.’⁹¹

Not only does the cross allow the Christian command over the natural world, but also the supernatural: ‘Satan himself and all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the Cross, when it is depicted by us against him.’⁹² This, in fact, reflects a wider belief in Late Antiquity that demonic powers could lurk in the natural environment as well as in pagan cities and temples. Modern scholarship, following Peter Brown, has begun to take belief in demons seriously, and a number of significant works have shown

⁸⁹ II. XI, 5, 12.

⁹⁰ II. XI, 6.

⁹¹ II. XI, 7. For a survey of attitudes to books and reading in East Syrian ascetic circles, see J. Walker, ‘Ascetic Literacy: Books and Readers in East-Syrian Monastic Tradition,’ in H. Börm and J. Wiesehofer, eds., *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2010), 307-345.

⁹² II. XI, 8.

how these beliefs shaped Christian attitudes to the urban environment, pagan statuary and the past, as well as to the formation of ascetic culture.⁹³ In addition to this, the study of incantation bowls has highlighted the range of demonic forces and deities that continued to play a part in the lives of pagans, Jews, Christians and Mandaean in Mesopotamia.⁹⁴ This robust belief in demonic powers inhabiting the natural and urban environments in Late Antiquity lies behind Isaac's appeal to the power of the cross over fire, water, plague, and demons.

Appealing to the power of the cross over demons is a common theme in Christian anti-pagan polemic.⁹⁵ Theophilus of Alexandria, for instance, wrote in a homily on the cross,

⁹³ S. Lunn-Rockcliffe, 'Demons and Demonologies,' in J. Lössl and N. J. Baker-Brian, eds., *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 493-510; P. Brown, 'Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages,' in M. Douglas, ed., *Witchcraft: Confessions and Accusations* (New York, NY: Tavistock, 1970), 17-45; P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,' *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101; D. S. Kalleres, *City of Demons: Violence, Ritual and Power in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014); C. Mango, 'Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder,' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963), 55-75; D. Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁹⁴ E. C. D. Hunter, 'Who are the Demons? The Iconography of Incantation Bowls,' *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente antico* 15 (1998), 95-115; For a list of angels, deities, demons and other supernatural forces in the Syriac incantation bowls, see M. Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls: Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia*, *Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity* 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 253.

⁹⁵ C. Tieszen, *Cross Veneration in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 18-22.

‘The cross is that which closed the temples of the idols and opens the churches and crowns them. The cross is that which has confounded the demons and made them flee in terror.’⁹⁶

Theophilus himself presided over the destruction of the Serapeum, the temple of the god Serapis in Alexandria, and Theodoret of Cyrus records in his *Ecclesiastical History* how Theophilus ordered the decapitation of the idol.⁹⁷ In a similar account, Theodoret describes the destruction of the shrine of Jupiter in Apamea, where a demon stops the timbers of the temple from burning until Bishop Marcellus casts the demon out by water, sanctified by the sign of the cross.⁹⁸ Such acts would have had real significance in a world in which idols were fed, bathed, dressed and housed; they were treated like human beings. Even in Rome at the end of the fourth century

⁹⁶ Cited in N. Russel, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2007), 69.

⁹⁷ Canivet, P. trans., *Théodoret de Cyr: Histoire ecclésiastique*, Sources Chrétiennes 530 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2009), V, 22. See also, E. J. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 1-4. There has been a recent increase in the study of violence, and specifically religious violence, in Late Antiquity and the Early Islamic Period. See, for instance, H. A. Drake, ed., *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006); T. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs Under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); J. H. F. Dijkstra and C. R. Raschle, eds., *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁹⁸ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 21.

C.E., cult statues still wore jewellery, the theft of which was considered a grave crime.⁹⁹

Isaac's homily belongs to this tradition. II. XI sets out to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over paganism (and Judaism) by showing the miraculous power of the cross over the natural and supernatural order. The cross, 'which unbelievers consider so contemptible,' is, for Isaac, the source of true knowledge of God.¹⁰⁰ This polemical context is clear in the opening paragraphs of the homily, where Isaac writes,

'we will describe, as far as possible, in simple words, concerning the glorious eternal power which is in the Cross, so that it may be realized that it is God who carries out and performs everything, in everything, amongst those of old, and amongst those of latter times, and for ever.'¹⁰¹

One of the ways in which Christian writers limited the power of their pagan opponents was to describe the *loci* of their cults (whether statues, or sacred trees and rivers) as inhabited by demons. Hagiographical texts from the Graeco-Roman world, as well as from the Syriac milieu, show the power of the cross to expel these

⁹⁹ P. Kiernan, *Roman Cult Images: The Lives and Worship of Idols from the Iron Age to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 205. Philip Kiernan extensively treats what it meant for idols to be treated as 'divine bodies.' Kiernan, *Roman Cult Images*, 200-218.

¹⁰⁰ II. XI, 22. Here, Isaac draws on 1 Cor. 1. 23.

¹⁰¹ II. XI, 2.

demons.¹⁰² This particular aspect of anti-pagan polemic provides the context for Isaac's assertion in II. XI that the power that resides in the cross continues to perform miracles, and that 'Satan himself and all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the cross, when it is depicted by us against him.'¹⁰³

In II. XI, Isaac alludes to the Scriptural theme of God's punishment on account of the worship of idols.

'Was it not because they applied the name of idols to the former things [that is, images made by human hands] that they received punishments... In similar fashion, if we attributed any other name to an artefact of this shape [the cross], when we worshipped it we would have received punishment as did of old those who exchanged the worship of God for (that of) idols'¹⁰⁴

Here, Isaac defends the veneration of man-made objects (namely the Ark and the cross) by asserting that these objects can be venerated only if worship is properly directed to God. It is 'in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity dwells' that the image of the cross is worshipped.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² R. Wiśniewski, 'Pagan Temples, Christians and Demons in the Late Antique East and West,' *Sacris Erudiri* 54 (2016), 111-128.

¹⁰³ II. XI, 8.

¹⁰⁴ II. XI, 11, 13.

¹⁰⁵ II. XI, 13.

Underlying this assertion is a suspicion, drawn from the Old Testament, of graven images.¹⁰⁶ For Christians in Late Antiquity, idol worship was the worship of demons.¹⁰⁷ A number of influential writers make this clear, including Augustine who refers to the Egyptian *Hermetica* and claims the Egyptians discovered how to make gods:

‘Hermes asserts that the visible and tangible idols are in some way the bodies of gods; certain spirits have been induced to take up their abode in them... When Hermes talks of gods being made by men, he refers to a kind of technique of attaching invisible spirits to material bodies, so that the images dedicated and subjected to those spirits become, as it were, animated bodies.’¹⁰⁸

Similarly, Lactantius writes,

‘[Demons] attach themselves, therefore, to individuals, and occupy houses under the name of Genii or (Di) Penates. To these temples are built, to these libations are daily offered as to the Lares, to these honour is paid as to the averters of evils. These from the beginning, that they might turn away men

¹⁰⁶ Exodus 20. 4-6.

¹⁰⁷ R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD. to the Conversion of Constantine* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986), 133-137.

¹⁰⁸ G. R. Evans, ed., and H. Bettenson, H., *St Augustine: City of God*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2003), VIII, 23.

from the knowledge of the true God, introduced new superstitions and worship of gods.’¹⁰⁹

As with the destruction of idols in Theodoret’s *Ecclesiastical History*, a number of accounts of religious violence from the late fourth and fifth centuries describe demons fleeing from pagan idols as they are destroyed. Cyril Mango cites an example from the *Life of Porphyry*, where the saintly bishop approaches the statue of Aphrodite in Gaza with a crowd bearing crosses and, as the demon flees before the cross, the statue is cast down and shatters.¹¹⁰ Robert Wiśniewski argues that this set of beliefs was particularly potent in the East, because of the emphasis on temples and shrines as places of theophany.¹¹¹

This belief in demons dwelling in statues is seen in the Classical Graeco-Roman notion that the gods were active in their images.¹¹² The Neoplatonists continued to articulate such a view into the fourth century.¹¹³ In Christian hands, however, this idea was subverted and became a rhetorical trope in anti-pagan writing and accounts

¹⁰⁹ Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 28, cited in D. Quinn, ‘Roman Household Deities in the Latin Christian Writers,’ *SP* 44 (2010), 75.

¹¹⁰ Mango, ‘Antique Statuary,’ 56.

¹¹¹ Wiśniewski, ‘Pagan Temples, Christians and Demons,’ 111-128.

¹¹² J. N. Bremmer, ‘The Agency of Greek and Roman Statues: From Homer to Constantine,’ *Opuscula* 6 (2013), 7-21.

¹¹³ E. R. Dodds, ‘Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism,’ *The Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947), 55-69.

of religious violence.¹¹⁴ It is also an idea that had significant traction in the Mesopotamian world. John Healey has recently written about the convergence of Hellenistic and Mesopotamian religious traditions at Edessa, as well as the enduring place of pagan festivals and the continued use of pagan names by Christian converts.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the *Acts of Mar Mari* provides examples of the belief in demons dwelling in idols from Mesopotamia.¹¹⁶ Mar Mari heals the daughter of King Shahgirad, and when asked by the King why their own gods do not heal the sick, Mari replies, ‘Because they are not gods, but idols and statues in which demons dwell.’¹¹⁷ The disciple of Mari, Adda, then calls seventy-two demons of various likenesses out of the idols in question, and sends them to Gehenna.¹¹⁸ Similarly in the following section, Mar Mari casts a demon out of a sacred fig tree and revives a child killed by the demon.¹¹⁹ The same understanding of pagan idols occurs in the

¹¹⁴ For a survey of more nuanced attitudes to pagan statuary in Late Antiquity, see H. Saradi-Mendelovici, ‘Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries,’ *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 47-61; I. Jacobs, ‘Production to Destruction? Pagan and Mythological Statuary in Asia Minor,’ *American Journal of Archaeology* 114 (2010), 267-303.

¹¹⁵ J. F. Healey, ‘The Pre-Christian Religions of the Syriac-Speaking Regions,’ in D. King, ed., *The Syriac World*, Routledge Worlds (London: Routledge, 2019), 63-64.

¹¹⁶ In the Mesopotamian context the phenomenon of the ancient Mesopotamian gods ‘becoming’ demons in a process of depopularisation is seen in Mandaean Incantation bowls: Hunter, ‘Who are the Demons?’, 102.

¹¹⁷ A. Harrak, trans., *The Acts of Mar Mari the Apostle*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2005), 13.

¹¹⁸ *Acts of Mar Mari*, 14.

¹¹⁹ *Acts of Mar Mari*, 15.

Acts of Sharbil, where the former pagan priest of Edessa refuses to submit to the king, saying,

‘I will not sacrifice to idols again, and I will not offer oblations to devils, and I will not honour evil spirits.’¹²⁰

In *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, this theme is taken up in the context of salvation history. Its account of Terah, the father of Abraham, identifies the origins of idolatry:

‘Now, there was in the city [Ur] a certain man who very rich, and he died at that time. And his son made an image of him in gold, and set it up upon his grave, and he appointed there a young man to keep guard over it. And Satan went and took up his abode in that image, and he spake to that youth (i.e. the son of the rich man) after the manner of his father. And thieves went into [his house], and took everything that the youth possessed, and he went out to the tomb of his father weeping. And Satan spake unto him, saying, “Weep not in my presence, but go and fetch thy little son, and slay him here as a sacrifice to me...” And straightaway the youth did as Satan told him... And behold, from that time the children of men began to sacrifice their sons to devils and

¹²⁰ W. Cureton, ed. and trans., *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighbouring Countries from the Year after Our Lord’s Ascension to the Beginning of the Fourth Century* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 51.

to worship idols, for the devils entered into the images and took up their abodes therein.’¹²¹

This description of the origins of idol worship in the *Cave of Treasures* shares the basic assumption with much of the polemical tradition that cult objects are demonic, but also projects this back into Biblical history, to the time before Abraham. Whilst Isaac’s own references to idolatry in II. XI are connected specifically with the commandment in the Mosaic law, and not with the generation before Abraham, Isaac says elsewhere that there was no idol worship in the time of Noah, suggesting an understanding of the origins of idol worship consonant with the *Cave of Treasures*.¹²²

Late Antique Christians strove to undermine pagan cults by accusing them of demon worship. Homilies and hagiographical texts in Greek and Syriac point to the common view that demons inhabited pagan statues and cult centres, such as sacred trees and rivers. Isaac’s presentation of the divine power residing in the cross, therefore, mirrors the conception of demonic forces residing in cult objects. In contrast to the *Acts of Mar Mari* where a child is killed by the demonic power inhabiting a sacred fig tree, Isaac describes the miracles wrought by the divine power that resides in the Cross, including raising the dead.¹²³ The strength of this contrast is

¹²¹ E. A. W. Budge, trans., *The Book of the Cave of Treasures: A History of the Patriarchs and the Kings their Successors from the Creation to the Crucifixion of Christ. Translated from the Syriac Text of the British Museum MS. ADD. 25875* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1927), 139-140.

¹²² I. 115-116.

¹²³ II. XI, 7.

seen elsewhere in the anti-pagan polemical tradition by the way in which the cross is invoked as a means of exorcism, as articulated in the homily on the cross of Theophilus of Alexandria:

‘The cross is that which closed the temples of the idols and opens the churches and crowns them. The cross is that which has confounded the demons and made them flee in terror.’¹²⁴

This is one way of understanding the incision of crosses on the foreheads of pagan statues, though Ine Jacobs suggests that the evidence for deliberate exorcism in this way is limited.¹²⁵ Pseudo-Athanasius’ question-and-answer text, *Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem*, states that demons do not tremble before asses, but shudder and flee before the Cross.¹²⁶ In the *History of the Holy Mar Ma ‘in*, the saint makes his cell in a cave next to a pagan cult site. He is afflicted by demons, but as soon as he makes the sign of the cross and prays, the demons are driven away.¹²⁷ This is precisely the same polemical trope that Isaac invokes in II. XI, 8: ‘Satan himself and all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the Cross, when it is depicted by us against him.’

¹²⁴ Cited in Russel, *Theophilus of Alexandria*, 69.

¹²⁵ Jacobs, ‘Production to Destruction?’, 279-280.

¹²⁶ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem*, 623-624. This text is widely attested in Greek, but the earliest manuscripts of the Arabic version predate the extant Greek text. B. Roggema, ‘The Integral Arabic Translation of Pseudo-Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Questiones ad Antiochum ducem*,’ in B. Roggema and A. Treiger, eds., *Patristic Literature in Arabic Translations* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 15-52.

¹²⁷ *The History of the Holy Mar Ma ‘in*, 77-82.

Hagiographical texts also illustrate the power of the cross over the natural world. In II. XI, 7, Isaac says that by the power of the cross, many ‘have acted boldly in the face of fire.’ The *Acts of Mar Mari* relates an episode in which Mar Mari tells the people of Seleucia that their sacred fire is not a goddess: ‘The holy one made the sign of the redeeming cross on himself and made the sign of the cross on the fire too, and entered into it and came out without harm.’¹²⁸ Accounts such as this, and the miracles performed through the power of the cross that Isaac lists, point to the Christian assertion of authority over a world inhabited by demonic forces. The sign of the cross is a powerful means of exorcism, and is a significant part of the way in which Late Antique Christians engaged with the world around them.¹²⁹ By appealing to the power of the cross over the natural world and over Satan and his demonic forces, Isaac situates his homily on the cross in a broader tradition of polemical writing in Late Antiquity.

2.3 The Ark and the Cross in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition

In a series of rhetorical questions, Isaac asks why the Ark of the Covenant was held in such adoration by Moses and ‘the People,’

‘What then was in the Ark to make it so awesome and filled with all manner of power and signs...? Did not Moses and the People prostrate before the Ark

¹²⁸ *Acts of Mar Mari*, 24.

¹²⁹ Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man,’ 88-89.

in great awe and trembling? Did not Joshua son of Nun lie stretched out on his face before it from morning until evening?’¹³⁰

Isaac gives the answer:

‘Were not God’s fearful revelations manifested there as if to (provide) honour for the object, seeing that the *Shekhina* of God was residing in it? This (*Shekhina*), which now resides in the Cross, has departed from there (the Ark) and has resided mysteriously in the Cross.’¹³¹

Isaac’s appeal to the Scriptural veneration of the Ark by the Jewish people is intended to demonstrate that the cross is worthy of veneration: by kissing the image of the cross or by prostrating before it, Isaac argues, Christians are not infringing the commandment forbidding the making of images and bowing down before them, and thus committing idolatry.¹³² The veneration of the cross is part of the proper worship of God because it is done ‘in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity dwells.’¹³³ Isaac’s argument here reflects the exegetical arguments made by a number of broadly contemporary writers to defend the veneration of images, whose works are

¹³⁰ II. XI, 5.

¹³¹ II. XI, 5. This thesis uses the transliteration *Shekinah*, but retains variants when quoting other scholars’ translations.

¹³² See II. XI, 13.

¹³³ II. XI, 13.

categorised as part of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition.¹³⁴ These texts have, on the whole, been studied in order to establish the nature of attitudes to holy images in the time immediately before the period of iconoclasm starting in the 720s.¹³⁵

In addition to this literary trope, the cross has an established place in the anti-Jewish polemic of Syriac writers.¹³⁶ Isaac's Ark-Cross typology has a parallel with an anti-Jewish motif seen in Ephrem and the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* by which

¹³⁴ The particular authors and texts under consideration are Leontius of Neapolis, the *Trophies of Damascus*, and the *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem*. For an introduction to these texts, see L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680-850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45. The fragments of Leontius used to discuss the place of icons before iconoclasm probably date to the eighth century, or have been edited by later iconodules; Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 49-50; Tieszen, *Cross Veneration*, 22-26; A. L. Williams, *Adversus Judaeos: A Bird's-Eye View of Christian Apologiae until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935); A. Cameron, 'Blaming the Jews: The Seventh-Century Invasions of Palestine in Context,' in *Melanges Gilbert Dagron, Travaux et Memoires* (Paris: College de France, 2002), 57-78.

¹³⁵ N. Baynes, 'The Icons before Iconoclasm,' *The Harvard Theological Review* 44/2 (1951), 93-106; Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 44-68.

¹³⁶ J.-L. Feiertag, 'À propos du rôle des Juifs dans les traditions sous-jacentes aux récits de l'Invention de la Croix,' *Analecta Bollandiana* 118/3-4 (2000), 241-265. For two recent discussions of anti-Jewish polemic in Syriac, see A. H. Becker, 'L'antijudaïsme syriaque: entre polémique et critique interne,' in F. Ruani, ed., *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, Études syriaques 13 (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 2016), 181-208; and D. Cerbelaud, 'Les Pères syriens et les juifs,' in J.-M. Auwers, R. Burnet, and D. Luciani, eds., *L'antijudaïsme des Pères. Mythe et/ou réalité?*, Théologie historique 125 (Paris: Beauchesne, 2017), 183-196.

various Temple furnishings are connected with Christ's Passion.¹³⁷ Similarly, the Syriac *inventio crucis* material (both the Helena material and the Protonike legend recorded in the *Teaching of Addai*) reflects a clear association between the Cross and Syriac anti-Jewish polemic.¹³⁸ One example of this occurs in a text known as the *History of the Likeness of Christ*,¹³⁹ where an image of the crucifixion, made by the 'Jews' in order to mock it, works a number of healing miracles leading to conversion. The Jewish leaders attempt to suppress these healing miracles, and persuade a formerly blind man to attribute his healing to the Ark.¹⁴⁰ The text juxtaposes the miracle-working image of the cross and the deceptive attribution of the miracles to the Ark. This undoubtedly reflects the author's own understanding of the relationship between the cross and the Ark, rather than any contemporary Jewish traditions around the miraculous power of the Ark.

¹³⁷ S. Minov, *Memory and Identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures: Rewriting the Bible in Sasanian Iran*, *Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture* 26 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 79-85; For Ephrem's anti-Judaism, see Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*.

¹³⁸ H. J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross: The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac*, *CSCO* 565 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 28.

¹³⁹ E. A. W. Budge, ed and trans., *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The History of the Likeness of Christ which the Jews of Tiberias Made to Mock At: The Syriac Texts Edited with English Translations*, *Luzac's Semitic Text and Translation Series* 4-5 (London: Luzac and Co., 1899); H. J. W. Drijvers, 'An Icon of the Dead Christ on the Cross in a Syriac Text', in R. Lavenant, ed., *Symposium Syriacum VII: Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages, 11-14 August 1996*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 256 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998), 607-616.

¹⁴⁰ *History of the Likeness of Christ*, 189.

These exegetical themes show the close relationship between the Cross and the Ark (and more broadly the Temple) for Syriac writers of anti-Jewish polemic. Isaac associates cross veneration and the Ark in II. XI in the broad context of this polemic, and he specifically employs a literary trope current in the *Adversus Judaeos* literature of the seventh century. This continued to act as a rhetorical defence of Cross veneration among Christian writers in the Islamic world.¹⁴¹

2.3.1 The Cross in anti-Jewish Polemic

Isaac's association of the Ark with the Cross is paralleled in passages from Ephrem and the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*, which connect elements from the Passion with articles from the Temple. In a hymn on the Crucifixion, Ephrem, following the reference in Numbers 4. 13 to the purple colour of the altar in the Temple, writes:

‘The covering, namely that of the altar, as we hear, they brought out after having entered (into the temple). They excavated deep and searched for a reason to accuse him. In order to be able to hang around him the sign of kingship, they entered and stripped the holy altar, and clothed him (with it), so that he would die. (Together with) the cover of the sanctuary, he took the royal dignity like the ephod with which also David clothed himself.’¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Tieszen, *Cross Veneration*, 27.

¹⁴² P. Botha, trans., ‘Ephrem the Syrian’s hymn *On the Crucifixion 4*,’ *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71/3 (2015), IV. 3.

Here, Ephrem reflects a tradition that the priests fetched the purple covering of the altar to lend more weight to the accusation that Jesus claimed to be a king.¹⁴³ The same tradition is found in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, V:

‘The priests took the veil from the holy place,
and with pure purple they dressed him...
They feared that he might not die
so they cast purple upon him in order to kill him.’¹⁴⁴

In a similar passage from the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*, the text reflects an otherwise unknown exegetical theme, claiming that the cross was made from the poles that carried the Ark, again fetched from the Temple:

‘And when the sentence of death had been passed on our Lord by Pilate, they (the Jews) made haste and went into the sanctuary and brought out from thence the carrying poles of the Ark of the Covenant, and out of them they made the Cross of Christ. Verily it was meet that these pieces of wood which used to carry the Covenant should also carry the Lord of the Covenant.’¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Botha, ‘Ephrem the Syrian’s hymn *On the Crucifixion* 4,’ n. 24.

¹⁴⁴ J. E. Walters, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian’s Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 30 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), V, 6, 9.

¹⁴⁵ *Cave of Treasures*, 228.

After the crucifixion, the author of the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* relates that the beams of the cross were hurriedly taken back to the Temple.¹⁴⁶ Discussing the spiritual meaning of this tradition, the text says that Christ was put to death ‘on the bearing poles of the Ark of the service of God and the covering of the sanctuary of propitiation.’¹⁴⁷ The reference to the ‘covering’ here is to the covering of the altar, reflecting the tradition to which Ephrem alludes in his *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, IV and *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, V.¹⁴⁸

The uniqueness of the connection between the cross and the poles of the Ark means that it is somewhat mysterious. In his study of cross mysticism in the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*, Antoni Tronina simply suggests that the connection was made because the poles are described as being made from ‘ξύλα ἄσθητος’ (‘incorruptible wood’) in Exodus 25. 13 (LXX).¹⁴⁹ Sergey Minov argues that this tradition, and the tradition concerning the scarlet robe reflected in Ephrem, allows the author of the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* to create an anti-Jewish motif for the text’s polemical purposes.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ *Cave of Treasures*, 236. This, presumably, reflects a tradition separate from the various accounts of the *inventio crucis* in Late Antiquity.

¹⁴⁷ *Cave of Treasures*, 236.

¹⁴⁸ Minov, *Memory and Identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures*, 79-83.

¹⁴⁹ A. Tronina, 'Mistyka krzyża w syryjskiej "Grocie skarbów"', *Vox Patrum* 38/2 (2008), 1178. I am grateful to Tomasz Szymczak for his help obtaining and reading this article. The same verse, however, also describes the poles of the Ark as gilded with gold, and there is no reference to this in the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*.

¹⁵⁰ Minov, *Memory and Identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures*, 79-83.

Whilst Ephrem and the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* associate the articles of the Temple with the crucifixion, the *inventio crucis* traditions use the occasion of the finding of the cross in a similarly polemical way.¹⁵¹ The most famous of these traditions are associated with the Empress Helena, and circulated in Latin, Greek and Syriac.¹⁵² The so-called Protonike legend projects the finding of the cross back into the first century, and is only-known from Syriac and Armenian sources.¹⁵³ The relationship between the various recensions of this material is disputed, but the legend of the finding of the cross originates and develops in the later fourth and early fifth centuries.¹⁵⁴

The Protonike legend in the *Teaching of Addai* presents the Jews of Jerusalem as the owners of sacred things, rightfully belonging to Christians. Protonike says to James, Bishop of Jerusalem:

“Show me Golgotha where the Messiah was crucified, the wood of his cross on which he was hung by the Jews, and the grave where he was laid.” James said to her: “These three things which your majesty wishes to see are under the authority of the Jews. They control them and do not permit us to go and

¹⁵¹ J. W. Drijvers, ‘The Protonike Legend, the Doctrina Addai and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 51/3 (1997), 298-309. For anti-Jewish polemic in the Judas Kyriakos legend, see Drijvers and Drijvers, *Finding of the True Cross*, 28-29.

¹⁵² For a brief survey of the sources for the Helena legend and scholarship, see Drijvers and Drijvers, *Finding of the True Cross*, 12-20.

¹⁵³ Drijvers and Drijvers, *Finding of the True Cross*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Drijvers and Drijvers, *Finding of the True Cross*, 11.

pray there before Golgotha and the grave. They are not even willing to give us the wood of his cross.”¹⁵⁵

Protonike orders the Jews to grant access to Golgotha and the grave, and that the wood of the cross be handed over. The true cross is revealed when it restores Protonike’s daughter to life after she dies in the tomb.¹⁵⁶ This particular miracle is a clear appeal to the power of the cross to work miracles, which often features in the context of anti-pagan polemic.¹⁵⁷ Protonike’s discovery of the cross leads directly to its veneration:

‘She took the cross of the Messiah and gave it to James that it might be kept in great honour. She also gave orders that an especially great edifice be built over Golgotha where he was crucified and over the tomb where he laid in order that these places might be honoured and that there might be an appointed place for prayer and an assembly for worship.’¹⁵⁸

The recovery of the cross, the construction of a church over Golgotha, and the subsequent expulsion of the Jews from Rome are part of the text’s anti-Jewish rhetoric.¹⁵⁹ The Jews are characterised throughout the text as the ones who crucified

¹⁵⁵ *Teaching of Addai*, 23.

¹⁵⁶ *Teaching of Addai*, 31.

¹⁵⁷ See 2.2 above.

¹⁵⁸ *Teaching of Addai*, 31.

¹⁵⁹ Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories*, 44.

the Messiah,¹⁶⁰ and the miracles they witness lead directly to conversion and the spread of Christianity:

‘Then the crowd of Jews and pagans who had been happy at the beginning of this affair and cheerful became very sad at the end of it. They would have been pleased if this which they had seen had not happened, for because of it many had believed in the Messiah.’¹⁶¹

The purpose of the Protonike legend is to make the *inventio crucis* part of the foundational history of the church in Edessa, thus connecting Edessa to Jerusalem and to the Roman Imperial family. The text was also used to propagate orthodox Christianity against the Jewish and dyophysite communities in Edessa, and so advance its status as a Christian city.¹⁶² As with the anti-Jewish motifs expressed in Ephrem and the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*, the cross has a significant place in this polemic.

¹⁶⁰ *Teaching of Addai*, 59.

¹⁶¹ *Teaching of Addai*, 32-33.

¹⁶² Drijvers, ‘The Protonike Legend, the Doctrina Addai and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa,’ 309.

Drijvers associates the *Teaching of Addai* with Bishop Rabbula of Edessa and his championing of orthodoxy. For Jews in Edessa at the time of Rabbula, see R. Phenix Jr., and C. Horn, *The Rabbula Corpus: Comprising the Life of Rabbula, His Correspondence, a Homily Delivered in Constantinople, Canons and Hymns*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016), cxlix-cliii. Phenix and Horn note that while Rabbula destroyed a synagogue in the city in order to build a church, the Jews of Edessa are not of particular concern to Rabbula’s hagiographer. For the conflation of Jews and heretics, see Cameron, ‘Jews and Heretics – A Category Error?’, 352.

In the *History of the Likeness of Christ*, an icon of the cross works a series of miracles through the blood and water that flows from its side after it is stabbed by the ‘Jews’ who commission the icon in order to mock it.¹⁶³ Han Drijvers situates this text among the *Adversus Judaeos* texts of the seventh century, and identifies the theological world of the text as the neo-Chalcedonian refutation of Theopaschism, Monophysitism and Monotheletism, as reflected in the canons of the Council in Trullo, 691-692.¹⁶⁴ He dates this text, therefore, to the period around the Council in Trullo but before iconoclasm started in 726, and suggests a Palestinian origin.¹⁶⁵ An icon at Mount Sinai, conforming to the image as described in the *History of the Likeness of Christ*, is dated to the first half of the 8th century [Fig. 2].¹⁶⁶ The dead Christ hangs on the cross, clothed in a purple garment and crown of thorns, with blood and water flowing from side (though in the *History of the Likeness of Christ* blood and water flow only once the icon is stabbed).

In the *History of the Likeness of Christ*, a blind Jew, Judah, is cured by the blood and water flowing from the image of the Cross, and confesses Christ. Then the ‘Jews’ take counsel and decide not to kill him and make him a martyr, but rather bribe him,

‘and when he has accepted it, let us teach him to say that we laid upon him the Ark which is filled with our Holy Scriptures, and the Tables of the Law

¹⁶³ *History of the Likeness of Christ*, 185-186.

¹⁶⁴ Drijvers, ‘Icon of the Dead Christ,’ 610-615. For anti-Jewish polemic as a reflection of inter-Christian disputes, see Brock, *The People and the Peoples*, 18.

¹⁶⁵ Drijvers, ‘Icon of the Dead Christ,’ 615.

¹⁶⁶ Drijvers, ‘Icon of the Dead Christ,’ 613.

which Moses wrote, and the Rod of Aaron, and the Coffers of Manna, and he saw the light.’¹⁶⁷

In the next episode, a paralytic sees the blind man as he came out of the Synagogue (having chosen exile over the bribe and taking with him some of the blood and water from the icon).

‘He perceived with his understanding, and he said within himself, “This man who hath now come out is he who was blind... he went in this day being blind, and, behold, he hath now come out with his eyes open. What is this wonderful thing? Who, then, can have opened his eyes for him? Can it be that the Ark of the priest[s] hath given him light?”’¹⁶⁸

The juxtaposition of the power of the Cross to work miracles and the false claims made for the Ark’s power is reminiscent of Isaac’s suggestion in II. XI, 5 that the divine presence has transferred from one to the other.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, the Jewish leaders in the narrative emphasise the contents of the Ark in their appeal to its power, whereas Isaac is clear that the Jar of Manna, the Tablets of the Law, and Aaron’s staff are not the source of the Ark’s awesome power.¹⁷⁰ The Jewish leaders in the *History of the Likeness of Christ* are appealing to a false power, or at least a power

¹⁶⁷ *History of the Likeness of Christ*, 187-188.

¹⁶⁸ *History of the Likeness of Christ*, 189.

¹⁶⁹ II. XI, 5.

¹⁷⁰ II. XI, 5.

that has been superseded. It is significant that the relationship between the Ark and the Cross in this text is both comparable and roughly contemporary with Isaac's.

2.3.2 The Ark and Cross Veneration in Isaac and the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition

A significant part of Isaac's homily on the cross is taken up with the relationship between the Ark of the Covenant and the cross. For Isaac, this typology provides a justification for the veneration of the cross by Christians:

'[The Cross] becomes a place of God's *Shekhina*, even more so than the Ark. Just as the ministry of the new Covenant is more honourable before God than the things which took place in the Old Covenant, just as there is a difference between Moses and Christ...so is this form of (the Cross), which now exists, much more honourable because of the honour of the Man whom the Divinity took from us for His abode.'¹⁷¹

Isaac's line of argument develops from the Scriptural accounts of the veneration of the Ark of the Covenant by Moses, Joshua and the Jewish people. He contends that the Ark 'was venerated amidst great honour and awe... because of the glory of God's honoured name which was upon it.'¹⁷² Isaac asks how this could be, given that,

¹⁷¹ II. XI, 12.

¹⁷² II. XI, 4.

‘God said in the Law to the People through Moses, “Do not worship the work of human hands or any image or likeness,” yet the Ark was built with the hands of carpenters and the Tablets were hewn by Moses’s hands from the mountain and inscribed by his own fingers.’¹⁷³

The answer is that whilst the Jewish people received punishment for worshipping images to which ‘they applied the name idols,’ in the case of the Ark and the Tablets, ‘the power of God was manifest in them openly, seeing that the glorious and revered name of God was set upon them.’¹⁷⁴ In relation to the cross, Isaac goes on to write,

‘In similar fashion, if we attributed any other name to an artefact of this shape [i.e. cruciform], when we worshipped it we would have received punishment as did of old those who exchanged the worship of God for (that of) idols. But now, it is because it is in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity dwells... [that] we receive through it divine power.’¹⁷⁵

This reflects a rhetorical strategy common to a number of texts from Late Antiquity in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition that use Old Testament examples to justify the Christian veneration of images.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ II. XI, 11.

¹⁷⁴ II. XI, 11.

¹⁷⁵ II. XI, 13.

¹⁷⁶ Tieszen, *Cross Veneration*, 23.

Isaac is clear from the beginning of his homily that the power found in the cross is no different to the power through which everything came into being and by which creation is guided according to the divine will.¹⁷⁷ From this, Isaac turns immediately to the power of God manifest in the Ark of the Covenant. He notes that it was ‘venerated amidst great honour and awe’ by the Jewish people, ‘who were not ashamed to call it “God,” because of the glory of God’s honoured name which was upon it.’¹⁷⁸ Brock suggests that this might be an allusion to Numbers 10. 35-36, where Moses appears to address the Ark as ‘Lord.’¹⁷⁹ Isaac asserts that the Ark was also held in awe by foreign peoples, freely citing 1 Samuel. 4. 7: ‘Woe to us, for the God of the People has come to the camp today.’¹⁸⁰ From the outset, Isaac notes the ‘miracles and awesome signs’ accomplished by the power residing in the Ark.¹⁸¹ He goes on to say that this power does not come from the jar of manna, the tablets of the Law, or the staff of Aaron, which were kept in the Ark, but rather its power comes from the *Shekinah* of God.¹⁸² This power, Isaac asserts, has departed from the Ark and now resides in the cross.¹⁸³

In these opening paragraphs, Isaac sets up the Ark-Cross typology that is at the heart of this homily: as the Ark was held in veneration by the people because of the power

¹⁷⁷ II. XI, 3.

¹⁷⁸ II. XI, 4.

¹⁷⁹ S. Brock, trans., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): ‘The Second Part.’ Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO 555 (Leuven: CSCO, 1995), 54, n. 4. 2.

¹⁸⁰ II. XI, 4.

¹⁸¹ II. XI, 4.

¹⁸² II. XI, 5.

¹⁸³ II. XI, 5.

of God that resided in it, so the cross is worthy of greater honour because of God's power manifest in it. His line of argument has striking parallels with a number of texts of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition, which seek to defend the veneration of the cross against accusations of idolatry. This was of particular concern in anti-Jewish polemic of the seventh century, and had a continued significance in the eighth century as the debates over iconoclasm raged.¹⁸⁴ A number of points of comparison emerge between this literature and the argument Isaac makes in his homily on the cross.

As has been noted above in the discussion of Isaac's homily in the context of anti-pagan polemic, appeals are made to the power of the cross, manifest in a range of miracles over the natural and supernatural worlds.¹⁸⁵ This particular trope is also found in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition, reflecting the close association of anti-Jewish polemic and heresiology in Late Antiquity.¹⁸⁶ In a passage reminiscent of the *History of the Likeness of Christ*, for instance, the author of the *Questiones ad Antiochum Ducem* writes,

‘Let those who refuse to do obeisance to the Cross and the icons explain how it is that the holy icons have often poured forth streams of myrrh by the power of the Lord, and how it is that a lifeless stele when it has received a blow has miraculously given forth blood as though it were a living body.’¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 45.

¹⁸⁵ See 2.2 above.

¹⁸⁶ Cameron, ‘Jews and Heretics – A Category Error?’, 352.

¹⁸⁷ Cited in Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 101.

Similar passages can be found in the anti-Jewish writings of Leontius of Neapolis and the *Trophies of Damascus*.¹⁸⁸ Norman Baynes stipulates that this is the only distinctively Christian argument that Leontius employs, and differs from the iconodule appeals of the eighth century to the Incarnation as a defence of making images.¹⁸⁹ An Armenian text of the seventh century on the holy images, like Isaac, connects the miraculous power of the Ark in Scriptural history with the miracles that the cross has performed and continues to perform.¹⁹⁰

As Baynes indicates in relation to Leontius' anti-Jewish polemic, however, the appeal to the miraculous power of the cross is not the primary mode of argument in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition. These texts use Scriptural examples to justify the veneration of the cross and to establish the parameters of idolatry and properly ordered worship. This is the line of reasoning along which Isaac's homily on the cross develops its justification of cross veneration.

In II. XI, 11, Isaac asks how it can be the case that Scripture forbids the worship of images made by human hands, and yet the Ark is made by carpenters and Moses himself inscribes the tablets of the Law.¹⁹¹ He says that in Scripture those who

¹⁸⁸ Baynes, 'Icons before Iconoclasm,' 101; Leontius of Neapolis, 'Ex quinto sermone pro Christianorum apologia contra Judaeos,' in J-P., Migne, ed. and trans., *PG* 93 (Paris: Garnier, 1857), 1597-1609; G. Bardy, ed., 'Le Trophées de Damas,' in R. Graffin and F. Nau, eds., *PO* 15 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1920), 171-292.

¹⁸⁹ Baynes, 'Icons before Iconoclasm,' 103.

¹⁹⁰ Baynes, 'Icons before Iconoclasm,' 105; S. der Nersessian, 'Une Apologie des Images du septième Siècle,' *Byzantion* 17 (1944-1945), 58-87.

¹⁹¹ II. XI, 11.

worship idols receive punishment, but because God's name was on the Ark and the tablets, the people 'received benefit and salvation through them.'¹⁹² This same argument is reflected in Leontius, who points to the divine origin of the Ark and the design of the Temple: 'If you wish to condemn me on account of images, then you must condemn God for ordering them to be made.'¹⁹³ He is concerned to show through Scripture that Christians are not innovators in the veneration of images, and those, like Solomon who had the Temple adorned with carved images, were not condemned, 'for he [Solomon] was not condemned for this, for he made these shapes to the glory of God just as we do.'¹⁹⁴ Leontius claims that the Christian veneration of images is not idolatry because Christian images are made to the glory of God, just like the cherubim on the Ark and the decoration of the Temple. This is also seen in the *Trophies of Damascus*, where Jewish veneration of the Ark of the Covenant, the tablets of the Law and the book of the Law in the Synagogue are held up as proof that the veneration of things made by human hands can have an appropriate place in worship without infringing the Biblical command to eschew graven images.¹⁹⁵

Isaac proceeds to argue that the cross is more honourable than the Ark, as the New Covenant is more honourable than the Old, and as Christ is more honourable than Moses.¹⁹⁶ For Isaac, the cross has this more honoured position because of Christ's

¹⁹² II. XI, 11.

¹⁹³ Cited in Baynes, 'Icons before Iconoclasm,' 98.

¹⁹⁴ Cited in Baynes, 'Icons before Iconoclasm,' 98.

¹⁹⁵ Baynes, 'Icons before Iconoclasm,' 104.

¹⁹⁶ II. XI, 12.

greater honour.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, Isaac claims, if the cross is given any other name when it is venerated, Christians would be guilty of idolatry and receive punishment: it is ‘because that Man was crucified upon it, we receive through it divine power.’¹⁹⁸ This is the heart of the defence of cross veneration in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition.

Leontius writes,

‘We do not make obeisance to the nature of the wood but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross... When the two beams of the Cross are joined together I adore the figure because of the Christ who on the Cross was crucified, but if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them.’¹⁹⁹

This passage has striking parallels with Isaac’s assertion in II. XI, 12 that it is the moment that the Cross is fashioned that it becomes a place of God’s *Shekinah*. The various writers of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition assert, along with Isaac, that the cross is only worthy of veneration because of the one who was crucified upon it.

Baynes notes with interest the ‘echo of the emotion which inspired the cult of the icon.’²⁰⁰ He cites a passage from the *Questiones ad Antiochum Ducem*, ‘We make our obeisance to express the attitude and the love of our souls... through the Cross

¹⁹⁷ II. XI, 12.

¹⁹⁸ II. XI, 13.

¹⁹⁹ Cited in Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 99. This argument is also taken up in the *Trophies of Damascus* and the *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem*. Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 99.

²⁰⁰ Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 104.

we express the attitude of our souls towards the Crucified.’²⁰¹ A parallel can be drawn here to Isaac’s description of the true believer gazing on the cross:

‘the sight of it is precious and fearful to them, and at the same time, beloved. And because they are children, they have all the more familiarity of speech towards Him – just as (ordinary) children customarily have familiarity of speech with their parents, as a result of confidence in (their) love.’²⁰²

One final point of comparison between Isaac’s treatment of the Ark and the cross in II. XI and the defences of cross veneration in the *Adversus Judaeos* literature is the basic conviction that God uses corporeal objects to draw the believer to himself. In the doxology that closes Isaac’s homily, he declares, ‘blessed is God who uses corporeal objects continually to draw us close.’²⁰³ Leontius, the *Trophies of Damascus* and the *Questiones ad Antiochum Ducem* all make the same point.²⁰⁴ Leontius, for instance, writes in relation to the bones of Elisha, ‘and if God works miracles through bones, it is clear that he can do the same through icons and stones and many other things.’²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Cited in Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 104-105. Baynes writes, ‘The very simplicity of the wording seems to carry with it an assurance of genuine feeling.’ Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 105.

²⁰² II. XI, 17.

²⁰³ II. XI, 31.

²⁰⁴ Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 101.

²⁰⁵ Cited in Baynes, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm,’ 101.

Isaac's homily on the cross uses a literary trope, well-known in the *Adversus Judaeos* literature, that establishes a justification for venerating the cross and other images, by appealing to the example of the Jewish veneration of the Ark of the Covenant. As such, his argument has much in common with other seventh century texts of this genre: he appeals to the miracles the Ark worked in biblical history and that the cross now works in his own day; Isaac is clear, like all the writers of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition, that the veneration of images is not an infringement of the command against graven images if worship is properly directed through them towards God; Isaac also appeals to his audience's desire for familiarity with God; and he asserts the fundamental principle that physical objects can point beyond themselves to metaphysical truths. These are all features of the defence of cross veneration in anti-Jewish polemic of the seventh century. Isaac's homily does, however, have a particular emphasis on the divine name and the *Shekinah*, which is not reflected in this wider body of literature. He describes the name of God being 'upon' the Ark and the *Shekinah* residing in it.²⁰⁶ Whilst Isaac employs a common rhetorical strategy to highlight the importance of cross veneration, he does so with his own particular emphasis. Isaac goes further than Leontius, for instance, for whom the cross is a reminder of God's power and an object made to the glory of God. For Isaac, the Cross is an object in which the *Shekinah* resides; the significance of his usage of the *Shekinah* will be explored elsewhere in this thesis.²⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the close parallels between Isaac's argument in II. XI and the defence of cross veneration in the *Adversus Judaeos* literature help to situate Isaac's homily amidst the polemical concerns current in the seventh century.

²⁰⁶ II. XI, 4-5.

²⁰⁷ See 3.4 below.

reflects the first of the stages of the ascetic life that Isaac draws from John of Apamea.²¹⁰ More than this, however, Patrik Hagman has shown that for Isaac, ascetic practice is ‘a type of the future existence.’²¹¹ Through their *ascesis*, monks point to the way human beings will live in the future world: in the Syriac tradition, the phrase ‘the life of the angels’ is used to designate the ascetic life.²¹² Isaac’s emphasis on the physical veneration of the cross, therefore, indicates the ascetic’s longing for intimacy with the person of Christ both in this world and in the eschaton. II. XI, 17 shows the relationship between cross veneration and intimacy with God, where Isaac writes:

‘For true believers the sight of the Cross is no small thing... whenever they raise their eyes and gaze upon it, it is as though they were contemplating the face of Christ... And because they are children they have all the more familiarity of speech towards Him... And whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ.’²¹³

The veneration of the cross that Isaac describes is not, therefore, simply a matter of liturgical praxis, but an integral part of Isaac’s conception of the ascetic life as a whole. This necessarily involves discipline not only of the mind, but the body as well, and explains why Isaac’s writings have such a particular emphasis on ascetic techniques and practice.

²¹⁰ J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh’s Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 119.

²¹¹ P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 172.

²¹² Hagman, *Asceticism*, 155.

²¹³ II. XI, 17-18.

The emphasis on the physicality of prayer serves to highlight Isaac's explicit condemnation of a group known as the Messalians, a group of strict ascetics who prioritised unceasing prayer.²¹⁴ In a discussion of the ascetic practice of the Fathers, Isaac notes,

‘The reason why these blessed Fathers compelled themselves, like servants, to keep such rules was fear of pride. They carried out these fixed numbers of prayers, accompanied by labour of the body, involving specific acts of worship, with prostrations in front of the Cross. It was not the case, as detractors say, that these fixed numbers of prayers related concerning them were prayers which just took place in the heart; this is what people with Messalian opinions proclaim concerning them, those who say that outward forms of worship are unnecessary.’²¹⁵

The ‘detractors’ that Isaac condemns here do not share his fundamental conviction that the discipline of both body and mind are necessary for the ascetic life. Rather, they reject outward forms of worship altogether.²¹⁶ The Messalian controversy raged

²¹⁴ I. 171, 465; *KG*. IV, 31, 34; and II. XIV, 22, 47. Hagman, ‘St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,’ 55-66. C. Stewart, *‘Working the Earth of the Heart’: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

²¹⁵ II. XIV, 22.

²¹⁶ Whether or not Isaac's description of the Messalian position here reflects the historical reality is impossible to ascertain, but the use of ascetic behaviour as a marker of orthodoxy or heterodoxy is a standard feature of Late Antique heresiology. T. Shaw, ‘Ascetic Practice and the Genealogy of Heresy: Problems in Modern Scholarship and Ancient Textual Representation,’ in D. B. Martin and P.

from the fourth century into the Middle Ages, and for Isaac, the physical act of cross veneration and other ascetic practices provide a marker of orthodoxy against the heterodox practices of the Messalians. The materiality of the cross and the physical acts of veneration in II. XI and elsewhere in Isaac's writings can be seen as an intended counter to the perceived Messalian worldview, and should be understood as a heresiological trope, significant for understanding the context of Isaac's writing on the cross in II. XI.

The Messalian movement, from *ܥܝ ܠܡܥܘܠܗ*, the Pa'el participle of the root *ܥܝ ܠܡ*, 'those who pray,'²¹⁷ emerged in Asia Minor in the fourth century and spread over the Christian East. Ephrem condemned them, along with Marcion, Mani, the Arians and others, in hymn XXII of his *Hymns against Heresies*, describing the Messalians as *ܥܝܠܡܝܢ* 'debauched, contemptible.'²¹⁸ As with most 'heresies' of Late Antiquity, the

C. Miller, eds., *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 213-236.

²¹⁷ J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903; repr. 1967), 478.

²¹⁸ E. Beck, ed. and trans., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra haereses*, CSCO 169-170 (Leuven: CSCO, 1957), XXII, 4. Columba Stewart suggests that this description may be a play on the name as the roots of the two verbs have a similar sound *ܥܝ ܠܡܥܘܠܗ*. Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart*, 15-16. For more on Ephrem as a heresiologist, see P. Wood, 'Syriac and the "Syrians",' in S. F. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 184; F. Ruani, trans., *Éphrem de Nisibe. Hymnes contre les hérésies*, Bibliothèque de l'Orient chrétien 4 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2018), x-lvi; J. Wickes, *Bible and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Ephrem's Hymns on Faith* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 24-39, 51-53.

only traces of Messalianism are to be found in the texts of its opponents. Averil Cameron's important essay, 'How to Read Heresiology,' sets out an approach to heresiology that sees this corpus as part of the political landscape of the Late Antique Christian world.²¹⁹ In light of this, it is clear that the construction of the Messalian heresy in polemical sources functioned as a means of marginalising those who were labelled as Messalian from the life of the church and its institutions.²²⁰ In his influential study of Messalianism, Columba Stewart wrote that 'what we can know is not about them, but against them,' and suggests that it is possible to trace the history not of a Messalian sect, but of the Messalian controversy.²²¹ The sources for Messalianism, from the fourth century to the fourteenth century, come from heresiological lists and synodical condemnations, and it is therefore unclear whether Messalianism was a social movement, a religious tendency, an 'ecstatic ascetic deviance' or simply a way of denoting an adversary in the Syriac ascetic milieu.²²² Daniel Caner provides a useful summary of the Greek sources dealing with the Messalians, notably Epiphanius and Theodoret, as well as the synodical acts of the

²¹⁹ A. Cameron, 'How to Read Heresiology,' in D. B. Martin and P. C. Miller, eds., *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) 193-212.

²²⁰ D. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 84.

²²¹ Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart*, 5-6.

²²² B. Bitton-Ashkelony, 'Neither Beginning nor End': The Messalian Imaginaire and Syriac Asceticism,' *Admantius* 19 (2013), 222.

fifth century.²²³ Similarly, Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony presents a survey of the Syriac sources, from the presentation of Babai the Great in the *Book of Governors* as a ‘Messalian hunter’ to the condemnation of three Syriac mystics by Timothy I in 786/7.²²⁴ These extant sources attribute to the Messalians a belief that there was a demon present in each human soul. Baptism was not sufficient for the expulsion of this demon; only prayer could rid the human soul of this demonic presence.²²⁵ Their opponents accused them of excessive sleeping, because of a belief that dreams are prophetic, as well as of having a disregard for the church and its structures.²²⁶ It is unclear what resemblance these beliefs had to any historical reality, but at the very least these comments give an indication of what others thought about the Messalians. Robert Murray suggests that Messalianism was not a sect but rather a movement, and like subsequent charismatic movements in churches across the world, Messalianism emphasised personal, spiritual experience too strongly for the

²²³ Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 86-96. For anti-Messalianism in Theodoret, see P. Wood, *We have no King but Christ’: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c. 400-585)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 56-59.

²²⁴ Bitton-Ashkelony, ‘Messalian Imaginaire,’ 222-223. For a recent study of Philoxenus of Mabbug’s designation of Adelphius as the founder of Messalianism, see S. Lunn-Rockcliffe, ‘The Invention and Demonisation of an Ascetic Heresiarch: Philoxenus of Mabbug on the ‘Messalian’ Adelphius,’ *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68/3 (2017), 455-473; for the condemnation of John of Dalyatha by Timothy I, see A. Treiger, ‘Could Christ’s Humanity See His Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,’ *JCSSS* 9 (2009), 3-21.

²²⁵ Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart*, 55-56.

²²⁶ Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart*, 55-56.

ecclesiastics of the institutional church.²²⁷ Caner argues that the marginalisation of those accused of Messalianism by ecclesiastical and monastic leaders lies in the demand for spiritual perfection on the part of those same leaders.²²⁸ Such a conclusion helps to situate the Messalian controversy within the lines suggested by Cameron: the anti-Messalian polemic that occupied writers across the Christian East was just as much political as theological.

Scholarly literature has long associated Syriac asceticism with the Messalian controversy. Ever since Michael Kmosko first edited the text in 1926, a number of scholars have considered the late fourth-century *Book of Steps* as a Messalian work.²²⁹ Given the change in understanding of ‘Messalianism’ among scholars, a more nuanced reading of the text is now necessary, especially as the *Book of Steps* maintains the necessity of the visible church and its sacraments for salvation. This does not cohere with the accusations of Messalianism levelled by the movement’s opponents.²³⁰ Nevertheless, Antoine Guillaumont argues that whilst the text is not in itself ‘Messalian,’ it does represent the trend that was to lead to persistent

²²⁷ R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 35. For a study of this tension in a modern context, see S. Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 152-186. Caner notes the use of the term ‘movement’ with skepticism on methodological grounds. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 99.

²²⁸ Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 125.

²²⁹ R. Kitchen and M. Parmentier, trans., *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2004), xxii.

²³⁰ Kitchen and Parmentier, *Book of Steps*, xxi. cf. *Book of Steps*, XXVII, 5. ‘No one should doubt the church or its priests, [for] from the catholic church all truth shall be known.’

accusations of Messalianism in the Syriac tradition as the text reflects a radical form of asceticism that divides the community into the Upright and the Perfect, demanding the Perfect do not hold property.²³¹

In the seventh century, Babai the Great strongly opposed the Messalians: he wrote a text against them, now lost, but his *Commentary on Evagrius' Kephalaia Gnostica* illustrates his position.²³² Although he never was the Patriarch of the Church of the East, due to the political intervention of the Sassanian shah Khosrow II, Babai acted as an inspector of monastic communities, rooting out the Messalian heresy and asserting the orthodoxy of his church.²³³ His role in the fight against Messalianism is

²³¹ A. Guillaumont, 'Situation et signification du 'Liber Graduum' dans la spiritualité syriaque,' in *Symposium Syriacum 1972*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1974), 311-325; Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 108-112. This distinction seems to parallel the Manichaean dichotomy of Hearers and the Elect. For the impression of Manichaeism in the *Book of Steps*, see T. Pettipiece, 'Parallel Paths: Tracing Manichean Footprints along the Syriac Book of Steps,' in K. Heal and R. Kitchen, eds., *Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac Book of Steps* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 32-40.

²³² Bitton-Ashkelony, 'Messalian Imaginaire,' 227; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer and the Ship of Stirrings: The Praying Self in Late Antique East Syrian Christianity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 94-96; A. Guillaumont, 'Le témoignage de Babai le Grand sur les Messaliens,' in F. Graffin and A. Guillaumont, eds., *Symposium Syriacum, 1976: célébré du 13 au 17 septembre 1976 au Centre Culturel 'Les Fontaines' de Chantilly (France)*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978), 257-265.

²³³ E. A. W., Budge, ed. and trans., *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Margâ A.D. 840, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries* (London: K. Paul Trench Trubner & Co., 1893), I. 27; Hagman, 'St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,' 57. For theological and biographic introductions to Babai, see G. Chediath, *The*

significant because, as Bitton-Ashkelony maintains, he is the first person to accuse the Messalians of believing they could achieve perfection in this life through spiritual prayer.²³⁴ The emphasis on spiritual prayer is linked to the widespread influence of Evagrian thought among Syriac ascetics,²³⁵ a tension reflecting what Bitton-Ashkelony calls ‘the interpretation and absorption’ of Evagrius’ spiritual writings into Syriac Christianity in the seventh-century.²³⁶ The question of Evagrian spiritual prayer is of substantial interest to Isaac of Nineveh, and much of his writing is dedicated to this subject.²³⁷ Isaac, therefore, also bears witness to the tensions surrounding the absorption of the Evagrian concept of pure prayer within the mainstream of the spiritual life of the Church of the East.

The fourteenth homily of Isaac’s *Second Part* is directed against the Messalians. Such condemnation is unusual in Isaac’s writing, given that he actively eschews polemic: ‘We are not concerned to rebuke or censure the faults of others, this is not

Christology of Mar Babai the Great (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1982); T. Engelmann, *Annahme Christi und Gottesschau: Die Theologie Babais des Großen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013).

²³⁴ W. Frankenberg, ed. and trans., *Evagrius Ponticus*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft zu Göttingen. Philologisch-historische Klasse 13/2 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912), III, 9, 85. (Hereafter, Babai, *Comm. KG*). Bitton-Ashkelony, ‘Messalian Imaginaire,’ 227; Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer*, 95. For a discussion of Babai’s *Comm. KG*. see Engelmann, *Annahme Christi und Gottesschau*, 103.

²³⁵ S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayers and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 64-65.

²³⁶ Bitton-Ashkelony, ‘Messalian Imaginaire,’ 228.

²³⁷ Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, 208-216.

our habit - indeed we spurn those who do this.’²³⁸ Isaac writes of the error that had come when ‘certain people abandoned the prayer’s venerable outwards forms’ as well as when ‘they completely deprived themselves of the Holy Mysteries, instead despising and scorning them’ and when they had neglected the Scriptures.²³⁹ His condemnation of the Messalians is primarily concerned with matters of church order and discipline, rather than any theological objection, meaning that Isaac’s emphasis in his anti-Messalian polemic is on forms of prayer.

Isaac emphasises the orthodoxy and the necessity of outward aspects of prayer:

‘You should realize, my brethren, that in all our service, God very much wants outward postures, specific kinds of honour, and visible forms of prayer – not for his own sake, but for our benefit. He Himself is not profited by such things, nor does He lose anything when they are neglected; rather they are for the sake of our feeble nature.’²⁴⁰

II. XIV, 19 suggests that the neglect of these outward forms of prayer leads to pride, and so even those great ascetics of the past, the ‘Holy Fathers’ who ‘possessed continual prayer, being filled with the Spirit,’ were bound by the recitation of the Office and the physical demands of the ascetic life, including ‘prostrations in front of the Cross.’²⁴¹ Isaac argues throughout this homily that the abandonment of the Office

²³⁸ II. XIV, 23.

²³⁹ II. XIV, 42. See also III. XI, 9.

²⁴⁰ II. XIV, 13.

²⁴¹ II. XIV, 19, 22.

is acceptable ‘when it is swallowed up by purity of prayer’ but he clearly states that it is not acceptable as a result of laziness or from ‘a corrupted Messalian mentality.’²⁴² In II. IV, 9, Isaac says much the same thing about one who is caught up in prayer before the cross:

‘In the case of someone who is clinging to God unceasingly in the continual outpouring that takes place in prayer, constantly stretched out on the ground in supplication to Him, his soul swallowed up with yearning as he lies fallen before the Cross, this person is not subject to any law or canonical rules... rather, he is from that point on above them, being with God without any limitation.’²⁴³

Hagman argues that the fourteenth homily is directed against those who accuse Isaac himself of Messalian tendencies.²⁴⁴ Isaac stresses that these outward forms of prayer are not ends in themselves, with Hagman suggesting that this in turn is written against those whose conservatism might accuse Isaac’s Evagrian doctrine of pure prayer of Messalian leanings. Isaac writes,

‘If someone says that we should recite the prayer uttered by our Saviour in all our prayers using the same wording and keeping the exact order of the words, rather than their sense, such a person is very deficient in his understanding of our Saviour’s purpose in uttering this prayer, nor has he ever drawn close to

²⁴² II. XIV, 47.

²⁴³ II. IV, 9.

²⁴⁴ Hagman, ‘St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,’ 61.

the thinking of the blessed Interpreter. Our Lord did not teach us a particular sequence of words here; rather, the teaching He provided in this prayer consists in showing us what we should be focusing our minds on during the entire course of this life. It was the sense that He gave us, and not the precise sequence of words to be recited by our lips.²⁴⁵

It is not necessary to follow entirely Hagman's conclusion that Isaac was responding to the accusations of a particular individual or group in this homily, but there is certainly evidence that Isaac was criticised by at least some of his contemporaries.²⁴⁶

Hagman shows the similarities in Isaac's work with supposed Messalian thought concerning manual labour and the authority of the church's leaders.²⁴⁷ Despite this, however, Isaac is keen to stress his orthodoxy in II. XIV, regardless of whether this homily was intended for his supporters or for his opponents.

The veneration of the cross is a way of maintaining and marking Isaac's orthodoxy, and this is especially clear in his appeal to the ascetic practices of the Fathers of the Church that he makes in II. XIV, 20-23. The appeal to cross veneration in the anti-Messalian polemic of II. XIV has a number of parallels with Isaac's writing on the cross in II. XI. For Isaac, the physical veneration of the cross is part of a broader heresiological intention in his writings.

²⁴⁵ II. XIV, 36.

²⁴⁶ S. Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica alla misericordia infinita: Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Biblioteca della Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 59-63.

²⁴⁷ Hagman, 'St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,' 64.

II. XI, 12 emphasises the materiality of the cross. Isaac describes the moment the form of the cross is ‘depicted on a wall or on a board, or is fashioned out of some kind of gold or silver and the like, or carved out of wood’ as the moment in which the cross is imbued with divine power. This physicality is of fundamental importance to the homily as a whole: in the closing doxology, Isaac writes:

‘Blessed is God who uses corporeal objects continually to draw us close in a symbolic way to a knowledge of His invisible (nature)... binding our minds with love for His hidden Being by means of shapes that are visible.’²⁴⁸

The knowledge of God is revealed for Isaac through physical objects, in the same way that bodily *ascesis* is an integral part of the monastic life. His line of argument mirrors the point he makes against the Messalians: the material object of the cross, like outward forms of prayer, is not for God’s benefit, but rather for the sake ‘of our feeble nature.’²⁴⁹

II. XI emphasises the reverence due to the cross. These passages are not so much a description of the physical acts of veneration that Isaac describes elsewhere, but indicate the theological justification for such acts.

‘In a similar fashion, if we attributed any other name to an artefact of this shape, when we worshipped it we would have received punishment... But now, it is because it is in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity

²⁴⁸ II. XI, 31.

²⁴⁹ II. XIV, 13.

dwells... Whenever we gaze upon this image in the time of prayer, or when we show reverence to it, because that Man was crucified upon it, we receive through it divine power.'²⁵⁰

The cross is worthy of worship because of its place in salvation history, and through the cross human beings are given 'the knowledge of angels.'²⁵¹ It is the means through which the Creator performs miracles, and so Isaac says it is 'joyfully revered and held in honour.'²⁵² There can only be prostrations before the cross or kissing the cross because of the power at work through this form. The act of veneration that Isaac describes in II. XI, gazing on the image of the cross, is a means of contemplation: it is an outward form that has a spiritual reality, and so Isaac's understanding of cross veneration parallels his anti-Messalian writing in II. XIV. Specific acts of worship, like cross veneration, prostration or the Office, are a way for Isaac to establish his connection with the Fathers, the models of ascetic behaviour, and present a vision of the spiritual life restrained from the *ecstasis* of the Messalians.

II. XI emphasises the materiality of the image of the cross and explores the theological rationale for its veneration. These themes are significant for Isaac precisely because they justify the outward forms of prayer, which act as markers of Isaac's own orthodoxy and designate those 'with Messalian opinions' as heterodox.

²⁵⁰ II. XI, 13.

²⁵¹ II. XI, 34.

²⁵² II. XI, 30.

Isaac's stance reflects the particular emphasis of East Syrian anti-Messalian polemic, as seen in Thomas of Marga's account of Babai's monastic visitations. It is well-known that Babai was commissioned to root out 'the wicked doctrine of the Mesalloyane' from the monasteries and convents.²⁵³ However, Bitton-Ashkelony and Hagman, who provide the most detailed discussions of Messalianism in the East Syrian milieu, do not note the method by which Babai sought to identify Messalian tendencies in monastic communities. The *Book of Governors* includes an episode in which Babai visits Thomas' own monastery, Beth 'Abe, in the time of its founder, Rabban Jacob.

On visiting Rabban Jacob, Babai uses cunning to try and trick him. Babai required,

'that he [Rabban Jacob] would abolish the glorious order of the service of readings which were read on the holy first days of the week in honour of the atoning Mysteries, inasmuch as it was not a thing appropriate for monks, but only for the clergy and the laity.'²⁵⁴

Rabban Jacob replies,

²⁵³ Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, I. 27; Hagman, 'St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians,' 57.

²⁵⁴ Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, I. 29.

‘Today let us perform the Holy Mysteries in the customary manner... and let us read the readings and not change the order of our service; and whatsoever pleaseth the Lord let us do whilst thou art here.’²⁵⁵

This reply meets with Babai’s favour, who then witnesses Rabban Jacob perform a healing miracle, before leaving Beth ‘Abe for other monasteries, ‘full of joy and praise.’²⁵⁶ Babai’s approval of the community life at Beth ‘Abe and of Rabban Jacob in the narrative is part of Thomas of Marga’s hagiographical approach to this history of his own community. However, it is clear from this episode, as it is from Isaac’s II. XIV, that East Syrian anti-Messalian polemic had a particular focus on matters of church order and discipline. In II. XIV, 19, 22-23, Isaac claims that even the great ascetic Fathers were bound by the recitation of the Office and a ‘fixed number of prayers.’ Babai’s efforts to trick Rabban Jacob into abandoning the service of readings on Sundays shows that maintaining outward forms of prayer in the monasteries was a way for those under suspicion of Messalian tendencies to demonstrate their orthodoxy.

Isaac consciously shuns controversy, but he does actively attack the Messalians in II. XIV for their disregard for outward forms of prayer. His emphasis on the material image of the cross in II. XI and the justification the homily provides for the other acts of cross veneration described in his writings is part of this same heresiological trope. For Isaac, outward forms of worship reflect spiritual realities. Furthermore, they are a means of participation in the institutional church, and therefore act as

²⁵⁵ Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, I. 29.

²⁵⁶ Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, I. 29.

markers of orthodoxy. Isaac's description of the physical veneration of the cross is part of the wider attempt in his writings to counter perceived Messalian disregard for such practices. Whilst II. XI does not name the Messalians as other homilies do, it is clear that the homily's particular concern to justify the outward aspect of cross veneration must be understood as part of the East Syrian anti-Messalian polemic of the seventh century.

2.5 Conclusion

Isaac's homily on the cross draws on three particular heresiological themes in order to establish the place of cross veneration in the lives of orthodox Christians. The first of these rhetorical strategies was an appeal to the power of the cross to work miracles in the natural world and to cast out Satan 'and all his tyranny.' Isaac draws on the place of demons in the Late Antique world and the power the cross has over them, showing the parallels II. XI has with apologetic and hagiographical literature from Mesopotamia and the Graeco-Roman world. Secondly, the typology Isaac sets up between the Ark and the Cross allows him in this homily to evoke a line of argument that has much in common with roughly contemporary texts of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition. Isaac, like these other writers, claims that cross veneration is not idolatry by drawing a comparison with the Jewish veneration of the Ark of the Covenant in Scripture. The third polemical theme reflects the specific concerns of the Church of the East in the seventh century amidst the enduring legacy of the 'Messalian controversy.' Isaac emphasises the physicality of cross veneration to show that outward forms of prayer are beneficial, and that church order and discipline are a necessary part of the ascetic life. The religious landscape of Late

Antiquity indelibly shaped Isaac's writings. II. XI adopts anti-Pagan, anti-Jewish and anti-Messalian tropes, but also reflects the most significant theological and polemical issue of Late Antiquity: Christology.



Fig. 2. An icon of the dead Christ. Mount Sinai, 8th Century.

H. C. Evans and B. Ratliff, eds., *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 55.

3. The Ark-Cross Typology of II. XI and Isaac's Christology

3.1 Introduction

At the heart of II. XI is the connection which Isaac makes between the Ark of the Covenant and the cross. He asserts that the metal plate (ܛܥܘܒܐ, *tassā*) covering the Ark is a type of Christ's humanity.²⁵⁷ Narsai, Cosmas Indikopleustes, Cyrus of Edessa and Babai the Great all make use of this typology and it is found only in East Syrian circles. The exegetical tradition began with Theodore of Mopsuestia and Antiochene exegesis concerning the Tabernacle. From Theodore, this typology became imbued with a new cosmological emphasis that led to an association between the Ark and Christ, and the typology connecting the mercy-seat with Christ's humanity. Such typology has significant Christological implications, which explains why it is unique to the East Syrian tradition. Theodore bar Koni and Isho'dad of Merv also associated the Ark and Christ, demonstrating that the typology Isaac uses in II. XI continued to be part of the normative exegetical tradition of the Church of the East in the eighth and ninth centuries.

A number of modern scholars have read Isaac's homily on the cross in such a way as to distance him from the Christological beliefs of the Church of the East in the seventh century.²⁵⁸ Isaac's use of this typology, which he connects to the cross in II.

²⁵⁷ II. XI, 15; III. VII, 11.

²⁵⁸ H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 55; J. Behr, 'St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,' in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian*

XI, positions him firmly within the exegetical and Christological tradition of his church.

3.2 Antiochene Exegesis and the Tabernacle

The background to the Christological typology used by Isaac in relation to the Ark of the Covenant in II. XI has its roots in the Antiochene exegesis of the construction of the Tabernacle. Following Theodore of Mopsuestia's interpretation of the Letter to the Hebrews, the East Syrian exegetical tradition came to understand the earthly Tabernacle as a type of the heavenly (an idea that is also present in the Jewish exegetical traditions as seen in Philo and Josephus).²⁵⁹ This profoundly shaped the cosmology of several East Syrian writers, including Isaac, who saw in the design of the Tabernacle a map of the heavens and the earth.²⁶⁰ Such a cosmological vision created a typology between the furnishings of the Tabernacle and the created order, and is the context for the association between Christ and the Ark of the Covenant in East Syrian exegesis from Narsai to Isho'dad of Merv.

and His Spiritual Legacy: Proceedings of the International Patristics Conference, held at the Sts Cyril and Methodius Institute for Postgraduate Studies, Moscow, October 10-11, 2013 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 93-94.

²⁵⁹ For a good study of the Tabernacle in Alexandrian exegesis, including Christological interpretations, see A. Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁶⁰ I. 188.

Scholarship has traditionally divided Patristic exegesis into two broad schools. The Alexandrian exegetes (typified by Origen and Cyril of Alexandria) were concerned with the spiritual sense of Scripture and Christian allegory.²⁶¹ The rival school of Antioch reacted against the extremes of allegorical interpretation, emphasising the historical and philological interpretations of Biblical texts.²⁶² Influenced by Frances Young's book, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, a number of scholars have shown this broad categorisation to be misleading.²⁶³ Young argues that these two schools shared a common heritage in contemporary systems of education, and shows how Origen first used the exegetical tools which became associated with the Antiochene school. Likewise, Antiochenes like Theodoret could present allegorical readings of the Song of Songs comparable with Origen's exegesis of the same text.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ K. Froehlich, ed. and trans., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 15-19.

²⁶² Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 20.

²⁶³ F. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 166, 176; P. Martens, 'Revisiting the Allegory/ Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008), 283-317; J. J. O'Keefe, 'Theodoret's Unique Contribution to the Antiochene Exegetical Tradition: Questioning Traditional Scholarly Categories,' in B. E. Daley and P. R. Kolbet, eds., *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 191-201. For an introduction to Antiochene theology and exegesis, see R. C. Hill, *Of Prophets and Poets: Antioch Fathers on the Bible* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007).

²⁶⁴ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 182-185.

Theodore of Mopsuestia, the foremost exegete of the Antiochene tradition, died in 428. The association of the school with dyophysite theology (Nestorianism) following Cyril of Alexandria's attack on Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore in 438, however, meant that the adherents of the School of Edessa were forced to move East, eventually to Nisibis, beyond the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire and under Sasanian control.²⁶⁵ Despite this physical translation, Theodore's influence, however, continued to grow. By the time his writings were eventually condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, his writings circulated in Greek, with translations in Latin and Syriac.²⁶⁶ Theodore wrote commentaries on nearly all the books of the Bible, as well as dogmatic and apologetic works.²⁶⁷ His exegesis of the creation accounts in Genesis influenced the homilies on creation of Narsai, the first director of the School of Nisibis and the prime proponent of dyophysite theology. Conversely, they also influenced the *Hexameron* of Jacob of Serugh, despite his active condemnation of Antiochene writers in his letters.²⁶⁸ Babai the Great

²⁶⁵ Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 19-20.

²⁶⁶ A. H. Becker, 'The Dynamic Reception of Theodore of Mopsuestia in the Sixth Century: Greek, Syriac, and Latin,' in S. F. Johnson, ed., *Greek Literature in Late Antiquity: Dynamism, Didacticism, Classicism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 29; F. G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2009), 4-7.

²⁶⁷ For a survey of Theodore's works, see D. Z. Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible: A Study of his Old Testament Exegesis* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 26-36.

²⁶⁸ A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 116; Becker, 'Dynamic Reception,' 39. For a broader discussion of Antiochene influence on West-Syrian exegesis, particularly that mediated through John Chrysostom, see C. Molenberg, 'The Silence of the Sources:

described Theodore as ‘the perfect disciple of the apostles and the shrine of the Holy Spirit.’²⁶⁹ His subsequent position as the primary exegetical authority for the Church of the East is confirmed by reference to him in biblical commentaries simply as *ܩܘܪܕܢܐ*, ‘the Interpreter.’²⁷⁰

One of the particular effects of Theodore’s influence is a transformation of Antiochene exegesis concerning the construction of the Ark and the Tabernacle in the later chapters of the Book of Exodus.²⁷¹ The earliest Antiochene exegesis of Exodus (as demonstrated by writers such as Eusebius of Emesa and Ephrem) do not

The Sixth Century and East Syrian “Antiochene” Exegesis,’ in P. Allen and E. Jeffreys, eds., *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?* (Brisbane: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1996), 146-148.

²⁶⁹ S. Brock, ‘The Christology of the Church of the East,’ in D. Afinogenov and A. Muraviev, eds., *Traditions and Heritage of the Christian East* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo ‘Indrik’, 1996), 163.

²⁷⁰ Becker, ‘Dynamic Reception,’ 39; For the influence on Isaac of the ‘infantile Adam’ tradition seen in Theodore and Narsai’s exegesis of Genesis, see J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh’s Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27-47; S. Brock, A. Butts, G. Kiraz, and L. Van Rompay, eds., *GEDSH* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), s.v. ‘Theodore of Mopsuestia.’ Adam Becker has shown that the reception of Theodore’s thought in the East Syrian milieu is more complicated than scholars have thought; whilst Theodore is proclaimed as the interpreter *par excellence* by East Syrian writers and synods, traces of allegorical exegesis and the influence of Evagrius can be seen in the East Syrian Exegetical tradition. Becker, *Fear of God*, 116-117, 122. Isaac of Nineveh refers to Theodore as ‘the Blessed Interpreter’ in II. XIV, 36.

²⁷¹ Cf. Exodus 25-40. For earliest Jewish and Christian exegesis concerning the Tabernacle, particularly within the Alexandrian School, see Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Tabernacle Imagery*, 35-46.

offer much interpretation of these chapters.²⁷² Bas Ter Haar Romeny suggests that this is because the Antiochene exegetes found little of historical interest in the descriptions of the Tabernacle and the sacrifices and, opposing allegorism, could do little with the biblical text.²⁷³ He posits that this aversion to the later chapters of Exodus, present in writers such as Eusebius of Emesa, is the reason chapters 25-31 of Exodus are condensed into a few lines in Ephrem's commentary: the last part of the commentary might not be lost, as has been thought, but may never have been written.²⁷⁴

²⁷² R. B. ter Haar Romeny, 'Early Antiochene Commentaries on Exodus,' *SP* 30 (1997), 117. For an introduction to Eusebius of Emesa's commentary, see R. B. ter Haar Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress: The Use of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac Biblical Texts in Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis*, *Traditio Exegetica Graeca* 6 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 12-19. Eusebius' commentary is known through catenae and in an Armenian translation, cf. V. Hovhannessian, ed. *Eusèbe d'Émèse. Commentaire de l'Octateuque* (Venezia: S. Lazzaro, 1980). For Ephrem's commentary, see A. Salvesen, trans., *The Exodus Commentary of St Ephrem: A Fourth Century Syriac Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, *Mōrān 'Ethō* 8 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 1. For the connection of Ephrem's commentary on Exodus to the Antiochene school, see L. Van Rompay, 'Antiochene Biblical Interpretation: Greek and Syriac,' in J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay, eds., *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 104.

²⁷³ ter Haar Romeny, 'Early Antiochene Commentaries on Exodus,' 117.

²⁷⁴ ter Haar Romeny, 'Early Antiochene Commentaries on Exodus,' 118. It is worth noting, however, that Gennadius reports that Ephrem's spiritual father, Jacob of Nisibis, wrote a work *On the Construction of the Tabernacle*, and so this is unlikely to have simply been of no interest to Ephrem. Gennadius, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, I. Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus describes the construction of the Tabernacle in typological terms: 'And I am persuaded that none of these things has been ordered in vain, none without a reason, none in a grovelling manner or unworthy of the legislation of God and the ministry of Moses, even though it be difficult in each type to find a theory descending to the most delicate details, to every point about the Tabernacle itself, and its measures and materials, and the

It is Theodore of Mopsuestia, more than half a century after Eusebius of Emesa, who first allows for a typological interpretation of these passages in the Antiochene school, seeing the Tabernacle as representing the two worlds, earthly and heavenly.²⁷⁵ His typological interpretation of the Tabernacle and its furnishings allows for the historical specificity that was considered essential in Antiochene exegesis without relying on the more speculative allegorism. This typology is clearly derived from his reading of the Letter to the Hebrews, but in subsequent Antiochene exegesis Theodore's interpretations are read back into the text of Exodus. Robert Devreesse has collected a number of extracts attributed to Theodore from the *Catanae of Nicephorus on the Octateuch* that outline this typology.²⁷⁶ He suggests that these passages come from Theodore's commentary on Hebrews 9 rather than a commentary on Exodus, based on the strong emphasis on the two worlds in these

Levites and Priests who carried them, and all the particulars which were enacted about the Sacrifices and the purifications and the Offerings.' C. G. Browne, and J. E. Swallow, trans., *Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series II, vii (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), XLV, 11.

²⁷⁵ ter Haar Romeny, 'Early Antiochene Commentaries on Exodus,' 117. R. Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste* (Citta del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1948), 25-27. For a general survey of Theodore's theology of the two *katastaseis* (worlds, ages) see McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 11, and A. Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, i, tr. J. Bowden (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd, 1975), 422.

²⁷⁶ For instance, Ἡ δὲ λυχνία σύμβολον ἦν τῆς ἀποτελουμένης παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμέρας. Ὅθεν καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς φωστῆρας εἶχε συμβόλαιον τῆς ἐβδομάδος τῶν ἡμερῶν. 'The lamp-stand was a symbol of the day made (accomplished, perfected) by God. From where also he had the seven candles (lit. light-givers, the branches of the lamp-stand) as a symbol of the number of seven of the days.' See also, Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*, 26, n. 1, 2; 27, n. 1, 2, 3, 4.

quotations which underlies the typology as it appears in the Letter to the Hebrews.²⁷⁷

As well as in the *Catanae of Nicephorus on the Octateuch*, this is also clearly seen in Theodoret of Cyrus' *The Questions on the Octateuch*, which offer a much more extensive treatment of the latter part of Exodus than earlier exegetes.²⁷⁸

This same exegetical theme is also found in Theodore's commentary on baptism, preserved in Syriac. He writes,

‘Thus the law contained the shadow of the good things to come, as those who lived under it had only a figure of the future things. In this way they only performed their service as a sign and a shadow of the heavenly things, because that service gave, by means of the tabernacle the things that took place in it, a kind of revelation, in figure, of the life which is going to be in heaven, and which our Lord Christ showed to us by His ascension into it.’²⁷⁹

The fact that Theodore draws this typological approach to the Tabernacle from the Letter to the Hebrews means that his exegesis has a particular cosmological focus. In this passage, Theodore clearly echoes the language of Hebrews 9. 11 where Christ

²⁷⁷ Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*, 25, n. 2.

²⁷⁸ R. C. Hill, trans., *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch*, 2 vols, The Library of Early Christianity (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), i, 315, n. 2.

²⁷⁹ A. Mingana, ed. and trans., *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni, Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus 6 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1933), 19.

the high priest enters the ‘the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation).’²⁸⁰ The typology contrasts the earthly and the heavenly, things made by human hands and things made by God. For the author of Hebrews (as for Theodore) the entrance of Christ into the heavenly Tabernacle has soteriological consequences: ‘he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.’²⁸¹ This cosmological vision of the Ark, the Tabernacle and its furnishings, laid out in Hebrews and used by Theodore, has its roots in Jewish exegetical traditions.²⁸² 2 Maccabees 2. 4-8, for instance, details how the Prophet Jeremiah hid the tent, the Ark and the altar of incense in a cave, the location of which would be revealed by God when ‘God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy.’²⁸³ This demonstrates the early development of an association between the Ark of the Covenant and eschatological expectation.²⁸⁴

This cosmological understanding of the Ark lies behind the tradition present in Philo, Josephus and the Letter to the Hebrews which sees the earthly tabernacle as a mirror of the heavenly court. In Philo’s *Life of Moses*, the tabernacle is a symbol of cosmic significance: the cherubim on the mercy seat represent the creative and kingly power

²⁸⁰ The same image appears again in Hebrews 9. 24.

²⁸¹ Hebrews 9. 24.

²⁸² For the connection between Antiochene exegesis and Rabbinical traditions, albeit at a later period, see R. B. ter Haar Romeny, ‘Eusebius of Emesa’s Commentary on Genesis,’ in Frishman and Van Rompay, eds., *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, 141-142.

²⁸³ 2 Maccabees 2. 7.

²⁸⁴ For the ‘hidden Ark’ legend, see S. Weitzman, ‘Myth, History and Mystery in the Copper Scroll,’ in H. Najman and J. Newman, eds., *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 243.

of God.²⁸⁵ The lampstand is a figure of the movement of the sun and moon, and the branches of the lampstand are types of the planets.²⁸⁶ Likewise, the altar of incense, situated in the middle of the tabernacle, represents earth and water, situated in the centre of the universe.²⁸⁷ This cosmic typology is also found in Josephus, who describes the partition of the tabernacle as an imitation of the division of the created order.²⁸⁸ This typology is given new theological significance in the Letter to the Hebrews, where Christ is understood as a cosmic high priest, entering the holy place to offer the blood, not of animals, but of his own sacrifice.²⁸⁹

Following Philo and Josephus, as well as the Letter to the Hebrews, the idea of the tabernacle as a symbol of the universe emerges in Patristic exegesis, particularly in the Alexandrian school.²⁹⁰ Clement of Alexandria describes the altar of incense as a symbol of the earth placed in the middle of the universe, and the lampstand as a symbol of the planets (though Clement also adds that the lampstand is a symbol of

²⁸⁵ F. H. Colson, trans., *Philo. On Abraham. On Joseph. On Moses*, Loeb Classical Library 289 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), II. 20. J. Daniélou, 'La Symbolique Cosmique au Temple de Jerusalem chez Philon et Joseph,' in R. Bloch, ed., *Le Symbolisme Cosmique des Monuments Religieux* (Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957), 83-90.

²⁸⁶ Philo, *Life of Moses*, XXI.

²⁸⁷ Philo, *Life of Moses*, XXI.

²⁸⁸ H. St J. Thackeray, trans., *Josephus. Jewish Antiquities, Volume I: Books 1-3*, Loeb Classical Library 242 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), III. 6, 4.

²⁸⁹ Hebrews 9. 11-14.

²⁹⁰ For a brief survey of this theme, cf. A. Holder, 'The Mosaic Tabernacle in Early Christian Exegesis,' *SP* 25 (1993), 101-106. See also, Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery*, 35-46.

the light of Christ).²⁹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, in the second of his *Theological Orations*, describes the ‘Tabernacle of Moses’ as a ‘figure of the whole creation – I mean the entire system of things visible and invisible.’²⁹² It is understood from this, that God’s presence undergirds and sustains the entire created order: the universe is ordered like the Mosaic tabernacle, with God present in the Holy of Holies.

Theodore’s exegesis, drawn from Jewish exegetical traditions and mediated through the Letter to the Hebrews, does not reflect a unique Antiochene perspective, but his emphasis on the two worlds allows for a typological interpretation of the Tabernacle within the boundaries of Antiochene exegesis for the first time. His understanding of the heavenly Tabernacle based on Hebrews is subsequently read back into Antiochene treatments of the Book of Exodus, as has already been demonstrated in relation to Theodoret of Cyrus. One particular consequence of this is that the passages dealing with the construction of the Tabernacle in the later chapters of Exodus came to assume a cosmological significance in the Antiochene tradition.

The *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes presents one of the clearest examples of this.²⁹³ Written in the sixth century, this treatise combines Greek

²⁹¹ A. Le Boullec, and P. Voulet, eds. and trans., *Les Stromates. Stromate V*, Sources Chrétiennes 278 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1981), i, V. 6.

²⁹² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations*, II. 31.

²⁹³ W. Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustes: Topographie chrétienne*, 3 vols (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968-1973). See also W. Wolska-Conus, *La Topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustes: théologie et science au VI siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962). For the relationship between the text of the *Christian Topography* and the miniatures preserved in the manuscript

philosophy and Syriac exegesis to demonstrate that the whole of creation was designed in accordance with God's plan of salvation.²⁹⁴ The author, who is not named in the text, was an Alexandrian merchant who had travelled widely.²⁹⁵ He was a pupil of Mar Aba the Great (referred to as 'Patrikios' and 'that most divine teacher' in the *Christian Topography*), when the latter travelled from the School of Nisibis to lecture in Alexandria, and this accounts for the strong influence of Syriac exegetical traditions in the work.²⁹⁶ This influence is particularly notable in Cosmas' description of the construction of the Tabernacle. At the beginning of the fifth book he writes, 'As regards the Tabernacle built by Moses in the desert, it is now time to give a description, as we have received it from that most divine teacher...'²⁹⁷ Two interpretative principles underpin Cosmas' description: he notes that the Tabernacle was built according to the plan revealed by God to Moses on Sinai, and, drawing on Hebrews 9, that the earthly sanctuary is contrasted with the heavenly.²⁹⁸ These principles are key to East Syrian exegesis of the Tabernacle, but they are drawn from Scripture. The influence of the East Syrian tradition on Cosmas' work is clearer in those places where it diverges from the Biblical account. Maja Kominko notes that in the description of the loaves Moses is commanded to place on the table of the

tradition, see M. Kominko, *The World of Kosmas: Illustrated Byzantine Codices of the Christian Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁹⁴ Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 1-2.

²⁹⁵ Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 13.

²⁹⁶ Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 16; V. Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus: Fragments from the Commentary of Isho'dad of Merv and the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes,' *Cristianesimo nella storia* 38/1 (2017), 30.

²⁹⁷ Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, V. 1. Translated in Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus,' 36.

²⁹⁸ Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 105-106.

Tabernacle in Exodus 25. 30, Cosmas offers a cosmological interpretation suggesting the division of the loaves reflects the months of the year and the four seasons.²⁹⁹ This same symbolism is found in Theodore of Mopsuestia, who is the likely source for this interpretation in the *Christian Topography*.³⁰⁰

Vittorio Berti has demonstrated that Cosmas's writing on the Tabernacle had its origins in the (now lost) exegetical work of Mar Aba on Exodus.³⁰¹ For Cosmas, the Tabernacle is the model of the whole cosmos with the earthly creation fashioned like the vaulted chest of the Ark of the Covenant, and beyond the vault, lies the Holy of Holies, the second *katastasis*.³⁰² This vision of creation, drawn from the exegetical school of Mar Aba and deeply rooted in Theodore of Mopsuestia's thought, exerted a profound influence in the Church of the East. Berti notes that this legacy is behind the description of the cosmos given by Isaac of Nineveh in I. 188:

‘The form of the whole world is length and breadth. The head is the east, the end is the west, the right part is the north, and the left part is the south. The earth is as a bed and the highest heaven as a vault. The second heaven is as a wheel fitted to the higher one, and the borders of heaven and earth are joined

²⁹⁹ Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 108.

³⁰⁰ Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 108; For the Greek text of Theodore's interpretation preserved in the *Catena of Nicephoras on the Octateuch*, see Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*, 26, n. 2. For further examples of Cosmas' debt to Theodore, particularly in relation to his shared heritage with Narsai and the School of Nisibis, see Becker, *Fear of God*, 122.

³⁰¹ Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus,' 45-46.

³⁰² Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus,' 45-46; Kominko, *World of Kosmas*, 43-45.

one to the other. The ocean surrounds them as a belt. Beyond it are high mountains ascending unto the sky...'³⁰³

He compares this with a passage from the *Christian Topography* and further suggests that as Isaac begins his passage with the particle ܐܝܢ 'indeed,' it is likely to be a quotation.³⁰⁴ Mar Aba continues to be cited as an authority in the commentary on Exodus by Isho'dad of Merv, writing in the ninth century, thus highlighting the absorption of Theodore's thought concerning the construction of the Tabernacle into the mainstream exegetical tradition of the Church of the East.³⁰⁵

The East Syrian tradition connecting the Ark and Christology developed in this context. For these authors, the typological relationship between the earthly Tabernacle and the heavenly Holy of Holies finds its fulfilment in Christ, who, as High Priest, enters into the presence of God and offers the sacrifice that abrogates the sacrifices of the Mosaic Law.³⁰⁶ The cosmological aspect of this typology sets up a relationship between the furnishings of the Temple and the created order as well as a pattern for salvation history, and it is for this reason that the Ark of the Covenant,

³⁰³ I. 188.

³⁰⁴ Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, V. 34; Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus,' 47, n. 52, 53.

³⁰⁵ Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus,' 42, 44-45.

³⁰⁶ Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, V. 1. For a brief discussion of this theme in Theodore, Cosmas and Narsai, see J. Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (Leiden University, 1992), 158-159.

the dwelling place of God in the Old Testament, becomes typologically associated with Christ in the East Syrian tradition.

3.2.1 Cosmology, the Ark and Christology in the Antiochene Tradition

The cosmological vision drawn from the Letter to the Hebrews leads to a specific association between the Ark of the Covenant and Christ in a number of writers from the East Syrian tradition, not least Isaac in his homily on the cross. These writers interpret the mercy-seat covering the Ark (described in Exodus 25. 17-22) as a type of Christ's human nature.³⁰⁷ In II. XI, 14-15, Isaac identifies the ܠܥܠܝܐ, 'metal plate' (that covers the Ark) with Christ's humanity: 'Now the orthodox Fathers say that that leaf (ܠܥܠܝܐ) depicted the symbol of our Lord's humanity.'³⁰⁸ The same typology is also found in III. VII, 11, where Isaac writes,

'If that mute metal leaf (ܠܥܠܝܐ) which manifests the mystery of Your human nature, gave pardon to those who earnestly entreat, how much more You, glorious image of the divinity!'³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Various Christological interpretations of the Ark appeared in the Alexandrian tradition, not least through Origen who identified the mercy-seat with Christ's soul. This clearly reflects a different tradition to the typology used by East Syrian writers, the Christological implications of which would be unacceptable to the Alexandrians. Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery*, 35-46.

³⁰⁸ II. XI, 15.

³⁰⁹ III. VII, 11.

Narsai's homily, *On the Fashioning of the Temporal Tabernacle*, has at its core the role of Christ as the one who expiates sin and the renewal of creation.³¹⁰ This comes from a typological reading of the Ark of the Covenant:

‘In the plate of gold [ܟܘܢܝܢܐ ܟܘܢܝܢܐ], the name of which is expounded as ‘expiation,’ the expiation of sins which is through our Saviour was being expounded. By the name of expiation was that plate [ܟܘܢܝܢܐ] called not that it expiates but rather that it is the symbol of the Expiator. The symbol of expiation was hidden in the plate of the law [ܟܘܢܝܢܐ ܟܘܢܝܢܐ] and it was awaiting the time when the Expiator of sins would reveal it.’³¹¹

Narsai subsequently connects this plate of gold that covers the Ark with Christ's humanity and divinity:

‘By the name ‘plate’ [ܟܘܢܝܢܐ] it was relating His bodiliness and by ‘expiation,’ the force of the Essence which was dwelling in him.’³¹²

³¹⁰ Frishman, *The Ways and Means*, 128-131.

³¹¹ Narsai, *On the Fashioning of the Temporal Tabernacle*, 165-170. The manuscript Frishman uses for her edition (BL. Or. 5463) reads ܟܘܢܝܢܐ, which has a range of meanings including ‘rite, liturgy’ and ecclesiastical ‘furniture, ornaments.’ This manuscript was copied at Urmia in 1893, and Frishman amends the reading to ܟܘܢܝܢܐ based on sense and three other manuscript readings.

³¹² Narsai, *On the Fashioning of the Temporal Tabernacle*, 183-184. BL. Or. 5463 does read ܟܘܢܝܢܐ here.

The clear connection between the Ark of the Covenant and Christ stems from the cosmological vision outlined at the beginning of the homily and the place of the Tabernacle in salvation history. God says to Moses,

‘The one world and the other, temporal and future, did my Will fashion; you too, fashion a tabernacle and a tabernacle in that very form.’³¹³

The Christological interpretation of the mercy-seat is also found in Book V of the *Christian Topography*. Cosmas demonstrates implicitly from Scripture that Christ passed into the heavens:

‘And again making clear one more time that Christ is in heaven, [Paul] says “God set him forth, an instrument of propitiation by his own blood,” because the mercy-seat (ἰλαστήριον) was placed in the second Tabernacle.’³¹⁴

He later cites the same verse (Romans 3.25) but is explicit in his use of typological language:

‘The mercy-seat was the type (τύπος) of the Lord Christ according to the flesh, as the Apostle Paul says, “God set him forth, an instrument of propitiation by his own blood.”’³¹⁵

³¹³ Narsai, *On the Fashioning of the Temporal Tabernacle*, 53-54.

³¹⁴ Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, V. 29.

³¹⁵ Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, V. 36.

The cosmological context for this typology, however, is most clearly seen in a passing reference in which Cosmas writes,

‘And what is there to say of the Tabernacle, which is an image (ἐκμαγεῖον) of the whole world, in which was placed the mercy-seat (ἰλαστήριον), holding the rank (τάξιτιν ἐπέχον) of the Lord Christ? But so as not to lengthen our discourse, having already said these things often, let us come to the prophecy itself through the words [of Moses.]’³¹⁶

The typology connecting the mercy-seat with Christ’s humanity as expressed in Narsai and Cosmas Indikopleustes was sufficiently common to be understood without further explanation in Cyrus of Edessa’s *Explanation of the Resurrection*.³¹⁷ Cyrus raises the hypothetical objection to the universal reach of Christ’s sacrifice, questioning how the redemption of men and angels might come about through a human being. He responds,

‘We say against one who asks this: (This can be proved) from many things, the plate (Ⲡⲉⲗ), I say, the serpent, the lamb and so on.’³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, V. 112.

³¹⁷ Frishman, *The Ways and Means*, 156. For Cyrus of Edessa’s Explanations see W. F. Macomber, ed. and trans., *Six Explanations of the Liturgical Feasts by Cyrus of Edessa: An East Syrian Theologian of the Mid Sixth Century*, CSCO 355-356 (Leuven: CSCO, 1974); Becker, *Fear of God*, 101.

³¹⁸ Cyrus of Edessa, *Explanation of the Resurrection*, II. 8.

Like Cosmas, Cyrus does not expand this remark, ‘so as not, however, to lengthen our discourse.’³¹⁹ William Macomber identifies the plate in question with that in Exodus 28. 36, tied to Aaron’s mitre, but Judith Frishman rightly observes in the light of Narsai’s homily on the Tabernacle, that this plate is in fact the mercy-seat covering the Ark.³²⁰ The trio of symbols employed by Cyrus in this passage are all types of Christ’s humanity connected with his sacrifice on the cross, but it is also worth noting that Cyrus emphasises the renewal of the whole created order by the resurrection and employs the liturgical language of Christ’s sacrifice drawn from the Letter to the Hebrews.³²¹ Cyrus’ brief remark in his *Explanation of the Resurrection* stands in the tradition of Narsai and indicates the widespread use of this typology.

The typology is also found in Babai’s *Commentary on Evagrius’ Kephalaia Gnostica*. A number of Evagrius’ *kephalaia* deal with spiritual interpretations of the priestly garments as described in Exodus 28.³²² In IV, 52, Evagrius writes, ‘the intelligible plate is the knowledge of the Holy Trinity,’ describing the plate worn by Aaron and the high priests on their foreheads.³²³ Babai, however, takes this to be the

³¹⁹ Cyrus of Edessa, *Explanation of the Resurrection*, II. 8.

³²⁰ Macomber, *Six Explanations*, 92, n. 8.3; Frishman, *The Ways and Means*, 156. The Peshitta of Exodus 28. 36 has ܚܘܢܐ, ‘crown,’ for this plate.

³²¹ Cyrus of Edessa, *Explanation of the Resurrection*, II. 8; IV. 4. The Theodoran contrast between the earthly and heavenly Tabernacle, and between Christ and Moses, can be seen in Cyrus of Edessa, *Explanation of the Ascension*, III. 10.

³²² Babai, *Comm. KG*. IV, 48, 52, 66, 69, 72, 75, 79.

³²³ ‘ܥܘܓܪܝܘܫܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ ܕܩܥܘܠܐܝܐ’ I. L. E. Ramelli, trans., *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, Writings from the Graeco-Roman World (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 227.

to absorb this well-known Christological typology into the new modes of spiritual exegesis current in monastic circles from the sixth century.

3.2.2 The Christological Implications of the Ark-Christ Typology

The phrase ܠܒ ܦܘܠܘܢ 'he put on the body,' is one of the earliest ways of expressing the fact of the Incarnation in Syriac, already appearing in fourth century writers.³³⁰

Aphrahat uses this clothing metaphor and it is a very common image in Ephrem, who, for instance, writes in *Hymns on the Nativity* XXIII, 13,

‘All these changes did the Merciful One effect,
Stripping off His glory and putting on a body;
For he had devised a way to reclothe Adam
In that glory which Adam had stripped off.’³³¹

of Christological Texts: Cambridge University Library MS. Oriental 1319, 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), xlvi–xlvi, 123–125; A. Vaschalde, ed. and trans., *Babai Magni: Liber de Unione*, CSCO 79–80 (Leuven: CSCO, 1915).

³³⁰ Brock, ‘The Christology of the Church of the East,’ 167

³³¹ Cited in S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), xxiv. A. Lehto, trans., *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 27 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), XXIII, 49. For the image of clothing in Aphrahat, see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 69–73. For this theme in Ephrem, see S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 39; H. Hunt, “‘Clothed in the Body’: the Garment of Flesh and the Garment of Glory in Syrian Religious Anthropology,” *SP* 54 (2012), 167–176. Hannah Hunt also draws out the

Despite the prevalence of this imagery in early Syriac theological texts, it came to be rejected in the West Syrian tradition.³³² The theological ambivalence to the language of Christ ‘putting on a body’ at the Incarnation is most clearly articulated by Philoxenos of Mabbug.³³³ David Michelson notes the tone of frustration in Philoxenos’ commentaries on Scripture as part of his attempt to use Greek theological idioms in Syriac.³³⁴ The example Michelson gives is from Philoxenos’

typological use of this image as Christ’s ‘putting on the body’ is contrasted, for instance in Ephrem, with Moses veiling his face. H. Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 142-143. It is also a common image in the Syriac liturgical traditions, see S. Brock, ‘The Robe of Glory: A Biblical Image in the Syriac Tradition,’ *The Way* 39/3 (1999), 247-259; and S. J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology: with special reference to the Maronite Tradition* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 44.

³³² Brock, ‘The Christology of the Church of the East,’ 166. Examples of this metaphor continue to be found among some writers in the West Syrian tradition, particularly those of popular and devotional texts. See, D. G. K. Taylor, ‘West Syrian Christology in the Sixth Century: The Psalm Commentary of Daniel of Ṣalāḥ,’ in T. Hainthaler, D. Ansorge, and A. Wucherpfennig, eds., *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der einen Kirche: Christologie - Kirchen des Ostens - Ökumenische Dialoge* (Freiburg: Herder, 2019), 265-266. For an example of this metaphor from a fifteenth-century Syrian Orthodox source, see Thomas A. Carlson, *Christianity in Fifteenth-Century Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 139, n. 136. This clearly reflects a significantly different milieu to the hotly contested Christological controversies of Late Antiquity.

³³³ S. Brock, ‘Clothing Metaphors as a means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition,’ in M. Schmidt, ed., *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter. Internationales Kolloquium, Eichstätt 1981*, Eichstätter Beiträge. Abteilung Philosophie und Theologie 4 (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1982), 18.

³³⁴ D. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 166.

commentary on the Johannine Prologue: commenting on the Peshitta text of Hebrews 5.7 (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, ‘in the days of his flesh’), Philoxenos shows the danger of theological error that lurks in poor translation:

‘in place of this they translated “when He was clothed in the flesh,” and instead of Paul, they inclined to the position of Nestorius who cast the body onto the Word as one does a garment onto an ordinary body, or as purple is put on kings.’³³⁵

For Philoxenos, this mistranslation gave an advantage to the dyophysite cause. His objection to the clothing metaphor to describe the Incarnation, and the objection of the Alexandrian tradition more widely, is that it undermines the fundamental unity of Christ’s humanity and divinity.³³⁶

The same objection is found in Jacob of Serugh’s *Letter to the Himyarites*, which contains a lengthy exposition on Christology.³³⁷ Jacob, however, unlike Philoxenos uses the idiom of clothing to describe the Incarnation, but with a qualification. He writes,

³³⁵ Cited in Michelson, *Practical Christology*, 122.

³³⁶ B. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 106. Philoxenos prefers the language of ‘becoming’ to describe the Incarnation. Michelson, *Practical Christology*, 21.

³³⁷ For a study of this letter, see P. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125-131.

‘The Father desired and sent him to the world, and he came down from heaven with the message of Gabriel. He dwelled in the virgin who was made holy by the Holy Spirit so that she might be a mother to him by grace. He was clothed from her spiritually with a body without an addition [ܠܚܘܒܘܢܝܗ] to the hypostases. He was born in the flesh from the seed of the house of David without intercourse.’³³⁸

Philip Forness notes that the language of ‘addition’ (ܠܚܘܒܘܢܝܗ) used by Jacob is often invoked in his Christological writings and his polemic against diophysitism.³³⁹ Like Philoxenos, Jacob is concerned about the interpretation of this metaphor that might undermine the unity of Christ’s humanity and divinity and lead to a ‘quaternity’ of *hypostases* in the Godhead.³⁴⁰ These miaphysite objections to the language of clothing to describe the Incarnation account for the metaphor’s decline in the West Syrian tradition, despite its prevalence in as authoritative a source as Ephrem.

The formula ܠܚ ܘܢܝܗ ‘he put on the body,’ and the metaphor of clothing for the Incarnation continue to be used in the Church of the East in Late Antiquity: whilst the Syriac term ܘܢܝܗܘܬܐ, a calque on the Greek verb ἐσαρκώθη, came to be used over the course of the fifth century, the notion of a humanity which Christ ‘put on’ was echoed in the sixth century synods of the Church of the East.³⁴¹ The *Letter of Mar Aba* of 544 contains reference in its account of the orthodox faith to Christ’s ܠܚ ܘܢܝܗܘܬܐ

³³⁸ Cited in Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 129.

³³⁹ Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 129.

³⁴⁰ Michelson, *Practical Christology*, 163.

³⁴¹ Brock, ‘The Christology of the Church of the East,’ 167-168.

ܠܗܘܘܢܐ ‘garment of humanity,’ and the creedal formula of the Synod of Mar Ezekiel in 576 uses the phrase ܡܠܗܘܘܢܐ ܠܗܘܘܢܐ ‘in the robe of his humanity.’³⁴² In his Christological work, *The Book of Union*, Babai suggests that the image of a garment and its wearer illustrates the voluntary character of the joining of the two natures.³⁴³ The same metaphor can be seen in the great flowering of East Syrian mysticism: Isaac himself writes in II. XI, ‘For the Cross is Christ’s garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the divinity.’³⁴⁴ For the sixth and seventh century dyophysite theologians of the Church of the East, the language of clothing was still a productive metaphor for describing the Incarnation.

The typology connecting Christ with the Ark of the Covenant, and more specifically associating Christ’s humanity with the mercy-seat covering the Ark, has similarly dyophysite overtones, which accounts for its use in East Syrian sources and its absence in the West Syrian exegetical tradition. It is a typology that continued to be used in the exegetical tradition of the Church of the East in eighth and ninth century writers: Isho‘dad of Merv (fl. 850), citing Romans 3.25, wrote in his commentary on Exodus:

³⁴² J. B. Chabot, ed. and trans., *Synodicon orientale, ou, Recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris: Impr. nationale, 1902), 542, 576.

³⁴³ Babai, *Liber de Unione*, 233.

³⁴⁴ II. XI, 24.

‘By the name ‘plate’ it was relating His bodiliness
and by ‘expiation,’ the force of the Essence which was dwelling in him.’³⁴⁷

There is a clear distinction between Christ’s humanity and his divinity in all these examples, and the language of ‘indwelling’ is strictly Theodoran.³⁴⁸ The typology is open to the same charges made by Philoxenos against clothing imagery from a miaphysite perspective, that this image undermines the unity of Christ’s humanity and divinity. This Christological interpretation of the Ark is not, therefore, found in West Syrian sources as, like the clothing metaphor rejected by West Syrians, this typology suggests that Christ’s humanity is something ‘put on.’ Instead, the emphasis in the miaphysite tradition is on a typology that sees the Virgin Mary as a new Ark. In *Hymns on the Nativity* XVI, 16, for example, Ephrem writes:

‘... Joseph rose
To serve in the presence of his Lord
Who was within Mary. The priest serves
In the presence of Your Ark because of Your holiness.’³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Narsai, *On the Fashioning of the Temporal Tabernacle*, 183-184.

³⁴⁸ McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 34-41.

³⁴⁹ K. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), XVI, 16.

Ephrem also treats the typology of Mary and the Ark in a variety of texts, including *Hymns on the Nativity* IV, 113 and *Hymns on Virginitv* XXV, 11.³⁵⁰

Mary is also conceived of as the new Ark in the Syrian Orthodox liturgy. The *General Rogation of Saint Jacob* at morning prayer on the fourth day in the *Shimo*, contains the verse,

‘Blessed are you, Mary, that you were represented in a mystery, the Ark that Moses made [as] a type. In it were the Tablets [of the Law] divinely written, but in you Mary was truly the bread of life.’³⁵¹

This Mary-Ark typology is also the dominant emphasis in the miaphysite tradition of Ethiopia, in which the veneration of the Ark of the Covenant is well documented.³⁵²

³⁵⁰ For a similar example in Jacob of Serug, see *Homily III* on the Mother of God. Jacob describes Mary’s encounter with Elizabeth: ‘While the Ark was being carried, David had danced for joy,/ so that he too might attest to the figure of the King, his Lord./ He typified in figure the way of Mary with John,/ for also that maiden was the ark of the Godhead.’ M. Hansbury, trans., *Jacob of Serug: On the Mother of God*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 74.

³⁵¹ Translated from the Syriac text in A. Bousquet, *Between the Twilights: An Interlinear Translation of the Syriac Orthodox Breviary* (printed by the author, 2019), 313. Another such example is found in the *Hymn to the Mother of God* at evening prayer on Saturday: ‘Moses represented you by the (burning) bush, and David, your father, by the Ark...’ Bousquet, *Between the Twilights*, 497.

³⁵² Ralph Lee discusses the development of the symbolic interpretations of Mary and the Ark in Ephrem and in Ethiopic literature from the fourth century to the fourteenth century. Lee shows the subtle change in emphasis with the earlier literature employing a range of imagery to signify divine immanence and the later literature becoming more narrowly focused on the Ark and the person of Mary, see R. Lee, *Symbolic Interpretations in Ethiopic and Ephremic Literature*, Eastern Christian

The Christ-Ark typology is particular to the East Syrian tradition because it is fundamentally a dyophysite mode of expression. When Isaac draws on this typology in II. XI, 14-15 ('Now the orthodox Fathers say that that leaf depicted the symbol of our Lord's humanity') or in III. VII, 11 (the *tassā* 'manifests the mystery of Your human nature'), he explicitly situates his writings in the Christological and exegetical traditions of the Church of the East.

3.3 Isaac's Christology and II. XI

The question of Isaac's Christology, particularly in relation to II. XI, is a vexed one. In the introduction to his Latin translation published in 1943, Jan van der Ploeg suggests that there is some doubt as to the authorship of the text, and goes on to write,

Studies (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 80-118. For examples of this typology in the Ethiopian tradition, see A. Tefera, *The Ethiopian Homily on the Ark of the Covenant: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of Dərsanä Şəyon*, Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 151, 153; J. A. McGuckin, trans., *Harp of Glory, Enzira Sebhat: An Alphabetical Hymn of Praise for the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), 28; *Liturgy Book of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: Preparatory Service, Anaphora of the Apostles and Anaphora of St. Dioscorus in Ge'ez, Amharic, English and English Phonetic Transcription* (Brooklyn, NY: Lion of Judah Society, 2012), 26-27. The only explicit association of the Ark and the Cross in the Ethiopian tradition of which I am aware is the suggestion by Maria Evangelatou that the rectangular base of Ethiopian hand crosses is a symbolic representation of the Ark of the Covenant. M. Evangelatou, *A Contextual Reading of Ethiopian Crosses through Form and Ritual: Kaleidoscopes of Meaning* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 273.

‘ce doute est renforcé par la façon dont l’auteur parle de l’union des deux natures dans le Christ qui, sur un point, semble s’écarter de la doctrine nestorienne traditionnelle.’³⁵³

Hilarion Alfeyev and John Behr reiterate this particular Christological interpretation of the text, though not to the extent of doubting the text’s authorship. Both authors use II. XI to distance Isaac from his ‘Nestorian’ context, making him more ‘Orthodox’: Alfeyev argues that in Isaac ‘we find a break with the extremes of diophysitism,’³⁵⁴ and similarly, Behr draws parallels with Gregory of Nyssa and places Isaac in opposition to Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus.³⁵⁵

Isaac uses the Christological idiom common in the East Syrian tradition. He is comfortable with the language of clothing to describe the Incarnation. In a passage in the *First Part*, Isaac writes,

‘For humility is the garment of divinity; for the word which became man, put it on and spoke in it with us, through our body...it has pleased Him to speak with us in a different way, concealing His majesty in the cover of flesh,

³⁵³ J. Van der Ploeg, ‘Un traité nestorien du culte de la croix,’ *Muséon* 56 (1943), 116.

³⁵⁴ Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, 58. Elsewhere, Alfeyev suggests that Isaac belonged to a pro-Chalcedon party within the Church of the East, see H. Alfeyev, ‘In Search of a Spiritual Pearl: Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Works,’ in Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 16-17

³⁵⁵ J. Behr, ‘St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,’ 93.

speaking to us while being in us, in the garment which Providence (ܠܘܗܝ) had woven from the womb of the virgin.’³⁵⁶

This is an image that also appears in his homily on the cross, as noted above:

‘For the Cross is Christ’s garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the divinity.’³⁵⁷

By the time Isaac was writing, the language of clothing had fallen out of use elsewhere in the Syriac world and so its use here endorses Isaac’s dyophysite Christology.

Another Christological image favoured by Isaac is that of Christ’s body as a ‘temple,’ often used with the language of indwelling.³⁵⁸ This is a prominent theme in II. V, for instance, where Christ is referred to as ‘the glorious Tabernacle of Your eternal Being.’³⁵⁹ This language is also found in II. XI: Isaac describes Christ as ‘the Man who completely became its temple [that is, of the “divine good pleasure,”]’ and as ‘that Man in whom the Divinity dwells.’³⁶⁰ This particular language of the ‘divine

³⁵⁶ I. 575. Isaac’s use of the image continues into I. 576. A similar image is found in Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Nativity* IV, 188, where Christ’s flesh is described as a garment woven by Mary.

³⁵⁷ II. XI, 24.

³⁵⁸ V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St Isaac of Nineveh*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 51 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 30-31.

³⁵⁹ II. V, 6.

³⁶⁰ II. XI, 12-13.

good pleasure’ dwelling in the Man Christ strongly reflects Theodore of Mopsuestia’s own Christological vision: he described the union of the Word and Christ’s humanity as the ‘indwelling of good pleasure in one *prosopon*.’³⁶¹ This is an important mode of expression for Theodore, and one on which Isaac draws.

The final observation to make on Isaac’s Christology is that he uses the phrase *ἑνωσις ἑκούσια*, ‘voluntary union,’ to describe the relationship between Christ’s humanity and divinity:

‘O Mystery exalted beyond every word and beyond silence, who became human in order to renew us by means of voluntary union with the flesh, reveal to me the path by which I may be raised up to Your mysteries.’³⁶²

This phrase, from Nestorius’ *Book of Heracleides*, was significant for Babai’s strictly dyophysite Christology.³⁶³ The formula’s importance for dyophysite theologians lay in its attempt to safeguard divine impassibility, which Nestorius had argued was compromised by any notion of hypostatic union.³⁶⁴

³⁶¹ Cited in McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 34.

³⁶² II. V, 7.

³⁶³ P. Bedjan, ed., *Nestorius. Le Livre d’Héraclide de Damas* (Paris: O. Harrassowitz, 1910), 264; Babai, *Liber de Unione*, 91.

³⁶⁴ B. Daley, ‘Antioch and Alexandria: Christology as Reflection on God’s Presence in History,’ in F. Murphy, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 130.

In his recent survey of Isaac's Christology in the context of contemporary East Syrian Christological thought, Valentin Vesa distinguishes a variety of opinions, seen primarily in the controversy over Henana of Adiabene in the late-sixth century and Sahdona in the early-seventh century.³⁶⁵ In light of this, Vesa suggests that on Christological questions, Isaac's position reflects a conciliatory, 'ecumenical mysticism.'³⁶⁶ Whilst there were competing theological agendas at work in Isaac's time in the Church of the East, and whilst Isaac largely eschews controversy in his writings, this characterisation of Isaac's Christological thought can hardly be the case. His Christological language reflects a strongly Theodoran emphasis on indwelling, and the clothing metaphor indicates his two-nature Christology. Perhaps most significantly, he uses the language of 'voluntary union' inherited from Nestorius and which was fundamental to the strict diophysitism of Babai that took hold in the Church of the East. Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* contains much of this Christological language.³⁶⁷

Beginning with Van der Ploeg's assertion that the homily's account of the union of the two natures in Christ reflects a departure from traditional Nestorian doctrine, the

³⁶⁵ Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 38-59. On the controversy surrounding each of these figures, see A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, CSCO 266 (Leuven: CSCO, 1965), 255; L. Abramowski, 'Martyrius-Sahdona and Dissent in the Church of the East,' in C. Jullien, ed., *Controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran sassanide (Chrétiens en terre d'Iran II)* Cahiers de Studia Iranica 36 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2008), 13-28.

³⁶⁶ Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 88.

³⁶⁷ For Isaac's explicitly Christological language in II. XI, see II. XI, 12 (Christ's humanity as a temple in which his divinity dwells); 15 (Ark-Christ typology); 21 (the two natures in Christ are 'preserved with their properties'); 24 (clothing metaphor).

few scholars who have written on this text have understood it to mean that Isaac's diophysitism was more moderate (and acceptable) than the Christology inherited from Theodore and promulgated through the synods of the Church of the East.³⁶⁸ The question of the union of Christ's humanity and divinity in II. XI is essential, therefore, to realising a proper understanding of Isaac's theological position. In contrast to Van der Ploeg, Alfeyev and Behr, the passages in II. XI concerning the union of natures in Christ can be accommodated within the theological world of Theodore, Babai and the synodal decrees of the Church of the East in the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries.

In II. XI, 12, Isaac attributes titles like 'God,' 'Creator,' and 'Lord,' to Christ's humanity just as to his divinity, writing,

'He granted to Him that He should be worshipped with Him indistinguishably, with a single act of worship for the Man who became Lord and for the Divinity equally, while the (two) natures are preserved with their properties, without there being any difference of honour.'³⁶⁹

Behr takes this passage to refer not to the Incarnation *per se*, but rather to the moment of Christ's Passion, 'the elevation of the man on the Cross to the honour of

³⁶⁸ Van der Ploeg, 'Un traité nestorien du culte de la croix,' 116; P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46.

³⁶⁹ II. XI, 12.

the divinity of the one who dwells in him.³⁷⁰ He then compares this passage with Gregory of Nyssa's work *Against Eunomius* in which he writes,

'The Right Hand of God... himself raised to his own height the man united to him, making him also, by the commixture, to be what he is by nature: he is Lord and King, and the King is called Christ; these things he made him too.'³⁷¹

Behr's comparison between Isaac and Gregory of Nyssa serves to distance Isaac from what he calls the 'Dyoprosopic Christology' of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia.³⁷² In this analysis, Behr mischaracterises Theodore's Christological thought and fails to consider the Christological modes of expression contemporary to Isaac in the Church of the East. Nestorius and Theodore both spoke of Christ's two natures united in one *prosopon*, and this was the Christological tradition inherited by the Church of the East.³⁷³ The phrase used by Isaac, 'the (two)

³⁷⁰ Behr, 'St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,' 91. This theme of starting with Passion to understand the Incarnation is a recurring one in Behr's work. See J. Behr, ed., and trans., *The Case Against Diodore and Theodore: Texts and their Contexts*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 43-44, and J. Behr, *John the Theologian and his Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4-5.

³⁷¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, III. 3, 40. Cited in Behr, 'St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,' 92.

³⁷² Behr, 'St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ,' 92-93.

³⁷³ Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great*, 84-85. For Theodore's understanding of *prosopon*, see McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 47-53. For a more extensive discussion, see F. G. McLeod, *The Roles of Christ's Humanity in Salvation: Insights from Theodore of Mopsuestia*

natures are preserved with their properties,’ in II. XI. 21 is an unusual but explicit reference to the East Syrian synods of 554 and 612.³⁷⁴ These synods, like Theodore and Babai, affirmed a union of natures in one *parsopa* (ܦܪܫܘܦܐ).³⁷⁵ The Christological language used by Isaac in II. XI, 12 is situated clearly within the East Syrian tradition, giving no reason to suppose that Isaac’s thought here reflects any divergence from the orthodoxy established by the synods of his church.³⁷⁶

In a similar argument, Alfeyev glosses the sharp contrast Isaac draws between Christ’s two natures,

‘This strongly dyophysite understanding of the person of Jesus Christ may appear to lead in the theological thought of Isaac to a division of the image of

(Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 144-175. Behr’s response to McLeod does not deal substantively with his argument. Behr, *The Case Against Diodore and Theodore*, 44, n. 126.

³⁷⁴ ܦܪܫܘܦܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ. This latter date cannot have been very long before Isaac was born. Brock, trans., *The Second Part*, 59, n. 21, 3. For partial translations of the *acta* of these synods, see S. Brock, ‘The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials,’ in G. Dragas and N. Nissiotis, eds., *Aksum Thyateira: a Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios of Thyateria and Great Britain* (London: Thyateria House, 1985), 135, 140-141.

³⁷⁵ Brock, ‘The Christology of the Church of the East,’ 135, 140-141.

³⁷⁶ For a similar passage see *KG*. III, 49: ‘Les deux [God and man] ayant été unis en une seule Personne, sans que les propriétés de chacune des natures soient confondues à cause de l’union.’ André Louf describes this as a ‘formule étonnement proche de la définition de Chalcédoine.’ A. Louf, trans., *Isaac le Syrien, Oeuvres spirituelles II. 41 Discours récemment découverts*, *Spiritualité Orientale* 81 (Bellefontaine: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2003), 140, n. 44.

the historical Jesus. But this is not the case. Isaac understands Christ as one person: God who came in human flesh... At the same time the man Jesus is simultaneously God the Word and the Creator of the universe.’³⁷⁷

In support of this interpretation, Alfeyev cites II. XI, 28:

‘O wonder! The Creator (clothed) in a human being enters the house of tax collectors and prostitutes... He was urging them, providing them, by means of His teaching, with assurance of reconciliation with Him.’³⁷⁸

Like Behr, Alfeyev wishes to suggest that anything expressing the unity of Christ’s natures must not accurately reflect the dyophysite Christology of the Church of the East. However, the point made implicitly by Isaac in II. XI about this union is explicit elsewhere: in I. 39, Isaac describes Christ as ‘the mediator of God and mankind, who was one in his two natures.’³⁷⁹ Such expression is entirely compatible with the Christological thought of Theodore of Mopsuestia, as noted in relation to Behr’s argument. The language of union is not alien to dyophysite thought.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, 55. Alfeyev also argues that Isaac’s language of ‘mingling’ of Creator and creation shows a distancing from classical dyophysitism. The same argument is taken up by Vesa in Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 113. This point is addressed by Patrik Hagman, who suggests Alfeyev gives undue Christological emphasis to one particular occurrence of $\Delta\psi\omega$. P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46.

³⁷⁸ II. XI, 28. The word ‘clothed’ here is Brock’s addition based on on sense.

³⁷⁹ I. 39.

³⁸⁰ Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great*, 83, 103, 162.

Isaac's Christology generally, and in II. XI specifically, reflects the received Christological traditions of the Church of the East in the seventh century. Isaac uses the language of clothing rejected in the West Syrian tradition, and he speaks of the 'voluntary union' of Christ's natures, a phrase that has its origins in Nestorius' *Book of Heracleides*. Modern scholars have been concerned to show that Isaac's understanding of this union is in some way a break with classical diophysitism, but this is a mischaracterisation of the tradition. Isaac's homily on the cross uses a range of these Christological phrases and draws on the language of the synodical decrees of the Church of the East in the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries. Moreover, the heart of Isaac's homily is the typology associating Christ's humanity with the ܐܘܢܝܢ placed above the Ark.

3.4 The Christ-Ark Typology and the Cross in II. XI

Isaac twice uses a traditional East Syrian typology, connecting Christ's humanity with the mercy-seat covering the Ark, in II. XI and in II. VII, 11. In both of these passages, the dyophysite Christology underlying the typology is clear. In Isaac's homily on the cross, this Ark-Christ typology appears alongside another type, connecting the Ark with the cross. Isaac describes the honour bestowed on the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament due to the 'miracles and awesome signs' performed by the Ark, and he writes,

‘That power which existed in the Ark (of old) is believed by us to exist in this revered form of the Cross, which is held in honour by us.’³⁸¹

Isaac then asks whether the power inherent in the Ark came from its contents (i.e. the Tablets of the Law, the jar of manna, or Aaron’s staff) but concludes that the Ark’s power comes from the fact that ‘the *Shekhina* of God was residing in it.’³⁸² He goes on to say,

‘This [*Shekhina*,] which now resides in the Cross, has departed from there (sc. the Ark) and has resided mysteriously in the Cross.’³⁸³

In one of the most striking passages of the homily, Isaac describes the moment the image of the cross is made:

‘In the case of the Cross, the moment this form of the Cross is depicted on a wall, or on a board, or is fashioned out of some kind of gold or silver and the like, or carved out of wood, immediately it puts on, and is filled with, the divine power... and it becomes a place of God’s *Shekhina*, even more so than the Ark.’³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ II. XI, 4.

³⁸² II. XI, 5.

³⁸³ II. XI, 5.

³⁸⁴ II. XI, 12.

For Isaac, the Ark provides a type of the cross, because the cross too becomes a place of God's *Shekinah*. The power of the cross is due to the power of God residing in it. In his homily, Isaac brings the double typology (Ark-Christ, Ark-Cross) together in two ways. Firstly, in II. XI, 14 he describes the metal plate above the Ark as having in it the '*Shekhina* of Divinity,' before introducing the traditional typology whereby the mercy-seat symbolises Christ's humanity in II. XI, 15. Here, Isaac makes an explicit connection between the *Shekinah* and Christ. Secondly, Isaac indicates the close relationship between Christ and the cross in Christological terms. He writes, 'For the Cross is Christ's garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the divinity.'³⁸⁵ Christ and the cross are as intimately joined as his humanity and divinity, or indeed as the Ark and the mercy-seat. These two typologies function together in the broad argument of Isaac's homily, suggesting that Isaac's principal aim in this text was to establish the cross as a *locus* of divine revelation.

Isaac refers to the *Shekinah* in a number of places in his writings.³⁸⁶ The Hebrew word is not Biblical, but the Aramaic form does appear in the Peshitta and Targum texts of I and II Chronicles.³⁸⁷ Nicolas Séd notes that a single interpretation of this

³⁸⁵ II. XI, 24.

³⁸⁶ I. 517; II. X, 24; II. XI, 5-6, 10, 12, 14, 24; III. VII, 5; III. VIII, 8, 9, 10, 12.

³⁸⁷ For the Hebrew and Aramaic forms of שְׁכִינָה, see M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac & Co., 1903), and also A. Unterman, 'Shekhinah,' in M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 18, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 440-441. N. Séd, 'La Shekhinta et ses amis «Araméens»,³⁸⁷ in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont. Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux*, Cahiers d'Orientalisme 20 (Genève: Patrick Cramer, 1988), 234-237.

word is not possible, but that primarily its root (*škn*) indicates dwelling and *šēkhīnāh* signifies the Divine Presence.³⁸⁸ The association between the Divine Presence and the Ark of the Covenant that Isaac draws on in II. XI is seen in the Peshitta text of II Chronicles 5.14, where the priests of the Temple are unable to minister once the Ark is brought to rest because of the cloud of glory that fills the Temple.³⁸⁹

In Syriac literature, the word ܫܟܝܢܐ is used by several early writers and in liturgical texts.³⁹⁰ Dominique Cerbelaud provides the most comprehensive survey of the Syriac sources to date, showing how the *Shekinah* acts as a mediatory figure, always appearing in relation to a place, object, or person, often in places where the *Shekinah* does not appear in the Biblical text.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Séd, 'La Shekhinta,' 233. ܫܟܝܢܐ has a multiplicity of meanings in addition to the 'Shekinah', including an ordinary 'dwelling-place,' or 'sepulchre,' or 'shrine.' J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903; repr. 1967), 576-577; M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns / Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 1557.

³⁸⁹ Séd, 'La Shekhinta' 235. II Chronicles 5.14 is cited by Isaac in III. VIII, 8.

³⁹⁰ Brock, trans., *The Second Part*, 46, n. 24.5. For the term in Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, see N. Séd, 'Les hymnes sur le Paradis de saint Ephrem et les traditions juives,' *Le Muséon* 81.3-4 (1968), 482-492. For the term in Aphrahat, Sahdona, and Philoxenus see D. Cerbelaud, 'Aspects de la Shekinah chez les auteurs chrétiens syriens,' *Le Muséon* 123.1-2 (2010), 99-101. For the term in Joseph Hazzaya, see Séd, 'La Shekhinta,' 239-240.

³⁹¹ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 97.

In relation to place, there is a strong connection with Mount Sion and the Temple, as seen in Aphrahat, Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh and Philoxenus of Mabbug.³⁹² Ephrem also associates the *Shekinah* with the eschatological Paradise.³⁹³ Sahdona's description of the desert as a place of the *Shekinah*³⁹⁴ resonates with a passage in Isaac, where Isaac says of the ascetic Fathers in the wilderness: 'You made human tombs, caves and crevices the tabernacle [ܟܘܚܠܐ] of Your revelations to them.'³⁹⁵ Brock's translation suggests that Isaac's use of ܟܘܚܠܐ here has the sense of an ordinary dwelling-place, but Sahdona's association of the desert and the *Shekinah* may indicate a more charged meaning in this passage of Isaac, associating the *Shekinah* and asceticism.³⁹⁶

In terms of the association of the *Shekinah* and an object, Cerbelaud draws heavily on Isaac's connection between the Ark and the cross, but also demonstrates the connection in Jacob of Serugh between the *Shekinah* and the Divine Chariot in Ezekiel 1.³⁹⁷ Likewise, Cerbelaud's final references, associating the *Shekinah* with people (a category in which he includes angels), rely in part on Isaac's association with the Ark, and the connection then to Moses, David and Solomon.³⁹⁸ There are also numerous passages where Isaac refers to the *Shekinah* in connection with the

³⁹² Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 99-103.

³⁹³ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 98.

³⁹⁴ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 100.

³⁹⁵ II. V, 12.

³⁹⁶ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 101.

³⁹⁷ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 106-108.

³⁹⁸ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 111.

angels.³⁹⁹ Isho'dad of Merv connects it with the people of Israel as a whole (mirroring the idea in Pseudo-Ephrem that the *Shekinah* prefigures the Church), and the Syrian Orthodox ordination rite invokes the *Shekinah* at the moment of ordination, thus connecting it with a particular individual.⁴⁰⁰

Both Séd and Cerbelaud compare Christian and Rabbinic texts drawing out similarities and differences.⁴⁰¹ Cerbelaud notes three particular differences: firstly, the Syriac texts hardly mention the luminous aspect of the *Shekinah*, which is prevalent in Rabbinic material; secondly, the common Rabbinic metaphor, 'the wings of the *Shekinah*,' appears only once in the Syriac tradition, in the Syriac *Apocalypse of Daniel*.⁴⁰² Thirdly, the relation of the *Shekinah* to the angels does not feature in the Rabbinic sources; the integration of the *Shekinah* into the angelic hierarchy is a peculiarly Christian phenomenon.⁴⁰³ Despite these differences, Cerbelaud emphasises continuity with the Jewish tradition and posits that the Aramaic Targum is the main source for the tradition among Christian and Jewish authors and even for the Syriac text of the Peshitta.⁴⁰⁴ Séd's survey concludes by suggesting that Evagrius in his *Kephalaia Gnostika* connects the *Shekinah* with his

³⁹⁹ For instance, I. 74; II. X, 24.

⁴⁰⁰ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 109, 111-112.

⁴⁰¹ Séd, 'La Shekhinta,' 240-242; Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 117-119.

⁴⁰² Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 102, 118.

⁴⁰³ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 117-119.

⁴⁰⁴ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 124-125.

understanding of pure prayer and thus offers the first instance of the interiorisation of this theme.⁴⁰⁵

Isaac's use of the *Shekinah* is consistent with the Syriac writers surveyed by Cerbelaud and the suggestion that it is in essence mediatory, and thus always associated with places, objects or people.⁴⁰⁶ Similarly, the three differences between Christian and Jewish conceptions of the *Shekinah* that Cerbelaud identifies are also characteristic of Isaac's descriptions of the *Shekinah*.

The role of the *Shekinah* in the life of prayer is the lens through which Maksim Kalinin and Eugeny Barsky discuss the concept of the *Shekinah* in the *Third Part* of Isaac of Nineveh's writings.⁴⁰⁷ Based on Isaac's assertion that 'God dwells in a place by the will and by the action of His power,' and not with his Nature (ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ), they argue that in Isaac, the *Shekinah* stands for God's presence in the world in God's action and not in God's essence.⁴⁰⁸ Their article serves to highlight Isaac's emphasis on the sanctification of the individual, and the connection that Isaac

⁴⁰⁵ Séd, 'La Shekhinta,' 240-242.

⁴⁰⁶ Cerbelaud, 'Aspects,' 97.

⁴⁰⁷ M. Kalinin and E. Barsky, 'Понятие Шхины в богословии Исаака Сирина,' in К. Битнер and Л. Лукинцова, eds., *Иудаика и арамеистика: Сборник научных статей на основе материалов Третьей ежегодной конференции по иудаике и востоковедению*, Трудыпоиудаике: Филология и культурология 3 (С.-Петербург: Петербургский институт иудаики, 2014), 275-277. My thanks are due to Revd Dr Daniel Mullaney for his assistance in translating this article. Kalinin and Barsky do not seem to cite Séd's article.

⁴⁰⁸ III. VIII, 7. Kalinin and E. Barsky, 'Понятие Шхины в богословии Исаака Сирина,' 275.

makes between the overshadowing of the Temple and the *Shekinah* that comes to reside in the temple of the soul:

‘it is not in His Nature but in His glory and in His energy that He abides in the place set apart for His holiness – whether this be in a building made by hand and in things not endowed with reason called vessels of His sanctuary, or in the rational temples which are the souls.’⁴⁰⁹

This quotation shows that for Isaac the *Shekinah* dwells in places, in physical objects, and in the soul in the same way.⁴¹⁰ As a result, the proposal of Kalinin and Barsky that the understanding of the *Shekinah* in the *Second Part* contrasts with that of the *Third Part* does not hold: in III. VII, 4 Isaac describes the ‘mysteries by which spiritual beings [i.e. angels] attain gradually to the *Shekhina* of Your Essence,’ and this mirrors the description of the *Shekinah* in II. X, 24 where Isaac writes, ‘as for the wondrous natures of angels... who peer into the place of the *Shekhina* of Invisibleness...’⁴¹¹ The reason that Kalinin and Barsky seek to maintain this division arises from the highly unusual descriptions of the *Shekinah* in II. XI, where Isaac suggests that it transfers from the Ark to the cross.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ III. VIII, 13.

⁴¹⁰ For this three-fold division, see Cerbelaud, ‘Aspects,’ 97.

⁴¹¹ Kalinin and Barsky, ‘Понятие Шхины в богословии Исаака Сирина,’ 277. For the specifically Christian incorporation of the *Shekinah* into the celestial hierarchy, see Cerbelaud, ‘Aspects,’ 97.

⁴¹² II. XI, 5-6, 10, 12, 14, 24. The distinctive nature of Isaac’s use of the *Shekinah* is noted by Cerbelaud who writes, ‘L’originalité d’Isaac se manifeste encore sur un autre point. Selon lui, une sorte de transfert de la *Shekhina* s’est opéré, de l’arche d’alliance jusqu’à la croix.’ Cerbelaud, ‘Aspects,’ 107.

In the conclusion to their article, Kalinin and Barsky argue that Isaac understands the *Shekinah* as a symbol of the descent of God to the individual (in which there is a change in the spiritual life of a person), and simultaneously as a means of ascent to God, where Isaac emphasises the unknowability of God's essence.⁴¹³ Isaac's homily on the cross shows that the cross, through the power of the *Shekinah*, becomes a means of drawing close to God.⁴¹⁴ However, this drawing close to God is not about the boundary of apophatic ascent as claimed by Kalinin and Barsky.⁴¹⁵ Rather, for Isaac, the *Shekinah* stands for the nearness of God, both in the interior life and objectively in the person of Jesus Christ:

‘And whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ.’⁴¹⁶

The image of the cross, in which the *Shekinah* comes to dwell, draws the believer closer to God and makes God more clearly known, bringing together the physical world and the interior life:

‘We look on the Cross as the place belonging to the *Shekhina* of the Most High, the Lord's Sanctuary, the ocean of the symbols of God's economy... Whenever we gaze on the Cross in a composed way... the recollection of our

⁴¹³ Kalinin and Barsky, 'Понятие Шхины в богословии Исаака Сирина,' 275-277.

⁴¹⁴ II. XI, 17, 24.

⁴¹⁵ Kalinin and Barsky, 'Понятие Шхины в богословии Исаака Сирина,' 268, 275.

⁴¹⁶ II. XI, 17-18.

Lord's entire economy gathers together and stands before our interior eyes.'⁴¹⁷

For Isaac, the *Shekinah* indicates the nearness of God, and its presence and action is a source of revelation of the knowledge of God. His homily on the Cross shows that the cross is the chief means by which this revelation is made known. This is reinforced by Isaac's Ark typology, associating Christ with the mercy-seat above the Ark. In the East Syrian tradition, the mercy-seat is associated with revelations and visions, a tradition developed from the account in Exodus on the creation of the Ark, where God says,

'There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.'⁴¹⁸

In his *Commentary on Exodus*, Ephrem notes, 'God's voice would come from between the cherubim to the priest who entered once a year.'⁴¹⁹ Similarly, Babai the Great, in his exposition of Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostica*, says, 'that gold leaf

⁴¹⁷ II. XI, 24, 26.

⁴¹⁸ Exodus 25. 22.

⁴¹⁹ Salvesen, *The Exodus Commentary of St Ephrem*, 49.

which... was placed above the Ark, (was the place) from which and in which God spoke.⁴²⁰

Isaac himself writes in I. 173,

‘And over the ark was placed a plate, from which the priest was taught by divine revelation what was required, at the time when the high priest, once in a year, entered the inner sanctuary... And while the high priest was prostrated the voice of God was heard from the plate over the ark, in a dreadful, unspeakable revelation.’⁴²¹

The cross in II. XI is a new Ark, and the identification of Christ with the metal plate above the Ark of the Covenant, means that the cross has become a place of revelation.

Like the revelations made once a year in the time of the high priest entering before the Ark, this revelation is indeed dreadful:

‘For true believers the sight of the Cross is no small thing... whenever they raise their eyes and gaze on it, it is as though they were contemplating the

⁴²⁰ Babai, *Comm. KG. IV*, 52. Translation in Brock, trans., *The Second Part*, 57, n. 14. 1. See also Theodore bar Koni, *Livre des Scolies*, III. 16, where the *tassa* (ܬܫܐ) is described ‘ܬܫܐ ܗܝ ܕܥܠ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ.’

⁴²¹ I. 173. See also, II. XLI, 2.

face of Christ, and accordingly they are full of reverence for it: the sight of it is precious and fearful to them, and at the same time, beloved.’⁴²²

It is not, however, unspeakable. Unlike the revelations revealed from the Ark to the High Priest once a year, Isaac suggests that the cross is the place where God’s revelation is made fully known to all people and for all time. He writes that the cross,

‘was eternally marked out in the mind of the Creator, for His intention was to give to all, by means of this form, knowledge of His glory, and the liberation which He was going to take, through its means, for all humanity.’⁴²³

Using the image of the *Shekinah* in relation to the cross alongside the Christological typology of the mercy-seat covering the Ark, Isaac’s homily shows that Jesus Christ is the revelation made from the Ark-Cross. This revelation is significant in Isaac’s thought as it reflects the summit of his understanding of salvation history: in Christ, God is made known directly and without mediation.⁴²⁴ For Isaac, the revelation of the cross encapsulates the whole of God’s loving purposes for humanity. The cross is ‘the ocean of the mysteries of God’s economy.’⁴²⁵

⁴²² II. XI. 17.

⁴²³ II. XI. 30.

⁴²⁴ Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 117-121.

⁴²⁵ II. XI. 24.

3.5 Conclusion

Isaac's typological understanding of the relationship between Christ's humanity and the mercy-seat of the Ark positions him within a Christological and exegetical tradition that goes back to Theodore of Mopsuestia's interpretation of the Letter to the Hebrews. Narsai and Babai the Great articulated this tradition which continued to be the normative exegetical tradition of the Church of the East maintained by writers such as Theodore bar Koni and Isho'dad of Merv, writing in the eighth and ninth centuries. *Contra* the assertions of some modern scholars, Isaac's own Christology reflects the strict diophysitism of Babai the Great and the synodical decrees of the sixth and seventh centuries. Much of the Christological language that Isaac inherits from the tradition is echoed in II. XI, wherein he sets up the typology between the Ark and the cross. The combination of the Ark-Christ typology with the image of the *Shekinah* passing from the Ark to the cross in this homily provides a way for Isaac to establish the cross as a place of revelation, where God is made fully known in Jesus Christ. The strong Christological focus of II. XI is further reflected in Isaac's treatment of the crucifixion of the intellect and cross veneration, themes he shares in common with a number of his contemporaries from Beth Qatraye.

4. The Cross in the Seventh-Century Syriac Writers of Beth Qatraye

4.1 Introduction

Isaac's own texts reveal little about his life, but he uses the imagery of pearls and pearl-fishing, clearly evoking his early life on the coast of the Persian Gulf:⁴²⁶

‘Naked the swimmer dives into the sea in order to find a pearl. Naked the wise monk will go through the creation in order to find the pearl of Jesus Christ himself.’⁴²⁷

Isaac often compares prayer with pearl fishing. In II. XXXIV. 6, he writes:

‘In the case of divers, they will very often go down and find oysters consisting of just ordinary flesh; only once in a while will there be a pearl in it. Their experience is also ours in the commerce which consists in prayer: barely a single one occurs through us wherein there is consolation for our weariness.’⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ For a history of pearl-fishing in the Persian Gulf from ancient to medieval times, see R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-fishing: Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 80-83, 105.

⁴²⁷ I. 326.

⁴²⁸ II. XXXIV, 6. This passage is part of an extended meditation on prayer and pearl-fishing.

After his consecration around 676 at the monastery of Beth ‘Abe, north-east of Nineveh, Isaac never returned to the region of Beth Qatraye. When he resigned his episcopal duties, he went to the mountains of Beth Huzaye and later came to the monastery of Rabban Shabur, in the region of Khuzistan (Iran).⁴²⁹ Nevertheless, as his use of pearl imagery suggests, Isaac’s education and early life in Beth Qatraye shaped his later writings.

By Isaac’s time, Christianity had been established for centuries along the coast of the Gulf. The *Chronicle of Arbela* refers to a number of bishoprics in the Gulf as early as 225, though this is not an unproblematic source.⁴³⁰ More reliably, an account of Abdisho of Arphelouna in the *Chronicle of Seert* suggests the presence of Christianity in Beth Qatraye in the late fourth century.⁴³¹ Catholicos Tomarsa consecrated Abdisho as bishop of Deir Mahraq, but when the people of the diocese

⁴²⁹ S. Maroki, *Les trois étapes de la vie spirituelle chez les Pères syriaques: Jean le Solitaire, Isaac de Ninive et Joseph Hazzaya: Source, doctrine et influence* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 50-51. For the monastery of Rabban Shabur, see F. Jullien, ‘Rabban-Šāpūr. Un monastère au rayonnement exceptionnel: La réforme d’Abraham de Kaškar dans le Bēth-Hūzāyē,’ *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 72 (2007), 333-348.

⁴³⁰ See P. Kawerau, trans., *Die Chronik von Arbela*, CSCO 468 (Leuven: Peeters, 1985), VIII. K. Friestad, ‘Christianity in Beth Qatraye,’ Unpublished MPhil dissertation (MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2016), 13; Peter Kawerau, the most recent editor of the text, suggests that it is more historically reliable than has been previously assumed, P. Kawerau, ed., *Die Chronik von Arbela*, CSCO 467 (Leuven: Peeters, 1985), ix-xiii. See also, W. Hage, ‘Early Christianity in Mesopotamia: Some Remarks concerning Authenticity of the Chronicle of Arbela,’ *The Harp*, 1/2-3 (1988), 39-46.

⁴³¹ J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, Arab Background Series (London: Longman, 1979), 280; P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, OECS (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 76.

rebelled at this appointment, Abdisho fled to an island off Bahrain where he lived as a solitary. Eventually he found himself baptising the people who came to him, and established a monastery there.⁴³² It is likely that Christianity spread along trade routes, and that Christian traders came to Northeast Arabia in search of pearls and textiles.⁴³³ Factors such as persecution in Persia, and Christian contact with Arab tribes in al-Hira also account for the spread of Christianity in the Gulf region.⁴³⁴ A Christian presence was evidently established by the early fifth century: bishops from the Gulf attended the synod of 410, and not long after that date, the earliest references to a metropolitan bishop of Fārs, whose jurisdiction included Beth Qatraye, appear in the sources.⁴³⁵

The seventh century was clearly a time of great intellectual flourishing in Beth Qatraye, and a number of significant writers are associated with the region.⁴³⁶ Aside from Isaac, Dadisho is the most well-known and, again like Isaac, he wrote ascetic

⁴³² *Chronicle of Seert*, I/ii LXII.

⁴³³ A. Rücker, *Die Canones des Simeon von Révârdešîr* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1908), 14.

⁴³⁴ J. F. Healey, 'The Christians of Qatar in the 7th Century A.D.,' in I. R. Netton, ed., *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, i (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 225-226.

⁴³⁵ Healey, 'The Christians of Qatar in the 7th Century A.D.,' 226.

⁴³⁶ See the essays in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014). See also M. Kozah, G. Kiraz, A. Abu-Husayn, H. Al-Thani, and S. S. Al-Murikhi, eds., *Beth Qatraye: A Lexical and Toponymical Survey*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 58 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2021), 2-19.

treatises and ended his life at the monastery of Rabban Shabur.⁴³⁷ The texts that survive from Beth Qatraye in this period are not solely monastic, however, and include works of Biblical and liturgical commentary, as well as a Syriac translation of a Persian legal text.⁴³⁸ Clearly much has been lost, too. Abdisho of Nisibis mentions a number of works by Isho‘panah Qatraya, including letters, liturgical material, various discourses and a book of spiritual philosophy, though none of these works are extant.⁴³⁹ Similarly, Isaac Eshbadnaya, writing in the fifteenth century, quotes a certain Jacob Qatraya, of whom no other trace survives.⁴⁴⁰

Recent archaeological work has shown the wealth of evidence for monastic life in Beth Qatraye. As early as 1960, Roman Ghirshman documented the excavations of the monastery on the island of Kharg, but it was not until 2003 that Marie-Joseph Steve published a detailed report of the site.⁴⁴¹ Similarly, a report of the monastic site

⁴³⁷ S. Brock, A. Butts, G. Kiraz, and L. Van Rompay, eds., *GEDSH* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), s.v. ‘Dadisho Qatraye.’

⁴³⁸ For the range of these texts, see M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murhiki, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *An Anthology of Syriac Writers from Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 39 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015), and S. Brock, ‘Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye,’ *ARAM* 11/1 (1999), 85-96.

⁴³⁹ Brock, ‘Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye,’ 94.

⁴⁴⁰ Brock, ‘Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye,’ 94. For Isaac Eshbadnaya, see T. A., Carlson, ‘A Light From “the Dark Centuries”: Ishaq Shbadnaya’s Life and Works,’ *Hugoye* 14 (2011), 191-214; T. A. Carlson, ‘The Future of the Past: The Reception of Syriac Qatraye Authors in Late Medieval Iraq,’ in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murikhi, and Al-Thani, eds., *Syriac Writers of Qatar*, 169-193.

⁴⁴¹ R. Payne, ‘Monks, Dinars and Date Palms: Hagiographical Production and the Expansion of Monastic Institutions in the Early Islamic Persian Gulf,’ *AAE* 22/1 (2011), 98; M-J. Steve, *L’île de*

on the island of Sīr Banī Yās, off the coast of the modern United Arab Emirates, was published in 1997 by Geoffrey King and further assessed by Joseph Elders in 2001.⁴⁴² Richard Payne describes these two sites as ‘the best documented archaeologically in the late antique Iranian world,’ and ‘the finest physical examples of a coenobitic movement that originated in northern Mesopotamia and inspired imitators as far afield as the Tarim Basin.’⁴⁴³ This archaeological work has contributed to a wider reassessment of the historical narrative concerning the expansion and decline of Christianity in the region. In 2008, Robert Carter published an article in which he offered a re-dating of the monastic sites at Kharg and Sīr Banī Yās. He proposed that, based on the pottery at Sīr Banī Yās, the site should be dated to between the mid-seventh and mid-eighth centuries.⁴⁴⁴ The significance of this dating is that it places the site after the advent of Islam to Eastern Arabia.⁴⁴⁵ On similar evidence, the site at Kharg is given a likely date of the early ninth century.⁴⁴⁶

Kharg: Une page de l'histoire du golfe Persique et du monachisme oriental (Neuchâtel: Civilisations du Proche-Orient, 2003).

⁴⁴² G. King, *Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, Season 1: An Archaeological Survey of Sir Bani Yas, Dalma and Marawah*, (London: Trident Press, 1997); J. Elders, ‘The Lost Churches of the Arabian Gulf: Recent Discoveries on the Islands of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates,’ *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 31 (2001), 47, 55-56.

⁴⁴³ Payne, ‘Monks, Dinars and Date Palms,’ 98.

⁴⁴⁴ R. Carter, ‘Christianity in the Gulf during the First Centuries of Islam,’ *AAE* 19 (2008), 90.

⁴⁴⁵ Carter, ‘Christianity in the Gulf,’ 89.

⁴⁴⁶ Carter, ‘Christianity in the Gulf,’ 98. Carter extended his study to present further conclusions in R. Carter, ‘Christianity in the Gulf after the Coming of Islam: Redating the Churches and Monasteries of Bet Qatraye,’ in C. J. Robin and J. Schiettecatte, eds., *Les preludes de l’Islam: Ruptures et continuités des civilisations du Proche-Orient, de l’Afrique orientale, de l’Arabie et de l’Inde à la veille de l’Islam*, *Orient et Méditerranée* 11 (Paris: De Boccard, 2013) 326-327.

Enigmatically, whilst attendance at synods by bishops from Beth Qatraye seems to cease after 676, the archaeological record suggests a continued monastic presence into the ninth century.⁴⁴⁷

Payne uses this reassessment to show how textual evidence also supports this later dating, arguing that texts such as the *History of Mar Yawnan* point not to the origins of Christian asceticism in the Gulf region, but rather to the emergence of a reformist monasticism in the seventh century influenced by Abraham of Kashkar (d. 588).⁴⁴⁸

For Isho'denah in the eighth century, Abraham of Kashkar (Abraham the Great) is the 'chief (ܐܘܘܪܝܢܐ) of the monks.'⁴⁴⁹ Likewise, Thomas of Marga in the ninth century

⁴⁴⁷ F. Briquel-Chatonnet, 'L'expansion du christianisme en Arabie: l'apport des sources syriaques,' *Semítica et Classica* 3 (2010), 180. This may point to the highly independent life of monastic institutions in the region.

⁴⁴⁸ Payne, 'Monks, Dinars and Date Palms,' 99. The *History of Mar Yawnan* is a text, probably from the eighth century, that describes the exploits of Mar Yawnan, the traditional founder of the monastery at Piroz-Shabur on the Euphrates. It is the only example of Syriac hagiography that is largely set in the Gulf region. For an introduction and translation of the text, see S. Brock, 'The *History of Mar Yawnan*,' in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murhiki, and Al-Thani, eds., *Anthology*, 1-41.

⁴⁴⁹ J-B. Chabot, ed. and trans., 'Le Livre de la chasteté, composé par Jésusdenah, Évêque de Basrah,' *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 16 (1896), 7. The most complete works to date on Abraham of Kashkar are S. Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità* (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2005), and F. Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse. La réforme d'Abraham le Grand, père des moines de l'Orient*, CSCO, Subsidia 121 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008). See also A. Camplani, 'The Revival of Persian Monasticism (Sixth to Seventh Century): Church Structures, Theological Academy, and Reformed Monks' in A. Camplani and G. Filoramo, eds., *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in*

describes him as the ‘father of the ascetics.’⁴⁵⁰ In the middle of the sixth century, Abraham settled on Mount Izla (near Nisibis) where he founded the ‘Great Monastery’ and composed a rule for his monks.⁴⁵¹ Abraham’s vision of the monastic life was modelled on Egyptian monasticism, drawing together those living the solitary life and those living in a monastic community.⁴⁵² The Rule emphasised silence, prayer and study.⁴⁵³ He also introduced a distinctive tonsure and form of dress, thus distinguishing his monks from monks of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the region.⁴⁵⁴ The reformed monasticism which Abraham developed had a significant legacy, and many of the great ascetics of the Church of the East were associated with the movement, not least Babai the Great.⁴⁵⁵

Abraham’s form of monasticism clearly flourished in Beth Qatraye. Based on archaeological evidence, Florence Jullien posits a reformist origin for the monastery

Late-Antique Monasticism: Proceedings of the International Seminar, Turin, December 2-4, 2004, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 157 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 277-295.

⁴⁵⁰ E. A. W., Budge, ed. and trans., *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Margâ A.D. 840, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries* (London: K. Paul Trench Trubner & Co., 1893), I. 4.

⁴⁵¹ Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 39-43. The rule of Abraham of Kashkar was edited and translated by in A. Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 11 (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1960), 150-162.

⁴⁵² Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 66-74.

⁴⁵³ Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 89-94.

⁴⁵⁴ Brock, Butts, Kiraz, and Van Rompay, eds., *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, s.v. ‘Abraham of Kashkar.’

⁴⁵⁵ Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 119-121.

on the island of Kharg; the presence of dispersed cells outside the monastic enclosure at Kharg corresponds to the practice outlined in the rule of Abraham.⁴⁵⁶ The reformist emphasis on prayer and study may well lie behind the flourishing of the intellectual life of Beth Qatraye in the seventh century.⁴⁵⁷ This was the environment in which Isaac was formed.

Against this background of a flourishing intellectual life and a reformed monastic tradition in Beth Qatraye, two principal themes connect Isaac's homily on the cross to the works of other Syriac writers from the region.

The first of these is the crucifixion of the intellect. Isaac understands the ascetic life as a 'crucifixion.' He describes the labours of the ascetic as the 'crucifixion of the body.' In one characteristic passage, he writes,

'the beginning of the holy way of God and of all virtues, is founded upon fasting and strict punctuality in the service of God, with the crucifixion of the body during the whole night in the strife against the pleasure of sleep.'⁴⁵⁸

Isaac also describes the crucifixion of the mind.

⁴⁵⁶ F. Jullien, 'Le réforme d'Abraham de Kaskar dans le golfe persique? Le monastère de l'Île de Khārg,' *Parole de l'Orient* 31 (2006) 207.

⁴⁵⁷ Payne, 'Monks, Dinars and Date Palms,' 99.

⁴⁵⁸ I. 238.

‘all temptations will be removed from us which are sent providentially for this – to set in us the remembrance of God by means of persistent intercession and the crucifixion of the intellect.’⁴⁵⁹

This particular theme comes from the *Asketikon* of Abba Isaiah, a work that was clearly significant for the reformist movement: Abraham quotes it in the introduction to his Rule, and Dadisho wrote a commentary on it.⁴⁶⁰ Dadisho’s commentary does not survive in its entirety, but additional parts of the work survive in another fragmentary, anonymous commentary on the *Asketikon*.⁴⁶¹ Dadisho’s *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah* had a widespread distribution: the text was translated

⁴⁵⁹ III. VIII, 3.

⁴⁶⁰ Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 162. R. Draguet, ed. and trans., *Commentaire du livre d’Abba Isaïe (logoi I-XV) par Dadišo Qatraya (VIIe s.)*, CSCO 326-327 (Leuven: CSCO, 1972). (Hereafter, Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*). Abba Isaiah was an Egyptian monk from Scetis who likely moved to Gaza around 434. The *Asketikon* was originally written in Greek. J. Chryssavgis and P. Penkett, *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2002), 25. See also, B. Bitton-Ashkelony, ‘Pure Prayer and Ignorance: Dadisho’ Qatraya and the Greek Ascetic Legacy,’ *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 78/1 (2012), 200-226. Dadisho, by providing a commentary on Abba Isaiah, stands in a particular tradition of monastic reading. See S. Brock, ‘Le monachisme syriaque: histoire et spiritualité,’ in *Le monachisme syriaque aux premiers siècles de l’Eglise, IIe – debut VIIe siècle. I: Textes français*, Patrimoine Syriaque, Actes du Colloque V. Antélias (Liban: Centre d’Études et de Recherches Orientales, 1998), 21-31.

⁴⁶¹ R. Draguet, ed. and trans., *Commentaire anonyme du Livre d’abba Isaïe (fragments)*, CSCO 336-337 (Leuven: CSCO, 1973).

into Sogdian, fragments of which were found at the Church of the East monastery of Bulay'iq, at Turfan.⁴⁶²

Isaac and Dadisho conceived of this crucifixion as an advanced stage of the spiritual life, drawing on their own contemporary experience of the life and praxis of the reformist monasticism of Abraham of Kashkar.

The second theme is cross veneration. Throughout his writings, Isaac describes particular acts of veneration of the cross, including prostration and kissing the cross.⁴⁶³ Isaac also refers to the action of making the sign of the cross: 'But when thou hast prayed and concluded and signed thy heart and they limbs with the living sign, rise for a short time, in silence.'⁴⁶⁴

Some significant parallels can be drawn between Isaac's striking descriptions of the cross in II. XI and Dadisho's reflection on the cross in his work, *On Stillness*.⁴⁶⁵ The hagiographical *History of Mar Yawnan* also reflects these particular ascetic practices.

⁴⁶² N. Sims-Williams, *An Ascetic Miscellany: The Christian Sogdian Manuscript E28*, Berliner Turfantexte 42 (Berlin: Brepols, 2017); N. Sims-Williams, *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C2*, Berliner Turfantexte 12 (Berlin: Brepols, 1985).

⁴⁶³ I. 140; II. XIV, 24. For this theme in Isaac's anti-Messalian polemic, see 2.4 above.

⁴⁶⁴ I. 546.

⁴⁶⁵ A. Mingana, ed. and trans., *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni, Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus 7 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1934), 70-143 (Hereafter, Dadisho, *On Stillness*). See Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 3-15. A more recent, critical edition of *On Stillness* has since been published: F. del Río Sánchez, ed. and

Isaac's writing on the cross also has important parallels with the place of the cross in Gabriel Qatraya's *Commentary on the Liturgy*.⁴⁶⁶ Gabriel Qatraya (known as bar Lipah) is not the exegete Gabriel Qatraya to whom Isaac was related; he is known only from this liturgical commentary. Nothing is known about his life except that a reference to Shubhalmaran, metropolitan of Karka d-Beth Sloth, indicates that Gabriel wrote his commentary before circa 620.⁴⁶⁷ Gabriel's *Commentary* is quite different to the ascetic writings of Isaac and Dadisho, but these writers understood

trans., *Los cinco tratados sobre la quietud (šelyā) de Dāḏišō' Qatrāyā*, *Aula Orientalis Supplementa* 18 (Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 2001).

⁴⁶⁶ Gabriel Qatraya's *Commentary on the Liturgy* was brought to the attention of liturgical scholars by Sarhad Y. Hermiz Jammo in 1966 and has largely been studied from this liturgical perspective. S. Y. H. Jammo, 'Gabriel Qatraya et son commentaire sur la liturgie chaldéenne,' *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 32 (1966), 39-52; B. Spinks, 'Addai and Mari and the Institution Narrative: The Tantalising Evidence of Gabriel Qatraya,' *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 98/1 (1984), 60-67. Brock introduced the text as well as translating the chapter headings and the passages connected to the Eucharistic liturgy: S. Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 6/2 (2003), 197-248. References to the text use Brock's chapter divisions; hereafter, Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*. Alex C. J. Neroth van Vogelpoel has prepared an edition and translation of part of the commentary from BL Or. 3336, and intends to edit and translate the rest of the text: A. C. J. Neroth van Vogelpoel, *The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the East Syriac Morning Service on Ordinary Days: Text, Translation, and Discussion*, *Texts from Christian Late Antiquity* 53 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018). I am grateful to Alex Neroth van Vogelpoel for sharing his images of the manuscript with me.

⁴⁶⁷ Brock, Butts, Kiraz, and Van Rompay, eds., *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, s.v. 'Gabriel Qatraya.' the date of Shubhalmaran's death is not known, but he was present at the court of Khosro II in 612. S. Brock, 'Patristic Quotations in Gabriel Qatraya's "Commentary on the Liturgical Offices,"' in *Manuscripta Graeca et Orientalia: Mélanges monastiques et patristiques en l'honneur de Paul Gehin*, *Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta* 7 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 129.

the cross as mystically making Christ present in prayer; connecting the cross and cross veneration with Christ's human nature. Indeed, Gabriel's *Commentary* provides the liturgical context for the theme of cross veneration and for the Ark typology that Isaac uses in his homily on the cross.

4.2 Isaac of Nineveh, Dadisho Qatraya and the Crucifixion of the Intellect

Almost nothing is known about Dadisho's life, except that he came from Beth Qatraye, lived in the otherwise unknown monastery of Rab Kennare and was later associated with the monastery of Rabban Shabur.⁴⁶⁸ The oldest source concerning his life and writings is the fourteenth century work, *Catalogue of Syriac Books*, by Abdisho bar Brikha (Abdisho of Nisibis) which simply states that Dadisho wrote commentaries on the *Paradise of the Occidentals* (that is the *Paradise of the Egyptian Fathers*) and Abba Isaiah, as well as various treatises and letters on stillness in body and soul.⁴⁶⁹ In his edition of Abdisho's *Catalogue*, Joseph Simon Assemani conflates Dadisho Qatraye with another Dadisho who succeeded Abraham the Great as the head of the Monastery of Mount Izla at the end of the sixth century, though this mistake was corrected in Addai Scher's 'Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de Dadišô' Qatraya' in 1906.⁴⁷⁰ The designation 'Qatraye' and circumstantial evidence from Dadisho's *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah* indicate

⁴⁶⁸ Brock, Butts, Kiraz, and Van Rompay, eds., *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, s.v. 'Dadisho Qatraye.'

⁴⁶⁹ J. S. Assemani, ed., *BO*, iii/1 (Rome: Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1725), 98-99.

⁴⁷⁰ *BO*, iii/1, 98, n. 1; A. Scher, 'Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de Dadišô' Qatraya,' *Journal Asiatique* 10/7 (1906), 105-109.

Assemani's mistake, and place Dadisho in the second half of the seventh century.⁴⁷¹

It is in this commentary that Dadisho notes that he lived in the monastery of Rab Kennare and also describes the liturgical life of the monastery of Rabban Shabur.⁴⁷²

Francisco del Río Sánchez suggests that Rabban Shabur may have been part of the monastic complex of Rab Kennare, but there is too little evidence to be certain.⁴⁷³

What is certain, however, is that Dadisho's reputation as an ascetic was significant in his own lifetime and he was sought out for advice. His treatise *On Stillness* was written at the request of another ascetic, and Dadisho's *Letter to Abkosh* begins with an apology to the recipient for not letting him enter his cell and for not speaking to him through the window in case 'others would request and require the same thing'.⁴⁷⁴ Like Isaac, Dadisho was also read widely after his death. The Syriac *Anonymous Commentary on Abba Isaiah's Asketikon* is not identical to Dadisho's commentary but René Draguet describes it as 'une sorte de centon construit avec des extraits de celui-ci,' indicating Dadisho's authoritative status as a monastic writer.⁴⁷⁵ Similarly, fragments of the *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah* and the

⁴⁷¹ Del Río Sánchez, ed. *Los cinco tratados sobre la quietud*, 15-16; Scher, 'Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de Dadišô' Qatraya,' 105-109.

⁴⁷² Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 2; XIII, 5.

⁴⁷³ Del Río Sánchez, ed. *Los cinco tratados sobre la quietud*, 18; F. Jullien, 'Rabban-Šāpūr. Un monastère au rayonnement exceptionnel: La réforme d'Abraham de Kaškar dans le Bēth-Hūzāyē,' *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 72 (2007), 338.

⁴⁷⁴ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, I, 1; D. Phillips, ed. and trans., 'Dadisho' Qatraya's *Letter to Abkosh*: the text according to MS Baghdad Archbishopric of the East no. 210 with critical notes and translation,' *BABELAO* 4 (2015) 204, 216.

⁴⁷⁵ Draguet, *Commentaire anonyme*, ix.

Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers survive in Sogdian, indicating the acquaintance with his writings amongst East Syrian monastic communities as far afield as the Turfan oasis on the Silk Road.⁴⁷⁶ Ge‘ez translations of his *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers* under the name ‘Filekseyus’ reveal Dadisho’s influence had penetrated miaphysite monastic circles.⁴⁷⁷

Dadisho and Isaac both understand the ascetic life as a kind of crucifixion and both writers draw on the language of the crucifixion of the intellect. Whilst there were Pauline precedents addressing the crucifixion of the self, neither Isaac nor Dadisho explicitly cite these particular passages in their extant writings.⁴⁷⁸ The idea that the heart must be crucified daily is found in Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Church*, but it appears that Isaac and Dadisho receive this theme from the Syriac version of Isaiah of Scetis’ *Asketikon*.⁴⁷⁹ In his *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, Dadisho writes:

⁴⁷⁶ For the Sogdian texts, see Sims-Williams ‘Dadisho’ Qatraya’s *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*,’ 33-64; Sims-Williams, *An Ascetic Miscellany: The Christian Sogdian Manuscript E28*, 45-71.

⁴⁷⁷ For the Ge‘ez texts, see R. Kitchen, ‘The Book of Monks: Ethiopian Monasticism via Beth Qatraye,’ in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murikhi, and Al-Thani, eds., *Syriac Writers of Qatar*, 231-232.

⁴⁷⁸ Romans 6. 6; Galatians 2. 19.

⁴⁷⁹ E. Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ecclesia*, CSCO 198 (Leuven: CSCO, 1960), XXIX, 8; R. Draguet, ed. and trans., *Les Cinq Recensions de L’Asceticon Syriaque d’Abba Isaie*, CSCO 289 (Leuven: CSCO, 1968), 40. (Hereafter when citing the text, Abba Isaiah, *Syriac Asketikon*).

‘Ce n’est pas seulement la pratique des passions qui empêche l’intellect de monter à la croix, mais aussi le commerce avec les hommes et la préoccupation des choses.’⁴⁸⁰

The particular references to the crucifixion of the intellect in Isaac reflect his broader emphasis on prayer and contemplation. In the *First Part* there are three relevant passages. In I. 15-16, Isaac describes the work of the Cross purifying the body through affliction and the mind through prayer, quoting a passage of Abba Isaiah, which indicates that the senses need to be stilled before the mind can mount the cross.⁴⁸¹ In a prayer, Isaac asks to be made worthy of knowing God,

‘so that I gaze at Thee by the compulsion of the bonds of the cross, the latter half of which is the crucifixion of the mind whose position of freedom is annihilated by the service of the impulses.’⁴⁸²

The passage continues with an echo of I. 15, describing the twofold work of the cross as the crucifixion of the body and the ascension into contemplation.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸⁰ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 22.

⁴⁸¹ I. 15-16. For a brief account of this theme in a number of Greek and Syriac authors, and with reference to Isaac, see G. Widengren, ‘Researches in Syrian Mysticism: Mystical Experiences and Spiritual Exercises,’ *Numen* 8/3 (1961), 169-177.

⁴⁸² I. 223.

⁴⁸³ I. 223.

In the final passage under consideration from the *First Part*, Isaac describes the way in which the ascetic follows the dominical command to deny the self and take up the cross:

‘What is the denial that is spoken of here? It is the denial of the flesh. And one who is destined to suffer crucifixion, he accepts the thought of death, and goes forth, as one who does not think that he has any further share in this life... He whose mind has complied with the loss of his self for the sake of finding the love of Me, he will be preserved, without harm, for life everlasting.’⁴⁸⁴

There is one reference to the crucifixion of the intellect in each of the *Second Part* and the *Third Part*. These both refer to the crucifixion of the intellect among other ascetic practices such as ‘frequent kneelings’ and persistent intercession.⁴⁸⁵ In the passage from the *Second Part*, crucifixion stands for perfection in the ascetic life:

⁴⁸⁴ I. 232-233. Dadisho’s *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers* contains a number of references to the command to take up the cross. For instance, ‘our Lord said, If you wish to become perfect, do not give little by little and piece by piece from your possession to the poor as sometimes, but sell all you have and give it to the poor at one time, and take up your cross which is the austerity of solitariness and come after me, that is, travel in my footsteps and imitate my renunciation.’ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 2. An edition and French translation of this is forthcoming. D. Phillips, ed. and trans., *Dadisho Qatraya: Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, Sources Chrétiennes (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, forthcoming). The English translation used here is a draft prepared from David Phillip’s Syriac text by Robert Kitchen.

⁴⁸⁵ II. XXX, 5-6; III. VIII, 3.

‘being crucified, he spends his days in life with Christ.’⁴⁸⁶ In III. VIII, 3, crucifixion of the intellect and other ascetic practices facilitate the ‘remembrance of God.’⁴⁸⁷

4.2.1 Crucifixion of the Intellect: A Common Theme

Isaac and Dadisho follow Abba Isaiah in describing the ascetic life as a crucifixion, with both writers making a connection between the crucifixion of the body and the intellect and various ascetic practices. This too stems from the Syriac Isaian corpus. In XIX, 2, Abba Isaiah writes,

‘Si l’intellect veut monter à la croix, il a besoin d’abondante requête, de larmes copieuses et d’être soumis à toute heure devant Dieu.’⁴⁸⁸

The following section contains an extended meditation on the stages and instruments of Christ’s passion, comparing them to the ascetic life. One characteristic example reads,

‘*Que Jésus ai été livré pour être flagellé avant la croix est le type de nous-même: de mépriser tout opprobre et toute flétrissure humaine.*’⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁶ II. XXX, 6.

⁴⁸⁷ III. VIII, 3.

⁴⁸⁸ Abba Isaiah, *Syriac Asketikon* XIX, 2.

⁴⁸⁹ Abba Isaiah, *Syriac Asketikon*, XIX, 3.

Regrettably, the fragmentary nature of the extant evidence means that the commentary on this passage does not survive, either from Dadisho or the *Anonymous Commentary*. Nevertheless, Isaac and Dadisho both associate the crucifixion of the self with aspects of ascetical praxis. In a discussion of what it means to take up the cross, Dadisho cites a number of patristic writers, including Theodore of Mopsuestia:

‘Selon l’explication de l’Interprète, quand, en plus, il entre en sa cellule et sert Dieu dans les travaux laborieux et astreignants dans la retraite, celui-là a pris sa croix comme dit notre Seigneur.’⁴⁹⁰

The *Anonymous Commentary* contains a similar passage, which is sufficiently characteristic of Dadisho’s writing that it may have originally been found in the *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*:⁴⁹¹

‘Il appelle souffrances les travaux du corps, croix le combat contre les pensées, mort la destruction des passions, ensevelissement la pureté de coeur, resurrection l’observance selon l’Esprit.’⁴⁹²

In both the *Second Part* and the *Third Part*, Isaac makes the same point. In II. XXX, 5, Isaac describes the monk who ‘occup[ies] himself night and day... in frequent kneelings’ as,

⁴⁹⁰ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XV, 43.

⁴⁹¹ Draguet, *Commentaire anonyme*, 38, n. 2.1

⁴⁹² *Commentaire anonyme*, VIII, 2.

‘a person who has truly crucified the world within himself, and who has been crucified over against the world, having suspended himself on the cross through abandonment of everything.’⁴⁹³

This recalls a passage of Abba Isaiah (which Draguet notes seems not to have been part of the Greek corpus) in which he cites Galatians 2.29 and writes,

*‘je me fus crucifié tout entire aux choses du dehors et que j’eus fait comme un mur entre moi et les choses corporelles.’*⁴⁹⁴

Similarly, in the *Third Part*, Isaac states that all temptations will be removed from the life of the ascetic through the remembrance of God, which is achieved by persistent intercession and the crucifixion of the intellect.⁴⁹⁵ This connection between crucifixion and the ascetic life is also mirrored in a number of passages where Isaac sees the ascetic life as an act of martyrdom:

‘Be dead in life... Not only those who suffer death for the sake of the faith in Christ are martyrs, but also those who die for the sake of keeping his commandments.’⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ II. XXX, 5.

⁴⁹⁴ Abba Isaiah, *Syriac Asketikon*, II, 1.

⁴⁹⁵ III. VIII, 3.

⁴⁹⁶ I, 31. See also, I. 209, 242, 436, 456; III. XII, 18.

For Isaac and Dadisho, the crucifixion of body and mind is the work of the monk, what Dadisho citing Theodore of Mopsuestia calls, ‘les travaux laborieux et astreignants dans la retraite.’⁴⁹⁷

More specifically, however, Isaac and Dadisho use the notion of the crucifixion of the intellect in the context of the monastic life of the Church of the East in their own day. In several places in his *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, Dadisho presents the life of crucifixion as particular to those living as solitaries and not those in secular life. In II, 2, for instance, he writes,

‘Il ne m’a pas suffi de ne pas pécher par actions, car ceci est proper aux séculiers; les solitaires en effet qui ont aspiré à la perfection, ont désiré la beatitude qu’il a promise aux purs de coeur.’⁴⁹⁸

This distinction, with its emphasis on the life of solitaries, reflects the norms of monastic culture in Dadisho’s own time. He also points to the necessity of maintaining solitude for the ascetic if he is to combat evil thoughts and pray without ceasing.⁴⁹⁹ This concern for the solitary life is also a broader concern of the *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*: in XIII, 6, Dadisho complains about liturgical reforms that have multiplied the number of hymns that solitaries are expected to sing, thus distracting them from their proper observances (namely

⁴⁹⁷ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XV, 43.

⁴⁹⁸ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, II, 2. See also XV, 43.

⁴⁹⁹ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 27.

silence and meditation).⁵⁰⁰ *On Stillness* distinguishes between solitaries and monks who live in the monastery, and the separation that Dadisho describes is borne out in the archaeological record in Beth Qatraye, with cells separated from the main monastic complex.⁵⁰¹ Dadisho's *Letter to Abkosh* shows that solitaries had difficulties maintaining boundaries and were often disturbed by their brothers seeking advice.⁵⁰² Here, Dadisho's writings reflect the sixth-century reformist monasticism of Abraham of Kashkar, with its emphasis on ascetic stratification.⁵⁰³ The notion of the crucifixion of the intellect in Dadisho's writings, with their emphasis on the solitary life, is developed in the context of the reformist monasticism of his own time.

Isaac, too, develops his understanding of the crucifixion of the self in the context of contemporary monastic practice. Homily XXX in the *Second Part* is an extended meditation on the varied ways to achieve converse with God in stillness, and outlines a number of ascetic exercises, including the reading of Scripture and recitation of the Psalter, frequent kneelings, the recitation of the Hours and meditating on Scripture. The one who attains to this union with God, 'by means of body and intellect being

⁵⁰⁰ L. Abramowski, 'Dadisho Qatraya and his Commentary on the Book of the Abbas Isaiah,' *The Harp* 4, 1,2,3 (1991), 69-70. Gabriel Qatraya's commentary on the liturgy distinguishes between the liturgy as celebrated by solitaries and by secular clergy. BL Or. 3336, f. 211b; Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' 8.

⁵⁰¹ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, I, 3; Payne, 'Monks, Dinars and Date Palms,' 103-104.

⁵⁰² Dadisho, *Letter to Abkosh*, 204, 216.

⁵⁰³ Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 68-69.

crucified, spends his days in life with Christ.⁵⁰⁴ These practices clearly reflect Isaac's own experience of the solitary life.

Dadisho and Isaac draw on Abba Isaiah in their understanding of the crucifixion of the body and the mind in the ascetic life, but both do so in ways that resonate with their own experiences and contexts. A common theme from the Syriac Isaian corpus is worked out in both writers in line with their experience of monastic life in the Church of the East in the seventh century.

Both Isaac and Dadisho cite the same passage from Abba Isaiah, connected to the understanding of the crucifixion of the intellect as a stage in the spiritual life. Isaiah writes,

‘Si, avant que les sens n’aient fait silence par rapport à la faiblesse, l’intellect veut monter à la croix, la colère de Dieu viendra sur lui, parce qu’il a commencé une chose qui est au-dessus de sa mesure, en n’ayant pas d’abord guéri ses sens.’⁵⁰⁵

Isaac quotes this passage as part of a discourse on the purifying work of the cross in the body and mind of the ascetic, developing Abba Isaiah's sentiment that the spiritual life cannot be progressed through too quickly.⁵⁰⁶ Isaac writes,

⁵⁰⁴ II. XXX, 6.

⁵⁰⁵ Abba Isaiah, *Syriac Asketikon*, XXVI, 4.

⁵⁰⁶ This is an almost exact quotation. The only substantial difference is that the Syriac *Asketikon* uses ܘܠܘܢ whereas Isaac uses ܘܠܘܢ for ‘will.’

‘By the fact of the ascension of the cross causing anger he does not point to the first part, namely the bearing of troubles patiently (which is the crucifying of the body) but to the theoretical ascension which is the second part, and which is [truly] subsequent to the healing of the soul. For he who hastens to meditate with his heart vain imaginations concerning future things, while his mind is still stained by reprehensible passions, will be reduced to silence on his way by punishment, because, before having purified his mind by means of the trials met in subduing carnal desires, on account of what he has heard and read merely, he has hastened headlong to tread a path full of darkness.’⁵⁰⁷

Here the relationship between the two parts of the ‘work of the cross’ that Isaac describes in I. 15 becomes clear: the crucifixion of the body, by abandonment of possessions and the mortification of the flesh, is a prerequisite for the crucifixion of the intellect, which can only happen after the stilling of the passions and the healing of the soul. Dadisho makes the same broad point in his *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*. He uses the quotation from Abba Isaiah to answer the question:

‘*The brothers*: An elder said, “If you see a young child who by his own will is ascending to heaven, grab him by his foot and pull him down from there.” For in this way he will help him. What is it that “by his will he ascended to heaven”?’⁵⁰⁸

Dadisho writes,

⁵⁰⁷ I. 16.

⁵⁰⁸ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 283.

‘But some of the novice brothers, in this way were simple and dare to persist and proceed in matters which are greater than their strength and their level, not wishing to learn, nor being persuaded by the commandments of their fathers... While they had not yet completed the physical way of life, they imagined to imitate the way of the mind. But therefore they revealed their way of life to the fathers and received correction.’⁵⁰⁹

Novice monks who have not yet laboured for the crucifixion of the body cannot achieve the crucifixion of the intellect. The use of this particular quotation from Abba Isaiah by both Dadisho and Isaac emphasises the understanding in both writers of what Isaac calls the ‘twofold’ work of the cross.⁵¹⁰ The way of crucifixion in the life of the ascetic necessitates firstly the crucifixion of the body before the mind is able to ascend the cross. For both writers, the crucifixion of the intellect represents an advanced stage in the spiritual life. This broadly reflects the dependence of Isaac and Dadisho on the reformist monasticism of Abraham of Kashkar: their writing on the crucifixion of the intellect, achievable only by the solitaries, reflects the emphasis on ascetic stratification and the value placed on the solitary life by the reformers.

The relationship between the cross and divine love provides another valuable connection between these texts. The spirituality of love is a well-noted theme in Isaac’s writings, and this ‘primacy of love’ is the subject of Kallistos Ware’s foreword to Hilarion Alfeyev’s *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*.⁵¹¹ Dadisho

⁵⁰⁹ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 283.

⁵¹⁰ I. 15.

⁵¹¹ Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, 9-13.

and Isaac both understand the cross to be a manifestation of God's love for humanity, and so the cross and love are bound together in the life of the ascetic. In the *Asketikon*, Abba Isaiah writes, 'la croix engendre la charité et sans la charité il n'a pas (non plus) de croix.'⁵¹²

This is taken up by Dadisho and in the *Anonymous Commentary* and has particular resonances with Isaac's theological thought. Dadisho states that the solitary perseveres in the combat of the cross against evil thoughts because by this combat the heart is purified.⁵¹³ He then gives an extended discussion of various motivations in the religious life, noting that those who succeed in the perfection of love are those who progress in virtue and have the Fathers to inspire them to work by love.⁵¹⁴ In the following section, Dadisho continues with this theme, citing Abba Isaiah:

'C'est ce qu'il a dit plus haut: "Sans la charité, il n'y a pas de croix," pour dire que les travaux et le combat ne sont pas profitables s'ils ne sont pas (faits) pour l'amour de Dieu, et que même les dons de l'Esprit ne sont pas profitables sans la charité.'⁵¹⁵

For Dadisho, the ascetic way of life, crucifixion of mind and body, must be motivated by the love of God. A passage from *On Stillness* further expounds this, showing that love for God is adequate as an initial motivation in the ascetic life,

⁵¹² Abba Isaiah, *Syriac Asketikon*, XIV, 54.

⁵¹³ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 27.

⁵¹⁴ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 27.

⁵¹⁵ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 28; *Commentaire anonyme*, III, 2.

connected to ‘bodily exercises,’ but the remembrance of God’s love for the ascetic provides the motivation for the higher goal of the crucifixion of the intellect, called here the ‘exercise of the mind’:

‘If a simple Brother remembers continually the love of our Lord for him, this remembrance will take the place of the exercise of the mind for him; and will guard him from the passions... and will bestow upon him the gift of endurance and the silent retreat of his cell. There is nothing higher, more sublime and more profitable... than the continual remembrance of the love of God and the love of Christ towards us.’⁵¹⁶

Similarly, in another passage from *On Stillness*, Dadisho quotes an Alexandrian nun speaking to Mother Melania, who describes her own motivation in the religious life:

‘I think that if our Lord made manifest His love to us in His death on the Cross, and if the Apostles and martyrs made manifest their love to our Lord in all sorts of torments and deaths, I do not consider myself doing a great thing when I lead a sinless life in seclusion, for the love of Christ.’⁵¹⁷

The relationship between the cross and love is seen elsewhere in Dadisho’s writings. In the *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, Dadisho shows the place of love in the Divine Economy:

⁵¹⁶ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, IV, 1-2.

⁵¹⁷ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, IV, 5. This story is also found in *The Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 95-96.

‘If he rushes to stillness and is silent from the conversation of human beings... the grace of stillness will... enlighten his mind, and fervent in the Spirit he will rejoice in God, because continually he will look at the cross of our Lord. He is fervent in his love and embraces and kisses him while remembering what is written, In this way God loved the world.’⁵¹⁸

This passage has particular resonances with Isaac’s writings, which also points to the centrality of love in the ascetic life, the way of crucifixion, motivated by God’s love. In a well-known passage from the *First Part*, Isaac writes that the sum of purity as ‘a heart full of mercy unto the whole created nature’, and goes on to describe what this looks like in the life of the ascetic:

‘And what is a merciful heart? He replied: The burning of the heart unto the whole creation, man, fowls and beasts, demons and whatever exists so that by the recollection and the sight of them the eyes shed tears on account of the force of mercy which moves the heart by great compassion. Then the heart becomes weak and it is not able to bear hearing or examining injury or any insignificant suffering of anything in the creation. And therefore even in behalf of the irrational beings and the enemies of truth and even in behalf of those who do harm to it, at all times he offers prayers with tears that they may be guarded and strengthened; even on behalf of the kinds of reptiles, on account of his great compassion which is poured out in his heart without measure, after the example of God.’⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁸ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 31.

⁵¹⁹ I. 507-508.

The beginnings of this perfection come from the renunciation of the world and the bodily ascesis that, for Isaac, characterise the solitary life:

‘In short: abiding abroad and poverty and lonely dwelling give birth to humility and purify the heart.’⁵²⁰

Those who have reached perfection in this ‘are delivered to burning for the sake of the love of mankind’⁵²¹ This perfection, the ‘heart full of mercy,’ properly comes from a recollection of the love of God. In the same homily, Isaac continues:

‘The sum of all is God, the Lord of all, who from love of His creatures, has delivered his son to death on the cross... Not that He was not able to save us in another way, but in this way it was possible to show us His abundant love abundantly, namely by bringing us near to Him by the death of His son. If He had anything more dear to Him, He would have given it us... And out of His great love He did not even choose to urge our freedom by compulsion, though He was able to do so. But His aim was, that we should come near to Him by the love of our mind.’⁵²²

Citing the examples of Antonius and Agathon, Isaac shows that this state of constant recollection of the love of God, which inspires the ascetic’s love of others, is an

⁵²⁰ I. 508.

⁵²¹ I. 508.

⁵²² I. 509. This particular theme is also reflected in *KG*. IV, 78.

advanced stage of the spiritual life, and comes about through renunciation of the self and the world:

‘He that has put on God, never can be persuaded to acquire any other thing except Him, but he puts off his body even. And if he is clad with the world or with love of his life, these will not allow him to put on God.’⁵²³

This homily connects explicitly the cross and the love of God, revealed in both the divine economy and in the ascetic life of renunciation and crucifixion. Like Dadisho, the love of God provides the initial motivation for ascetic praxis but the remembrance of God’s love reflects a more advanced stage, indeed the perfection, of ascetic life. The maxim from Abba Isaiah, ‘la croix engendre la charité et sans la charité il n’a pas (non plus) de croix,’ and Dadisho’s commentary, offers a helpful insight into the place of love in Isaac’s theological thinking and in his conception of the ascetic struggle. From this, it is clear that the particular emphasis on divine love in Isaac’s writings sits within a broader tradition, and that whilst love is a motivation for bodily labours, the mental activity of the recollection of love of God, like the crucifixion of the intellect, reflects an advanced stage of ascetic life.

The crucifixion of the intellect is a theme common to both Dadisho and Isaac, continuing the tradition that they inherit from the Syriac Isaian corpus. Both writers connect this mental crucifixion to the ascesis of solitary life, and they both reflect the monastic norms of their own day. The monasticism of Abraham of Kashkar further

⁵²³ I. 511.

influences their understanding of the crucifixion of the intellect in that Dadisho and Isaac pay close attention to the stages of the spiritual life, following the ascetic stratification of the reformist movement. The notion of the crucifixion of the intellect comes to reflect an advanced state, achievable only by those living the solitary life. Furthermore, Isaac and Dadisho draw on Abba Isaiah to explore the relationship between God's love revealed in the divine economy and the ascetic life, which, following Christ, is a life of bodily and mental crucifixion.

4.2.2 Crucifixion of the Intellect: Differing Emphases

Whilst the crucifixion of the intellect is a common theme in Isaac and Dadisho, reflecting a shared heritage and providing the context in which Isaac formulated his works, both writers have particular emphases, reflecting their own interests and concerns. For Dadisho, this is a glossing of the crucifixion of the intellect as a 'dying to sin' in both thought and deed.

In the *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, Dadisho clarifies the phrase, '*je me fus [entièrement] crucifié aux choses du dehors,*' by saying 'c'est à dire... je fus complètement mort à toutes les choses de péché.'⁵²⁴

This language of being 'dead to sin,' is Pauline and appears in a number of places in Romans 6. Similarly, the idea of crucifying the self appears in Galatians 2. 20 and 5. 24, but the glossing of one phrase with the other is not scriptural, rather it is part of

⁵²⁴ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, II, 2.

Dadisho's attempt to comment on the text of Abba Isaiah. Dadisho implies a sense of completeness in his understanding of what it means to die to sin, encompassing both body and soul. Commenting on the passage, 'jamais je n'ai eu de cesse à la colère contre mon corps et contre mon âme, pour qu'ils ne fassent rien de mal,' Dadisho adds the clarification:

'Il veut dire: il ne m'a pas suffi de ne pas pécher par actions... ils [the solitaires] doivent être en garde contre le péché constitué par des pensées dans l'esprit.'⁵²⁵

This point is reinforced by Dadisho's use of patristic quotations in XV, 43 in which he explains a passage of Mark the Ascetic, writing:

'Le solitaire triomphe des péchés par [paroles] et par actions... celui qui travaille de cette façon pour purifier son coeur du péché.'

Sins of body and mind are to be completely rejected, and this is part of the process of crucifixion and dying that should characterise monastic life. This is further seen in XIV, 21:

'Et montrant que, en parlant de croix, notre Seigneur ne parle pas de cette croix visible, mais du fait d'être mort à l'activité des passions du péché.'⁵²⁶

⁵²⁵ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, II, 2.

⁵²⁶ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 21.

This emphasis on dying to sins of both mind and body is explicitly connected to the crucifixion of the self in Dadisho's *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, and whilst it is not unique to him, it is not a theme that is so clearly stated in Isaac's writings.

Similarly, Isaac's understanding of the crucifixion of the intellect has its own set of emphases, primarily to do with his theological anthropology and the question of knowledge.

In I. 15, Isaac outlines the twofold work of the cross as asceticism of the body and of the mind. He follows the Evagrian tri-partite division of the soul (ܠܘܚܐ) into the mind (ܠܘܚܐ), the irascible part (ܠܘܚܐ ܥܘܪܘܫܐ) and the concupiscible part (ܠܘܚܐ ܩܘܒܐ), and describes the work of what he calls the 'power' (ܠܘܚܐ) or 'energy' (ܠܘܚܐ ܥܘܪܘܫܐ) of each part of the soul:

'The work of the cross is twofold. And this corresponds to the duality of nature which is divided into two parts: into endurance of bodily afflictions which comes about through the energy of the irascible part of the soul and is called practice; and into the subtle work of the mind in sacred studies and constant prayer and so forth, which is done with that desiring part and is called contemplation. Practice purifies the passionate part through the power

of zeal; contemplation refines that part capable of knowing by means of the energy of the love of the soul, which is its natural longing.⁵²⁷

According to Isaac, the bodily senses disrupt the harmony of body and soul, but the bodily senses are counteracted by three impulses, each proper to a part of the soul.⁵²⁸

These are reason (ⲁⲓⲗⲓⲗⲉ), zeal (ⲁⲓⲗⲉ) and loving desire (ⲁⲓⲗⲉⲛⲁ) and correspond to the mind, the irascible part of the soul and the concupiscible part respectively.⁵²⁹

This reflects Isaac's unique understanding of the composition of the soul, drawing together the psychological systems of Evagrius and John of Apamea.⁵³⁰

In this passage, Isaac shows how the impulses purify the soul, but crucially he connects these impulses with the ascetical labours of bodily affliction, sacred studies and constant prayer, and contemplation. The purification of the soul by means of these impulses is a necessary step in the ascetical life and must happen before the mind can ascend the cross.⁵³¹ Isaac's understanding of the crucifixion of the intellect, therefore, is inseparable from his unique theological anthropology.

⁵²⁷ I. 15. Translation from, M. Hansbury, trans., *On Ascetical Life: St Isaac of Nineveh*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 1989), 37.

⁵²⁸ J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 124-125.

⁵²⁹ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 125.

⁵³⁰ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 117.

⁵³¹ I. 16.

In addition to this, Isaac notes that this process of purification by means of the crucifixion of the intellect is a prerequisite for revelation:

‘For divine things present themselves spontaneously, without thy perceiving them, if the place of the heart be pure and undefiled.’⁵³²

For Isaac, the fundamental question of how human beings can know God has its answer in the cross and the ascetic life of crucifixion. In I. 223, Isaac writes,

‘Make me worthy of knowing Thee, my Lord, then I shall love Thee too. [I do not desire] that knowledge which arises amidst distractions of the mind... But make me worthy of the knowledge by which the mind, while gazing at Thee, will be glorifying thy nature... so that I gaze at Thee by the compulsion of the bonds of the cross, the latter half of which is the crucifixion of the mind...’⁵³³

Isaac stresses the primacy of revelation in his understanding of knowledge, which is to say that God fundamentally gives all knowledge, but the human person can only receive this knowledge by an inner transformation.⁵³⁴ This process of transformation, and therefore of knowing anything at all, is characterised by ascetic praxis, principally in the crucifixion of the intellect.

⁵³² I. 16.

⁵³³ I. 223.

⁵³⁴ V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St Isaac of Nineveh*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 51 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 289, 305.

In his homily on the cross, Isaac further shows the extent to which the image of the cross shapes his understanding of knowledge and revelation. He does not explicitly describe the crucifixion of the intellect in this homily, but Christ's crucifixion and the physical image of the cross stand at the heart of what it means to know God. He writes,

‘Blessed is God who uses corporeal objects [that is, the cross] continually to draw us close in a symbolic way to a knowledge of His invisible nature... binding our minds with love for His hidden Being by means of shapes that are visible...’⁵³⁵

Isaac's emphasis on the crucifixion of the intellect in the ascetic life, and the purification of the soul so that it is able to receive knowledge of God, has a clear parallel in the connection between contemplation and the cross in II. XI.

The particular way in which Isaac understands the crucifixion of the intellect reflects his unique theological anthropology and his epistemological thought. The cross, and the ascetic life of crucifixion, is a means of stilling the soul, and the cross therefore enables the soul's contemplation of God.

⁵³⁵ II. XI, 31-32.

4.3 Cross veneration in Isaac and Dadisho

Isaac establishes a distinctive typology in II. XI, which sees the power and presence of God, formerly residing in the Ark, dwelling in the cross:⁵³⁶

‘In the case of the Cross, the moment this form of the Cross is depicted on a wall, or on a board, or is fashioned out of some kind of gold or silver and the like, or carved out of wood, immediately it puts on, and is filled with, the divine power... and it becomes a place of God’s *Shekhina*, even more so than the Ark.’⁵³⁷

The relationship that Isaac sets up between the Ark and the cross has important implications for his Christology and for his understanding of the interior life of the Christian:

‘For true believers the sight of the Cross is no small thing... whenever they raise their eyes and gaze upon it, it is as though they were contemplating the face of Christ... And because they are children they have all the more familiarity of speech towards Him... And whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ.’⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ See 3.4 above.

⁵³⁷ II. XI, 12.

⁵³⁸ II. XI, 17-18.

The entire homily is a meditation on this theme of the power in the cross, which for Isaac represents the entire mystery of creation and God's purposes for humanity:

'[the Cross] is the cause of the miracles which the Creator performs through it in the entire world... (how much) to be worshipped is the symbol of the power of the Cross, seeing that it has given to us all these things, and through it we have been deemed worthy of the knowledge of the angels – (that is), through the power by which all created things, both visible and invisible, were created.'⁵³⁹

The typology created in II. XI draws together a number of important themes in Isaac's writings and indicates his theological ingenuity. Above all, it is clear from this homily that Isaac understands the cross as a locus of the Divine Presence: as he writes in II. XI, 18, to approach the cross is in some way to approach Christ.

There is a striking parallel here with Dadisho's description of cross veneration in *On Stillness* V, 5:

'Rise from your kneeling, greet and kiss our Lord on his cross; make ten further prostrations, firmly believing what I tell you: just as your sight is aware of the sun's light and your lips of its warmth when the sun shines on the cross and you want to kiss it - even though the sun is in heaven and the cross is on the wall - in a similar way, and even more so, while the Man of

⁵³⁹ II. XI, 30, 34.

our Lord Christ in the flesh is sitting in heaven on the throne of Majesty, as the blessed Paul preaches, nevertheless, his power, glory, activity and authority are in the cross, and it is our Lord Jesus Christ you are kissing and embracing in love.⁵⁴⁰

From this passage it is clear that Dadisho, like Isaac, understands the cross in some way as a locus of the divine presence, and this is in essence a statement of Christology. Like Isaac, Dadisho also emphasises the physicality of prayer, with kissing and prostrations. It is telling that in some manuscripts, Dadisho's *On Stillness* circulates under Isaac's name, pointing to the close relationship between the interests and concerns of these authors.⁵⁴¹ Dadisho uses the honorific ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ('lord') to describe the cross in *On Stillness*, and cross veneration is as significant for his

⁵⁴⁰ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 5. Cited in S. Brock, trans., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part.' Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO 555 (Leuven: CSCO, 1995), 58, n.18, 1. A similar passage can be found in a discourse of John of Dalyatha from the eighth century: 'Sometimes when I am kissing the cross, there shines from it upon my face a star of wondrous and glorious brightness, and my heart rejoices: and when I stretch out my hand and put it before me in the air or on my body I see it established in the likeness of an ineffable light.' B. E. Colless, ed. and trans., *The Mysticism of John Saba*, i, Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Melbourne, 1969), 162-163.

⁵⁴¹ Bedjan published a portion of *On Stillness* in his edition of the *First Part* of Isaac's work, based on a West Syrian manuscript. P. Bedjan, *Mar Isaacus Ninivita, de Perfectione Religiosa* (Paris-Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1909), 601-628; S. Chialà, 'The Arabic Version of Saint Isaac the Syrian,' in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy: Proceedings of the International Patristics Conference, held at the Sts Cyril and Methodius Institute for Postgraduate Studies, Moscow, October 10-11, 2013* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 67.

conception of the monastic life as it is for Isaac.⁵⁴² For both writers the divine presence in the image of the cross has Christological implications, and the divine presence imbues the cross with power.

4.3.1 The Cross, the Temple and Christology in Isaac and Dadisho

Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* uses the typology of the Ark and the cross to express his dyophysite Christology.⁵⁴³ In II. XI, 14-15, Isaac identifies the *tassā* ('metal plate, leaf') that covers the Ark with Christ's humanity, and the East Syrian exegetical tradition understands the Ark as a type of his divinity.⁵⁴⁴ Christ's humanity for which the *tassā* is a type, therefore, is something that is 'put on,' reflecting the archaic Christological language of the Church of the East for the Incarnation, *ܠܒ ܘܫܘܒ* 'he put on the body.'⁵⁴⁵ By arguing in this homily that the Ark is a type of the cross, the cross becomes for Isaac a place of the *Shekinah* and an object of Christological significance. He writes,

'... just as the honour of a human person is greater and more excellent... than (that of) dumb objects – so is this form of (the Cross), which now exists,

⁵⁴² Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 6.

⁵⁴³ See 3.3 above.

⁵⁴⁴ II. XI, 15. See 3.2.1 above.

⁵⁴⁵ S. Brock, 'The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials,' in G. Dragas and N. Nissiotis, eds., *Aksum Thyateira: a Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios of Thyateria and Great Britain* (London: Thyateria House, 1985), 167.

much more honourable because of the honour of the Man whom the Divinity took from us for His abode.’⁵⁴⁶

Isaac’s explicit Christological statements in this homily draw on the image of the Ark and the Temple, and show that the cross, the new Ark, derives its power from the presence of Christ:

‘Whenever we gaze upon this image in the time of prayer, or when we show reverence to it, because that Man was crucified upon it, we receive through it divine power.’⁵⁴⁷

For Isaac, the mystery of Christ’s divine and human natures is revealed through the cross:

‘All that applies to (the Man) is raised up to (the Word) who accepts it for Himself, having willed to make Him share in this honour. All this is made known to us in the Cross...’⁵⁴⁸

There are significant points of comparison between Isaac and Dadisho in relation to the cross and Christology. In the passage from *On Stillness* cited above, Dadisho uses the dyophysite description of Christ as ‘the Man’:

⁵⁴⁶ II. XI, 12.

⁵⁴⁷ II. XI, 13.

⁵⁴⁸ II. XI, 22.

‘just as your sight is aware of the sun’s light... even though the sun is in heaven and the cross is on the wall - in a similar way, and even more so, while the Man (ܡܢܫܐ) of our Lord Christ in the flesh is sitting in heaven on the throne of Majesty...’⁵⁴⁹

A similar line of argument can be seen in the *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, where Dadisho uses the image of the sun to express the dyophysite distinction between Christ’s humanity and his divinity:

‘Whenever we pray and worship God our Creator, immediately we ought to exalt our mind to heaven where he is the chief priest of our faith, Our Lord Jesus Christ... For just as whenever we remember and see the sun, first we see the sphere and then the light in it. This is together and with one vision, as we recognize that one is the nature of the sphere and the other is the nature of the light. Continuing, when we remember a person and see him, at first our mind is utilizing also our vision of his body, and afterwards we imagine the soul that dwells in him, and when we hear again his voice, at first we hear the sound and then we understand the word, in the same way whenever we Orthodox pray, at first we look to our Lord Christ who in the flesh is in heaven, and then we shall understand God who dwells in him.’⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁹ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 5.

⁵⁵⁰ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 290.

Dadisho's language is characteristic of the division between Christ's human nature and the divine nature in the East Syrian tradition.⁵⁵¹ The same language is found in Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part*: he refers to Christ, for instance, as 'the Man in whom the Divinity dwells' and the 'Man who became Lord.'⁵⁵²

Isaac and Dadisho both consider the place of the cross in the divine economy in these Christological terms. In II. XI, Isaac considers the verse from Hebrews 11. 3, 'By His hands the worlds were established...' and writes,

'For He to whom all these things apply willingly dwelt in Him, giving Him the honour of His divinity and authority over all, because of the benefits which creation was about to receive through Him, whose beginning occurred on the Cross for it.'⁵⁵³

In a passage reminiscent of Isaac and Dadisho's writings on the cross and divine love, Dadisho gives an account of the Incarnation and Crucifixion from a Trinitarian perspective:

'God the Father loves the world in this way, that is the sinners, just as his only begotten Son he gave to death for their sake. And the Son, the lord of

⁵⁵¹ See also, Brock, 'The Christology of the Church of the East,' 175.

⁵⁵² II. XI, 12, 21.

⁵⁵³ II. XI, 21.

glory, gladly was crucified for them. The Holy Spirit is without ceasing like a bird over its chicks and like a mother over the children of her womb.⁵⁵⁴

He continues,

‘God the Word on account of his love with sinners, came to take the name of suffering and death of the cross. Therefore, it was said of its (humanity’s) lord that glory was crucified for us, and in this way God loved the sinners.’⁵⁵⁵

Isaac and Dadisho have a shared Christological heritage, and their statements of Christology are particularly clear in their discussions of the cross. The comparison, however, finds richer expression in a passage from the *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers* in which Dadisho uses the image of the Temple and worship to show that Christ and the cross are worthy of veneration:

‘God has taken a perfect human being from our race and made him a inseparable temple and a glorious image and bodily clothing, and we were commanded to worship our Creator through him. Therefore, we do not have the power to worship him nakedly and to pray and praise outside of his image and his clothing and his temple, but through his temple and with his clothing together in one worship and glorification. If the holy prophets in the likeness of a human being worship God, how much should we even more worship God in his human image and his dress and his temple? And if we worship

⁵⁵⁴ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 71.

⁵⁵⁵ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 71.

the cross of Our Lord and the body of our Lord because of our Lord as our Lord, how much more does it suit us to worship the humanity of Our Lord, the one who is worshiped by all through the worship of God without distinction and without end.

If in a temple of stones and of bricks God is worshiped, how much more... should God who is over all and without end be worshiped and praised by all rational creatures.⁵⁵⁶

This passage, again, uses characteristically dyophysite language, and clearly expresses the notion that veneration is due to the cross because of Christ, the one who was crucified. Here, Dadisho uses the image of the Temple ‘of stones and bricks’ in a similar way to Isaac’s use of the image of the Ark. The power of God was formerly expressed in the Temple and Ark, and they received the veneration of the people. The new dispensation, however, means that because of ‘the Man who completely became its (the Divinity’s) temple,’ Christ and his cross are worthy of worship. Isaac is clear that the cross can receive veneration because of Christ: the cross ‘is revered and honoured by us in His name and because of Him.’⁵⁵⁷ This is further seen in a passage from *The Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, in which Dadisho discusses the two different words for the cross in Syriac:

‘*Zqifo* et *šlibo*, c’est tout un: *šlibo*, c’est quand les mains et les pieds de quelqu’un sont étendus sur le bois et qu’il est fixé par des clous, gisant sur le

⁵⁵⁶ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 290.

⁵⁵⁷ II. XI, 12, 21.

sol; *zqifo* se dit quand sont dressés et érigés le bois et celui qui a été crucifié dessus. Et de même que le bois est appelé aussi *šlibo* à cause de celui qui a été crucifié dessus, ainsi l'homme aussi est-il appelé *zqifo* à cause du bois que a été dressé et érigé après qu'il a été crucifié dessus.⁵⁵⁸

This explanation of terms clearly reflects the relationship in Dadisho's understanding between the wood of the cross, the act of crucifixion, and the one crucified. Christology and cross veneration are closely related for both writers.

4.3.3 The Cross and Prayer in Isaac and Dadisho

Given the emphasis in Isaac and Dadisho on the cross as a locus of the divine presence and their Christological justification for cross veneration, it is unsurprising that both writers have similar views on the place of the cross in the life of prayer. Both Isaac and Dadisho often describe the physical acts of veneration made by solitaries, notably prostrations and kissing the cross. The cross also seems to be the focus for spiritual disciplines such as reading the Scriptures and the Fathers. Likewise, Isaac and Dadisho emphasise the efficacy of the cross in prayer, and this latter theme is particularly evident in the casting out of demons.

In a passage from the *First Part*, Isaac describes the way one of his brothers prayed before the cross in his cell:

⁵⁵⁸ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, XIV, 22.

‘One day I went to the cell of a holy brother and lay down in a corner as I was ill... he would begin with Psalms and would recite them diligently. Then, of a sudden, he would leave the service, [and] fall on his face... on account of the fervor which grace had kindled in his heart. Thereupon he would rise and salute the cross. Then again he prostrated himself, rose, saluted the cross and again fell down on his face.’⁵⁵⁹

Similarly, Isaac describes the act of kissing the cross in the ascetic practices of the Fathers. He writes in the *Second Part*, that:

‘Each time they stood up, they performed many acts of worship, their body assisting them as the occasion might allow, kissing the Cross five or maybe ten times, reckoning each act of worship and kiss as a single prayer.’⁵⁶⁰

These particular practices are also echoed throughout Dadisho’s writings. In *On Stillness*, for instance, Dadisho describes ‘kissing and embracing (the cross) in love.’⁵⁶¹ Kissing the cross is also seen in the *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*:

‘But the bowings are, when you stand up from a genuflection vigorously and swiftly and without hesitating you should kiss the holy cross, and you should knock your head before him on the ground ten times or as much [as you can],

⁵⁵⁹ I. 140.

⁵⁶⁰ II. XIV, 24.

⁵⁶¹ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 5.

while not bringing your knees to the ground, but only upon the palm of your hands should you support yourselves.⁵⁶²

The *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers* includes a number of references to the practice of prostration before the cross:

‘Stand up quickly and throw yourself down before the holy cross and seek mercy and salvation from God.’⁵⁶³

Dadisho says of Macarius the Younger,

‘whenever he prayed, he stretched out his hands in likeness of the cross, and in this way he prayed.’⁵⁶⁴

As in Isaac’s writings, cross veneration is often accompanied by other spiritual practices, notably tears:

‘But we shall endure in our place, and when a battle comes upon us or a temptation, let us fast, kneel down, beat our head before the cross of our Lord, and with suffering and with tears let us ask for assistance and salvation from him... Let us beat our head before the Lordly cross, let us hit upon our head, let us strike upon our face, let beat upon our breast, let us weep with a

⁵⁶² Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 231.

⁵⁶³ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 176.

⁵⁶⁴ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 23.

mournful voice, let us bathe our cheeks with tears, let us call to our sweet Lord with the spiritual bellowing of the intellect. Immediately, he will rescue us from Satan...'⁵⁶⁵

Isaac and Dadisho clearly share the same conception of the place of the physical act of cross veneration in the life of prayer, with the practices they describe reflecting the norms of contemporary monastic culture. This is seen particularly in the centrality of the image of the cross in spiritual reading.⁵⁶⁶ Dadisho refers to the practice of reading, sitting in front of the cross:

‘If you truly desire that the fear, affection and love of the greatness of the Holy Mysteries should be fixed in your heart... read carefully and with understanding on all the Sundays of your solitude of the Seven Weeks, while you are humbly sitting face to face with the adorable Cross the second discourse of the "Book on Priesthood" written by the Blessed Interpreter.’⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁵ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 75, 100.

⁵⁶⁶ For monastic reading, see J. Walker, ‘Ascetic Literacy: Books and Readers in East-Syrian Monastic Tradition,’ in H. Börm and J. Wiesehoefer, eds., *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2010), 307-345.

⁵⁶⁷ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, I, 35. See also, Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 85. Shem’on the Graceful refers to the same practice: ‘Take the book of the solitary Fathers, sit before the cross and read a little.’ Shem’on the Graceful, *Discourse on the Solitary Life*, XI. Shem’on, like Isaac and Dadisho, was associate with Rabban Shabur. M. Hansbury, trans., *Shem’on the Graceful: Discourse on the Solitary Life* (Oxford: SLG Press, 2020), i.

Isaac does not, himself, describe the act of sitting in front of the cross for the reading of Scripture or the Fathers, but in II. XXX, he connects the reading of and meditation on scripture with the crucifixion of the body and the intellect in the ascetic life.⁵⁶⁸ Elsewhere, he notes the importance of reading the Scriptures for prayer, and he clearly conceives of the recitation of the psalter in the Office in the presence of the cross.⁵⁶⁹ In addition to the physical acts of cross veneration that Isaac and Dadisho describe, the practice of spiritual reading shows that the cross permeates all aspects of the ascetic's life of prayer.

One further aspect of the relationship between prayer and the cross is its efficacy in casting out demons.⁵⁷⁰ This is of particular concern in Dadisho's writings, and in a number of places he points to the example of a holy father or counsels the solitary to make the sign of the cross wherever a demon appears. For instance, he describes how one of the fathers sealed the cave of a brother with the sign of the cross, and this

⁵⁶⁸ II. XXX, 6-7.

⁵⁶⁹ III. IX, 3, 'reading is for prayer'; III. IX, 10, 'Scripture ought not to leave one's hands'; II. IV, 4. The first homily of the *Second Part* contains a discussion of the kind of reading that is profitable for the monk, warning against anything that is likely to upset the ascetic's meditation. This homily has not been edited, but a translation appears in S. Brock, 'St Isaac the Syrian: Two Unpublished Texts,' *Sobornost* 19/1 (1997), 20.

⁵⁷⁰ For the background to this, see B. Bitton-Ashkelony, 'Demons and Prayers: Spiritual Exercises in the Monastic Community of Gaza in Fifth and Sixth Centuries,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 57/2 (2003), 200-221; and also P. Brown, 'Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages,' in M. Douglas, ed., *Witchcraft: Confessions and Accusations* (London: Tavistock, 1970), 17-45.

particular practice is echoed in the *History of Mar Yawnan*.⁵⁷¹ Dadisho is clear that demons flee before the sign of the cross:

‘The devils are afraid and are trembling, not only from the crucifixion of Christ, but also from the sign of his cross everywhere it is shown. If on occasion something is depicted and if it is inscribed in the air, in the same way the demons are afraid and trembling... One should name the name of Christ, and he should cross himself with the sign of his cross. Immediately, the demons will flee and their images will disappear, and this will happen, not only by holy and perfect people, but also by lesser and plain [folk.]’⁵⁷²

Isaac’s writings contain fewer references to the practice of expelling demons by means of the cross, but it is evident from a passage in II. XI in which he writes,

‘Why do I speak of these things? Satan himself and all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the Cross, when it is depicted by us against him.’⁵⁷³

The casting out of demons resonates with the particular struggles of the ascetic life. As a means of combatting the demon of fornication, Dadisho instructs the solitary:

⁵⁷¹ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 47; *History of Mar Yawnan*, VII, 10. For the *History of Mar Yawnan*, see footnote 448 above.

⁵⁷² Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 53-54; see also II, 175.

⁵⁷³ II. XI, 8.

‘Stand up immediately and kneel before the holy cross and beat your head harshly before our Lord and arouse your soul to weeping and to groaning words. Then stand up and kiss our Lord with his cross lovingly and affix the vision of your mind with nails that fasten on to his hands and his feet for the sake of your life and salvation.’⁵⁷⁴

There are a number of points of connection here with a passage from *On Stillness*, notably the particular emphasis on Christ’s wounds. In a lengthy section on combatting demons in the ascetic life, he writes,

‘Rise upon your feet and embrace and kiss the Crucifix with a feeling of repentance and love. While embracing it, say thus: "Glory be to Thee, our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, who wast crucified for us! In Thee we find deliverance from the demons, in Thy blood we have forgiveness of sins, and in Thy wounds we are delivered from passions." Then kiss our Lord on His Cross, twice on the nails of His right foot and twice on the nails of His left foot, and say at each kiss : "Let me be healed with Thy wounds," until your heart is stirred and burns in His love. Genuflect again before the Crucifix and stand in the middle (of your cell), not leaning on a staff like the old, nor on the wall like the weak, but standing erect on both your feet...

And when you recite "Let them say continually that the Lord is great who had pleasure in the peace of His servant," look also in your mind at our Lord

⁵⁷⁴ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 178.

on the Cross. And when you recite "Let the demons be cursed, but mayest Thou, Lord, be blessed, and may I, Thy servant, rejoice in Thee," in saying "Let them be cursed" look at the demons; in saying "mayest Thou be blessed" look at our Lord ; and in saying "Thy servant" think of yourself and of your angel. And if the demon waxes wrathful and terrifies you with his visions and frightens you with his temptations, be not afraid, excited and disturbed, but look at our Lord on the Cross, and have trust and confidence in the holy angel who is standing at your right hand to help you and guard you.'⁵⁷⁵

For Dadisho and for Isaac, the cross stands as an effective defence against the assaults of demons in the struggle of the ascetic life. This particular trope may also reflect the older traditions of defending Cross veneration against the accusations of idolatry levelled by Jews and pagans, as outlined above in relation to II. XI.⁵⁷⁶ The miraculous power of the cross points to the truth of the Christian religion. Driving home this point, Dadisho gives one explicit example in the *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers* of the way in which this miraculous power is used to polemical effect:

⁵⁷⁵ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 10-15. The vividness of the image Dadisho calls to mind here perhaps explains Mingana's translation of ܥܘܠܒܐ as 'Crucifix' rather than Cross. Mingana was a Chaldean Catholic and so the image of the Crucified Lord on the Cross would not have scandalised him in the way it would contemporary members of the Church of the East. See, G. P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals*, ii (London: Joseph Masters, 1852), 132.

⁵⁷⁶ See 2.5 above.

‘In the land of Persia he (the saint) exorcised a demon from the son of Shapur and astonished the king and his nobles and debated before [them]... They seized the great fire in the middle of the courtyard of the king, and he made the sign of the cross upon one of his ten disciples who were with him, and commanded him to enter and stand in the middle of the fire until he called him. They shamed and embarrassed all the Magi and [their] chiefs, and everyone praised God.’⁵⁷⁷

This is significant in that it demonstrates the outward effects of prayer with the cross. For Isaac and Dadisho, cross veneration is part of the ascetic’s conformity to Christ but it is also part of the divine victory over demons and pagans.

4.3.4 Dadisho’s *On Stillness* and the reformist context of II. XI

Dadisho wrote the homilies that make up *On Stillness* to a brother, offering counsel on the observation of varying periods of solitude.⁵⁷⁸ The fifth discourse opens with some short, metrical pieces of advice, and goes on to discuss the preparation a solitary should make for leaving the cell on Sundays in order to gather with the community and receive the Holy Mysteries.⁵⁷⁹ He writes,

‘When the communal bell sounds and calls you to go to the monastery... for the sake of receiving the life-giving Sacrament – a little before this bell

⁵⁷⁷ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 189.

⁵⁷⁸ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, I, 1.

⁵⁷⁹ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 2-3.

sounds, put your affairs in order, close your doors, and sit for about an hour and think within yourself how to keep both your outer and inner senses from the stains of sin, which you may encounter on your way and in the monastery, till you return to your cell.⁵⁸⁰

When Dadisho describes the veneration of the cross as ‘kissing and embracing (the Lord himself) in love,’ it is within the context of the prostrations and prayers that Dadisho prescribes for the solitary preparing to leave the cell. Immediately there follows this advice:

‘After having gone out and closed the outer door of your cell, remain awhile before the door and lift your eyes, your thoughts and your hands towards Heaven, and pray thus: “O our Lord Jesus Christ, set a watch over my mouth and my lips”... Then make the sign of the holy (✝) Cross on yourself and over the path you are following, and proceed in your way till you reach the monastery...”⁵⁸¹

He says that the solitary must not look more than a cubit beyond the path, and must be a good example to the brothers during the service and at the meal afterwards.⁵⁸²

He then advises,

⁵⁸⁰ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 3.

⁵⁸¹ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 6.

⁵⁸² Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 6.

‘Immediately after having returned in peace to your cell, fall down and genuflect before the Crucifix, and recite the Lord’s Prayer.’⁵⁸³

The same practice can also be seen in the *History of Mar Yawnan*, where the saint sets out on the road on which he will meet Mar Awgen:

‘Arising from prayer, he sealed himself with the life-giving sign of the cross as he faced the road on which he was about to travel.’⁵⁸⁴

The practice seen here and as dictated by Dadisho clearly reflects the norms of monastic practices for those solitaries influenced by the reformist monasticism of Abraham of Kashkar. The particular relationship of the solitary to the monastery reflected in Dadisho is one indication of this, and the ‘Egyptianisation’ of the *History of Mar Yawnan* in linking the monasticism of Beth Qatraye to Mar Awgen is another.⁵⁸⁵

The close parallels between *On Stillness V*, 5 and II. XI may indicate that Isaac’s own writing on the cross was influenced by the kinds of practice that Dadisho describes. Isaac echoes Dadisho’s emphasis on visualising Christ’s wounds in prayer in *On Stillness V*, 10, writing that,

⁵⁸³ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 7.

⁵⁸⁴ *History of Mar Yawnan*, III, 6.

⁵⁸⁵ Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità*, 66; Brock, ‘The *History of Mar Yawnan*,’ 2.

‘whenever they (true believers) raise their eyes and gaze on (the cross), it is as though they were contemplating the face of Christ, and accordingly they are full of reverence for it.’⁵⁸⁶

Similarly, when Dadisho encourages the solitary to come before the cross on returning the cell, he says, ‘Recite also words of thankfulness of your own composition...’⁵⁸⁷ This reflects Isaac’s concern for ‘familiarity of speech’ with God:

‘because they are children, they have all the more familiarity of speech towards Him – just as (ordinary) children customarily have familiarity of speech with their parents, as a result of confidence in (their) love.’⁵⁸⁸

The notion that ‘whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ’ is the underlying principle at work in II. XI.

There are some significant points of contact on the theme of cross veneration in Isaac and Dadisho. Both writers understand the cross mystically to be a place of the divine presence, with the cross being a focus for clear Christological statements. Thus Christology justifies the practice of cross veneration. It is interesting that this is achieved in Isaac by his typology of the Ark of the Covenant and the cross, and in Dadisho by allusion to the Temple. Furthermore, both Isaac and Dadisho emphasise the role of the cross in prayer. There are extensive references to the physical acts of

⁵⁸⁶ II. XI, 17.

⁵⁸⁷ Dadisho, *On Stillness*, V, 7.

⁵⁸⁸ II. XI, 17.

cross veneration, most notably prostration and kissing the cross, and both writers attribute a place to the cross in the discipline of spiritual reading. Cross veneration is not a solely interior matter, however, and both writers are clear about the efficacy of the cross in casting out demons, which may reflect earlier polemical traditions. Finally, the similarity between Isaac and Dadisho's writing suggests that Isaac's understanding of the cross was shaped by the ascetic practices outlined by Dadisho in *On Stillness*. As with Isaac's understanding of the crucifixion of the intellect, Isaac's writing generally, and his homily on the cross specifically, can be situated within the reformist tradition that was prevalent in Beth Qatraye in the seventh century.

4.4 The Cross in Isaac and Gabriel Qatraya

Gabriel Qatraya, writing some time before 620, provides some important insights into the liturgical life of the Church of the East before the reforms of Isho-yahb III.⁵⁸⁹ His *Commentary on the Liturgy* is part of the broader 'cause' genre in the East Syrian tradition, which Becker argues is concerned with aetiology and the origins of the liturgical feasts of the church.⁵⁹⁰ Such works became popular from the mid-sixth

⁵⁸⁹ Brock, Butts, Kiraz, and Van Rompay, eds., *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, s.v. 'Gabriel Qatraya.'

⁵⁹⁰ For this movement, see Adam Becker's characterisation in A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 13-14, 104. These characteristics of scholasticism are, in part, drawn from J. Cabezón, ed., *Scholasticism: Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 4-6. See also A. H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, Translated

century, although Gabriel almost certainly wrote his commentary in the early decades of the seventh century.⁵⁹¹ His concern is with questions such as, ‘with what aim is the psalm(ody) of Sapra arranged?’ and ‘why do we say ‘*onyatha* of the Martyrs, and not of the Apostles, in particular on Sunday; and why do the Solitaries say them every day?’⁵⁹² Such questions are clearly very different to the concerns that Isaac and Dadisho seek to address in their writings. The genre of liturgical commentary in the Syriac churches is connected to the catechetical traditions of the fourth century, seen in the catechetical homilies on baptism and the Eucharist by authors such as John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Jerusalem.⁵⁹³ Brock suggests that one such early liturgical commentary might have been intended as a series of notes for catechetical instructors.⁵⁹⁴ The ways in which Isaac and Dadisho thought about the cross was not confined to ascetic writers. The *Commentary* reflects the scholastic concerns of the East Syrian schools, but also the notion seen in Isaac and Dadisho that the cross makes Christ mystically present in prayer and worship and that the cross provides a locus for Christological thought.

Gabriel’s *Commentary* is known only from one manuscript of the thirteenth century, BL Or. 3336. It is described briefly in Margoliouth’s *Descriptive List of Syriac and*

Texts for Historians 50 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008). See also S. Brock, ‘The Origins of the Qanona “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” according to Gabriel of Qatar (Early 7th Century),’ *The Harp* 21 (2006), 178-179.

⁵⁹¹ Brock, ‘Patristic Quotations in Gabriel Qatraya’s “Commentary on the Liturgical Offices,”’ 129.

⁵⁹² Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, II. IV; IV. IX.

⁵⁹³ S. Brock, ‘An Early Syriac Commentary on the Liturgy,’ *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37/2 (1986), 399.

⁵⁹⁴ Brock, ‘An Early Syriac Commentary on the Liturgy,’ 398-399.

Karshuni Mss. in the British Museum acquired since 1873, but the *Commentary* was only first studied seriously by Sarhad Jammo in 1966.⁵⁹⁵ Gabriel's commentary consists of five memre on the morning and evening offices and on the Eucharist.⁵⁹⁶ Abraham bar Lipah, whose relationship to Gabriel with whom he shares a family name is unclear, provides a redaction of Gabriel's commentary in question and answer form.⁵⁹⁷ This indicates the authoritative nature of Gabriel's work.⁵⁹⁸ Jammo noted that Abraham bar Lipah's *Commentary* is identical to that of Gabriel with the exception of one addition and two omissions: he suggests that the omissions make the sense of Abraham's text less clear but are not substantial.⁵⁹⁹ Jammo's survey of the contents of the manuscript and the comparison with Abraham's *Commentary* were valuable, but more recent work by Brock has corrected a couple of his conclusions as to the date of the text.⁶⁰⁰

Scholarly interest in East Syrian liturgical practice has largely been to do with baptism and the Eucharist. This is, in part, due to the preservation of ancient

⁵⁹⁵ G. Margoliouth, *Descriptive List of Syriac and Karshuni Mss. in the British Museum acquired since 1873* (London: British Museum, 1899), 15; Jammo, 'Gabriel Qatraya et son commentaire sur la liturgie chaldéenne,' 39.

⁵⁹⁶ Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' 3.

⁵⁹⁷ M. Kozah ed. and trans., 'Abraham Qatraya bar Lipah's *Commentary on the Liturgical Offices*,' in Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murhiki, and Al-Thani, eds., *Anthology*, 97-146. Brock, Butts, Kiraz, and Van Rompay, eds., *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, s.v. 'Gabriel Qatraya.'

⁵⁹⁸ Kozah ed. and trans., 'Abraham Qatraya bar Lipah's *Commentary on the Liturgical Offices*,' 97-99.

⁵⁹⁹ Kozah ed. and trans., 'Abraham Qatraya bar Lipah's *Commentary on the Liturgical Offices*,' 98.

⁶⁰⁰ Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' 2.

traditions. Modern scholarship has been largely concerned with the question of anointing during the baptismal rite, as a number of Syriac sources preserve a single, pre-baptismal anointing as opposed to the additional post-baptismal anointing of later tradition.⁶⁰¹ At the Eucharist, the East Syrian tradition still uses the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, which may be as early as the third century.⁶⁰² As a result, most studies on the East Syrian liturgical tradition have focused primarily on the Eucharist.⁶⁰³

This is no less the case with Gabriel's *Commentary*. Jammo's article is substantially concerned with the Eucharistic rite, and he subsequently translated the parts of the fifth memra on the Eucharist into Latin.⁶⁰⁴ In 1974, Fr Placid Podipara translated this

⁶⁰¹ S. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 27-32. For a digest of recent scholarship on the subject, see P. Bradshaw, 'Early Patterns of Christian Initiation in Syria,' in P. Bradshaw, and J. Day, eds., *Further Essays in Early Eastern Initiation: Early Syrian Baptismal Liturgy*, Joint Liturgical Studies 78 (Norwich: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2014).

⁶⁰² The dating is hard to prove or disprove. A. Gelston, *The Eucharistic Prayer of Addai and Mari* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 21.

⁶⁰³ There are a couple of notable exceptions. For studies of early witnesses to the East Syrian Daily Office, see S. Brock, 'Some Early Witnesses to the East Syriac Liturgical Tradition,' *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 18 (2004), 9; E. C. D. Hunter and J. F. Coakley, *A Syriac Service-Book from Turfan*, Berliner Turfantexte 39 (Berlin: Brepols, 2017). Othottil Ulahannan Jincy has undertaken a number of thematic studies of the Hudra, see O. U. Jincy, 'The Commemoration of Blessed Marth Maryam in the Church of the East: A Study Based on Hudra Ms. dt 1598 Alkaya,' *The Harp* 25 (2010), 291.

⁶⁰⁴ Jammo, 'Gabriel Qatraya et son commentaire sur la liturgie chaldéenne,' 42; S. H. Jammo, *La structure de la messe chaldéenne* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978), 29-

part into English, but Brock made another translation on the grounds that Podipara's translation was not easily accessible.⁶⁰⁵ Given this early focus on the Eucharist in Gabriel's *Commentary*, it is unsurprising that the little work done on this commentary by liturgical scholars has concentrated on the Eucharistic rite.⁶⁰⁶

Despite this, Gabriel's *Commentary* is important for the study of the East Syrian liturgy more widely. A clear example of this, given by Brock, is the necessity of an icon of Christ at the consecration of the Eucharist: this is taken up in Abraham's redaction of the *Commentary* and is substantial evidence contradicting the notion that the Church of the East has always been aniconic.⁶⁰⁷

48. Jammo also published an article on the evening office; S. H. Jammo, 'L'office du soir chaldéen au temps de Gabriel Qatraya,' *L'Orient Syrien* 12 (1967), 187-210.

⁶⁰⁵ Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' 3, 9-24.

⁶⁰⁶ See B. D. Spinks, 'Addai and Mari and the Institution Narrative: The Tantalising Evidence of Gabriel Qatraya,' *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 98 (1984), 60-67; E. J. Kilmartin, 'John Chrysostom's Influence on Gabriel Qatraya's Theology of Eucharistic Consecration,' *Theological Studies* 42 (1981), 444-457. One significant exception is J. Alencherry, 'The Rite of *Lakhumara* according to the Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar (VII Century),'

https://www.academia.edu/31403003/The_Rite_of_Lakhumara_according_to_the_Commentary_of_Gabriel_of_Qatar_VII_Century_in_Christian_Orient. Accessed 06/09/19. This article translates a number of passages concerned with the evening office. Neroth van Vogelpoel's partial edition, *The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the East Syriac Morning Service on Ordinary Days*, will also help to redress this imbalance.

⁶⁰⁷ Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' 4, 15.

4.4.1 The Cross and the Presence of Christ

Like earlier liturgical commentators, Gabriel is concerned to explain the origins of and the reasons for liturgical action: one early fifth-century example, for instance, notes ‘the Veil above the cup and the paten (is) a sign of the stone which was placed above the sepulchre of our Saviour.’⁶⁰⁸ These explanations are often brief but theologically and symbolically significant. In this example, the connection is made between the altar and Christ’s tomb, strengthening the scriptural connection between the Eucharist with Christ’s death. Gabriel’s *Commentary* contains many similar examples, simply connecting the liturgy with the scriptural narrative through symbols. For example, at the reading of the Gospel in the Eucharistic rite, Gabriel says, ‘the Lights at that moment are a symbol of what our Lord told his Apostles, ‘You are the light of the world’’ and similarly, ‘The (sweet) incense at this moment is a symbol of the sweetness of our Lord’s words.’⁶⁰⁹ Other examples are more theologically complicated: the liturgy opens, for instance, with a *marmitha*, a section of the psalter. Gabriel indicates that there is one *marmitha* here because ‘the Lord Jesus Christ Son of God is one’ but the *marmitha* is composed of three psalms because Christ makes known the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.⁶¹⁰ Similarly, Brock has shown how the passage in the *Commentary* on the Trisagion, another theological example of liturgical explanation, was used polemically.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁸ Brock, ‘An Early Syriac Commentary on the Liturgy,’ 391.

⁶⁰⁹ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 30.

⁶¹⁰ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 3.

⁶¹¹ Brock, ‘The Origins of the Qanona,’ 178-179

The physical image of the cross is of great significance in the unfolding of the liturgy that Gabriel describes. The processional cross is understood to signify Jesus in the liturgical action. The strong theological association in the tradition between the altar and Christ's death and burial means that the entire liturgy comes to stand for the narrative trajectory of Christ's ministry, death and resurrection. Some of these examples are quite straightforward: Gabriel explains the movement of the cross out of the sanctuary as 'a symbol of Jesus' going out to the wilderness and his fight with Satan.'⁶¹² Likewise, he writes,

'the ascent of the Cross to the Bema accompanied by the deacons and priests is a symbol of Jesus' frequent ascents to Jerusalem accompanied by his twelve disciples and the seventy.'⁶¹³

After the Gospel, Gabriel describes the cross and the Gospel on the Bema as 'a symbol of the sitting of Jesus among his disciples as he taught the crowds in Jerusalem.'⁶¹⁴ As the liturgy moves towards the Eucharistic rite proper, the cross comes to stand for Jesus at the time of his passion:

'the fact that the Cross and the Gospel come down from the Bema without any procession and unaccompanied by priests and deacons: because when

⁶¹² Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 8.

⁶¹³ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 9.

⁶¹⁴ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 34.

Jesus was arrested and led off to be crucified, all his disciples abandoned him and fled.’⁶¹⁵

In relation to the image of the cross, Gabriel’s *Commentary* is full of the language of symbol and mystery.⁶¹⁶ The processional cross stands as a symbol for the presence of Jesus in the action of the liturgy, and the presence of the cross is essential for the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. This symbolic language is echoed in Isaac of Nineveh’s homily on the cross: ‘For true believers the sight of the cross is no small thing, for all symbols are understood to be contained in it.’⁶¹⁷ He says of the cross,

‘we look on the Cross as the place belonging to the *Shekhina* of the Most High, the Lord’s Sanctuary, the ocean of the symbols (or, mysteries) of God’s economy.’⁶¹⁸

For Isaac and Gabriel, the image of the Cross signifies the presence of God and the work of salvation. In Isaac it is connected with the revelation of the ‘knowledge of His glory, and the liberation which He was going to take, through its means, for all humanity,’ and with the ‘Mystery of the New Covenant.’⁶¹⁹ In Gabriel’s

⁶¹⁵ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 38.

⁶¹⁶ For a brief survey of *raza* in the East Syrian tradition, see A. Royel, *Mysteries of the Kingdom: The Sacraments of the Assyrian Church of the East* (Modesto, CA: CIRED, 2011), 50-58.

⁶¹⁷ II. XI, 17.

⁶¹⁸ II. XI, 24.

⁶¹⁹ II. XI, 30, 32.

Commentary, this language of signification is connected explicitly and intimately with the Eucharistic celebration:

‘The Cross and the Gospel that are placed on the altar, and above them the icon of our Lord, amidst which the awesome Mysteries are consecrated: these fulfill the place of the person of our Lord...’⁶²⁰

In the light of Isaac’s text on the cross, Gabriel’s understanding of the cross in the liturgy has some additional theological substance. If the image of the cross is the locus of God’s glory, as Isaac suggests, then to describe the cross as a symbol of Christ’s body, or to see the movement of the cross recalling specific events in Christ’s life, is more than an explanation of the liturgy. The image of the cross makes Christ present in the liturgical action of the Eucharist, and so becomes the Divine dwelling place: by means of the mystery of the cross, the earthly sanctuary is joined to the heavenly.⁶²¹

⁶²⁰ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 45.

⁶²¹ Baby Varghese writes, ‘An icon or a cross is used not simply to direct our imagination during the prayers. They are always erected with a prayer of consecration, asking God to manifest them as a means of grace and salvation. Thus they serve as a material centre in which there reposes a divine power, an energy, for they point to the archetype.’ B. Varghese *West Syrian Liturgical Theology, Liturgy, Worship and Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 42. Varghese’s section on *raza* includes citations of a number of East Syrian authors, including Narsai and Moses Bar Kepha.

4.4.2 The Cross and Christology in Gabriel's *Commentary*

Gabriel's *Commentary on the Liturgy* includes a number of Christological passages, perhaps most notably in his discussion of the Eucharistic gifts, where Christ is described as one,

‘who in his human *qnoma* is body and soul, like everyone, because of the conjunction with God the Word who shared everything with him apart from his (divine) nature.’⁶²²

This continues in a polemical vein:

‘It was not the case that the Father gave to his eternal Son to have life in his *qnoma*, as is the supposition of the heretics, but (he did so) to the Man who (derives) from us, who, because of his union with God the Word, has inherited a name that is more honourable than all names.’⁶²³

The language Gabriel uses here reflects the Christological norms of the East Syrian tradition.

In addition to this passage on the Eucharist, the veneration of the cross is a focus for Christology in the *Commentary*. This parallels the writings of Isaac and Dadisho on cross veneration. Gabriel gives theologically complex explanations for a number of

⁶²² Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 73.

⁶²³ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 73.

examples of the liturgical use of the cross: at the Gospel procession, for instance, Gabriel writes,

‘The coming forth of the Gospel, and the Cross with it: a symbol of the humanity of our Lord which existed in body and soul. The Cross is a symbol of the body which was crucified, and the Gospel a symbol of the soul in which there is rationality.’⁶²⁴

This symbolic division of Christ’s humanity into the cross and the Gospel book, his body and soul, appears again just before catechumens are expelled from the church: the cross is set up in the sanctuary and the Gospel book is placed at the other side of the church. Gabriel gives this theological significance by suggesting that this is a symbol of the separation of Christ’s soul from his body and his body’s entrance into Paradise.⁶²⁵

Gabriel’s association between the cross and Christ’s physical body naturally seems to be because it is the body that is crucified:

‘the raising of the Cross at the entrance of the sanctuary door: a symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus on the wood (of the Cross).’⁶²⁶

⁶²⁴ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 23.

⁶²⁵ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 40.

⁶²⁶ Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, V. II, 39.

The connection between the cross and Christ's body mirrors the typology in Isaac's homily on the cross, which associates Christ's humanity with the cross and the covering of the Ark. For both Isaac and Dadisho, the cross is worthy of veneration because of the 'Man' who is crucified.⁶²⁷ Dadisho writes,

'And if we worship the cross of Our Lord and the body of our Lord because of our Lord as our Lord, how much more does it suit us to worship the humanity of Our Lord, the one who is worshiped by all through the worship of God without distinction and without end.'⁶²⁸

For Isaac, Dadisho and Gabriel there is a close relationship between the image of the cross, its worship, and Christ's human nature. Despite the difference in style, genre and audience of these texts, the cross provides a focus for Christology, which in turn justifies the veneration of the cross.

4.4.3 Cross Veneration and the Liturgy

The liturgical context explained by Gabriel gives further indication of how the cross was used in prayer and worship. Isaac and Dadisho describe acts of prostration and kissing, but from the context of the solitary's cell. It is worth considering that Dadisho's description of worship before the cross as a preparation for leaving the cell on Sundays mirrors Gabriel's account of the place of the cross in the liturgy. Likewise, Isaac's typology in II. XI focuses on the veneration of the Ark in former

⁶²⁷ II. XI, 12.

⁶²⁸ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, II, 290.

times and the veneration now due to the cross. Reading Isaac's homily in the light of Gabriel's *Commentary on the Liturgy* shows that for these writers the cross is inseparable from worship.

Isaac writes,

'the limitless power of God dwells in the Cross, just as it resided in an incomprehensible way in the Ark which was venerated amidst great honour and awe by the (Jewish) People, performing by it miracles and signs in the midst of those who were not ashamed to call it 'God,' that is, they would gaze upon it in awe as though upon God...'⁶²⁹

The Ark as an object of veneration continues to be an important theme in this passage:

'Did not Moses and the People prostrate before the Ark in great awe and trembling? Did not Joshua son of Nun lie stretched out on his face before it from morning until evening? Were not God's fearful revelations manifested there as if to (provide) honour for the object, seeing that the *Shekhina* of God was residing in it?'⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹ II. XI, 4.

⁶³⁰ II. XI, 5.

Here Isaac describes the patriarchs Moses and Joshua prostrating themselves before the Ark in the same terms that he describes the veneration of the cross by the Fathers of the church.⁶³¹

The relationship between the cross and worship has an eschatological dimension. Gabriel addresses the question, ‘Why do we sound the *naqosha* again at the last Session, and open the door of the sanctuary; and why do we say the *Qale d-Shahra?*’⁶³² Gabriel’s answer is that this signifies the trumpet that announces the Second Coming, and he describes an angel carrying the cross with great glory before the resurrection of the dead. If Gabriel understands the *naqosha* as a type of the trumpet that sounds, then, though this is not explicit, the angel carrying the cross provides a type of the processional cross used in the liturgy. The worship of the church is connected to the end times, and the sight of the cross during the liturgy recalls its being carried with great glory ahead of the angelic host.

In describing the worship accorded to the Ark and the veneration of the Cross in II. XI, Isaac clearly draws on a liturgical context, where, as Gabriel shows, the language of signification and mystery is prevalent in relation to the Cross. There are a number of similarities in the ways in which Isaac and Gabriel understand the Cross. It is a symbol and a mystery; it manifests the Divine Presence and is consequently a focus of veneration; it is a focus for Christological themes. When Isaac writes, ‘and whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of

⁶³¹ II. XIV, 24.

⁶³² Gabriel Qatraya, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, III. V.

Christ,' this is not just about the image of the cross in the cell of a monk, but also about the use of the cross in the liturgy, as Gabriel's *Commentary* makes clear.⁶³³

Gabriel of Qatar's *Commentary on the Liturgy* reflects an altogether different kind of text to the ascetic writings of Isaac and Dadisho; its concerns are aetiological, and whilst it acknowledges the particular differences between solitaries and secular clergy, the text does not come from the reformist monastic milieu of which Isaac and Dadisho were a part. Nevertheless, there are some significant points of comparison with Isaac and Dadisho's writings on the cross. For Gabriel, as for the others, the physical image of the cross signifies the mystical presence of Christ, and the theme of cross veneration has a particular Christological emphasis. Gabriel's *Commentary* furthermore highlights the importance of worship as a context for the veneration of the cross veneration, and for Isaac's Ark typology in II. XI. Dadisho and Isaac's ascetic writings, alongside Gabriel's *Commentary*, provide additional evidence for the theology of the cross that Isaac establishes in his homily from the *Second Part*.

4.5 Conclusion

Recent scholarship has highlighted the flourishing Christian community in Beth Qatraye in the seventh century. The evidence points to a vibrant intellectual life of the East Syrian community in the region, providing a compelling reason to compare Isaac's writing with his contemporaries. The similarities between Isaac and Dadisho's descriptions of the crucifixion of the intellect illustrate a particular aspect

⁶³³ II. XI, 18.

of this shared culture, that drew on the writings of Abba Isaiah. It is clear that Isaac and Dadisho understand the crucifixion of the intellect as an advanced stage of the spiritual life, contextualised by their own experiences of the ascetic life, which was influenced by the reformist monasticism of Abraham of Kashkar. Furthermore, Isaac's emphasis on divine love can also be seen in Dadisho and in the Syriac Isaian corpus. Contextualising Isaac's homily on the cross within the broader themes of the crucifixion of the intellect and cross veneration in Dadisho and Gabriel Qatraya indicates that his was not a singular, unique exegesis. Isaac's writing on the cross shares profound similarities with texts by his contemporaries, and the flourishing mystical tradition of which they were a part.

5. The Mystical Ascent in Isaac of Nineveh: A Theme in Christian and Jewish Mysticism

5.1 Introduction

Five times in his writings, Isaac cites the example in 2 Corinthians 12 of a person (understood to be Paul himself) ‘caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.’⁶³⁴ Isaac draws on Paul’s language of mystical ascent to describe the prayer of the ascetic. In III. XIII, 5, for instance, he writes:

‘Together with the mind beginning to abound in hidden things, it begins to have astonishment of thoughts; and as the mind grows in this way it is strengthened until it arrives at what Blessed Paul said when he recounted the ravishing of his mind: whether in the body or whether without the body, I do not know [2 Cor. 12. 3].’⁶³⁵

⁶³⁴ 2 Corinthians 12. 2. For Isaac’s use of this verse, see I. 50; *KG*. II, 59; II. XXXIV, 2; III. IX, 20; III. XIII, 5-6. In all these cases Isaac applies Paul’s experience to the contemporary experience of the mystic. Isaac also alludes to Paul’s ascent to Paradise in I. 316 without citing 2 Corinthians 12. For a survey of the way Paul’s vision influences the Christian mystical tradition, particularly its mediation through Augustine in the medieval West and beyond, see L. Nelstrop, with K. Magill and B. B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 159-182.

⁶³⁵ III. XIII, 5.

Isaac's understanding of prayer draws fundamentally on the Evagrian dictum that 'prayer is the ascent of the mind to God.'⁶³⁶ Evagrius, in turn, relies on a philosophical tradition of noetic ascent stretching back into the Classical past.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁶ Evagrius, *De oratione*, 35. Cited in W. Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 345. For Isaac's dependence on Evagrius for his understanding of prayer, see B. Bitton-Ashkelony, 'The Limit of the Mind (ΝΟΥΣ): Pure Prayer according to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,' *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 15/2 (2011), 295, 298, 317; and É. Khalifé-Hachem, 'La prière pure et la prière spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninivé,' in F. Graffin, ed., *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis (1898-1968), Fondateur et directeur de L'Orient syrien, 1956-1967* (Leuven: Imprimerie orientaliste, 1967), 166.

⁶³⁷ For a survey of the Classical background to the theme of the heavenly ascent of the soul and of its use in Jewish, early Christian, and Gnostic sources, see J. N. Bremmer, 'Descents to Hell and Ascents to Heaven in Apocalyptic Literature,' in J. J. Collins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 348-353. Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce discuss the Graeco-Roman practice of the heavenly journey as a way of contextualising Paul's heavenly journey. A. Destro and M. Pesce, *From Jesus to his First Followers: Continuity and Discontinuity* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 85-111. For the ascent theme in the context of Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas of divinisation specifically, see J. Anna, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 51-71; and D. J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31-39. On the reception on these ideas in a Jewish context, see Peter Schäfer's chapter on Philo in P. Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 154-174. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony discusses the changing philosophical discourse concerning prayer among pagan and Christian Greek intellectuals in the second and third centuries and demonstrates Evagrius' synthesis and development of these ideas. B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer and the Ship of Stirrings: The Praying Self in Late Antique East Syrian Christianity*, *Late Antique History and Religion* 22 (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 21-51.

Despite this underlying dependence on Greek philosophical ideas, aspects of Isaac's description of the ascent in prayer resemble the broader context of Jewish and Christian ascent texts, from the Apocalypses of the Second Temple Period and Late Antiquity, to the later Jewish writings known as the *Merkavah* or *Hekhalot* texts.⁶³⁸ These correspondences include the role of asceticism in the mystical ascent; traditions around the Temple; the revelation of the mysteries of creation; a rich angelology; and an emphasis on the power of the Divine Name. As in Evagrius, Isaac's understanding of the mystical ascent reflects an 'interior' movement of the

⁶³⁸ For the Apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple Period, a general sense of date, language and origin can be gained from the relevant essays in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, i (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983). Citations in this chapter from pseudepigraphical apocalypses come from this volume. For the Late Antique Jewish Apocalypses written on the cusp of the rise of Islam, the most significant of which is *Sefer Zerubbabel*, see C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). In relation to the Hekhalot literature, this chapter will largely use the terms *Hekhalot*, 'palaces,' and *merkavah* 'chariot, throne' interchangeably to refer to the body of literature that recounts a visionary ascent through the heavenly palaces to the throne of God. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, reprint of 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 45-47. These texts are in essence descriptions of the mystical ascent (paradoxically called a 'descent') through the heavens to the chariot-throne. J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism: vol. I, Studies in Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 35. For the general point of the influence of Jewish traditions on Syriac writers into the Islamic period, see S. Brock, 'Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources,' *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979), 212-232. Brock discusses specifically the Jewish traditions mediated through Syriac translations of apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, including some texts which only survive in Syriac. Brock, 'Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources,' 223-225.

soul, but it is shaped by the visionary experience common to Jewish and Christian ascent traditions.

From a methodological point of view, it is worth noting that the language of ascent is often metaphorical in Isaac, as in other spiritual writers. This is particularly the case when these writers describe ascending with wings, drawing on Psalm 55. 6: ‘and I say, “O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.”’ Such imagery appears in III. X, for instance:

‘Be, my Lord, wings for my thought
to fly in the air,
so as with [these] wings to be present
at our true abode.’⁶³⁹

This passage is clearly not intended to reflect a literal ascent to heaven on the part of the mystic.⁶⁴⁰ Similarly, the metaphorical language of ascent is used to describe the progress of the ascetic through the stages of the spiritual life, and this has a long

⁶³⁹ III. X, 19. This chapter is probably not by Isaac, but may have been incorporated into the *Third Part* by Isaac himself. See M. Hansbury, trans., *Isaac the Syrian’s Spiritual Works*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 45 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 200, n. 1.

⁶⁴⁰ One notable exception to this assertion that wings signify a metaphorical ascent can be found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, where Abraham and an angel who ride to heaven on the right wing of a sacrificed pigeon and the left wing of a sacrificed turtledove. *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 15.

history in Greek and Syriac ascetic traditions.⁶⁴¹ However, the language of ascent in this context will only be considered where it describes the attainment of spiritual perfection. Isaac is seen primarily as a mystical writer, following the principle set out by Robert Beulay that mysticism,

‘non pas simplement ce qui indique, indirectement, chez un auteur une expérience personnelle d’union à Dieu, mais la description de cette expérience ou la réflexion dont elle fait l’objet.’⁶⁴²

On this account, mystical writings describe the act of mystical experience, whether that is envisaged as union with God, or as perceiving or knowing God in a particular way.⁶⁴³ This is particularly clear in the eighth-century Syriac mystics, whose

⁶⁴¹ For a recent and thorough treatment of the notion of ‘three stages’ in the spiritual life, see S. Maroki, *Les trois étapes de la vie spirituelle chez les Pères syriaques: Jean le Solitaire, Isaac de Ninive et Joseph Hazzaya. Source, doctrine et influence* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 175-283.

⁶⁴² R. Beulay, *La Lumière sans forme: Introduction à l’étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale* (Chevetogne: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1987), 242, n. 25. See also A. Pirtea, ‘The Mysticism of the Church of the East,’ in D. King, ed., *The Syriac World* (London: Routledge, 2019), 355-357.

⁶⁴³ Pirtea, ‘The Mysticism of the Church of the East,’ 356. For a comparative study of East Syrian and Sufi mysticism, see S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2003). For the recent move towards seeing the Church Fathers as ‘mystagogues’ see the essays in P. van Geest, ed., *Seeing Through the Eyes of Faith: The Mystagogy of the Church Fathers, Late Antique History and Religion* 10 (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), and H. van Loon, G. de Nie, M. Op de Coul, and P. van Egmond, eds., *Prayer and Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy, Late Antique History and Religion* 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

thoughts on ‘seeing’ God provoked a strong reaction from the institutional church.⁶⁴⁴ Despite the official condemnation of these mystics, the centrality of the *visio dei* as the goal of the spiritual life is explicit from Evagrius onwards.⁶⁴⁵ Isaac also believes it is possible in this life to ‘see’ God, saying that human beings have two inner, ‘mental’ eyes (ܢܚܢܐ ܢܦܫܘܬܐ) that parallel the two physical eyes (ܢܚܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ); with these eyes, human beings can see ‘the hidden glory of God which is concealed in the things of nature, His power and His wisdom, and His eternal care’ as well as ‘the glory of His holy nature (ܘܥܘܠܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܐ).’⁶⁴⁶ Similarly, he writes in III. XVI, 3,

‘By the action of the Holy Spirit, nature goes out from what is its own, outside of the will, and the soul remains only in that amazing divine glory, in the order of those holy hosts in ineffable praises.’⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁴ A. Treiger, ‘Could Christ’s Humanity See His Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy Between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,’ *JCSSS* 9 (2009), 9-27.

⁶⁴⁵ J. Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic* (London: Routledge, 2009), 77-107. Julia Konstantinovsky also considers the theme of light and vision of God in relation to the *Macarian Homilies*, the Syriac translation of which exercised considerable influence in the Syriac mystical tradition. For the idea of ‘seeing God’ in Rabbinic Judaism, see R. Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity*, *Greek Culture in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41-81.

⁶⁴⁶ I. 315. For the important idea of ‘spiritual sight’ in Isaac, see A. Pirtea, *Die geistigen Sinne in der ostsyrischen christlichen Mystik: Wahrnehmung und Gotteserkenntnis in der griechisch-syrischen und syro-orientalischen asketischen Literatur der Spätantike*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (Free University of Berlin, 2017), 215-252.

⁶⁴⁷ III. XVI, 3.

For Isaac, prayer and the ascetic life is intimately connected with the vision of God. This theme has an eschatological dimension: it is possible to experience the future, heavenly life in the present reality.⁶⁴⁸ He writes in II. XXIX, 12,

‘what is comparable to this, that someone should resemble the angels [while still] in this world, as his reflection is continually upon God and upon things divine.’⁶⁴⁹

The same mystical impulses underlie the Apocalypses that describe a heavenly journey, and the Hekhalot texts.⁶⁵⁰ The ‘ascent Apocalypses’ and Hekhalot literature

⁶⁴⁸ See, for instance, I. 305. This eschatological emphasis is described in J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh’s Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 70-71.

⁶⁴⁹ II. XXIX, 12. The idea that ascetics seek to live the life of the angels in the present reality has a long history in Syriac Christianity. A. Salvesen, ‘Imitating the Watchers: Restoring the Angelic Life of Adam in Early Syriac Thought,’ *Parole de l’Orient* 46 (2020), 1-25.

⁶⁵⁰ Apocalyptic and Hekhalot texts do reflect different concerns and should not be conflated. However, they also have much in common and can be read alongside each other. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 70-73. See particularly M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the relationship between the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature, see M. Himmelfarb, ‘Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the “Hekhalot” Literature,’ *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988), 73, and J. Davila, ‘The Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature,’ in A. D. DeConick, *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 122-125. For a comparative study based on J. Z. Smith’s notion of ‘difference,’ see R. Boustan and P. G. McCullough, ‘Apocalyptic Literature and the Study of Early Jewish Mysticism,’ in Collins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, 85-100. Michael Swartz presents a cautious and balanced account of the difference between the ascent in the apocalypses and the ascent in the

both involve a heavenly journey, in which angels play a significant role, often revealing the mysteries of creation; there is a degree of transformation of the one who ascends; in some, but not all, the visionary sees God, or at least participates in the heavenly liturgy.⁶⁵¹ They are very striking texts and, influenced by Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a number of scholars have sought to situate them in the history and development of Jewish mystical traditions.⁶⁵² The texts in question span a considerable period of time and they have a complicated transmission history.⁶⁵³ As an indication of this diversity, the most influential of

Hekhalot literature in, M. D. Swartz, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Later Jewish Magic and Mysticism,' *Dead Sea Discoveries* 8 (2001), 190. See also Schäfer, *Origins*, 340.

⁶⁵¹ Peter Schäfer argues that the culmination of the visionary experience in the Hekhalot literature is not the vision of God or the *unio mystica* (as is the case in much Christian mysticism) but rather what he calls the *unio liturgica*, the participation in the heavenly liturgy. Schäfer, *Origins*, 281; P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 165. Schäfer suggests that Scholem places undue weight on the idea that the *Shi'ur Qomah* reflects the culmination of mystical experience in the Hekhalot texts. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 63-67; G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965), 36, 76, 79-83, 118. For a survey of the role of angels in the Hekhalot literature, see R. Elijor, 'Mysticism, Magic and Angelology: The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature,' *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993), 5-53.

⁶⁵² Dan, *Jewish Mysticism I*, 30-74; Schäfer, *Origins*, 53-111, 243-330. For the most up-to-date review of Hekhalot scholarship, see M. D. Swartz, *Mechanics of Divine Providence: The Workings of Ancient Jewish Magic and Mysticism*, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 172 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

⁶⁵³ For discussions of scholarship and dating, see the introductory essays to the texts in Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, i. These dates should not, however, be accepted uncritically, see J. Davila, 'A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous

these ascent texts, *1 Enoch*, is a composite work that survives in a complete form only in Ethiopic manuscripts dating from the fifteenth century.⁶⁵⁴ However, fragments written in Aramaic found at Qumran dating from the second century B.C. to the first century C.E. show the much earlier transmission of this work.⁶⁵⁵ By contrast, *On Providence*, by the East Syrian mystic, Joseph Hazzaya, post-dates Isaac of Nineveh thus situating him in the trajectory of apocalyptic thought.⁶⁵⁶ Joseph's writings share a number of common themes with Isaac, and the apocalyptic portion of *On Providence* provides an interesting reference point for the nexus of ideas in various texts, including: *2 Enoch*, the *Testament of Levi*, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.⁶⁵⁷

Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism: A Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/3 (2002), 587-588. James Davila provides excellent summaries of the issues surrounding date and provenance in his introduction to each of the Hekhalot texts in his translations. J. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism*, Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

⁶⁵⁴ For more on the complicated transmission history of 1 Enoch, see M. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments*, ii (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1-47. No Syriac version survives, but at the very least extracts circulated in Syriac through translations of Greek historical works. S. Brock, 'A Fragment of Enoch in Syriac,' *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19/2 (1968), 626-631.

⁶⁵⁵ Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, i, 6-8.

⁶⁵⁶ The text was written by Joseph at the end of his life. The date of his death is unclear, but he was posthumously condemned at a synod held in either 786 or 790. N. Kavvadas, ed. and trans., *Joseph Hazzaya, On Providence*, Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1-4.

⁶⁵⁷ These apocalyptic texts all include a heavenly journey. With the exception of the apocalypse in *On Providence*, this chapter will not consider apocalyptic texts that do not contain some kind of mystical

Scholem's conviction that much of the Hekhalot literature originated in Palestine at an early date has been displaced by an emerging consensus that posits a later date, and proposes strong reasons suggesting that its origins lay in Babylonia.⁶⁵⁸ Elements of the Merkavah texts may be earlier, but Peter Schäfer broadly argues that this literature is 'a late rabbinic or even postrabbinic phenomenon,' from the sixth

ascent. The lack of such an ascent is a notable feature of later apocalypses, which are broadly contemporary with the Hekhalot material. This is the case with the Syriac *Apocalypse of Daniel* and the Jewish apocalypses translated in Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*.

⁶⁵⁸ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 41-42; Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 248. For Hekhalot themes in the Babylonian Talmud, see N. Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 24. M. Himmelfarb, 'The Practice of Ascent in the Ancient Mediterranean World,' in J. J. Collins and M. Fishbane, eds., *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 123-137. The tractate *Hagigah* 11b-16a of the Babylonian Talmud famously contains an account of the Merkavah as an exegetical activity. For a discussion of this passage of the Bavli and a broader contextualisation of the Hekhalot texts within Rabbinic Judaism, see R. Boustán, 'Rabbinization and the Making of Early Jewish Mysticism,' *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 101/4 (2011), 482-501. For the recent tendency towards a Babylonian context, see the essays in R. Boustán, M. Himmelfarb and P. Schäfer, eds., *Hekhalot Literature in Context: Between Byzantium and Babylonia*, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 153 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). There is a trend in Merkavah scholarship, seen for instance in the work of Rachel Elijor and Christopher Morray-Jones, that seeks an historical context for this material at Qumran, drawing particularly on the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*. For a critique of this position, see Schäfer, *Origins*, 142-146. For the reasons outlined by Schäfer, this chapter will not draw on the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* as an example of early Jewish ascent mysticism.

century onwards.⁶⁵⁹ These particular developments in the scholarship on the Hekhalot literature give further credence to the assertion that Isaac's descriptions of the mystical ascent and the contemporary Jewish ascent mysticism of these texts emanate from the same cultural world, sharing a common religious landscape in Mesopotamia with *Merkavah Rabbah*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Hekhalot Zurtati*, and *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the primary texts under consideration. The Jewish academies of Sura and Pumbedita were important intellectual centres right in the heart of Mesopotamia, and Adam Becker has shown that these institutions need to be seen alongside the scholastic movement in the Church of the East.⁶⁶⁰ Without suggesting any any direct textual influence between rabbinic sages and East Syrian mystics, the notion of 'creative symbiosis,' demonstrates that the mysticism of ascent is part of the religious vocabulary of the various mystical traditions of Late Antique Mesopotamia.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ Schäfer, *Origins*, 245. Joseph Dan notes on the question of continuity with earlier traditions that whilst some of the Hekhalot material may be early in date, what he calls the 'mystical attitude' is new. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism I*, 35.

⁶⁶⁰ A. H. Becker, 'The Comparative Study of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,' *AJS Review* 34/1 (2010), 91-113. For the historical background to the Jewish Academies in Babylonia, see R. Brody and Y. Brodi, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 35-53.

⁶⁶¹ Steven Wasserstrom complicates the notion of creative symbiosis, but does not dismiss it. Of particular relevance are his methodological conclusions, but he also he treats apocalyptic extensively (notably Metatron in Islamic sources). S. M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3-12, 181-202, 210-237. Whilst this chapter will primarily consider the ways in which a Christian writer draws on a shared Jewish-Christian culture of mysticism, there is evidence for genuine 'symbiosis', particularly in relation to apocalyptic literature: the appearance in Jewish texts of the late sixth or early seventh

There have been a handful of attempts to link the mysticism exemplified in these ascent texts with aspects of Syriac Christianity, particularly by Alexander Golitzin and Mary Hansbury, the latter of whom has explored aspects of Hekhalot in relation to Isaac's writings.⁶⁶² Exploring the mysticism of ascent in both Isaac and in a

century of 'Armilos,' an Antichrist figure, seems to be a polemical response to Christian doctrine and the recapture of Jerusalem by the Emperor Heraclius in 630. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 19-23. This is a negative example of symbiosis, but it is still a 'creative' one in the sense that it leads to developments in Jewish apocalyptic material. Jewish interaction with later Muslim apocalyptic ideas may have been mediated through Arabic translation of Christian traditions in Syriac. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 22-3. Hillel Newman discusses some of the similarities and differences between apocalyptic themes in Christian and Jewish liturgical poetry in H. Newman, 'Apocalyptic poems in Christian and Jewish Liturgy in Late Antiquity,' in B. Bitton-Ashkelony and D. Krueger, eds., *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th centuries* (London: Routledge), 239-249. For a discussion of the ways in which Christian and Muslim apocalyptic traditions interacted from earliest times until the Ottoman period, see D. B. Cook, 'Muslim and Christian Apocalypticism: Playing off each other,' in D. Pratt and C. Tieszen, eds., *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, xv (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 413-433. For a similar work exploring the mysticism of ascent in Christian and Jewish traditions, see A. Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in its Christian and Jewish Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶⁶² A. Golitzin, 'Recovering the "Glory of Adam": "Divine Light" Traditions in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Ascetical Literature of Fourth-Century Syro-Mesopotamia,' in J. Davila, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity. Papers from an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 275-308; A. Golitzin, 'The Image and Glory of God in Jacob of Serug's Homily "On that Chariot that Ezekiel the Prophet Saw,"' *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47/3-4 (2003), 323-364. A. Golitzin, 'A Monastic Setting for the Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel,' in R. A. Darling Young and M. J. Blanchard, eds., *To Train His Soul in Books: Syriac Asceticism in Early*

variety of Apocalyptic and Hekhalot texts isolates a number of themes that emerge with Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part*. In doing so, it exposes an understanding of East Syrian mystical theology in the context of the diverse mystical traditions of the Late Antique Near East.

Christianity, CUA Studies in Early Christianity (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 66-98. For Mary Hansbury's work, see M. Hansbury, *Evidence of Jewish Influence in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: Translation and Commentary*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation (Temple University, 1987); M. Hansbury, 'Remembrance of God and its relation to Scripture in Isaac III including Insights from Islamic and Jewish Traditions,' in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 93-121 ; M. Hansbury, "'Insight without Sight": Wonder as an Aspect of Revelation in the Discourses of Isaac the Syrian,' *JCSSS* 8 (2008), 60-73. On Aphrahat, see S. K. Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God: A Study of Early Syriac Theological Anthropology*, Gorgias Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics 36 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008). For situating this literature in a broader religious context, including particularly Mandaean sources, see M. Morony, 'Magic and Society in Late Sasanian Iraq,' in S. Noegel, J. Walker and B. Wheeler, eds., *Prayer, Magic and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, Magic in History (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). Erica Hunter argues that some Hekhalot themes, notably the emphasis on the throne, can be seen in Mandaic incantation bowls. E. C. D. Hunter, 'Two Mandaic incantation bowls from Nippur,' *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 25 (1994), 605-18.

5.2 The Mystical Ascent in the Life of the Mystic: Prayer and ‘Realised’ Eschatology

Throughout his works, Isaac writes about the ascent of the mind to God in prayer.

One characteristic example can be seen in *KG. I. 89*, where Isaac writes,

‘the mind is raised to the vision of the divine and ineffable realities through an operation [of the Spirit] ... all thoughts of earthly things become silenced.’⁶⁶³

In *I. 175* he describes the moment of spiritual perfection where ‘the mind has ascended here *above* prayer.’⁶⁶⁴ In articulating his ideas of ‘pure prayer’ and ‘non-prayer,’ Isaac’s account of the mind’s ascent appears to reflect the ‘interiorization’ of the mystical journey,⁶⁶⁵ a notion that was part of the changing discourse on prayer in Late Antiquity.⁶⁶⁶ Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Guy Stroumsa have shown that the

⁶⁶³ *KG. I. 89*.

⁶⁶⁴ *I. 175*. My italics.

⁶⁶⁵ Isaac’s theory of prayer has been well-documented in modern scholarship. For the most recent account, see Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 79-103; particularly influential in secondary literature on the subject of prayer in Isaac are, Bitton-Ashkelony, ‘The Limit of the Mind (ΝΟΥΣ),’ 291-321; and Khalifé-Hachem, ‘La prière pure et la prière spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninivé,’ 157-173. The idea of ‘interiorization’ comes from Hans Jonas’ work on mystery cults, see H. Jonas, ‘Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought,’ *The Journal of Religion* 49/4 (1969), 315-329.

⁶⁶⁶ For the contextualising of Isaac’s thought in light of the changing discourse on prayer in Late Antiquity, see Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 7-14.

fourth century witnessed a profound shift in attitudes and approaches to prayer and ritual for pagans, Jews and Christians.⁶⁶⁷ This is reflected in changing attitudes to prophecy and ecstatic experience, as well as to blood-sacrifice, in what Stroumsa has called ‘patterns of rationalization.’⁶⁶⁸ Both scholars stress the changing role of the ‘self’ and the idea of self-transformation in this development.⁶⁶⁹ Isaac’s writing on the ascent of the mind reflects another dimension to this revolution in the idea of prayer in Late Antiquity.⁶⁷⁰

5.2.1 ‘Pure Prayer,’ ‘Non-Prayer’ and the Mystical Ascent

Isaac’s theory of prayer offers a synthesis between Greek and Syriac traditions, combining Evagrius’ theory of ‘pure prayer’ with the theological anthropology and emphasis on silence that Isaac inherits from John of Apamea.⁶⁷¹ Following Evagrius, Isaac identifies the mind as the part of the human person that is active in prayer: for both writers, prayer is a mental state, what Bitton-Ashkelony has called ‘an art of

⁶⁶⁷ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 24-51; G. G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁶⁶⁸ G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43.

⁶⁶⁹ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 1-3; Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 14-27. B. Bitton-Ashkelony, ‘Discerning Mystagogia and Pedagogia: Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogia,’ in Van Loon, De Nie, Op de Coul, and Van Egmond, eds., *Prayer and Transformation of the Self*, xi-xxii.

⁶⁷⁰ See Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions*, 54-55.

⁶⁷¹ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 79-80; Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 117-134.

introspection centred on the inner dynamics of the mind.⁶⁷² Isaac associates various kinds of prayer with the tripartite division found in John of Apamea: the level of the body, the level of the soul, and the level of the spirit.⁶⁷³ Prayer at the level of the body includes various ascetic practices, notably the recitation of the Office.⁶⁷⁴ The level of the soul is characterised by ‘pure prayer,’ which he understands to be non-sensory and free from distractions.⁶⁷⁵ For Isaac, pure prayer marks the limit of the mind’s activity in relation to God, and it enters a state of astonishment [ἄσπλαγχνος] before it is drawn by God into a state of wonder [ἄσπλαγχνος].⁶⁷⁶ Since this highest state is not a human activity, it cannot, for Isaac, be called prayer and so is known as ‘non-prayer.’⁶⁷⁷ Isaac writes,

⁶⁷² Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 83.

⁶⁷³ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 88. It is worth noting that Isaac is not always consistent when it comes to the stages of the spiritual life. In II. XXII, for instance, his tripartite division of the ascetic life has fasting and recitation of the psalter, followed by reading Scripture and kneeling, before the final stage, which is the prayer of the heart. Patrik Hagman notes this complexity in Isaac’s ascetical system, but concludes that Isaac’s intention to describe a way of life that moves from the things of the body to the soul and to the spirit. Hagman, *Asceticism*, 139, n. 77.

⁶⁷⁴ I. 382-383; II. XIV, 34. See Hagman, *Asceticism*, 159-162.

⁶⁷⁵ In this, Isaac follows Evagrius. Hagman, *Asceticism*, 163.

⁶⁷⁶ For the difference between ‘astonishment’ and ‘wonder’ in Isaac, see Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 74. See also, Hansbury, “‘Insight without Sight,’” 60-67.

⁶⁷⁷ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 110.

‘From that point onwards [that is, passing the boundary of pure prayer] the mind ceases from prayer; there is the capacity to see, but the mind is not praying at all.’⁶⁷⁸

This final stage on the way to spiritual perfection is different to Evagrius’ conception of prayer, and comes from John of Apamea’s teaching on silence.⁶⁷⁹ Isaac himself cites John, in the *Third Part*, when he writes, ‘The soul is reduced to silence when it is lifted up from the stirrings of the passions, has seen hidden things... when it dwells in silence.’⁶⁸⁰ For Isaac, prayer is the Evagrian ascent of the mind to God, but more than this, spiritual perfection is only to be found *beyond* prayer, in that state where the mind transcends all human activity.⁶⁸¹ Isaac’s account of the levels of the body, the soul and the spirit, along with his description of being drawn up by divine action to a state of wonder, reinforces the notion of prayer as a form of ascent in his writings. Prayer is dynamic: the mind moves upwards towards God before it is finally pulled up beyond the limits of human capacity.

One recurring image in relation to this ascent is the ladder, drawn from Evagrius, by which the mystic climbs to heaven.⁶⁸² Inspired by the advances made in the study of

⁶⁷⁸ I. 165-166. Translation from S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 254.

⁶⁷⁹ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 91, 96-98.

⁶⁸⁰ III. XIII, 17.

⁶⁸¹ I. 175.

⁶⁸² I. 12; I. 156; *KG*. IV, 31; II. XXXV, 7, 13; III. VII, 17; III. IX, 12-13. Hansbury, trans., *Spiritual Works*, 184, n. 10. In Christian circles, the image of the ladder was already used to describe the spiritual life in the fourth-century. In his funeral oration for Basil of Caesarea (*Oration XLIII*, 71),

Jewish-Christian relations in Late Antiquity, Hansbury draws attention to some common themes in Christian and Jewish mystical texts.⁶⁸³ She connects Isaac's description of the ladder of ascent in III. IX, 12-14 with the references in *Hekhalot Rabbati* to the mystic as a man,

‘who has a ladder inside his house on which he ascends and descends; there is no being who restrains his hand.’⁶⁸⁴

Gregory Nazianzus uses the image of Jacob's ladder along with Jacob's wrestling to describe Basil's spiritual growth. Similarly, in his *Homilies on John* LXXXIII, 5, John Chrysostom writes: ‘And so mounting as it were by steps, let us get to heaven by a Jacob's ladder. For the ladder seems to me to signify in a riddle by that vision the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners.’ In the fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrhus wrote in the *History of the Monks in Syria*, XXVII, that ‘the nurslings of piety have devised many and differing ladders for the ascent into heaven.’ The most famous Christian example comes from John Climacus' (d. 649) *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, where the ladder image becomes the structuring motif for the whole work. This symbolic ladder captured the Christian imagination and is frequently depicted in icons and manuscripts. J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954). This work also became important in the Syriac world, and often features in monastic anthologies. The colophon of the oldest manuscript indicates that the text was translated into Syriac before 817, probably by Melkites at Sinai, and the manuscript tradition suggests that the translation was revised in miaphysite circles. For the *Ladder* in Syriac, see Teule, H., ‘L'échelle du paradis de Jean Climaque dans la tradition syriaque,’ *Parole de L'Orient* 20 (1995), 279-293; and J. Childers, ‘Bringing the Syriac Climacus to the Twenty-First Century,’ (forthcoming).

⁶⁸³ Hansbury, ‘Remembrance of God,’ 114-121.

⁶⁸⁴ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 199. Hansbury, ‘Remembrance of God,’ 116. The image of the ladder might also appear in *Hekhalot Zurtati*, 336 (‘In the name of B'RY 'BH'Y H''Y MR MR'WT *SMW SLM*

Ithamar Gruenwald and Elliot Wolfson both connect the use of the ladder in *Hekhalot Rabbati* with Jacob's dream vision in Genesis 28. 12.⁶⁸⁵ Later on in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the author uses the same image of a ladder to describe the descent of the angels to the world and their ascent back into heaven, and it is a theme that recurs in later Jewish mystical writings.⁶⁸⁶ The emphasis in *Hekhalot Rabbati* is on the image of the ladder as a means of ascent and descent for the mystic, as it is for the angels. James Davila makes an interesting comparison between this image and a silver amulet of unknown provenance, but likely to date from the Talmudic period; the amulet lists angelic names and various *nomina barbara*, and may depict a ladder underneath the word 'their abode,' traditionally a name of one of the seven firmaments used in Hekhalot literature.⁶⁸⁷ Davila posits that, given the ladder theme in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, this amulet may hint at the kind of heavenly ascent envisioned in the Hekhalot literature.⁶⁸⁸

[i.e. "they have placed a ladder"] 'BRY W'NKYBWN...') but this seems an unlikely reading. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 200, n. j.

⁶⁸⁵ I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 1st ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 120-121, and E. R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 17-18.

⁶⁸⁶ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 181 (not translated by James Davila). Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 17.

⁶⁸⁷ J. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot: The People behind the Hekhalot Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 216.

⁶⁸⁸ Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot*, 216. For a more cautious interpretation of this amulet, which acknowledges the possibility of Davila's reading, see G. Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 275-276.

Hekhalot Rabbati draws on the ladder of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28 to emphasise that the mystic can ascend to heaven and descend in the same way as the angels. The same Scriptural passage underlies Evagrius' *KG*. IV, 43, in which he interprets the angels as manifestations of Christ and the ladder as the way that leads to the knowledge of God.⁶⁸⁹ Brock suggests that this is the passage Isaac has in mind when he cites Evagrius, writing about the 'ladder of the intellect,' in II. XXV, 7, and 13.⁶⁹⁰ Given Evagrius' Christological interpretation of Genesis 28, Isaac's emphasis is not on the ascent and descent of the angels when he uses the image of the ladder, but rather on the ladder of prayer as a means of knowing God. For Isaac, the image of the ladder is principally concerned with the mind receiving divine revelation.⁶⁹¹ The fundamentally different exegetical approaches to the ladder in Jacob's vision in Genesis 28 lead to quite distinct uses of the ladder motif in Isaac and *Hekhalot Rabbati*.

Hansbury does not make any substantial comparison between Isaac's writing and *Hekhalot Rabbati*, but notes the similarity of language, and particularly the pattern of ascent and descent that Isaac describes in III. IX, 12-14.⁶⁹² Functionally, Isaac uses the image of the ladder of prayer to describe his theory of non-prayer:

⁶⁸⁹ I. L. E. Ramelli, trans., *Evagrius's Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, Writings from the Graeco-Roman World (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), IV, 43.

⁶⁹⁰ S. Brock, trans., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part.'* Chapters IV-XLI, CSCO 555 (Leuven: CSCO, 1995), 154, n. 7. 3.

⁶⁹¹ II. XXXV, 7, 13.

⁶⁹² Hansbury, 'Remembrance of God,' 116.

‘When, however, one has ascended to that place, then prayer will have another use there: at once the use for which it went up on the roof has arisen for it, and until it descends again to earth, its function of ladder is no longer needed. But if prayer is a figure of a raised ladder which lifts up to heaven, by which the intellect ascends continually... as long as we are on earth, we always need this ladder which is prayer...’⁶⁹³

The image of prayer as the ladder to heaven is found in Evagrius, but Isaac incorporates this theme into his developed theory of prayer, pointing to the state beyond prayer and in which prayer is no longer needed.⁶⁹⁴ The way the ladder is incorporated into Isaac’s theory of prayer points to significantly different conceptual frameworks in *Hekhalot Rabbati* and Isaac’s writings. The mystic is likened to one who actively ascends and descends a ladder in his house at will in *Hekhalot Rabbati*. Isaac’s use of the ladder theme is less clearly active in sense: certainly in I. 12 the mystic does physically climb the ladder, but in III. XI, 13, the mystic is passive and is drawn up to heaven by the ladder of prayer. In his schema, prayer is not a straightforwardly human endeavour: there comes a point where divine activity takes over, and prayer itself ceases. This explains Isaac’s account of the ladder in the *Third Part* as eventually redundant. The Hekhalot texts do not envisage such a state of ‘non-prayer’: the closest the mystic can come to God is in the mystic’s active participation in the heavenly liturgy, singing the songs of the angels. The image of

⁶⁹³ II. XI, 13.

⁶⁹⁴ Hansbury, trans., *Spiritual Works*, 184, n. 10. Isaac cites Evagrius in connection with the ladder theme in II. XXXV, 7. For the use of the term in Evagrius, see Brock, trans., *The Second Part*, 154, n. 7. 3.

the ladder is not explicitly associated with prayer in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, and Isaac's use of the image to illustrate his theory of prayer reflects the fundamentally different understandings of prayer in these texts.

Hansbury notes Isaac's passing reference to Jacob's ladder in I. 156, which is part of a chapter on revelation, but omits a more relevant reference to this ladder theme in I. 12:

'The ladder [سُلَّم] unto the Kingdom is hidden within thee and within thy soul. Dive into thyself [freed] from sin; there thou wilt find steps [حِصْبَت] along which thou canst ascend.'⁶⁹⁵

The language of the soul and freedom from sin in this passage point to a specifically Christian understanding of the ladder motif in Isaac, though it is also worth noting that *Hekhalot Rabbati* requires the one who can ascend and descend as on a ladder to be,

'innocent and void of idolatry, lewdness, bloodshed, slander, a vain oath, profanation of the Name, an insolent demeanor, and an unfounded grudge. And he keeps every positive and negative commandment.'⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁵ I. 12. Hansbury does use this reference in connection with Hekhalot material in her doctoral thesis, written twenty-seven years before her article 'Remembrance of God'; Hansbury, *Evidence of Jewish Influence in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: Translation and Commentary*, 48.

⁶⁹⁶ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 199.

The moral component outlined in I. 12 that requires the mystic to be free from sin, whilst Christian in its expression, has a parallel in the ethical requirements of *Hekhalot Rabbati* for the one who wishes to ascend and descend at will. The image of the mystic ascending to heaven as on a ladder is common to both Isaac and the *Hekhalot Rabbati*, but, despite some similarities, the way in which this image is used reflects the manifestly different assumptions about exegesis and prayer in these texts.

In her recent assessment of Isaac's theory of prayer, Bitton-Ashkelony attributes the development of Evagrian themes to a 'shift in the religious sensibility of Isaac's cultural milieu.'⁶⁹⁷ Whilst noting the dangers of a phrase like 'religious sensibility,' she describes Isaac's emphasis on the personal, rather than theoretical, aspects of pure prayer, as well as his focus on the *experience* of prayer (and non-prayer).⁶⁹⁸

Hans Jonas argued that the Platonic doctrine of the soul's ascent, present in various gnostic traditions, came to be 'internalised' in Late Antiquity, expressed in mystical and cultic language.⁶⁹⁹ Certainly Isaac's account of the mind's ascent to God reflects a move away from the theoretical and theological approach of Evagrius to the description of mystical experience that came to characterise the flowering of East Syrian mysticism in the seventh and eighth centuries.⁷⁰⁰ The description of the ladder, hidden within the mystic's soul, in I. 21 reflects this same impulse. Similarly, in II. X, 17, Isaac writes,

⁶⁹⁷ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 102.

⁶⁹⁸ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 102.

⁶⁹⁹ Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism,' 316-320.

⁷⁰⁰ Pirtea, 'The Mysticism of the Church of the East,' 358-360.

‘‘How then shall it [i.e. the intellect] be raised up to this kind of reflection, and what is the beginning of [this] meditation on God? How can I find a place to ascend towards Him?... As a result of the practical discovery of the things that belong to Him a person is raised up in his thoughts to the contemplation of Him; this constitutes the true vision of Him, not of His nature, but of the dark cloud of His glory...’’⁷⁰¹

For Isaac, prayer is certainly a kind of ascent; his writings describe the experience of the soul as it is raised up to the vision of God. It is, however, an ‘interior’ ascent, an ascent of the mind, and in that regard differs in form to the Ascent Apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature.⁷⁰² Shared Scripture means that there are a number of similarities in their conception of heaven and the heavenly worship: in I. 157, Isaac combines aspects of Ezekiel’s vision with Is. 6. 1, and he prays that he may be made worthy to join the praise of the Seraphs around the chariot-throne [כִּי־יִחַבְּדוּ].⁷⁰³ Nevertheless, Isaac does not describe a journey through the heavenly spheres, and nor does he recount the trials and dangers that confront the mystic during the heavenly ascent.

One further correspondence is, however, worth noting in relation to Isaac’s theory of prayer and the mystical ascent. For Isaac, a ‘thick dark cloud’ marks the limit of

⁷⁰¹ II. X, 17.

⁷⁰² The *Ascension of Isaiah*, however, makes it clear that Isaiah’s spirit is the subject of the ascent and not his body. *Ascension of Isaiah*, 6. 13-16. Schäfer, *Origins*, 94.

⁷⁰³ I. 547. For a similar vision, though without the chariot-throne, see II. X, 24, where the angels flying around the throne stare into the *Shekinah* of Invisibleness.

‘pure prayer’ and the movement to ‘non-prayer,’ as seen in the passage from II. X, 17 cited above: ‘this constitutes the true vision of Him, not of His nature, but of the dark cloud of His glory [ܡܫܘܒܐ ܕܗܘܐ].’⁷⁰⁴

In the *Third Part*, this is connected explicitly with the Shekinah, where Isaac writes,

‘You have given us the great gift of faith by which we may draw near to the mysteries of knowledge – mysteries by which spiritual beings attain gradually to the Shekinah of Your Essence. By means of the mysteries of faith, indeed, those whom You are near to in faith and not in vision, remain upright, my Lord, within the cloud of thick darkness of Your glory.’⁷⁰⁵

The primary point of reference here is to the cloud that overshadows the Temple in 1 Kings 8. 10-12 (a passage Isaac explicitly refers to in III. VIII, 8), or the cloud that descends on Sinai in Exodus 19.⁷⁰⁶ Isaac’s language of the thick cloud comes from Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, and Jason Scully has shown how Isaac incorporates the language of darkness and light from Pseudo-Dionysius into his own

⁷⁰⁴ II. X, 17.

⁷⁰⁵ III. VII, 4-5. Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 104-105.

⁷⁰⁶ For the Shekinah in Syriac sources, see D. Cerbelaud, ‘Aspects de la Shekinah chez les auteurs chrétiens syriens,’ *Le Muséon* 123.1-2 (2010), 99-101. For Rabbinic sources, see P. Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 79-102. The most comprehensive work on the Rabbinic conception of the Shekinah is A. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen über die Vorstellung von der Schekhinah in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969).

thought on wonder and the state of non-prayer.⁷⁰⁷ In II. V, Isaac describes how even the angels are illumined by the glory emanating from the dark cloud:

‘Angelic beings are submerged in silence, awed at the dark cloud of this eternal mystery and at the flood of glory which issues from within this source of wonder...’⁷⁰⁸

Two factors, however, suggest that a connection with ascent mysticism may lie in the background to Isaac’s thought here. Firstly, Golitzin has shown that the sixth-century Greek commentator on the *Mystical Theology*, John of Scythopolis, understood the ‘thick darkness’ (γνόφος) in Pseudo-Dionysius to be a translation of the Hebrew *araphel* in Exodus 20.21, and he notes that this is, in Jewish tradition, the name of the seventh heaven into which Moses ascended.⁷⁰⁹ John here alludes to the Rabbinic tradition that Moses ascended into the heavens at Sinai and saw the

⁷⁰⁷ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 98-105. Pseudo-Dionysius’ influence is also seen in Isaac’s division of the angels into nine types, in three groups in I. 184-188. For a discussion of this division and a comparison with Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy*, see S. Seppälä, ‘Angelology of St Isaac the Syrian,’ in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 99-102.

⁷⁰⁸ II. V, 1.

⁷⁰⁹ A. Golitzin, ‘Revisiting the “Sudden”’: Epistle III in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*,’ *SP* 37 (2001), 482. For Moses’ ascent through *araphel*, see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 20.18. This passage is discussed helpfully in L. Freedman, ‘Seeing Divine Writing: Thoughts on the Drama of the Outside within the Technology of Inscription,’ in L. Kaplan and K. Koltun-Fromm, eds., *Imagining the Jewish God* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 30. The same tradition of Moses’ ascent through *araphel* can be seen in *Midrash Tanchuma Vaetchanan* 6. 1.

divine light of the Shekinah.⁷¹⁰ For Pseudo-Dionysius, as for the Moses tradition underlying his thought here, divine light paradoxically comes from the thick darkness of divine glory.⁷¹¹ The language of light and darkness that Isaac inherits from Pseudo-Dionysius and incorporates into his theory of prayer is understood, at least by John of Scythopolis in the sixth-century, to come from a Jewish ascent tradition.⁷¹² Secondly, this contrast between light and darkness parallels the image of thick cloud ‘with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually’ in Ezekiel’s vision.⁷¹³ This vision had a great influence on 1 Enoch, and on much subsequent apocalyptic.⁷¹⁴ As Enoch begins his ascent, he relates:

⁷¹⁰ Golitzin, ‘Revisiting the “Sudden”’: Epistle III in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*,’ 482. The ascent of Moses to heaven in order to receive the Torah is found in the Bavli (b. *Shabbat*, 88b-89a): ‘**And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on High to receive the Torah, the ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, what is one born of a woman doing here among us? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: He came to receive the Torah.**’ For a general survey of this tradition in Rabbinic and non-Rabbinic sources (notably Philo, Josephus, and the Pseudepigrapha) as well as in Samaritan sources, see W. Meeks, *The Prophet King: Moses Traditions and Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967). It is a tradition to which Pseudo-Dionysius explicitly alludes in *Mystical Theology*, III.

⁷¹¹ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 101.

⁷¹² The association between the Shekinah and light has a strong background in Judaism. José Costa argues that the Talmudic references to the Shekinah as a luminous being betray a certain reservation on the part of the rabbis, and so locates this tradition in Hellenistic circles. J. Costa, ‘La Shekhina et le motif de la lumière: une mystique juive non rabbinique?’ in S. C. Mimouni and M. Scopello, eds., *La mystique théorétique et théurgique dans l’Antiquité gréco-romaine. Judaïsmes et christianismes* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 321-353.

⁷¹³ Ezekiel 1. 4.

⁷¹⁴ Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 10.

‘And behold I saw the clouds: And they were calling me in a vision; and the fogs were calling me, and the course of the stars and the lightings were rushing me... the winds were causing me to fly and rushing me high up into heaven.’⁷¹⁵

Schäfer suggests that Enoch’s vision indicates a reversal of the pattern of ascent and descent in Ezekiel’s vision: whereas in Ezekiel, the cloud and fire descend from above towards the prophet who remains physically on earth, in 1 Enoch, the clouds and lightning draw the visionary from the earth and into heaven.⁷¹⁶ In Isaac, too, it is divine power rather than human action that draws the mystic upwards into the thick darkness:

‘meditating upon Him first of all stirs in a person, and gradually the meditating encompasses his intellect little by little, and it brings [the intellect] in and makes it stand in the dark cloud of His glory.’⁷¹⁷

In 1 Enoch, the image of thick cloud stands as a barrier between heaven and earth, which draws Enoch up on his heavenly journey. For Isaac, the thick cloud also acts as a barrier, but following Pseudo-Dionysius, it reflects the limits of what is perceptible to created beings. This particular function of the image of the cloud is also found in the Hekhalot texts. In the *Shi‘ur Qomah* passage of *Merkavah Rabbah*, for instance, there is ‘glistening splendour and fear from the midst of darkness’ and

⁷¹⁵ 1 Enoch 14. 8.

⁷¹⁶ Schäfer, *Origins*, 56.

⁷¹⁷ II. X, 17.

‘cloud and misty cloud encircle Him.’⁷¹⁸ Both these phrases echo the vision in 1 Enoch, except that here (as in Isaac), the cloud hides God himself. Similarly, in *Hekhalot Zurtati*, the mystic is so close to the throne that he can touch it, but the throne and the figure seated on it are hidden by the cloud.⁷¹⁹ In the Hekhalot texts, the thick cloud marks the fine line between the imminence and transcendence of God.⁷²⁰

The paradox of divine light emanating from thick darkness that Isaac inherits from Pseudo-Dionysius can be read alongside parallel traditions in 1 Enoch and the Hekhalot literature. In these texts, the thick cloud highlights the ultimate unknowability of God. In Isaac’s writing, this theme is developed specifically in line with his theory of prayer, with the thick cloud marking the transition from pure prayer to non-prayer, as the divine power draws the mystic into the state of wonder that is beyond prayer.

⁷¹⁸ *Merkavah Rabbah*, 699. *Shi‘ur Qomah*, ‘the measure of the body,’ refers to a speculative literature describing the physical appearance of God. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 63-67; Dan, *Jewish Mysticism I*, 49-51. A shorter macroform, *The Youth*, similarly describes the ‘darkness and cloud and misty cloud and thick mud before Him. *The Youth*, 8-9.

⁷¹⁹ *Hekhalot Zurtati*, 356. Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 64.

⁷²⁰ Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 64.

5.2.2 Eschatology, Transformation and the Mystical Ascent

The ascent from prayer at the level of the body through ‘pure prayer’ and to the ecstatic state of non-prayer, marks a participation in the heavenly life that is the ultimate destiny of the believer. Isaac describes this ‘ecstasy in God,’ as,

‘the order of that high future state which will be given in freedom that lives in immortality, in that way of life which will be after the resurrection.’⁷²¹

He continues a little later in the same passage,

‘if God had not limited the duration of these moments in this life, man would not come back from that state his whole life, if he were allowed.’⁷²²

In the *Second Part*, this is framed as participation in the worship of the angels:

‘Thus may we sing praise at every moment with the halleluiahs of the Watchers on high in honour of the might of Your Being. And, as though in heaven, may we bear on our hidden limbs the sanctification of Your divinity.’⁷²³

⁷²¹ I. 304.

⁷²² I. 305.

⁷²³ II. X, 41.

Crucially for Isaac, it is possible for the ascetic to participate in this heavenly life in the present reality. This emphasis on the hope of the life of the world to come is part of the legacy of John of Apamea in Isaac's thought: it is strongly Pauline, and John's use of Paul draws heavily on the distinction between the inner and outer man (for instance, in 2 Corinthians 4. 16) and the image of the transformation of the corporeal body into a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15. 43-44).⁷²⁴ John understands this transformation as beginning in baptism and finding its fulfilment in the life of the world to come, a life that mirrors the life of the angels.⁷²⁵ For Isaac, this 'way of life of the new world' ('*דרכו של עולם החדש*') is a mental activity: as Scully notes, 'the way of life of this world is composed of bodily labour, but the way of life of the new world takes place in the mind.'⁷²⁶ John emphasises the beginnings of this new way of life in baptism, but for Isaac it is realised in the life of prayer.⁷²⁷ Isaac connects the eschatological language he inherits from John of Apamea with his theory of prayer to explain the way in which the ascetic can live the promised future, heavenly life in

⁷²⁴ For a study of these themes in John of Apamea and Isaac's development of John's thought, see Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 48-72. Scully is right to point to the strong influence of John of Apamea here, but it is worth noting that Evagrius maintains that the knowledge of God and vision of divine light can be experienced in this life and 'inaugurate the fuller knowledge of the life to come.' Evagrius' eschatological focus, is however, much more clearly fixed on the end of time. Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic*, 155.

⁷²⁵ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 67-68.

⁷²⁶ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 68.

⁷²⁷ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 68.

the present reality.⁷²⁸ The cross also stands for Isaac as a sign of the eschatological future in the present moment:

‘Whenever we [believers] gaze on the Cross in a composed way, with our emotions steadied, the recollection of our Lord’s entire economy gathers together and stands before our interior eyes.’⁷²⁹

Non-prayer, in which the divine power draws the mind upwards into a state of wonder, is at the heart of this eschatological experience. Wonder is the means by which the spiritual insights of the world to come are mediated to the mind: this is important for Isaac’s understanding of knowledge, which strictly delineates knowledge acquired through the created world (including the soul) and the knowledge of heavenly realities.⁷³⁰ The divine action which brings the mind into a state of wonder overcomes this sharp epistemological divide, and so in this state the mind is receptive to the knowledge of heaven. This eschatological state necessitates a transformation of the ascetic, as he is conformed in his present reality to the future life of heaven. Scully writes,

⁷²⁸ Isaac depends on Theodore of Mopsuestia’s theology of the two *katastaseis* (worlds, ages), on which see F. G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2009), 11. P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 147.

⁷²⁹ II. XI, 26.

⁷³⁰ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 135-136; V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St Isaac of Nineveh* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 217-222.

‘wonder makes a person virtuous because it is accompanied by comprehension and knowledge of the mysteries of God... Once a monk is able to understand and process spiritual insights through wonder, he is then able to abide by the way of life of the new world.’⁷³¹

For Isaac, the ascent of the mind in prayer has a fundamentally eschatological dimension, one which changes the mystic who no longer lives his old life, but the new life of heaven. This has a strong experiential emphasis in his conception of the life of the ascetic, and is therefore part of the self-transformation that Isaac envisions.⁷³² The ascetic, when caught up in ‘non-prayer,’ participates in the future reality of the Kingdom and thus becomes a ‘figure’ of the Kingdom on earth.

Isaac’s eschatological theory of prayer, by which the mind perceives the spiritual realities of the new world, explains the emphasis on spiritual sight in his writings on the mystical ascent. The relationship between the eschatological state of wonder and spiritual sight is clear from *KG*. I. 89, where Isaac writes,

‘Mortification of the spirit is that the mind is raised to the vision of the divine and ineffable realities through an operation [of the Spirit], and that all

⁷³¹ Scully, *Ascetical Eschatology*, 149.

⁷³² For the notion of self-transformation, see particularly Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 2-3. Bitton-Ashkelony uses the Foucaultian idea of ‘technologies of the self’ to explore the ways in which personal prayer in Late Antiquity was understood to reshape and reorient the self towards the divine. Also see, I Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018), 1.

thoughts of earthly things become silenced; and while being in the midst of a figure of the future [world, filled] with wonder from intuitions about the realities that are not from the world of the dead he receives through spiritual feelings, as a deposit, that Kingdom and rises to those dwellings that are not from flesh or from blood. This is [the meaning of] “Let thy Kingdom come before the time” that we are commanded to ask and reflect upon at any time and to long for it incessantly – we are commanded [to do that] by our Saviour with diligence.’⁷³³

Drawn into the state of wonder, the mind sees and understands spiritual mysteries. Isaac writes of the vision of the dark cloud of God’s glory (II. X, 17) and he describes the intellect peering into the Holy of Holies (II. XXX, 9). Isaac never describes the vision of God on his throne: instead, he describes the angels ‘who peer into the place of the *Shekhina* of Invisibleness,’ or simply speaks of the soul in the presence of the divine glory.⁷³⁴ Nevertheless, Isaac does in a number of places write about coming into the presence of Christ and of seeing Christ. He prays, for instance,

‘O Christ, Goal of the path of the saints, show me the path of truth in my heart, by means of the sweetness of reflection on You, so that I may travel and go on [this path] towards you until I see Your face.’⁷³⁵

Similarly, in his homily on the cross, Isaac writes,

⁷³³ *KG*. I. 89. A similar theme can be found in I. 305.

⁷³⁴ II. X, 24; III. XVI, 3.

⁷³⁵ II. XXX, 14. See also, II. XXXII, 1.

‘For true believers the sight of the Cross is no small thing, for all symbols are understood to be contained in it. But whenever they raise their eyes and gaze on it, it is as though they were contemplating the face of Christ.’⁷³⁶

This ambivalence about ‘seeing’ God reflects a tension inherent in the tradition: a number of Antiochene Fathers assert that it is not possible to see God’s essence, but only God’s glory in Christ.⁷³⁷ Timothy I condemned John of Apamea and the eighth-century mystics, John of Dalyatha and Joseph Hazzaya, for holding the ‘Messalian’ doctrine that it was possible to see God’s essence.⁷³⁸ To some extent, the condemnation reflects a deliberate misreading of the mystics: John of Dalyatha, for instance, maintains the orthodox distinction between God’s essence and his glory throughout his writings.⁷³⁹ It is nevertheless clear that the language of vision was an important part of the Church of the East’s mystical tradition, and this is no less the

⁷³⁶ II. XI, 17.

⁷³⁷ This is the case for John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, and specifically in the East Syrian tradition, for Narsai and Babai. See, Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 68, n. 205.

⁷³⁸ Treiger, ‘Could Christ’s Humanity See His Divinity?’, 9-27; Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience*, 67-70.

⁷³⁹ R. Beulay, *L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha: mystique syro-oriental du VIII siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), 447; V. Berti, ‘Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée I^{er}: la perspective du patriarche,’ in A. Desreumaux, ed., *Les mystiques syriaques*, *Études Syriaque* 8 (Paris: Geuthner, 2011), 156.

case with Isaac of Nineveh.⁷⁴⁰ For Isaac, spiritual sight is part of his understanding of prayer and the mystical ascent. In connection with the spiritual vision of Christ, Isaac describes in II. XI the moment that, ‘our hidden vision is swallowed up through a certain contemplation on the mystery of faith.’⁷⁴¹ Likewise, he writes in III. III, 32,

‘The holy Nature of Christ is therefore worthy of all praise! By His Economy, He has lifted us up from looking on earthly realities and directs the mind to the divine ascent which is above the world. By means of converse in prayer, He has brought us near to the vision of the heavenly Kingdom...’⁷⁴²

Isaac is clear that the vision of the future reality of the Kingdom of God is possible in the present time through the mystical ascent in prayer, as the mind is drawn into the state of wonder. It is fundamentally important for Isaac’s theory of prayer and the ascetic life that the mystic can participate in the eschatological life of the world to come in the here and now.

These related themes of eschatology and transformation in the mystical ascent have some interesting parallels in the Ascent Apocalypses and Hekhalot literature. These are less systematic, and the modes of expression are quite different: nevertheless, the relationship between eschatology and the transformation of the mystic in both Isaac

⁷⁴⁰ Beulay, *La Lumière sans forme*, 130-137; P. Bettiolo, ‘Rivelazioni e visioni nell’opera di Isacco di Ninive: il retroterra scolastico di un insegnamento spiritual,’ in P. Bettiolo, ed., *Testimoni Dell’Eschaton: Monaci siro-orientali in un’età di torbidi* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019), 97-122.

⁷⁴¹ II. XI, 19.

⁷⁴² III. III, 32.

and these Jewish mystical texts show a similar impulse centred on the mysticism of ascent.

The idea of the inner transformation of the mystic might seem alien to the Ascent Apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature, with their focus on visions, cosmography and revelation. However, a number of scholars have proposed psychological readings of these texts whereby the theme of ascent reflects some inner reality.⁷⁴³ In the ascent Apocalypses, an external transformation often occurs to the mystic who enters the presence of God. Where such transformation occurs, it is usually a kind of ‘angelification,’ and draws on the language of priestly investiture.⁷⁴⁴ This transformation is hinted at in the *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37-71) in the late first century B.C. and it is an integral theme in 2 Enoch, roughly a century later.⁷⁴⁵ Similarly, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* culminates in Abraham joining the praise of the angels before God, and whilst any angelic transformation is not explicit, it is implied by this participation.⁷⁴⁶ The account of Isaiah’s mystical ascent in the

⁷⁴³ See footnote 753 below.

⁷⁴⁴ This process is hinted at in the *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37-71) in the first century B.C.E. and is explicit in 2 Enoch in the first century C.E. The same angelic transformation can be found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and the *Ascension of Isaiah*. It is also implied in the so-called *Self-Glorification Hymn* from the Qumran material. The language of priestly investiture is seen in 2 Enoch and the *Testament of Levi*. The term ‘angelification’ is to be preferred to ‘deification,’ as the latter is rooted in neo-Platonic and Christian ideas of the *unio mystica*. The texts in question never imply union with God. Schäfer, *Origins*, 19-20. On the theme of priestly investiture, see Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 29-46.

⁷⁴⁵ 1 Enoch 71. 11; 2 Enoch 22. 8-10. Schäfer, *Origins*, 28, 76, 81-82.

⁷⁴⁶ *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 17-18. Schäfer, *Origins*, 91.

Ascension of Isaiah belongs to the Christian portion of the text, but it is likely that it depends on a Jewish source.⁷⁴⁷ When he enters the seventh heaven, Isaiah is clothed with a heavenly garment and he temporarily joins the ranks of the righteous dead who are clothed like the angels, but who can, unlike the angels, see God's glory.⁷⁴⁸ Whilst some scholars, such as Wolfson, have seen a similar concern for physical transformation of the mystic in the Hekhalot literature, Schäfer has argued that it is a much less important theme here than it is in the Apocalypses.⁷⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is a theme that resurfaces in 3 Enoch, a late Hekhalot text which draws heavily on earlier apocalyptic and rabbinic themes.⁷⁵⁰ Here, Enoch's transformation into Metatron is narrated at length as he is given divine wisdom, grows to an enormous size, with seventy-two wings and 365,000 eyes, and given the name 'The lesser YHWH'.⁷⁵¹ This is unlike any other accounts of angelic transformation in the Ascent Apocalypses or the Hekhalot literature.

⁷⁴⁷ Schäfer, *Origins*, 94.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ascension of Isaiah*, 9. Schäfer, *Origins*, 97-98. The idea that some things are hidden from angels and yet revealed to human beings can also be seen in Isaac's writing. See II. X, 19. For a broader discussion of the way in which Isaac frames the imperfect knowledge of the angels, see Seppälä, 'Angelology of St Isaac the Syrian,' 106-107. What Seppälä terms the 'deficiencies' of the angels, can also be seen in the Hekhalot literature, where angels are punished for not singing in perfect harmony (*Hekhalot Rabbati*, 185).

⁷⁴⁹ E. R. Wolfson, 'Mysticism and the Poetic-Liturgical Compositions from Qumran: A Response to Billah Nitzan,' *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (1994), 194; Schäfer, *Origins*, 342-343.

⁷⁵⁰ Schäfer dates 3 Enoch to the period between 700 and 900 C.E., though significantly earlier and later dates have been proposed. Schäfer, *Origins*, 316. For a discussion of the various scholarly positions see P. Alexander, '3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch,' in Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, i, 225-229.

⁷⁵¹ 3 Enoch, 7-12. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 52-53.

Such transformation is far removed from the transformation of the mystic in the eschatological state of wonder that Isaac describes. Whilst for Isaac, as for other Syriac ascetics, to live the life of the angels is understood as a kind of spiritual perfection, there is no sense in which these Christian authors envisage the angelic transformation as depicted in the Ascent Apocalypses and 3 Enoch. Recent work on the Hekhalot texts, however, has shown the ways in which this literature is concerned with subtler forms of inner transformation more akin to the state of spiritual perfection seen in Isaac's writing.⁷⁵² Mortimer Ostow, a psychiatrist, has worked on a psychoanalytic approach to the Merkavah texts, and various psychosexual readings of the texts have been proposed.⁷⁵³ Psychosexual interpretations of the Hekhalot texts have not been very widely accepted, with Gruenwald describing them as having 'intellectually redundant results.'⁷⁵⁴ Despite this, psychological readings have proved fruitful. Arbel has used Jonas' work on 'interiorization' to consider the role of symbolic death and rebirth of the mystic in

⁷⁵² D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 359, 372-375

⁷⁵³ M. Ostow, 'The Psychodynamics of Merkavah Mysticism, in M. Ostow, ed., *The Ultimate Intimacy: The Psychodynamics of Jewish Mysticism* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1995). An essentially psychological reading of the Hekhalot texts is proposed by David Halperin (who contributed to Mortimer Ostow's volume on the psychodynamics of Jewish mysticism), see Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 359, 372-375. The continued interest in psychological readings of these texts can be seen in E. R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005) and S. M. Kimbrel, *Penetrating the Seventh Palace: Reading the Sexual Dimensions of the Hebrew Book of Enoch and the Hekhalot Genre*, unpublished MA thesis (The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2017).

⁷⁵⁴ I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (2nd ed., Leiden: Brill, 2014), 8.

the Hekhalot literature.⁷⁵⁵ She argues that a number of important Merkavah texts describe a threefold process of self-transformation: there is a symbolic death (indicated by a loss of consciousness, collapsing, or the separation of body and soul); the second stage is seen in images of rebirth or awakening, where the mystic gains new understanding; finally, the mystic attains to the vision of God or the chariot-throne.⁷⁵⁶ Arbel's work emphasises the significance of the inner transformation of the mystic in these texts, and so reflects the changing attitudes towards prayer in Late Antiquity that Bitton-Ashkelony describes in relation to Evagrius and the East Syrian mystics.⁷⁵⁷ In this regard, the Hekhalot literature may be interpreted as sharing a common background with the writings of Isaac and the mystics of the seventh and eighth centuries whose texts emphasise the transformative aspects of mystical experience.

This kind of inner transformation seen in the Hekhalot texts, as in Isaac's writing, has an eschatological dimension. Schäfer argues that the heart of these texts is the *unio liturgica*, and that participation in the heavenly worship enables the Merkavah mystic, convinced of God's enduring love for Israel, despite there being no earthly Temple, to become the 'harbinger of redemption' to the people of Israel.⁷⁵⁸ This is a

⁷⁵⁵ D. V. Arbel, "'Understanding of the Heart": Spiritual Transformation and Divine Revelations in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature,' *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999), 333-343.

⁷⁵⁶ Arbel, 'Understanding of the Heart,' 333-334. Arbel illustrates these stages with the example of Rabbi Ishmael in 3 Enoch.

⁷⁵⁷ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 102.

⁷⁵⁸ Schäfer, *Origins*, 281.

particular concern in *Hekhalot Rabbati*.⁷⁵⁹ At the culmination of the visionary experience as the mystic joins the angelic chorus of ‘holy, holy, holy,’ the mystic is commanded to testify:

‘And testify to them. What testimony? You see Me – what I do to the visage of the face of Jacob your father which is engraved for Me upon the throne of My glory. For in the hour that you say before Me “Holy,” I kneel on it and embrace it and kiss it and hug it and My hands are on its arms three times, corresponding to the three times that you say before Me, “Holy.”’⁷⁶⁰

The eschatological vision of God’s abiding love for Israel is focused on the community, and the mystic is threatened should he fail to testify to all that he has seen:

‘The decree of heaven is against you, descenders to the chariot, unless you say what you have heard and unless you testify to what you have seen concerning the Presence.’⁷⁶¹

Davila argues that the lengthy hymnody in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 170-173, and 189-197 points to a merging of heaven and earth in one single act of worship.⁷⁶² This reflects a ‘realised’ eschatology in which heaven and earth are joined together in the moment

⁷⁵⁹ Schäfer, *Origins*, 281.

⁷⁶⁰ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 164.

⁷⁶¹ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 169.

⁷⁶² Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 44.

of mystical experience, and the mystic must then return to earth and tell Israel what he has seen. Whilst the communal aspect of this ‘realised’ eschatology, this proclamation to all Israel, is not particularly a feature of Isaac’s thought (which is much more concerned with the individual ascetic), the notion that heaven and earth are joined together in the present moment by a single act of worship is recognisable:

‘Thus may we sing praise at every moment with the halleluiahs of the Watchers on high in honour of the might of Your Being. And, as though in heaven, may we bear on our hidden limbs the sanctification of Your divinity.’⁷⁶³

The parallel with *Hekhalot Rabbati* can be seen in the mingling of heaven and earth in the moment of the mystic’s experience, through joining the angelic worship.

Much of the emphasis on the ‘world to come’ in the Hekhalot literature reflects classical rabbinic eschatology, which sees good deeds in this world rewarded in the future world.⁷⁶⁴ This is, for instance, seen in *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, where R. Akiva relates that for the one who completes the mystery each day,

⁷⁶³ II. X, 41.

⁷⁶⁴ For a range of Talmudic examples, see D. Novak, ‘Jewish Eschatology,’ in J. L. Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116-117.

‘RWZYY YHWH, God of Israel, accomplishes righteous acts with him every day in this world and stands by him for his honour and he is assured that he is a son of the world to come.’⁷⁶⁵

However, there is also a sense in which the visionary experience of the mystic acts as a foretaste of the world to come, what Davila calls the ‘undercurrent of realised eschatology’ in the Hekhalot literature.⁷⁶⁶ He suggests that this is made explicit in *Merkavah Rabbah*, 675:

‘Cheerful is the man who completes this mystery from dawn to dawn. He acquires this world, and the world to come, and the worlds, and he merits greeting the return of the Presence of the *Shekhinah* in the future.’⁷⁶⁷

This reflects Isaac’s understanding of the mystical experience in which he describes his ‘ecstasy in God’ as a foretaste of the ‘way of life which will be after the resurrection,’ and notes that,

‘if God had not limited the duration of these moments in this life, man would not come back from that state his whole life, if he were allowed.’⁷⁶⁸

⁷⁶⁵ *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, 547.

⁷⁶⁶ Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 305.

⁷⁶⁷ *Merkavah Rabbah*, 675. A similar sentiment is expressed in *Merkavah Rabbah*, 705-706.

⁷⁶⁸ I. 305.

Like Isaac, the mystic of *Merkavah Rabbah* experiences the bliss of the world to come in his mystical encounter.

The state of perfection that the mystic attains in both the Hekhalot literature and in Isaac of Nineveh's writings has an eschatological dimension: the mystic lives the future, heavenly life in the present moment. There are some differences, notably in the communal emphasis of *Hekhalot Rabbati*. There are also some similarities. The idea of the mingling of heaven and earth in the present moment of the mystic's experience through joining the angelic worship can be seen in both Isaac and *Hekhalot Rabbati*. Similarly, the parallel with *Merkavah Rabbah* shows a common concern for the transformative aspects of the future life, which, through the mystical experience, it is possible to live in the present reality.

5.3 Ascetic Practice, Contemplation and the Ascent

The place of asceticism in Isaac's thought has been well-established, and this *ascesis* is intimately connected with the life of prayer.⁷⁶⁹ Prostrations, fasting and tears play an important role in Isaac's conception of the mind's ascent in prayer. Ascetic preparations also have an important role in the Hekhalot texts, as Rebecca Macy Lesses has pointed out.⁷⁷⁰ Furthermore contemplation features as a significant

⁷⁶⁹ Hagman, *Asceticism*, 126-131.

⁷⁷⁰ R. M. Lesses, *Ritual Action to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations, and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 117-160. Lesses begins her discussion with an account of Saint Anthony of Egypt, pointing to the widespread connection between ascetic practice and the state of spiritual perfection in Late Antiquity.

component in both Isaac and the Hekhalot texts as a preparation for the mystical ascent. Isaac gives significant weight to *theoria* (ܠܝܘܪܝܐ), usually translated ‘contemplation,’ in the life of prayer and mystical experience.⁷⁷¹ In *Merkavah Rabbah*, the contemplation of the mystery that is invoked is part of the mystical experience itself, and has parallels with Isaac’s conception of *theoria*.⁷⁷² These texts share the notion that the mystical ascent can be achieved by particular prayers, meditation or even study.

5.3.1 *Ascesis*

Isaac combines his broadly Evagrian theory of prayer with the tripartite division of the levels of the body, the soul and the spirit found in the writing of John of Apamea.⁷⁷³ The ascetic practices that Isaac sets out and encourages throughout his writings, such as the recitation of psalms, vigils, prostration, cross veneration, and fasting, are forms of prayer at this first level, the level of the body.⁷⁷⁴ This reflects the preliminary stages of the ascetical life, and in that sense they are a means of preparation for the advanced stages of pure prayer and non-prayer. Isaac himself writes,

⁷⁷¹ For the difficulty in translating ܠܝܘܪܝܐ, see S. Brock, ‘Some uses of the term *theoria* in the writings of Isaac of Nineveh,’ *Parole de l’Orient* 22 (1996), 409, n. 9.

⁷⁷² *Merkavah Rabbah*, 655, 675, 705. Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 107.

⁷⁷³ See page 230 above; Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder of Prayer*, 88.

⁷⁷⁴ Hagman, *Asceticism*, 139; 55-56.

‘Bodily labours are called bodily discipline unto God. For they serve for the purification of the body through the service of excellence, which is manifest personal works, by which man is purified from the pus of the flesh.’⁷⁷⁵

Ascetic discipline is a necessary first step in the life of the solitary, and without it, the advanced stages of prayer (and non-prayer) are unattainable. For Isaac, prayer of the body is a purification that makes the human person receptive to the stirrings of the soul and the spiritual insight.⁷⁷⁶

The idea that ascetic labours prepare the mystic for spiritual experience is common in Late Antique religions.⁷⁷⁷ Lesses’ study of ritual practice in the Hekhalot literature

⁷⁷⁵ I. 303-304.

⁷⁷⁶ I. 304.

⁷⁷⁷ Christian asceticism has been a central part of Late Antique studies since the field’s conception. P. Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,’ *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101. For a survey on the scholarship of Christian asceticism in Late Antiquity, see R. Krawiec, ‘Asceticism,’ in S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 764-780. There is a debate about the usefulness of asceticism as a category in the study of Judaism, given the Christian context in which the scholarly category was developed. P. Heger, *Women in the Bible, Qumran, and Early Rabbinic Literature: Their Status and Roles*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 249-301. An opposing view that embraces the category of asceticism in the rabbinic context, however, can be seen in M. L. Satlow, “‘And on the Earth You Shall Sleep’: *Talmud Torah* and Rabbinic Asceticism,’ *The Journal of Religion* 83/2 (2003), 204-225. For the relationship between asceticism and divination in Graeco-Roman paganism of the Second Century C.E., see J. A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 118-126.

shows the ways in which the ascetic *praxis* as a means of preparation in these texts reflect the broad religious environment of Late Antiquity.⁷⁷⁸ She notes, however, that the specific ascetic preparations she discusses (grouped around the avoidance of sexual activity, food restrictions, and ritual immersion) have clear roots in Jewish tradition, with the exception of the prohibition on vegetables, which she traces to a common ancestor to, or social world with, the Manichaeans.⁷⁷⁹ *Ma'aseh Merkavah* suggests that the recitation of specific prayers, or indeed posture, fasts, or 'magic' ritual, cause the ascent of the mystic.⁷⁸⁰ Whilst this particular emphasis is unusual in relation to the other Hekhalot texts, the general theme of ascetic preparation is also found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, where Abraham must fast from wine and cooked food before he is able to ascend to heaven.⁷⁸¹ The ascetic practices Lesses explores in the Hekhalot literature have clear parallels with Christian ascetic practice generally, including with the kinds of asceticism that Isaac of Nineveh advocates. This is particularly the case with prostration, fasting and the avoidance of women.⁷⁸² Lesses notes that the ascetic practices reflected in the Hekhalot texts are

⁷⁷⁸ Lesses, *Ritual Action*, 119.

⁷⁷⁹ *Sar Torah*, 299; *Merkavah Rabbah*, 684. Lesses, *Ritual Action*, 118-119, 148-155.

⁷⁸⁰ *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, 544, 547, 550, 564, 565, 572, 592. Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 87; Arbel, 'Understanding of the Heart,' 330.

⁷⁸¹ *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 9. 7. For general connection between sanctification, prayer and revelation, see Daniel 10. 2-3; 4 Ezra 5. 13; 6. 30, 35; and 2 Baruch 9. 2; 20. 5. Lesses, *Ritual Action*, 147.

⁷⁸² For prostration and physical posture in Isaac, see I. 129; II. IV, 4. For fasting, see I. 48, 281; II. XXII, 1; III. XII, 30. For the avoidance of women, see I. 293; II. XVII, 12. For Isaac, this means avoiding the company of women altogether, but in the Hekhalot literature, the emphasis is much more

stricter than in the Talmud and can be compared more readily to the asceticism of the community at Qumran.⁷⁸³ Unlike the emphasis on communal purity seen in the Qumran scrolls, however, the Hekhalot texts point to a highly individualised approach to purity, which seems closer to the model of Christian asceticism that took hold in Late Antiquity.⁷⁸⁴ One significant difference, though, can be seen in the function of these ascetic practices. For Isaac, the ascetic discipline of prostration, fasting and avoiding contact with women is the first step in the purification required to live the eschatological life of the angels on earth. The emphasis on ritual purity in the Hekhalot literature, on the other hand, points to specific periods of purification for the duration of the *praxis* surrounding the mystical ascent.⁷⁸⁵ In both traditions, however, ascetic discipline is part of the preparation necessary to receive spiritual insight and experiences.

The connection between ascetic practice and mystical experience is something that Isaac directly addresses in relation to the veneration of the cross. In II. XI, he writes,

‘And whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ... And through our drawing near to Him, and at our gaze towards Him, straightaway we travel in our intellects to heaven, mystically. As though at some sight that cannot be seen or sensed, and out of

on avoiding seminal emissions, which for a married man means avoiding sexual intercourse with his wife, as in *Hekhalot Zurtati*, 424.

⁷⁸³ Lesses, *Ritual Action*, 142-143.

⁷⁸⁴ Lesses, *Ritual Action*, 142-143.

⁷⁸⁵ Lesses, *Ritual Action*, 144.

honour for our Lord's humanity, our hidden vision is swallowed up through a certain contemplation on the mystery of faith.⁷⁸⁶

The physical act of cross veneration acts as a means of preparation for the mystical ascent in prayer.

One of the other ascetic practices on which Isaac places great emphasis is the weeping associated with repentance, what he calls *دُمُوع*, 'tears.'⁷⁸⁷ Tears in Isaac's thought have their own hierarchy, beginning with the tears of contrition at the outset of the ascetic life.⁷⁸⁸ As the solitary progresses, his tears are the result of spiritual insight, as he realises the mercy he has received from God. Tears can be joyful, deriving directly from the knowledge and experience of God.⁷⁸⁹ For Isaac, tears are a

⁷⁸⁶ II. XI, 18-19.

⁷⁸⁷ This is a well-noted aspect of Isaac's spirituality. See D. A. Lichter, 'Tears and Contemplation in Isaac of Nineveh,' *Diakonia* 11 (1976), 239-258; P. T. Mascia, 'The Gift of Tears in Isaac of Nineveh,' *Diakonia* 14 (1979), 255-265; H. Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 129-168; J. Akiki, 'The Ritual of Tears in Isaac of Nineveh,' in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 155-167. For the place of tears in the Greek context, see the thorough treatment in Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 1-25. For tears in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, see C. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: the Career of Peter the Iberian*, OPCS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 375, n. 191-192.

⁷⁸⁸ Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 155-157.

⁷⁸⁹ II. VII, 17.

necessary part of spiritual progression, and mark the boundary between the life of this world and the life of the new world.⁷⁹⁰ He writes,

‘When thou hast reached the place of tears, then understand that the spirit has left the prison of this world and set its foot on the way towards the new world. Then it begins to breathe the wonderful air which is there, and to spend tears.’⁷⁹¹

This is a recurrent theme in Isaac’s writing, and the solitary’s tears, which are ultimately a divine gift, are associated with the language of abundance:

‘[the ascetic] has to abandon the Office because of abundant weeping, and he is like someone aroused from the depths, his whole body becoming, so to say, a fountain of weeping... he is drenched in tears.’⁷⁹²

The notion that tears in Isaac’s thought mark a boundary between the earthly life and the life of the world to come has some interesting parallels with the role of water in the ascent in the Hekhalot texts, though it offers no direct comparisons. *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zurtati* both contain a ‘test’ involving water which the mystic must pass before being allowed to proceed on his journey.⁷⁹³ In this ‘water test’, the

⁷⁹⁰ Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 155-157.

⁷⁹¹ I. 125-126.

⁷⁹² II. XIV, 46.

⁷⁹³ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 258-259; *Hekhalot Zurtati*, 407-408. It is found in *Merkavah Rabbah*, 672 in one manuscript (MS N8128). A version is also found in the Bavli, b. *Hagigah*, 14b.

mystic can only enter the sixth heaven after being tested by angels who seem to hurl water at him, which he must realise is in fact not water at all.⁷⁹⁴

‘Because the guardians of the entrance of the sixth palace cast and throw upon him a thousand thousand waves of waters, but there is not really even one drop there, if he says, “These waters – what is their nature?” at once they run after him with stoning, saying to him, “Fool! Perhaps you are of the seed of those who kissed the calf, and you are unfit to feast your eyes on the King and His throne!”’⁷⁹⁵

Incidentally, water also indicates the boundary between the first and second heavens in the *Testament of Levi*, and in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* (reworked in the Christian *Apocalypse of Paul*), the visionary must cross a great sea by ship to enter Paradise.⁷⁹⁶ The ‘water test’ of the Hekhalot literature has puzzled commentators, and a number of theories have been proposed, but whatever the detail, it is clearly to do with correct spiritual perception.⁷⁹⁷ Isaac’s account of tears in the stages of the spiritual life is also an outward sign of correct spiritual perception as the ascetic recognises the seriousness of sin and his reliance on God’s mercy. Tears mark the

⁷⁹⁴ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 259; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 52-53; Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 37-39; 38, n. 122.

⁷⁹⁵ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 259.

⁷⁹⁶ *Testament of Levi*, 2. 7; *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, 8. 1. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 54, 91. The *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* provides an interesting parallel to the ‘water test’ of the Hekhalot literature in so far as Zephaniah sees the great sea in 6. 1 and thinks that it is water, but then discovers that it is in fact a sea of fire.

⁷⁹⁷ Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 38, n. 122.

boundary of the stages of the ascetic life. It may be that Isaac's thought in this regard reflects the broader 'interiorisation' of the mystical ascent seen in his theory of prayer and the visionary experiences he relates.

Isaac and the Hekhalot mystics share an understanding common in Late Antiquity of the relationship between *ascesis* and revelation. Whilst there are distinct differences in the emphases of these texts, they both endorse a fundamental principle: ascetic practices are a necessary part of the preparation for mystical experience.

5.3.2 *Theoria*

Another aspect of this process of purification can be seen in the role of contemplation, and even study, as part of the mystical experience. A significant part of Isaac's spiritual vocabulary is to do with *theoria* (ܬܘܪܝܐ), which has a range of meanings.⁷⁹⁸ The translation, 'contemplation,' does not cover the entire semantic range of *theoria*, which in Isaac is to do with spiritual vision and perception,⁷⁹⁹ meditation on the mysteries of God⁸⁰⁰ and creation,⁸⁰¹ a way of life⁸⁰² and

⁷⁹⁸ J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903; repr. 1967), 602.

⁷⁹⁹ I. 522, 528; II. X, 17; II. XIX, 5.

⁸⁰⁰ *KG*. II, 4. This includes aspects of Christ's incarnate life, *KG*. I, 44; *KG*. IV, 82.

⁸⁰¹ I. 172.

⁸⁰² II. XII (title).

discipline,⁸⁰³ as well as the study of the Scriptures.⁸⁰⁴ It is an important part of his homily on the cross, which bears the title *ܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܠܝܢ ܕܥܠܝܢ ܕܥܠܝܢ* ‘On the contemplation of the mystery of the Cross.’⁸⁰⁵ For Isaac, the cross is the means by which human beings are deemed worthy of the knowledge of the angels,⁸⁰⁶ and he is clear that contemplation of the mystery of the cross is an active and dynamic part of the life of prayer: ‘Let us enter, in our mind’s contemplation [*ܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܠܝܢ ܕܥܠܝܢ*], into this amazing action He has taken for us.’⁸⁰⁷ This contemplation is a mystical experience, by which the ascetic is drawn into the whole drama of God’s engagement with humanity. For Isaac, to contemplate the cross is to contemplate the whole of salvation history.⁸⁰⁸ II. XI has a strong emphasis on contemplating the mysteries that he is expounding (i.e. the salvific power of the Cross) as leading to mystical experience, including seeing the face of Christ.⁸⁰⁹

Contemplation is, in part, is to do with the inner disposition of the ascetic. Isaac prays often in II. V that he may be receptive to the divine work in him:

⁸⁰³ I. 307.

⁸⁰⁴ I. 127, 164; *KG*. I, 41; II. XV, 8.

⁸⁰⁵ II. XI (title).

⁸⁰⁶ II. XI, 34.

⁸⁰⁷ II. XI, 32.

⁸⁰⁸ II. XI, 26.

⁸⁰⁹ II. XI, 17.

‘renew my life with a transformation of mind and with beneficial thoughts
which You, in Your grace, stir within me.’⁸¹⁰

A similar idea is expressed in *Hekhalot Zurtati*, which maintains that ‘understanding
of the heart’ is a pre-requisite to the mystical experience.

‘If you want to be unique in the world, to have the mysteries of the world and
the secrets of wisdom revealed to you, study this teaching... Do not seek
understanding of what is behind you, and do not search out the words of your
lips. What is in your heart you shall understand when you merit the beauties
of the chariot.’⁸¹¹

This sentiment echoes much of Isaac’s thought, where purity of heart is necessary to
come into the presence of God.⁸¹² In III. III, 2, Isaac writes that ‘prayer must stir up
the heart to increasing meditation about God.’⁸¹³ For Isaac, purity of heart consists in
‘being purified of all evil, and in gazing favourably on everything, and considering it
from God’s point of view.’⁸¹⁴ The ‘understanding of the heart’ reflects a
transformation of the mystic’s perception.

⁸¹⁰ II. V, 8.

⁸¹¹ *Hekhalot Zurtati*, 335. Arbel, ‘Understanding of the Heart,’ 328.

⁸¹² H. G. Choi, ‘Images of “Heart” and Isaac the Syrian,’ *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology*
45/3 (2013), 161-186.

⁸¹³ III. III, 2.

⁸¹⁴ II. XV, 2.

One of the distinctive features of *Merkavah Rabbah* is the way in which the passing on of a ‘mystery’ takes precedence as a mystical experience over the heavenly ascent.⁸¹⁵ The beginning of the text makes it clear that this consists principally in the mystery of God’s names, which the mystic must ‘use’ to achieve the knowledge of creation.⁸¹⁶ The divine name is closely associated with the names of the angels, and these names are to be ‘prayed.’⁸¹⁷ *Merkavah Rabbah* emphasises the way in which this mystery can be learnt, and the text clearly envisages the transmission of the mystery in the traditional pedagogical way, from teacher to student.⁸¹⁸ This scholastic concern is further seen in the relationship the text sets up between the revelation of the mystery in the mystical experience and the study of the Torah: the concluding section of *Merkavah Rabbah* declares that the one who studies the mystery will find that ‘his Torah is preserved in him, and he does not forget the words of the Torah all his days.’⁸¹⁹ For Isaac, *שבתא רבא*, the ‘contemplation of the Scriptures’ is also part of the mystical experience. He describes the way in which God opens the ascetic’s heart to the mysteries by the contemplation of the Scriptures and the instruction of the Fathers.⁸²⁰ Similarly, in I. 127, he makes a similar point,

⁸¹⁵ Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 107. Schäfer notes the varied terminology used in the text for ‘mystery,’ including *raz*, *middah*, and *davar*. Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 107, n. 75.

⁸¹⁶ *Merkavah Rabbah*, 655.

⁸¹⁷ *Merkavah Rabbah*, 663. This specific act of prayer must be preceded by various ritual actions, ritual bathing, and fasting. The use of angelic names is not a feature of Isaac’s angelology; Angels fulfil particular tasks, such as acting as a guardian or mediating revelation, but they are never named.

⁸¹⁸ *Merkavah Rabbah*, 687, 681. Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 109.

⁸¹⁹ *Merkavah Rabbah*, 705.

⁸²⁰ I. 164.

drawing on his own experience. For Isaac, contemplation of the Scriptures is part of the mystical experience.

5.4 Paradise and the Heavenly Temple

In the Ascent Apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature, the locus of ascent is the Heavenly Temple, the place of the throne of God; extensive architectural descriptions are given. This is the culmination of a mystical speculation that begins with Ezekiel.⁸²¹ 1 Enoch describes white marble walls and tongues of fire, mosaics of white marble and floors of crystal, and as he enters it is simultaneously like ice and fire.⁸²² The Hekhalot literature, too, continues this mystical tradition, with the structure of the heavenly Temple mirroring the earthly temple.⁸²³

This is the place where the heavenly liturgy takes place. Schäfer argues that this is the culmination of the visionary experience in the Hekhalot literature, what he calls the *unio liturgica*.⁸²⁴ The visionary stands before the very throne of God and joins the angelic worship. Such liturgical emphasis is clear from *Hekhalot Rabbati*, which includes two significant collections of hymns.⁸²⁵ In the first, the Gedullah hymns (*Hekhalot Rabbati*, 81-93), the angels praise the mystic who is able to ascend to the

⁸²¹ Schäfer, *Origins*, 243.

⁸²² 1 Enoch 14. 8-25.

⁸²³ Schäfer, *Origins*, 243.

⁸²⁴ Schäfer, *Origins*, 281.

⁸²⁵ Schäfer, *Origins*, 245.

throne of God.⁸²⁶ The second collection of hymns, the Qedushah hymns (*Hekhalot Rabbati*, 94-106), culminates in the recitation of the Trisagion from Isaiah 6.3:

‘Holy, Holy, Holy.’⁸²⁷

Drawing on the same set of Scriptural images, Isaac too conceives of the Heavenly Temple as the *locus* of divine worship. Isaac describes the angels around the throne, ‘who peer into the *Shekhina* of Invisibleness,’ and as in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, their worship culminates in the solemn chant of ‘Holy,’ the sound of which human beings cannot bear.⁸²⁸ Despite this, Isaac maintains that the ascetic can participate in the Heavenly liturgy, this being the end goal of the spiritual life. In III. XVI, 3, he writes,

‘By the action of the Holy Spirit, nature goes out from what is its own, outside of the will, and the soul remains only in that amazing divine glory, in the order of those holy hosts in ineffable praises.’⁸²⁹

For Isaac and for the writers of the Hekhalot literature, participation in the heavenly liturgy is the climax of the spiritual experience, as the mystic enters into the Temple and the presence of God.

⁸²⁶ Schäfer, *Origins*, 245-253.

⁸²⁷ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 105.

⁸²⁸ II. X, 24.

⁸²⁹ III. XVI, 3.

This is an important theme in the Qumran material and in the Ascent Apocalypses, and clearly from the Second Temple Period into Late Antiquity there are a variety of attitudes to the Temple cult.⁸³⁰ Martha Himmelfarb, for instance, connects 1 Enoch 12-16 and the *Testament of Levi* to movements critical of the priesthood in the Second Temple period.⁸³¹ Modern scholarship, following Hans Wenschkewitz's interpretation of the New Testament passages concerning the Temple, has seen the emphasis on the heavenly temple and the critique of the priesthood as reflecting a 'spiritualisation' of the Temple Cult in the Second Temple Period and in Hellenistic Judaism.⁸³² However, Albert Hogetrep has demonstrated the ways in which it is problematic to see this idea of 'spiritualisation' in Philo and Paul, on the grounds that the Temple still stood by the time these writers died.⁸³³ In the case of Philo, the physical Temple is significant; he encourages pilgrimage and writes to dissuade Caligula from setting up his statue in the Temple.⁸³⁴ As far as Paul is concerned, there is a danger of reading early Christian polemic from the period after the Temple's destruction back into the Pauline Epistles.⁸³⁵

⁸³⁰ For the importance of this 'liturgical communion' in the Qumran material, see Schäfer, *Origins*, 124-135.

⁸³¹ Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 27, 30.

⁸³² H. Wenschkewitz, *Die Spiritualisierung der Kultusbegriffe Tempel, Priester und Opfer im Neuen Testament* (Leipzig: E. Pfeiffer, 1932). For a more recent example of this approach to Philo, see D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: the Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 109, 114.

⁸³³ A. L. A. Hogetrep, *Paul and God's Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence*, *Biblical Tools and Studies* 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 6-7, 380.

⁸³⁴ Hogetrep, *Paul and God's Temple*, 6.

⁸³⁵ Hogetrep, *Paul and God's Temple*, 7, 380.

The idea that the Qumran documents reveal a ‘spiritualised’ cult has divided scholarship. Whilst there is continued evidence for the importance of the Jerusalem Temple and ritual sacrifice, Hannah Harrington has recently argued that attitudes towards sanctity and purity enabled an understanding of Israel as a Temple.⁸³⁶ This idea reaches its logical conclusion in the florilegium 4Q174, in which God commands the building of a *miqdash adam*, ‘a human temple,’ in which ‘works of thanksgiving [sometimes translated, “Law”]’ are offered.⁸³⁷

The ‘spiritualisation’ of the Temple cult is alien to the rabbis, as seen in the treatises on Temple ritual in the Mishnah.⁸³⁸ Naftali Cohn posits that the accounts of Temple ritual in the Mishnah serve to establish the legal and ritual authority of the rabbis over and against competing discourses over the place and function of the Temple among various groups living in Roman Palestine, as well as signalling resistance to Roman cultural domination.⁸³⁹

These competing discourses continued into Late Antiquity, and despite the role of the Temple in these texts, the Hekhalot literature displays varying attitudes to the

⁸³⁶ H. K. Harrington, *The Purity and Sanctuary of the Body in Second Temple Judaism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 127-168.

⁸³⁷ Harrington, *The Purity and Sanctuary of the Body*, 164-165. For a discussion of the scholarship on this text and the issues of translation, see D. Dimant, ‘4QFlorilegium and the Idea of the Community as a Temple,’ in D. Dimant, *History, Ideology and Bible Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Collected Studies* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 269-288.

⁸³⁸ Hogetrep, *Paul and God’s Temple*, 6.

⁸³⁹ N. S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 116-117, 121.

Levitical priesthood, thus mirroring the ambivalence that is also evident in the texts of the Second Temple Period.⁸⁴⁰ Ra‘anan Boustan argues that the Hekhalot texts, through their varied treatment of R. Ishmael, demonstrate a range of views on the purpose of ritual action, and especially about the legitimate authority for engaging in these rituals: this, he suggests, points to an underlying diversity of religious opinion and experience that sheds light on the nature of Jewish mysticism in Late Antiquity.⁸⁴¹

In the Syriac Christian context, one particular expression of this plurality of views on the Temple cult is the idea of ‘becoming a temple,’ which is important for a number of writers, not least for Isaac, both as an expression of theological anthropology and for his Christology. For Isaac, the Temple can refer to the Jerusalem Temple, the human person as a temple of God, and the Heavenly Temple in which God dwells. Isaac uses a variety of words for ‘temple,’ each with a particular nuance. He uses ܕܒܝܬܐ ‘temple’, ܕܒܝܬܐܘܠܐ ‘sanctuary’ and ܕܒܝܬܐ ‘house’ to refer to the historic Temple.⁸⁴² Expressing the idea that the human person is a temple of God (including in Christological expressions), Isaac uses the words ܕܒܝܬܐ, ܕܒܝܬܐܘܠܐ but also ܕܒܝܬܐ

⁸⁴⁰ R. S. Boustan, ‘Rabbi Ishmael's Priestly Genealogy in Hekhalot Literature,’ in A. D. DeConick, *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 127-141.

⁸⁴¹ Boustan, ‘Rabbi Ishmael's Priestly Genealogy,’ 141.

⁸⁴² For ܕܒܝܬܐ, see III. VI, 35, and III. VIII, 7, 9; for ܕܒܝܬܐܘܠܐ, see I. 118, 173, 221-222; and for ܕܒܝܬܐ, see III. VIII, 10, 12. This latter use follows the text of Ezekiel that Isaac cites in this passage. Cf. Ezekiel 43. 2-4.

‘temple, shrine.’⁸⁴³ He describes the Heavenly Temple either as ܬܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ or ܘܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ ܬܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ ‘the Holy of Holies.’⁸⁴⁴ In terms of his theological anthropology, Isaac also uses the associated image of the heart as an altar.⁸⁴⁵ This has a long history in Syriac and can be seen, for instance, in the *Book of Steps*⁸⁴⁶ as well as in Dadisho.⁸⁴⁷

Aphrahat is another writer for whom this nexus of ideas is significant. In her survey of the role of the Temple in Aphrahat’s theological anthropology, Stephanie Skoyles Jarkins argues that Temple imagery is essential to Aphrahat’s Christology.⁸⁴⁸

Aphrahat uses ‘Holy of Holies’ as a title of Christ, and following John 2. 19, he equates the Temple (in which dwells the Holy Spirit) with Christ’s body.⁸⁴⁹ The same is also the case in Isaac’s writing. In II. XI, 12, Isaac describes Christ as the

⁸⁴³ For ܬܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ, see III. VIII, 1, 14; For ܘܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ, see II. V, 6; for ܘܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ, see I. 352-353, and III. VI, 45.

⁸⁴⁴ For ܬܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ, see III. VII, 8, 34, and III. VIII, 5; for ܘܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ ܘܘܒܝܬܘܢܘܢ, see I. 517, 519, and III. X, 84.

⁸⁴⁵ I. 167; II. XLI, 2; III. VIII, 5.

⁸⁴⁶ R. Kitchen and M. Parmentier, trans., *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2004), XII.

⁸⁴⁷ ‘Aaron is a pointer to the intellect, just as in the Old Testament priest were bidden by God not to offer up both clean and unclean animals as a whole offering on the altar in the temple, so too monks have been bidden by our Lord not to offer up on the altar of their hearts a whole offering in the form of mental sacrifices of praises appropriate to God if these are intermingled with evil thoughts and the sinful passion.’ Dadisho, *Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah*, VII, 13. Translation in S. Brock, ‘Fire from Heaven: from Abel’s Sacrifice to the Eucharist. A Theme in Syriac Christianity,’ *SP* 25 (1993), 241.

⁸⁴⁸ Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God*, 16-17.

⁸⁴⁹ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* XIX, 9-10; XII, 8. Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God*, 53-54.

Man who became a temple of the divine good pleasure.⁸⁵⁰ What is true for Christ in Aphrahat and Isaac is also the case for all human beings.⁸⁵¹ Aphrahat writes, for instance, ‘Your majesty burrows into the little heart, you have made us temples wherein your glory dwells.’⁸⁵² Skoyles Jarkins shows that in his *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat connects the transformation of the human person with the idea of becoming a temple of God.⁸⁵³ Similarly Isaac writes,

‘You have built for my renewal a tabernacle of love on earth where it is Your good pleasure to rest, a temple (made) of flesh and fashioned with the most holy sanctuary oil... I give praise to Your holy Nature, Lord, for You have made my nature a sanctuary for Your hiddenness and a tabernacle for your Mysteries, a place where You can dwell, and a holy temple for Your divinity.’⁸⁵⁴

The earthly tabernacle was built to house the Ark of the Covenant, and at the heart of Isaac’s anthropology is the belief that the human soul is a tabernacle in which God comes to reside.⁸⁵⁵ The connection between the indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian soul and the image of the temple is explicit:

⁸⁵⁰ II. XI, 12.

⁸⁵¹ Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God*, 49.

⁸⁵² Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* XXIII, 59.

⁸⁵³ Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God*, 107.

⁸⁵⁴ II. V, 1, 6.

⁸⁵⁵ This is a particularly prominent theme in the *Third Part*. III. VI, 45; III. VIII, 15, 18-19; III. X, 91.

‘the saints are sanctified by the Spirit to be temples of the adorable Trinity... by means of continual prayer, the saints are sanctified, becoming a dwelling for the action of the Holy Spirit.’⁸⁵⁶

Aphrahat and Isaac are both witnesses to the way in which the human person came to be understood as a temple, with implications for their theological anthropology and their Christology. This reflects one aspect of the process of ‘interiorisation’ and spiritualisation of the Temple theme that begins with the criticisms of the Second Temple priesthood. For Aphrahat and Isaac, this interiorising does not rule out the mystical ascent, rather the process of becoming a temple culminates in the noetic ascent to the heavenly Temple.⁸⁵⁷ Aphrahat writes:

‘He [the sage] is a great temple for his maker: and the king of the heights comes and dwells in him, raises his intellect to the heights and makes his thought soar to the sanctuary, revealing to him treasures of all sorts... He regards it and observes the place, and his mind is awestruck with all that he sees. All the Watchers are eager to minister to him and the Seraphs cry “Holy.”’⁸⁵⁸

Despite the emphasis on the Temple as a locus of the divine presence, historically, anthropologically and eschatologically, it is not always the sole locus of the mind’s

⁸⁵⁶ III. VIII, 1.

⁸⁵⁷ Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God*, 150-165.

⁸⁵⁸ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* XIV, 35. This is an allusion to Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6.

ascent in prayer for Isaac. He also invokes early Syriac traditions about the ascent to Paradise.⁸⁵⁹ In II. V, 20, he prays,

‘O Unbinder of our nature, unbind from me the hidden bonds which have been case around my interior limbs... so that I may run to enter the Paradise of Your mysteries and eat of the Tree of Life from which Adam was not allowed to eat.’⁸⁶⁰

This prayer also reflects an otherwise unknown suggestion Isaac makes in I. 315-316 that Paul was sustained on heavenly food from the Tree of Life during the heavenly sojourn to the third heaven, recounted in 2 Corinthians 12.⁸⁶¹ Paradise and the Tree of Life play a significant role in the Enochic literature, and clearly these traditions are very ancient.⁸⁶² This is also seen in the way that the *Pardes* story is embedded in the Hekhalot literature. The story of the four rabbis who entered a garden is found in the Tosefta tractate *Hagigah* 2.3-4, and following Scholem, scholars have seen this as an early Rabbinic expression of Merkavah mysticism.⁸⁶³ Schäfer contests this

⁸⁵⁹ See N. Séd, ‘Les Hymnes sur le Paradis de saint Ephrem et les traditions juives,’ *Le Muséon* 81 (1968), 455-501.

⁸⁶⁰ II. V, 20.

⁸⁶¹ I. 315-316. This has parallels with the discussion in Joseph Hazzaya’s *On Providence*, 105 about what Enoch and Elijah eat in Paradise. Joseph says they do not eat from the Tree of Life, but rather eat manna. The identification of Paradise as the third heaven can be seen in 2 Enoch 8 and in Dadisho, *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, I, 19.

⁸⁶² 1 Enoch 25; 2 Enoch 8. See also, B. Stovell, ‘The Tree of Life in Ancient Apocalypse,’ in D. Estes, ed., *The Tree of Life*, Themes in Biblical Narrative 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 134-165.

⁸⁶³ Schäfer, *Origins*, 196-197.

reading on a number of grounds, not least because this garden is not explicitly Paradise, and the original text would appear not to have used the language of ascent/descent.⁸⁶⁴ The way this story is developed and incorporated in *Hekhalot Zurtati* is designed to emphasise R. Akiva's role as the one who ascends to the Merkavah and is unharmed.⁸⁶⁵ The recounting of the story in the Hekhalot material reframes the narrative in line with the mystical traditions concerning the heavenly journey.⁸⁶⁶

Beginning in the Second Temple period, discourse concerning the Temple began to emphasise its spiritual rather than geographic significance. In Isaac, this manifests itself primarily in the notion that the human person is a temple in which God dwells, an idea seen elsewhere in the Syriac tradition and one with an important Christological dimension. The idea of 'becoming' a temple does not, however, rule out the visionary experience of the heavenly Temple, but is rather its culmination. The diversity of attitudes to the Temple cult seen in the Qumran material, the Ascent Apocalypses and among the rabbis shows that this process of 'spiritualisation' was not uncontroversial. However, the ideas seen at Qumran that identify the community as a 'Temple' and the divine command for the building of a *miqdash adam*, 'a human temple,' point to an understanding of the Temple cult that is similar to Isaac's: the saints have a communal identity as a 'temple' of the Holy Spirit and that the individual person can become a 'tabernacle' of the divine mysteries.⁸⁶⁷

⁸⁶⁴ Schäfer, *Origins*, 197.

⁸⁶⁵ Schäfer, *Origins*, 287.

⁸⁶⁶ Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 68, 117-119, 145. *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, 587.

⁸⁶⁷ III. VIII, 1; II. V, 1, 6.

5.5 The Revelation of the Mysteries of Creation

The revelation of the mysteries of creation to the mystic, usually by a mediating angel is one of the central themes of the Apocalyptic and Hekhalot literature. The mystic sees the majesty and vastness of creation, and an angelic figure explains some aspect of what is seen. This is clearly shown in 1 Enoch 18, where on his first journey, Enoch sees the ‘storerooms of the winds,’ the foundations of the earth, the pillars of heaven, as well as souls carried by clouds and the paths of the angels.⁸⁶⁸ Enoch is taken to a desolate and terrible place, which has neither heaven above or earth below, a place where seven stars are like burning mountains.⁸⁶⁹ He is told by the angel accompanying him that this is ‘the prison house for the stars and the powers of heaven... which have transgressed the commandments of God.’⁸⁷⁰ Similar examples can be found throughout Enoch’s heavenly journeys, where angelic figures explain what he is seeing, and its place in God’s economy.⁸⁷¹ The same theme is also manifest in 3 Baruch, where the angel of the Lord gives the meaning of the mysterious bird that is the guardian of the world, as well as explaining the movement of the sun and moon.⁸⁷² This mediating role in the transmission of revelation is a dominant aspect of Isaac’s angelology.⁸⁷³ In the *Third Part*, Isaac distinguishes between angelic revelation and divine revelation:

⁸⁶⁸ 1 Enoch 18.

⁸⁶⁹ 1 Enoch 18, 12-13.

⁸⁷⁰ 1 Enoch 18, 14-16.

⁸⁷¹ 1 Enoch 23. 1-4; 25. 1-7; 27. 1-5. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 72.

⁸⁷² 3 Baruch 6-9.

⁸⁷³ I. 407; *KG*. III, 59; II. XVIII, 19-20; III. VIII, 11. Hansbury, “‘Insight without Sight,’” 68-70.

‘All of the visions which happen to the saints were done for them by the mediation of angels, and they are instructed by the angels until one has approached the revelations of the divine vision... angelic revelations precede the divine revelation and the service which is performed for them by the activity of the Holy Spirit.’⁸⁷⁴

Isaac’s description parallels the narrative arc of the Ascent Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* literature, whereby the knowledge mediated by the angels finally gives way to knowledge that comes from God himself: in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, for instance, the angelic revelations from Suriah, Prince of the Presence, to R. Ishmael concerning the fate of Lupinus Caesar give way to the hymns of three-fold ‘holy,’ before God himself declares his enduring love for Israel.⁸⁷⁵ As for Isaac, in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, angelic mediation eventually gives way to direct revelation from God.

In the Ascent Apocalypses, the revelation of the mysteries of creation is particularly concerned with the final fate of the righteous and the unrighteous. Jewish and Christian apocalypses often include a ‘tour’ of hell, a popular motif that continued in Christian writing long after Late Antiquity.⁸⁷⁶ The origins of this tradition, which can

⁸⁷⁴ III. VIII, 11. This also reflects a distinction he makes between revelations in the Old Testament, which are angelic revelations, and those in the New Testament, which come from the Holy Spirit. III. IX, 30.

⁸⁷⁵ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 112-120 (revelations mediated by Suriah), 152-162 (hymns), 163-164 (God speaks).

⁸⁷⁶ M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 169-172.

be found in 1 Enoch, developed widely in Christian literature following the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which is dated no later than the middle of the second century.⁸⁷⁷

The revelation of the mysteries of creation is an essential part of the mystical experience: the revelation about the creation of the world in 2 Enoch is the culmination of Enoch's vision and the substance of the message he communicates to his children.⁸⁷⁸

These themes also play a significant role in the Hekhalot literature.⁸⁷⁹ One of the shorter macroforms, *Sar Panim*, begins with a question from R. Akiva to R. Eliezer the Great:

‘With what do they adjure the Prince of the Presence to descend to earth in order to reveal to a man mysteries of above and below, and the searchings of the foundations above and below, and *the dark things of wisdom* (Job 11.6), and the shrewdness of abiding success?’⁸⁸⁰

As in the Ascent Apocalypses, the revelation of such knowledge occurs as part of the visionary experience, as the mystic is shown the height and depth of creation. In the tradition, such revelation finds its climax in 3 Enoch:

⁸⁷⁷ Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, 2-3, 8. For a survey of the descent to Hell in Classical Antiquity and Late Antique Judaism and Christianity, see Bremmer, ‘Descents to Hell and Ascents to Heaven in Apocalyptic Literature,’ 341-347.

⁸⁷⁸ Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 72. 2 Enoch 40-67.

⁸⁷⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 56.

⁸⁸⁰ *Sar Panim*, 623.

‘The Holy One, blessed be he, revealed to me from that time onward all the mysteries of wisdom, all the depths of the perfect Torah, and all the thoughts of men’s hearts. All the mysteries of the world and all the orders of nature stand revealed before me as they stand revealed before the Creator. From that time onward I looked and beheld deep secrets and wonderful mysteries. Before a man thinks in secret, I see his thought; before he acts, I see his act. There is nothing in heaven above or deep within the earth concealed from me.’⁸⁸¹

Enoch comes to view the whole of creation as God sees it, and this marks the fulfilment of his heavenly journey and the process of angelic transformation. Beginning with 1 Enoch, the revelation of these mysteries is a fundamental part of the mystical experience narrated in the Ascent Apocalypses and Hekhalot literature.

In Isaac’s writing, there is also a clear connection between the mystical ascent in prayer and the revelation of ‘hidden’ knowledge concerning creation, particularly in relation to the role of Divine Providence. In III. I, 17, Isaac writes,

‘The nature of the Essence is invisible but can be known by means of His mysteries. That is to say, those mysteries which [God] wills that they be made known. And they are known by means of meditating on the structure of the universe. [This occurs] especially by continual consideration of God’s

⁸⁸¹ 3 Enoch 11.

Economy in its various revelations, given indeed to inform the diligent mind which inquires faithfully and searches these things assiduously.’⁸⁸²

This emphasis in Isaac’s work has strong parallels with Joseph Hazzaya’s *On Providence*, which itself includes a portion of apocalyptic, drawing on Syriac traditions surrounding the translations of Enoch and Elijah.⁸⁸³

As a treatise, *On Providence* covers a number of themes, including Trinitarian theology and Christology, but it is primarily intended to show the working of Divine Providence in the first half of the Book of Genesis, and in the events at the end of time.⁸⁸⁴ Nestor Kavvadas notes that the Chronicle of Seert records that Elisha of Nisibis in the sixth century wrote a treatise covering similar subject matter, and this work, like *On Providence*, was also conceived of as a defence of Christian orthodoxy.⁸⁸⁵ The integration of the fundamentals of Christian faith with an exposition of both the first part of Genesis and the Last Things clearly stands in a particular tradition of East Syrian theological writing. The Apocalyptic portion of *On Providence* (117-153) is situated in a larger digression on Enoch and Elijah, which addresses questions over their physical location, what they eat and wear, and whether and how they receive the Eucharist.⁸⁸⁶ The Apocalypse in *On Providence* has much

⁸⁸² III. I, 17.

⁸⁸³ Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 9, n. 33; 22-26. For this text, see footnote 656 above.

⁸⁸⁴ Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 5, n. 16.

⁸⁸⁵ Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 5, n. 16.

⁸⁸⁶ Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 12. Kavvadas notes that these questions were widely discussed in the Syriac world, and points to the letters of Severus of Antioch as another example. Joseph’s answers to

in common with the post-Talmudic Jewish Apocalypses of the seventh century, particularly in relation to the return of Elijah (without Enoch), who has a central role in combatting the ‘Lost One,’ before the Lost One is finally killed by the Lord’s breath.⁸⁸⁷ This Apocalypse, like the rest of *On Providence*, however, is intended primarily to reflect Joseph’s key theological concern. Just as God’s love and providential care are seen guiding the events of the Book of Genesis, so too at the end of time. Elijah rebukes the ‘Lost One,’ saying that in Christ, God ‘revealed His eternal love for our nature,’ and he expounds the Scriptures to counter the lies of the ‘Lost One.’⁸⁸⁸ Moreover, the distinctive feature of this Apocalypse is that there is no vision of Hell, and Joseph implies the salvation of all rational beings, except the ‘Lost One.’⁸⁸⁹ The vanquishing of the ‘Lost One’ takes place in front of all angels, human beings and demons, and on this display of power, they all give thanks for God’s mercy and understand that both sinners and the righteous are justified freely

these questions lie in an Easy-Syrian exegetical tradition that goes back to Theodore of Mopsuestia and can be seen in Narsai. Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 23.

⁸⁸⁷ See for instance, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, where Elijah heralds the Lord’s deliverance and Armilos is slain when Menahem b. ‘Amiel breathes in his face. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 64-66. *On Providence* reflects Joseph Hazzaya’s response to the process of Islamisation that he witnessed, and so shares the same socio-historical background to the seventh-century Jewish Apocalypses. There are also a number of similar Syriac Apocalypses of the seventh century, including one by Shubhalmaran. Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 17, n. 62. For the eschatological role of Elijah, see G. Rouwhorst, ‘The Biblical Stories about the Prophet Elijah in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity,’ in A. Houtman, T. Kadari, M. Poorthuis, and V. Tohar, eds., *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 165-188.

⁸⁸⁸ Joseph Hazzaya, *On Providence*, 130-141.

⁸⁸⁹ Kavvadas, *On Providence*, 12.

by grace.⁸⁹⁰ The overriding concern of the entire text is God's love and mercy, and this is demonstrated in his exposition of Creation and in his account of the Last Things. He writes,

‘Because I [that is, God] brought the world into being out of love and mercy, also with love and mercy I steer and govern it – not with merciless judgement nor with vengeance. And out of love I created its consummation.’⁸⁹¹

This is also a fundamental aspect of Isaac's thought. The known portion of the *Fifth Part* of Isaac's work consists of two treatises on Divine Providence, both of which assemble Scriptural passages to show God's infinite mercy for creation and which, like Joseph, suggest a belief in the final salvation of all.⁸⁹² II. XL, includes in the title

⁸⁹⁰ Joseph Hazzaya, *On Providence*, 151.

⁸⁹¹ Joseph Hazzaya, *On Providence*, 57.

⁸⁹² S. Chialà, ‘Due discorsi ritrovati della *Quinta parte* di Isacco di Ninive?’, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 79 (2013), 61-112. The style of these treatises is notably different to anything else that Isaac wrote, which raises the question of authenticity. However, the themes of universal salvation and infinite divine love are consistent with the references to Isaac's *Fifth Part* in later and medieval authors. Hansbury, trans., *Spiritual Works*, 343-344. See also S. Chialà, ‘Two discourses of the ‘Fifth Part’ of Isaac the Syrian's Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?’, in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 128-131. See also, A. Fokin, ‘Apokatastasis in the Syrian Christian Tradition: Evagrius and Isaac,’ in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 132-134. The doctrine *apokatastasis*, universal salvation, has its origins in Christian thought with Origen, and was mediated to the Syriac tradition through Origen's disciple Evagrius. For the history of the doctrine and its reception among Syriac authors, including Isaac, see I. L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian*

of the homily the description, ‘The subject of the discourse is the constancy, harmony, and love of the divine Nature at both the beginning and at the end of creation,’ echoing the structure of *On Providence*.⁸⁹³ Throughout his writings, Isaac is concerned to show that God’s providential love underlies the working of creation and the whole of salvation history. In the conclusion to his homily on the cross in the *Second Part*, for instance, Isaac writes, ‘(How much) to be worshipped is the God who, for our salvation, has done everything in the world to bring us close to him.’⁸⁹⁴ The cross is the means by which this salvation is made known, and a sign of God’s providential care. This is a theme echoed elsewhere: Christ’s death was,

‘not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for his creation.’⁸⁹⁵

Isaac’s writings do not contain any apocalyptic passages comparable with *On Providence*, but Isaac does write about Gehenna. Joseph Hazzaya writes,

Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 120 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1-10, 690-773.

⁸⁹³ II. XL (title).

⁸⁹⁴ II. XI, 33.

⁸⁹⁵ *KG*. IV, 78. Translated in H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 52.

‘Even the sinners and the wicked, it is with love that I [God] torment them: the fire of love burns the brushwood of the sin of their thoughts. And this love is their food and drink in the Gehenna of love.’⁸⁹⁶

For Isaac, too, even Gehenna is a sign of God’s love. Sinners in Gehenna (which Isaac does not believe to be an eternal state) are not deprived of divine love, but rather sinners and the righteous are loved equally. For those in Gehenna, this is experienced as torment:

‘Also I say that even those who are scourged in Hell are tormented with the scourgings of love. Scourgings for love’s sake, namely of those who perceive that they have sinned against love, are more hard and bitter than tortures through fear... It is evil for a man to think that the sinners in Hell are destitute of love for the Creator.’⁸⁹⁷

The fact that Hell in Isaac’s understanding is not eternal can be seen in relation to the demons:

‘demons will not remain in their demonic state, and sinners (will not remain) in their sins; rather, He is going to bring them to a single state of perfection in relationship to His own Being... in perfection of love.’⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁶ Joseph Hazzaya, *On Providence*, 57.

⁸⁹⁷ I. 201.

⁸⁹⁸ II. XL, 4.

As in the Apocalypses and Hekhalot literature, Isaac sees prayer and the mystical ascent as a source of revelation concerning the created order. It is by prayer and by ‘meditating on the structure of the universe’ that God reveals the mysteries of creation.⁸⁹⁹ In the Hekhalot literature, particularly in 3 Enoch, this involves the visionary seeing creation as God sees it. From the time of 1 Enoch onwards, these visions of the mysteries of creation included seeing and understanding the fate of the righteous in heaven and the fate of sinners in Hell. The ‘tour’ of Hell became a significant part of Christian apocalyptic writing. In Isaac and later in Joseph Hazzaya, there is a subversion of this theme. The ascent of the mind in prayer does indeed lead to the revelation of mysteries, and even of seeing creation as God sees it. In Isaac, however, this does not include a ‘tour’ of Hell but rather the understanding that everything that happens in creation, including Hell, is guided by God’s mercy. This revelation means seeing all rational creatures, including the demons, with one equal love. Isaac’s meditation on the created order shares the all-encompassing vision of the Ascent Apocalypses, ranging from the bliss of the angels before God to the torment of sinners, but Isaac’s conclusions are radically different.

5.6 The Power of the Divine Name

Isaac’s homily on the cross stresses the close association between the Ark and the ‘God’s honoured name.’ He describes the veneration given to the Ark, alluding to Numbers 10.35-36 where Moses addresses the Ark as ‘Lord’:

⁸⁹⁹ III. I, 17.

‘[The Ark] was venerated amidst great honour and awe by the [Jewish] People, performing by it miracles and awesome signs in the midst of those who were not ashamed to call it “God”, that is, they would gaze upon it in awe as though upon God, because of the glory of God’s honoured name which was upon it.’⁹⁰⁰

Isaac uses this rhetorical strategy to justify the veneration of the physical image of the cross, as has been argued above.⁹⁰¹ The Israelites are punished for the worship of idols, but objects bearing ‘the glorious and revered name of God’ perform ‘fearful supernatural signs’ and the people receive through them ‘benefit and salvation.’⁹⁰² For Isaac, this becomes a Christological argument, and the cross is deemed worthy of veneration because it is done ‘in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity dwells.’⁹⁰³ It is again the power of the divine name through which the cross is worthy of veneration.

Isaac uses the same language of being ‘called “God”,’ drawn from Numbers 10. 35-36, in III. V, this time in relation to the divinisation of creation through Christ:

‘He has conferred on [creation] the magnificence and the glory of His divinity in order that instead of the invisible God, visible creation might be called “God” ... On the work of His creation, in honour of its sacred

⁹⁰⁰ II. XI, 4.

⁹⁰¹ See 2.3.2 above.

⁹⁰² II. XI, 11.

⁹⁰³ II. XI, 13.

character, He has set the glorious name which even the mouths of the angels are not pure enough to utter... God loved all of creation to such an extent that creation is called “God,” and the name of the majesty of God becomes creation’s own.’⁹⁰⁴

As the Ark and the cross are imbued with supernatural power in II. XI because they are associated with God’s name, so too Isaac understands all creation in III. V to become sacred because God’s name has been set upon it. This aspect of Isaac’s thought is likely drawn from Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius, who both emphasise the divine name as a manifestation of divine power on earth.⁹⁰⁵

A similar emphasis can also be seen in the Hekhalot literature, where God’s name has the power to confer, in some sense, divine status. Naomi Janowitz’s work has emphasised the way in which the divine name is ‘effective’ language, both as God’s creative power and also in ritual contexts in the Hekhalot literature specifically and in Rabbinic Judaism more widely.⁹⁰⁶

⁹⁰⁴ III. V, 14. For the Christological aspects of this argument, see III. V, 10.

⁹⁰⁵ N. Janowitz, ‘Theories of Divine Names in Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius,’ *History of Religions* 30/4 (1991), 359-372.

⁹⁰⁶ N. Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity*, Magic in History (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 19-32, 63-84. See also, Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent*, 83-100.

God's kingship and the power of God's name are closely related in the Hekhalot literature, notably in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Hekhalot Zurtati* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.⁹⁰⁷ The relationship between the two is particularly clear in the latter, where there is a lengthy hymn of praise, describing God as 'the King of Kings of Kings,'

'YHWH is God, YHWH is God, YHWH is God! (1 Kgs 18.39)

He is one and His name is one...

[All who dwell in the inhabited world] bend down and fall down,
to the glory of Your name they ascribe worth...

And as for me, I will declare holy Your great and mighty and fearsome name,
which is adorned, magnificent, wondrous, and honoured.

HDRYRWM 'DRYRWM, firm, great, pure, explicit is Your name. It hews
with flames of fire. Living YH' YHW holy and fearsome.'⁹⁰⁸

The connection between God's kingly rule and his name is also expressed in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, where the throne is a visible sign of God's power: it was created before the world and God swears by the throne of his glory, that he has not left since creation and will not leave for eternity.⁹⁰⁹ In the Hekhalot texts, the worship of God is intimately connected with the divine throne and the divine name:

'May Your kingdom be forever, from one end of the world to the other. All things that You created in Your world invoke Your name... Cherished and

⁹⁰⁷ Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 78.

⁹⁰⁸ *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, 551.

⁹⁰⁹ Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 12; *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 119.

unique are You, Your love shines in the whole world, and truth and righteousness are Your name. Your throne is effulgence and adornment, glory and ornament, holiness and purity.⁹¹⁰

In the shorter macroform, *The Chapter of R. Nehuniah Ben HaQanah*, one theurgic prayer reads,

‘In the name of GMNWN YKTD‘ TRTR‘ KS’N, throne, peg of the world which fills [extensive *nomina barbara*] blessed be the name of the glory of Your kingdom forever and ever. In the name of *I Am* KMYNY YKRRH KS’N throne, peg of the world...’⁹¹¹

The connection between the divine name and the divine throne in these texts comes close to identifying the throne with God himself.⁹¹² The Divine Name leads to close, almost complete, identification with the Creator.

For Isaac, created things, like the Ark and the cross in II. XI, can receive worship and veneration (as the throne does in the Hekhalot literature) by association with the divine name, and in III. V the whole of creation is given a semi-divine status as God’s name is conferred upon it through Christ. This may seem like a surprising argument for Isaac to make, but as the parallels with the Hekhalot literature show, the divine name had a sanctifying, even divinising, power in Late Antiquity.

⁹¹⁰ *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, 592

⁹¹¹ *The Chapter of R. Nehuniah Ben HaQanah*, 314.

⁹¹² Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 78-79; *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 257; Schäfer, *Origins*, 280-281.

5.7 Conclusion

Viewed superficially, Isaac's ascetic writings seem to have little in common with the Ascent Apocalypses of the Second Temple Period and the Hekhalot literature of Late Antiquity. However, Isaac's understanding of prayer as an ascent of the mind, though influenced by Evagrius, is shaped by a number of common themes seen in the broader context of Late Antique ascent mysticism. In particular, there are some interesting points of contact in ideas of self-transformation, the role of ascetic practice, the function of the Temple, the revelation of the mysteries of creation, angelology, and the power of the Divine Name. Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* draws on a number of these themes, showing the role of cross veneration in the mystical ascent; the cross as a means of revelation of the mysteries of the divine economy; and the power of the Divine Name. However, there are also some profound differences in the way that particular themes and images are applied. Isaac uses the ladder motif, for instance, to illustrate his theory of prayer, something which is quite alien to Hekhalot literature. Underlying this are the significantly different exegetical assumptions between Christian and Jewish authors in relation to Genesis 28. Such differences also emerge in relation to eschatology and ideas of physical, angelic transformation. Nevertheless, these texts clearly inhabit the same cultural world, in which heaven and earth are brought together as the mystic ascends to heaven, has mysteries revealed to him, and joins the worship of the angels. Such common themes situate Syriac ascetic writers like Isaac within the religious pluralism and varied mystical traditions of Late Antique Mesopotamia.

6. The Cross and the Iconography of *Xwarrah* in the Sasanian World

6.1 Introduction

Isaac was born and educated in Beth Qatraye, situated in the gulf region, along the northeast coast of Arabia.⁹¹³ In his early life, the region was firmly under Sasanian political control. Despite an attempted schism from the patriarchate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the sixth century, Beth Qatraye lay under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Fars, on the other side of the Persian Gulf.⁹¹⁴

The sixth century saw an intensification of the Roman-Persian conflict, and local peoples (including Arabs) became increasingly important in defending frontier territory.⁹¹⁵ Persian influence in Arabia and among the Arabs can be traced back to the Achaemenid period, as Arabia is listed on royal inscriptions and rock reliefs as a territory under Achaemenid control.⁹¹⁶ From the beginning of Sasanian rule, Arabia

⁹¹³ See 4.1 above.

⁹¹⁴ See 1.1 above.

⁹¹⁵ G. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 214-275; G. Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); G. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). In *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, Greg Fisher distinguishes between the geographical area north of the 200mm isohyet (rainfall line), the Fertile Crescent, and the area below it, including southern Syria, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. This chapter is principally concerned with southern Mesopotamia (notably al-Hira) and the Gulf coast. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, 2-5.

⁹¹⁶ Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, 57-59.

formed an important part of their territories, having defensive and economic significance.⁹¹⁷

Ample archaeological evidence attests Sasanian presence and influence in Eastern Arabia. Sasanian coins have been found at Tarut, al-Khobar, and Jabal Kenzan.⁹¹⁸ Part of a stucco frieze depicting a ram at Tarut has parallels in the palaces at Kish, Ctesiphon and Chal Tarkhan.⁹¹⁹ The remains of two Sasanian irrigation systems, *qanats*, are known from al-Qatif and al-Khobar.⁹²⁰ Among the funerary monuments at ed-Dur, archaeologists found an ossuary of the kind known from Zoroastrian sites in Iran and Central Asia.⁹²¹ The church discovered at Akkaz, Kuwait appears to have been built on top of a Zoroastrian *dakhma*.⁹²² The Zoroastrian presence in the region is further confirmed by al-Tabari, whose account of the conversion of Oman to Islam notes that the *jizya* was collected from Zoroastrians.⁹²³

⁹¹⁷ Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, 60; T. Daryaee, 'The Persian Gulf in Late Antiquity: The Sasanian Era (200-700 c.e.),' in L. G. Potter, ed., *The Persian Gulf in History* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 59-60; Fisher, *Between Empires*, 91-95.

⁹¹⁸ D. T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, ii: *From Alexander the Great to the Coming of Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 216-218.

⁹¹⁹ Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, ii, 216.

⁹²⁰ Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, ii, 208, 217.

⁹²¹ Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, ii, 282.

⁹²² J. Gachet-Bizollon, 'Niveau 3: un bâtiment circulaire / Level 3: a circular building,' in J. Gachet-Bizollon, ed., *Le Tell d'Akkaz au Koweït*, Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée (Lyon: MOM Éditions, 2011), 121.

⁹²³ Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, ii, 341. It is also worth considering the Persian cultural influence, seen in the use of Pahlavi loan words in the local Arabic dialect of Beth Qatraye. M. Kozah, G. Kiraz, A. Abu-Husayn, H. Al-Thani, and S. S. Al-Murikhi, eds., *Beth Qatraye: A Lexical*

It was into this Sasanian and Zoroastrian cultural milieu that Isaac of Nineveh was born and educated in Beth Qatraye. He lived in turbulent times for it was during his lifetime that the Sasanian Empire collapsed and the Umayyad Caliphate was established. It is likely that he left Beth Qatraye around 676, some twenty years after the assassination of Yazdegerd III.⁹²⁴ The cultural impact of the Sasanian Empire in the region, however, still endured in various ways long after the political victory of the Arabs: the fact that the *jizya* was collected from Zoroastrians in Oman indicates their lasting presence; Sasanian architecture (notably the *qanats*) continued to function. Isaac himself read and cited the lives of the Persian martyrs, which draw on Zoroastrian belief and practice.⁹²⁵ Political discontinuity did not lead to cultural discontinuity. Even though new political regimes were installed by the mid-seventh century, Isaac lived in a world dominated by a Zoroastrian *Weltanschauung*, which would continue until well into the ‘Abbāsīd period.

In situating Isaac’s writings in the context of this post-Sasanian world, his homily on the cross may be seen to reflect a broad appropriation of the Zoroastrian concept of *xwarrah*, ‘glory’ or ‘fortune,’ among Christians and other religious minorities in the

and Toponymical Survey, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 58 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2021), 9-10.

⁹²⁴ See 1.1 above.

⁹²⁵ On this last point, see III. XII. For the kinds of engagement with Zoroastrian belief in these texts, see A. H. Becker, ‘Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*,’ *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2 (2009), 300-336.

Empire.⁹²⁶ Richard Payne has demonstrated the ways in which hagiography can be used to make a Christian claim on Zoroastrian sacred landscape, channelling the Zoroastrian *xwarrah* of the land into a new Christian use.⁹²⁷ The stucco cross plaques which have been found at various sites in Southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, indicate the graphic association of the Sasanian iconography of *xwarrah* with the image of the cross.⁹²⁸ Given that these items continued to be produced for churches in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf during the eighth and ninth centuries, it is reasonable to assume that Isaac knew this kind of depiction of the cross.⁹²⁹ Additionally, this association of the cross and *xwarrah* among Christians in the Sasanian world emerges in a group of seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac.⁹³⁰ Mirroring the way in which the iconography of *xwarrah* is used to assert the power of the cross in the stucco cross plaques and seals, it seems fitting to suggest that Isaac drew on anti-Zoroastrian polemical themes in his writing on the cross.

⁹²⁶ For *xwarrah*, see 6.2.1 below. On a terminological note, this chapter will use the Avestan form *xʷarənah* to describe the concept as it appears in the Avesta, and the Middle Persian *xwarrah* for the Sasanian context and more generally.

⁹²⁷ R. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 91.

⁹²⁸ A. Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration in Southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf Region, Sixth to Ninth Centuries*, Unpublished DPhil Thesis (University of Oxford, 2017), 233-240.

⁹²⁹ St J. Simpson, 'Christians on Iraq's Desert Frontier,' *Al-Rāfidān* 39 (2018), 17-21

⁹³⁰ J. A. Lerner, *Christian Seals of the Sasanian Period* (Leiden: Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te İstanbul, 1977), 18-22.

6.2 *Xwarrah* in the Sasanian World

6.2.1 *Xwarrah* in the Zoroastrian Context

The Avestan word *x^varənah*, often translated ‘glory, splendour’ is attested in a number of Iranian languages: it appears as *farnah*- in Median proper names from the ninth century B.C.E. and in Old Persian, and among the Middle Iranian languages, it is found in Sogdian (*farn*), Bactrian (*faro*), and Khotanese (*phārra*).⁹³¹ *X^varənah* came to mean a range of things: in Buddhist Sogdian and Khotanese it appears to mean ‘position’ or ‘stage’ on the path of enlightenment.⁹³² The word also passed into Armenian as *p’ark*’, where it can mean ‘fortune’ or ‘opinion.’⁹³³ The meaning ‘fortune, prosperity’ is widely attested in translations to non-Iranian languages, though there is a debate about whether this or ‘glory’ should be understood as its primary connotation.⁹³⁴ More recent scholarship appears to have reached a consensus

⁹³¹ G. Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ in E. Yershater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ix (New York, NY: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 1999), 312. The meaning and etymology of this noun is highly contested, and a recent survey of the scholarship can be found in A. Hintze, ‘Avestan Research 1991-2017. Part 2: Morphology, Syntax, Lexicon (nos. 32-79),’ *Kratylos* 62 (2017), 83-84. See also, A. Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt. Edition, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1994), 15-32.

⁹³² H. W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943), 56-57.

⁹³³ Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems*, 38-39, 62.

⁹³⁴ Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 313.

that ‘glory,’ associated with ideas of splendour and luminosity, is the best way of translating *x^varənah*.⁹³⁵

The idea of luminosity is suggested by the likely etymology of *x^varənah* in the Iranian word *xu^rar/n* ‘sun.’⁹³⁶ As such, in the Zoroastrian tradition one of the principal associations of the supernatural *x^varənah* is with fire.⁹³⁷ Yt. 10. 124-132 of the Avesta describes the chariot of the god Mithra, surrounded on all sides by mythological creatures and followed behind by the blazing *x^varənah*.⁹³⁸ The association is also found in a variety of Middle Persian texts, including *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* where the *xwarrah* burns without interruption.⁹³⁹ Similarly, in *Wizīdagthā ī Zādspram*, there is an account of Zoroaster’s mother, describing the *xwarrah* in the form of fire:

‘About the glory of Zartosht becoming manifest even before his birth, it is thus declared, that... when Freno gave birth to the mother of Zartosht... it came down from the endless light, in the manner of fire, and mingled with the fire which was before her; and from the fire it mingled with the mother of Zartosht. For three nights it was manifest, to all passers-by, as a species of

⁹³⁵ Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 313; P. O. Skjærvø, ‘Review of P. Gignoux, *Noms propres sassanides en moyen-perse épigraphique*,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (1989), 127-129.

⁹³⁶ Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 313.

⁹³⁷ G. Gnoli, ‘Note sullo X^varənah,’ in *Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemain Emerito Oblata*, *Acta Iranica* 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 207.

⁹³⁸ Yt. 10. 127.

⁹³⁹ Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 314. See 6.3 below.

fire in the direction of the house, and passers on the road always saw great radiance.⁹⁴⁰

The *xwarrah* is said to reside in the heavenly fire and is manifest as fire at the time of Zoroaster's conception and birth.

Zamyād Yašt is one of the principal sources for understanding *x^varənah*.⁹⁴¹ This hymn from the Younger Avesta is traditionally thought to have two parts, the first being a list of important mountains (Yt. 19. 1-8), and the second a hymn praising the *x^varənah* (Yt. 19. 9-96).⁹⁴² Almut Hintze distinguishes two types of *x^varənah* in this hymn.⁹⁴³ Firstly, there is the *x^varənah* of the Kayanid dynasty, which belonged to Ahura Mazda (Yt. 19. 10) and passes from ruler to ruler until it is lost by Yima.⁹⁴⁴ It is associated with a range of divine beings in this part of the hymn, particularly the Amesha Spenta (Yt. 19. 15) and the Yazatas, including Mithra (Yt. 19. 22, 35).⁹⁴⁵ Secondly, there is what Hintze calls the 'gleaming' *x^varənah*, which is not possessed, but is desired by human and divine beings; this part of the hymn (Yt. 19. 45-69)

⁹⁴⁰ E. W. West, trans. *The Selections of Zadspram: Vizīdagihā ī Zādspram*, Sacred Books of the East 5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880), 13. 1-2.

⁹⁴¹ Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt*, 17.

⁹⁴² P. Ichaporia, 'Zamyād Yašt.' in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2006, available at <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zamyad-yast> (accessed 21/07/2020). For the connection between *xwarrah* and mountains, see the discussion of Payne's treatment of the martyrdom of Mar Pethion in 6.2.2.2 below.

⁹⁴³ Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt*, 17.

⁹⁴⁴ Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt*, 17-18.

⁹⁴⁵ Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt*, 17-18.

narrates the stories of those who try to catch the *x^varənah*.⁹⁴⁶ There is a cosmic race for the *x^varənah* as the Fire, the Son of Ahura Mazda, and the Dragon Dahāka set out to catch it, before the *x^varənah* escapes to Lake Vourukaša and is seized by Aṣəm Napāt and dragged to the depths.⁹⁴⁷

As well as residing at the bottom of Lake Vourukaša, the *x^varənah* is also associated with Lake Kašaoiia and the river Haētumaṇt in Yt. 19. 66. This connection with water implies the *x^varənah* is a creative force in Zoroastrian cosmology, and this is supported by the germinal and seminal sense of *x^varənah* noted by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin.⁹⁴⁸

In addition to water and fire, *Zamyād Yašt* describes the *x^varənah* as belonging to particular groups and individuals. It ‘accompanied’ members of the Kayanid dynasty,⁹⁴⁹ and likewise, the *x^varənah* ‘accompanied’ Zoroaster.⁹⁵⁰ It will also accompany the future *Saoshyant*, the ‘Victorious one among the Saviours... so that he will make life excellent.’⁹⁵¹ In these contexts, the *x^varənah* is presented in *Zamyād-Yašt* as a spiritual force directing each person or group in their duties.⁹⁵²

⁹⁴⁶ Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt*, 18-19; A. Hintze, *Zamyād-Yašt: Introduction, Avestan Text, Translation, Glossary*, Iranische Texte 7 (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1994), 11.

⁹⁴⁷ Yt. 19. 45-51.

⁹⁴⁸ J. Duchesne-Guillemin, ‘Le *x^varənah*,’ *AION-L* 5 (1963), 25.

⁹⁴⁹ Yt. 19. 71.

⁹⁵⁰ Yt. 19. 79.

⁹⁵¹ Yt. 19. 89.

⁹⁵² Yt. 19. 79, 84, 89; Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 315.

This is fundamental to Zoroastrian cosmology, and is the route by which *x^varənah* comes to mean ‘fortune.’⁹⁵³

This conception of *xwarrah* as ‘fortune’ became a way in which Iranian kings legitimised their kingship.⁹⁵⁴ There is a debate as to precisely the significance of the concept in the Achaemenid period, as no form of the word appears in Achaemenid inscriptions, but clearly the imagery of light and fire, that is the imagery of *xwarrah*, was important in royal contexts.⁹⁵⁵ A similar conception of kingship is seen elsewhere in the ancient world, notably in the *tychē basileōs* and *fortuna regia* of the Greek and Roman worlds.⁹⁵⁶ The nature of the sources, particularly monumental

⁹⁵³ Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 315. See also, P. Gignoux, ‘How Has the Avestan *Xvarenah* Been Interpreted in the Philosophical Pahlavi Texts?’, in F. Vahman and C. V. Pedersen, eds., *Religious Texts in Iranian Languages: Symposium Held in Copenhagen May 2002* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2007), 175-184.

⁹⁵⁴ G. Ahn, *Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im achämenidischen Iran: die Voraussetzungen und die Struktur ihrer Argumentation*, *Acta Iranica* 31 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 199-200, 251-252.

⁹⁵⁵ G. Gnoli, ‘Politica religiosa e concezione della regalità sotto gli Achemenidi,’ in *Gururājamañjarikā: studi in onore di Giuseppe Tucci*, i (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1974), 72-75.

⁹⁵⁶ See for instance, S. B. Matheson, ed., *An Obsession with Fortune: Tyche in Greek and Roman Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1994), 14; D. Miano, *Fortuna: Deity and Concept in Archaic and Republican Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 118. Scholars in Iranian studies often make this comparison, whereas the references to the *tychē* or *fortuna* of kings in Classical sources are relatively sparse. More broadly, *xwarrah* is often compared to *tychē* and to the Aramaic *gd*, and whilst these concepts are clearly interrelated and reflect the diverse cultural milieu of the ancient Near East, the evidence is not sufficient to draw precise parallels or posit influence in one direction or the other. Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 315-316. For *gd* in the context of pre-Islamic Arabia, see R.

‘investiture reliefs’ like those at Naqsh-i Rostam, means that scholars have strongly emphasised the religious nature of Sasanian kingship.⁹⁵⁷ Whilst the Sasanian kings were Zoroastrian, and presented themselves as a dynasty favoured by the gods, recent works by Albert de Jong and Shaul Shaked have shown that their relationships with the religious institutions of the Empire were more complicated.⁹⁵⁸ Discussing the idea of *xwarrah*, de Jong, particularly, has emphasised the fact that the Sasanian kings never claimed *xwarrah* for themselves, and notes that the relationship between Zoroastrianism and the state was complex and uneasy.⁹⁵⁹ It is important, therefore, to consider *xwarrah* in a broader context than the scholarly emphasis on kingship has, in the past, allowed.

Xwarrah was not exclusively associated with royal power, and, as has been noted, various individuals and groups possessed *xwarrah* in the Zoroastrian tradition.⁹⁶⁰

Dussaud, *La pénétration des Arabes en Syrie avant l’Islam* (Beirut: Presses de l’Ifpo, 1955), 110; T. Fahd, *Le Panthéon de L’Arabie Centrale à la veille de l’Hégire* (Paris: Geuthner, 1968), 78. For references to inscriptions at Palmyra and Hatra, see J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 212-213.

⁹⁵⁷ For example, H. Emrani, ‘Like Father, Like Daughter: Late Sasanian Imperial Ideology and the Rise of Boran to Power,’ *Nameye Iran-e Bastan: The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies* 13 (2009), 3-5; B. Overlaet, ‘And Man Created God? Kings, Priest, and Gods on Sasanian Investiture Reliefs,’ *Iranica Antiqua* 48 (2013), 313-354.

⁹⁵⁸ A. De Jong, ‘Sub Specie Maiestatis: Reflections on Sasanian Court Rituals,’ in M. Stausberg, ed., *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 345-365; S. Shaked, ‘Religion in the late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran and other Religious Designations,’ in V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart, eds., *The Sasanian Era, The Idea of Iran 3* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008) 103-117.

⁹⁵⁹ De Jong, ‘Sub Specie Maiestatis,’ 365.

⁹⁶⁰ See 6.2.1 above.

Bruce Lincoln helpfully emphasises the place of *xwarrah* in Sasanian ethnographic writing: in the *Dēnkard* VIII, 13, a measure of *xwarrah* is given to each of the world's peoples.⁹⁶¹ Similarly, the land possessed its own *xwarrah*: there is a reference in the *Supplementary Texts to the Šāyast-nē-Šāyast* to the 'xwarrah of the mountain and hill,' which blesses and befriends the person who goes to a lofty mountain and recites the Gathic formula *yaθā ahū vairyō* (Yasna 27. 13) eleven times.⁹⁶² This might suggest that the two parts of the *Zamyād Yašt*, on the mountains and on the *xwarrah*, are perhaps not as unrelated as they seem. In addition to the mythological dimensions described in the Avesta, the concept of *xwarrah* had a range of meanings and features in diverse contexts. This multiplicity is reflected in the way *xwarrah* shaped the Sasanian worldview, and how its myriad associations impacted on the considerable population of Mesopotamia who did not adhere to the Zoroastrian faith.

6.2.2 *Xwarrah* among the Non-Zoroastrian Religions of the Sasanian Empire

Evocations of *xwarrah* can be found among the various religious groups of the Empire, often adapted with new emphases. Thus the concept of *xwarrah* is found in the Armenian, *p'ark'*, where it can mean 'fortune.'⁹⁶³ Theo van Lint discusses the

⁹⁶¹ B. Lincoln, 'Human Unity and Diversity in Zoroastrian Mythology,' *History of Religions* 50/1 (2010), 9, n. 6.

⁹⁶² F. M. Kotwal, *Supplementary Texts to the Šāyast-nē-Šāyast* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 1969), 79.

⁹⁶³ Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems*, 38-39, 62.

role this plays in questions of Armenian identity, and in 2014, David Bagot gave a conference paper at St Andrews titled, ‘Armenian P’ark: Armenian Cultural Perceptions for Understanding Farr in the Sasanian Period.’⁹⁶⁴ Van Lint suggests that the idea of *p’ark* ‘was engrained in Armenian society, particularly during the Arsacid period (12-428 AD), and this is reflected in the fifth-century *Epic Histories* which incorporates much Iranian cultural and linguistic material.’⁹⁶⁵ Clearly, the close relationship between Armenian and Iranian political and religious institutions in the Sasanian period had a profound impact on shaping Armenian culture.⁹⁶⁶ The adoption of concepts of *xwarrah* was not limited to Armenia, but these ideas percolated into the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in Mesopotamia. Even after the Arab conquest, coins minted by local elites in conjunction with Arab governors that used the language and iconography of *xwarrah* as a way of legitimising their power.⁹⁶⁷

6.2.2.1 Rabbinic Judaism

Arnold Goldberg’s monumental study of rabbinic conceptions of the *Shekinah* demonstrates clearly that it is always identical with God, but in some sense

⁹⁶⁴ T. van Lint, ‘The Formation of Armenian Identity in the First Millenium,’ *Church History and Religious Culture* 89 (2009), 264-265. I have been unable to obtain a copy of Bagot’s paper.

⁹⁶⁵ Van Lint, ‘The Formation of Armenian Identity,’ 264-265.

⁹⁶⁶ Van Lint, ‘The Formation of Armenian Identity,’ 267.

⁹⁶⁷ For instance, Farrozzād minted coins in Fārs between 693 and 698 CE, some of which bear the legend *xwarrah abzūd*, ‘increased in glory.’ See T. Daryaee, ‘The Xwarrah and the Sēnmurv: Zoroastrian Iconography on Seventh Centruy Copper Coinage,’ in S. Farridnejad, ed., *Fazination Iran: Gedenkschrift for Klaus Schippmann* (Wiesbaden: Otto Horrosowitz, 2015), 43-44.

designates God's presence on earth.⁹⁶⁸ There is, therefore, a fundamental theological difference between the *Shekinah* and *xwarrah*. However, the ubiquitous association of the *Shekinah* with light and fire in both Palestinian and Babylonian traditions, would have had a particular set of resonances for the Babylonian rabbis because of their cultural context.⁹⁶⁹ The notion of *xwarrah* as an analogue to the *Shekinah* was already made (in connection with a spurious etymological argument) by Friedrich von Spiegel in the nineteenth century.⁹⁷⁰ Irrespective of the difficulties in discerning the direct influence of *xwarrah* among the Babylonian rabbis, there are, of course, some obvious parallels. In the Biblical narrative, the association of the Divine Presence with cloud and fire is clear, and this is taken up in the Babylonian Talmud.⁹⁷¹ Likewise, the *Shekinah* departs from the Temple in Ezekiel 11. 23-25 and this too is taken up in the Babylonian Talmud, where the *Shekinah* returns to heaven

⁹⁶⁸ A. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen über die Vorstellung von der Schekhinah in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969), 534.

⁹⁶⁹ P. Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 91-92. For an important study in understanding the Sasanian context of the Babylonian rabbis, see Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud*, 8-33. Biblical texts like the Book of Ezekiel were written and redacted after the Babylonian exile, and a number of scholars have connected themes in Ezekiel with Zoroastrian influence. B. Lang, 'Street Theater, Raising the Dead, and the Zoroastrian Connection in Ezekiel's Prophecy,' in J. Lust, ed., *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and their Interrelation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986), 297-316.

⁹⁷⁰ cf. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems*, 69.

⁹⁷¹ E.g. Exodus 24. 16. For the association of light and fire with the *Shekinah* in the Talmud, see Menachot 86b: 9. In *Yoma* 21b: 9, the fire of the Divine Presence is described a 'fire that consumes other fire,' drawing on a non-Biblical tradition by which God burns the angels, who are also made of fire.

as a consequence of particular wrongdoing. For instance, in *Sanhedrin* 7a: 17, every judge who does not judge a case justly causes the Divine Presence to withdraw from Israel.⁹⁷² The departure of the *Shekinah* in this way may have called to mind for the Babylonian rabbis the way in which the *x^varənah* departs from Yima (in the form of a bird) in *Zamyād Yašt* as a consequence of Yima's sin.⁹⁷³ If it is challenging to draw any specific textual link between the *Shekinah* of the Babylonian Talmud and the *xwarrah* of Zoroastrianism, traces of the Zoroastrian *xwarrah* in Babylonian rabbinic material have been detected by some scholars. These examples, albeit tentative, give some intimation of the dissemination of similar theological ideas within the different religious communities of the Sasanian Empire.

Yaakov Elman argues, from the context of polemic in the Talmud, that the Zoroastrian understanding of *xwarrah*, as evidence of the truth of Zoroastrian doctrine, may underlie a polemical reference to the 'glory of the Torah' in the Babylonian Talmud.⁹⁷⁴ In *Berakhot* 17b, Rab Ashi defended the lack of converts in Mata Mehasia (a suburb of Sura, on the Euphrates) by attributing a hardness of heart to the city's inhabitants:

⁹⁷² *Sanhedrin* 7a: 17. See also *Berakhot* 27b: 2, where one who says something in the name of his rabbi which the rabbi did not say likewise causes the *Shekinah* to withdraw.

⁹⁷³ Yt. 19. 34.

⁹⁷⁴ Y. Elman, 'Some aspects of interreligious polemic in the Babylonian Talmud,' in I. Kalimi, ed., *Bridging between Sister Religions: Studies of Jewish and Christian Scriptures Offered in Honor of Prof. John T. Townsend* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 192-193.

‘Similarly, **Rav Ashi said:** The heathen residents of the city **Mata Meḥasya are the stubborn-hearted, as they witness the glory of the Torah twice a year** at the *kalla* gatherings in Adar and Elul, when thousands of people congregate and study Torah *en masse*, **yet no convert has ever converted from their ranks.**’⁹⁷⁵

The later Tosafists understood this manifestation of the ‘glory of the Torah’ to refer to the pillar of fire that descended from heaven on these two occasions when laymen gathered to hear scholars discuss the coming festivals.⁹⁷⁶ The formulation ‘glory of the Torah’ is known in Palestinian rabbinic sources, but the Babylonian context for the story recounted in *Berakhot* 17b means that the phrase has a particular connotation.⁹⁷⁷ Elman compares this passage with a number of instances in the Zoroastrian tradition where *xwarrah* is an indication of the truth of Zoroastrianism.⁹⁷⁸ The *xwarrah* of priests is acquired through knowledge and study, and the Middle Persian *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* describes the ‘the great *xwarrah*-bestowing force of the pure true religion.’⁹⁷⁹ In the polemical context recalled in *Berakhot* 17b, the appearance of the ‘glory of the Torah’ would have been expected to prove the truth of Judaism to Christians, Zoroastrians and Manichaeans, and the fact that it did

⁹⁷⁵ *Berakhot* 17b.

⁹⁷⁶ Elman, ‘Some aspects of interreligious polemic,’ 192.

⁹⁷⁷ Eg. y. Sotah 9: 15.

⁹⁷⁸ Elman, ‘Some aspects of interreligious polemic,’ 193.

⁹⁷⁹ ‘wuzurg xwarrah ī abēzag rāst dēn.’ *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Pt. I. 36. 73, translation cited in Gnoli, ‘Farr(ah),’ 314. Elman, ‘Some aspects of interreligious polemic,’ 193.

not must point to the hard-heartedness of the other inhabitants of Mata Mehasia.⁹⁸⁰

The image of the ‘glory of the Torah’ as a manifestation of the truth of Judaism in *Berakhot* 17b, associated later in the tradition with a pillar of fire would appear to correspond with the Zoroastrian idea of *xwarrah* as a signifier of truth.⁹⁸¹

Rachel Neis also suggests the influence of Zoroastrian notions of *xwarrah* on the Babylonian rabbis’ attitude to beauty.⁹⁸² She presents a number of texts that describe R. Yohanan’s physical beauty, and points to the emphasis on the radiance of his skin.⁹⁸³ There is an obvious parallel with Moses in Exodus 34, but Neis highlights the *xwarrah* of deities, kings and priests as a point of comparison, particularly the notion that the Sasanian kings were said, in some sense, to have inherited their appearance from the gods.⁹⁸⁴ At the heart of Neis’s discussion of R. Yohanan is the

⁹⁸⁰ Elman, ‘Some aspects of interreligious polemic,’ 193.

⁹⁸¹ Elman, ‘Some aspects of interreligious polemic,’ 193.

⁹⁸² R. Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity*, Greek Culture in the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 165.

⁹⁸³ Neis, *The Sense of Sight*, 165. The Palestinian rabbis made use of the motif of a ‘shining face.’ See the discussion of y. Shabbat 8:1, 11a in C. Hezser, *Rabbinic Body Language: Non-Verbal Communication in Palestinian Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 179 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 255-256. In this account, Catherine Hezser argues, the ‘shining face’ of R. Yudah b. Eliezer is presented as a sign of his concentration on the study of the Torah to counteract any indication that he may be blushing, and therefore guilty of thoughts and actions unworthy of a sage. Neis’ reading of the story of R. Yohanan, however, whilst drawing on a shared context involving radiant skin, goes on to elaborate the specifically Iranian parallels.

⁹⁸⁴ Neis, *The Sense of Sight*, 165, n. 223. This interpretation relies on translating the Middle Persian word *čīhr* as ‘face/ image/ appearance’ rather than as ‘seed/ lineage’ in the monumental inscriptions at Naqsh-e Rostam, erected by kings, *kē čīhr az yazdān*, ‘whose image/seed is from the gods.’ This is

use of feminine images of beauty, including the motifs of roses and pomegranate seeds, both of which fulfil similar functions in Persian literature.⁹⁸⁵ R. Yohanan claims his descent and his beauty from the biblical figure, Joseph, who is described elsewhere in the Talmud (*b. Sotah* 36b) as having a rose-coloured face. Neis compares this with the idea of pomegranate-coloured skin as a marker of beauty as found in Persian texts like *Khusrow and his Page*.⁹⁸⁶ Given the strong connection with Iranian ideals of beauty in the description of R. Yohanan, it may be that ideas of priestly or royal *xwarrah* may underlie these passages.

6.2.2.2 East Syrian Hagiography

The importance of the saints' lives and martyr acts as a source for the political and social history of Christians within the Sasanian Empire has only recently come to be

contested, but Touraj Daryaee has effectively shown the double sense of this word and justifies either reading. T. Daryaee, 'Kingship in Early Sasanian Iran,' in V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart, eds., *The Sasanian Era, The Idea of Iran 3* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 65-66. The double sense of *čih*r is recorded in D. N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 23. For a more idiosyncratic argument and discussion of *čih*r, see A. Soudavar, 'The Vocabulary and Syntax of Iconography in Sasanian Iran,' *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), 446-450. See also A. Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Meza, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 45.

⁹⁸⁵ **'One who wishes to see something resembling the beauty of Rabbi Yoḥanan should bring a new, shiny silver goblet from the smithy and fill it with red pomegranate seeds [*partzidayā*] and place a diadem of red roses upon the lip of the goblet, and position it between the sunlight and shade. That luster is a semblance of Rabbi Yoḥanan's beauty.'** *b. Bava Metsi'a* 84a. Neis, *The Sense of Sight*, 165, n. 224.

⁹⁸⁶ Neis, *The Sense of Sight*, 165, n. 224.

appreciated by scholars, despite many of the texts being published by Paul Bedjan in the 1890s.⁹⁸⁷ These texts shed light on a number of important issues, not least being the place of Christians in Sasanian society and the interaction and polemic between Christians and the Zoroastrian elite. Recent studies have demonstrated some of the ways in which these texts incorporate and subvert Zoroastrian beliefs and practices, including the evocation of Zoroastrian *xwarrah* in an explicitly Christian context.⁹⁸⁸ The East Syrian hagiographical material, notably the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, from Sasanian Iran shows some of the ways in which Christians engaged with the Zoroastrianism of the elites. The close cultural proximity meant that concepts like *xwarrah* became embedded in the Christian context, but underwent radical transformation.

In his article, ‘Une Typologie des Miracles des Saints et Martyrs Perses dans l’Iran Sassanide,’ Philippe Gignoux notes the significant number of instances in the East

⁹⁸⁷ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 17-18; In 2008, Gorgias Press launched the series, *Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation*. A couple of recent studies have shown how this body of hagiography can reshape scholarly interpretation of the Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire: T. Godwin, *Persian Christians at the Chinese Court: the Xi’an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019), 48; K. Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia: Martyrdom and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 125-153.

⁹⁸⁸ See for instance, Becker, ‘Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire,’ 300-336; H. Francisco, ‘Corpse Exposure in the Acts of the Persian Martyrs and its Literary Models,’ *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 19/1 (2016), 193-235; J. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 87-120.

Syrian hagiographical material where a bright light accompanies a critical moment in the narrative.⁹⁸⁹ In cases of conversion or of visions, there is, of course, a strong biblical tradition behind the image of light. However, because of the Sasanian context of these texts, Gignoux connects the use of light in these narratives with the *xwarrah*.⁹⁹⁰ The connection between light and glory in some of these accounts is explicit, as for instance in the account of the priest Aitalaha who, when he prays, fills the room with ܠܘܨܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ, ‘glorious light.’⁹⁹¹ The role of conversion from Zoroastrianism and the engagement with Zoroastrian theology and cosmology in many of these texts also suggests that *xwarrah* was evoked in a polemical context. One particular example from Gignoux’s survey highlights this, though he does not make the connection himself. In the *Life of Mar Awgin*, the saint, formerly a pearl fisher, sees a bright star descending in the water before him.⁹⁹² This strongly recalls the myth recounted in Yt. 19. 51 where the water deity Apām Napāt seizes the *x’arənah* and hides it at the bottom of a lake.⁹⁹³ In a similar way, fire also represents a manifestation of divine power in the martyr acts: in the *History of the ‘Slave of Christ’*, a miraculous fire burns on the grave of the martyr, and light emanates from

⁹⁸⁹ P. Gignoux, ‘Une Typologie des Miracles des Saints et Martyrs Perses dans l’Iran Sassanide,’ in D. Aigle, ed., *Miracle et Karāma. Hagiographies médiévales comparées 2* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 515-516.

⁹⁹⁰ Gignoux, ‘Une Typologie,’ 515-516.

⁹⁹¹ P. Bedjan, ed., *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, iv (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 136. Gignoux, ‘Une Typologie,’ 516.

⁹⁹² Gignoux, ‘Une Typologie,’ p. 515.

⁹⁹³ Yt. 19. 51; M. Boyce, ‘Apām Napat.’ in Yershater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ii/2 (New York, NY: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 1987), 148-150.

his tomb.⁹⁹⁴ The importance of images of light and its association with glory in the East Syrian saints' lives and martyr acts indicates a Christian appropriation of the imagery of *xwarrah* in the Sasanian world.

In Zoroastrian thought, there was an especial connection between *xwarrah* and the mountains.⁹⁹⁵ Payne suggests that this is particularly true of Bisutun in the Zagros mountains, which was situated on the 'royal road,' linking Seleucia-Ctesiphon with Central Asia.⁹⁹⁶ The Middle Persian form of the name, *baystūn*, means 'place of the gods,' and this mountain was an important place for Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian kings who declared their authority in rock reliefs on this mountain.⁹⁹⁷ Mount Bisutun connected a number of sacred sites in the region, and Zoroastrian rituals were conducted on the mountain.⁹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Payne contends that by the sixth century, Mount Bisutun was also a cultic centre for Christians in the region, arguing that it is the mountain at the centre of the *Martyrdom of Mar Pethion*,

⁹⁹⁴ A. Butts and S. Gross, eds., and trans., *The History of the 'Slave of Christ': From Jewish Child to Christian Martyr*, Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 6 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), 17. It is also worth noting that from the Second Century, the Diatessaron attests that fire and light were present in the Jordan at Christ's baptism, and this tradition is taken up in a number of Syriac writers. See W. L. Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 18-20.

⁹⁹⁵ Ichaporia, 'Zamyād Yašt.'

⁹⁹⁶ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 59.

⁹⁹⁷ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 59.

⁹⁹⁸ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 59-60; R. Schmitt, 'Bisotun i. Introduction,' in Yershater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, iv/3 (New York, NY: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000), 289-290.

Aduhrmazd and Anahid.⁹⁹⁹ Bisutun, a potent symbol of royal power and Zoroastrianism, became a symbol of Christian faith through the ascetic practices of these saints, their martyrdom on the slopes of Bisutun, and the interment of their relics on the mountain.¹⁰⁰⁰ Payne's thesis is that this text was part of a Christian claim to belong in the Empire, in both sociological and geographical terms.¹⁰⁰¹ The mountain is significant in the narrative: it is the site of conversion, monastic cells are established on its slopes, and it is the place of martyrdom for Pethion and Anahid.¹⁰⁰² Bisutun becomes a Christian sacred site, not simply through the establishment of a martyrium, but also through an engagement with Zoroastrian beliefs and practices.¹⁰⁰³

Anahid's dying body, smeared with honey, is protected from wild beasts by swarms of wasps, and once she has died they devour the earth of the mountain, leaving more visible the precipice on which Anahid was martyred.¹⁰⁰⁴ This remarkable phenomenon reflects a subversion of Zoroastrian cosmology in which insects are co-

⁹⁹⁹ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 60-61.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 61.

¹⁰⁰¹ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 67.

¹⁰⁰² Payne, *State of Mixture*, 72.

¹⁰⁰³ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 75.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 76. Payne translates ܠܒܝܝܘܬܝܢ as 'bees,' though this might more properly be translated as 'wasps.' According to Payne Smith, 'bees' would be rendered in Syriac as ܠܒܝܝܘܬܝܢ. For the text, see P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, ii (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 599-600. It is also worth noting that Anahid is named after the Yazata, Anahita. For her prominence in Zoroastrian thought, see the essays in P. Nabraz, ed., *Anahita: Ancient Persian Goddess and Zoroastrian Yazata* (London: Avalonia, 2013).

workers with Ahreman, the evil spirit: here, all creatures, even those considered harmful, are presented as being subject to the authority of Christ and his saints.¹⁰⁰⁵ Furthermore, the saints become intercessors on behalf of the land. In the same way that the recitation of the *yasna* was thought to bring prosperity and security, in *The Martyrdom of Mar Pethion, Adurohrmazd and Anahid* the saints' intercession is said to augment 'good fortune,' recalling *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁰⁶ Rather than the recitation of the *yasna*, the intercession of the saints protects the land and brings prosperity.¹⁰⁰⁷ Payne posits that Zoroastrian beliefs about the land, and the place of ritual in sustaining the land, meant that any Christian claim to belong required new, Christian, land-sustaining rites: these emerge in the cult of the martyrs,¹⁰⁰⁸ marking an important sign of Christian integration within Iranian society.¹⁰⁰⁹

The Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain provides a further example of the Christian transformation of Zoroastrian ideas of the land and its *xwarrah*. Again, the saints form an ascetic community in a mountainous cave.¹⁰¹⁰ A number of significant moments in the narrative involve light and fire, particularly Mihrnarse's vision of Christ on the throne, thus evoking the idea of *xwarrah* in a Christian context.¹⁰¹¹ Significantly, the martyrs' final confession in this text further supports Payne's

¹⁰⁰⁵ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 76.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 78, 83.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 77.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 91.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 91.

¹⁰¹⁰ S. Brock, *The Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, *Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 4* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 28.

¹⁰¹¹ *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, 10.

thesis about the saints' relationship to the land: the three children speak in unison as they pray, 'increase, Lord, prosperity in this region where we are being slain out of love for You,' and they ask a range of blessings for the land.¹⁰¹² Their prayer for an increase in prosperity evokes the Middle Persian word *afzūn*, 'increase,' on Sasanian coins and other visual media, a concept linked explicitly to *xwarrah* in some contexts.¹⁰¹³

In addition to the idea of the saints granting prosperity to the land through their intercessory martyrdom, this body of hagiographical material also indicates the transformation of the physical landscape through the building of churches and monasteries, upholding the importance of mountains as sites of religious activity in the Sasanian period. In the case of the martyrs of Mount Ber'ain, the narrator states that,

'for a long while the holy site of the glorious crowning of Christ's martyrs remained unadorned, seeing that the pagans did not allow any building to be erected there. This continued until the persecution of Christians ceased, through the grace of our Lord.'¹⁰¹⁴

¹⁰¹² *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, 101.

¹⁰¹³ T. Daryaei, 'Persian Lords and the Umayyads: Cooperation and Coexistence in a Turbulent Time,' in A. Borrut and F. M. Donner, *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State* (Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2016), 77-78; M. G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 41; Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 16-19, 59-62, 91.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, 108.

Whilst this may reflect the status of the mountain as a sacred place in Zoroastrian thought, *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in* gives an impression of what the Christian transformation of the physical landscape could look like. Mar Ma'in is said to be from Sinjar, 'a town in Persian territory,' that was lost from the Romans to the Persians around 360.¹⁰¹⁵ He is described as being 'very well educated in literature and in the Magian religion; he was extremely clever and was proficient and skilled at everything,' thus testifying to the presence of a Zoroastrian community in the former Roman town.¹⁰¹⁶ Seeing the willingness of some Christians to die for Christ leads Mar Ma'in to wonder about the truth of Christianity.¹⁰¹⁷ Mar Ma'in then has a vision:

'there appeared to him a wondrous man, his face illumined and glorious like the sun: no human tongue could describe his glory. He called out to him and said, 'Be of good courage, Ma'in; arise, and ascend the mountain adjoining this town, and there you shall be told all that you are asking of Christ.'¹⁰¹⁸

¹⁰¹⁵ S. Brock, ed. and trans., *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in: with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts*, Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 1 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 1; this presumably dates the saint's life to after the conclusion of the Persian wars of Constantius II in 361. Sinjar, ancient Singara, was a Roman fortified town on the southern slopes of the Jebel Sinjar. F. Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 B.C. – A.D. 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 126; W. E. Kaegi, 'Challenges to Late Roman and Byzantine Military Operations in Iraq (4th – 9th Centuries),' *Klio. Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 73 (1991), 586-594.

¹⁰¹⁶ *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 3. For the interaction of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians at Sinjar, see *History of the 'Slave of Christ,'* 30-33, 36, 45-50.

¹⁰¹⁷ *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 4.

¹⁰¹⁸ *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 9.

The bright light and the importance of the mountain as a place of conversion are reminiscent of *The Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain* and other East Syrian hagiography of this period.¹⁰¹⁹ After his conversion, Mar Ma'in comes into conflict with the king, and travels throughout the region around Sinjar. He is credited with the building of ninety-six monasteries on mount Sinjar, regarding which 'our Lord granted that they became great and renowned in his own days.'¹⁰²⁰ Even allowing for the hyperbole that is typical of the genre, this shows a further way in which Christians in the Sasanian period understood their connection to the land. Texts like *The Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain* and *The Martyrdom of Pethion, Adurohrmazd, and Anahid* demonstrate a transformation of Zoroastrian ideas of prosperity and the role of ritual in relation to the physical environment. *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in* shows the transformation of the landscape through the building of monasteries and churches in the mountainous areas: this great number of monasteries built by the saint occupied the same space in which the Zoroastrian rites, intended to sustain the people of Sinjar below, would have been performed.¹⁰²¹

6.2.2.3 Early Islamic Iran

The connection of *xwarrah* to ideas of transformation and continuity also emerges in the context of Early Islamic Iran. Patricia Crone's last book, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*, surveys the revolts

¹⁰¹⁹ Gignoux, 'Une Typologie,' 515-516; *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, 10.

¹⁰²⁰ *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 84.

¹⁰²¹ See J. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 164; Payne, *State of Mixture*, 60.

against ‘Abbāsīd authority in the mid-eighth century. The spark for these revolts was the assassination by the Caliph of the governor and general, Abū Muslim, who had helped to bring the ‘Abbāsīds to power.¹⁰²² At their heart, these revolts were a complex nexus of socio-political divisions. The Umayyads had restricted the entry of non-Arabs into Muslim society, and Abū Muslim’s death proved that the change of regime had not changed the status of non-Arabs in the Caliphate.¹⁰²³ There was a deep division between the cities and rural areas. In cities, non-Arabs saw Abū Muslim as a liberator of Islam and came to understand themselves as the new and more pious upholders of the religion they had received from the Arabs.¹⁰²⁴ In rural communities, by contrast, the religion of the Caliphs came to be seen as oppressive and false, or at least perverted by the Arabs; leading to a rejection of classical Islam in the countryside and the adoption of a more syncretic form of the new religion.¹⁰²⁵ Muslims regarded these communities with suspicion; they were labelled often as Khurramīs.¹⁰²⁶ The continued existence of Khurramīs into the Islamic period, and the syncretism that occurred, indicates the ways in which local forms of Zoroastrianism continued to shape the religious landscape after the fall of the Sasanian Empire.

¹⁰²² P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20.

¹⁰²³ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 20.

¹⁰²⁴ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 21.

¹⁰²⁵ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 22.

¹⁰²⁶ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 22. Crone argues that the Khurramīs practised a form of religion related to Mazdakism, the Zoroastrian heresy which caused a revolt in Iraq and western Iran c. 531-540 C.E.

Of particular concern here is Crone's argument that Zoroastrian *xwarrah*, and particularly the *xwarrah* of priests and kings, came to shape the way the early Islamic Khurramīs understood their religious leaders.¹⁰²⁷ She gives a nuanced account of the concept of divine kingship in the Sasanian period, showing that the Sasanian kings did not claim divinity for themselves but rather stood between their subjects and the heavenly realm.¹⁰²⁸ Some Muslim groups in former Sasanian territories gave their leaders and the members of the Prophet Muhammad's family divine status, paralleling the Trinity in Christianity or the divine emanations of Manichaeism: one tradition, for instance, among the Pārsīs of Azerbaijan held that Muhammad, Ali and Salmān al-Fārisī were God, three in one, and likewise, the Mukhammisa taught that Muhammad was God, who appeared in five *ashbāh*, 'phantoms'.¹⁰²⁹ This kind of 'divinisation' is not the case with Khurramī claims about Abū Muslim and their prophetic, religious leaders. Rather, like the Sasanian

¹⁰²⁷ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 329.

¹⁰²⁸ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 328-329. This understanding of kingship reflects the ancient Mesopotamian tradition, which indicates that kings were endowed with kingship from heaven, but were not themselves divine. The Sumerian King List from Nippur, for instance, 'When kingship came down from heaven...' Cited in W. W. Hallo, 'Urban Origins in Cuneiform and Biblical Sources,' in W. W. Hallo, ed., *The World's Oldest Literature: Studies in Sumerian Belles-Lettres* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 550. For further explorations of this theme, see W. W. Hallo, 'Royal Hymns and Mesopotamian Unity,' in W. W. Hallo, ed., *The World's Oldest Literature*, 177; and W. W. Hallo, 'Beginning and End of the Sumerian King List in the Nippur Recension,' in W. W. Hallo, ed., *The World's Oldest Literature*, 417, n. 51.

¹⁰²⁹ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 212, 329. For another example of this syncretic, gnostic form of Islam, including the divinisation of Ali, see S. Wasserstrom, 'The Moving Finger Writes: Mughīra B. Sa'īd's Islamic Gnosis and the Myths of Its Rejection,' *History of Religions* 25/1 (1985), 1-29.

kings, these leaders were understood to stand in succession to each other, with divine favour passing from one to the other.¹⁰³⁰ Crone sees at work in this succession a modification of the idea of *xwarrah*.¹⁰³¹ She notes that in *Zamyād Yašt* the human possessors of *xʷarənah*, including Yima, the Kayanid kings, Zoroaster and the future *Saoshyant*, serve to form ‘a chain of quasi-divine beings running through Iranian history from the beginning to the end.’¹⁰³² The Sasanian monarchs cast themselves as the successors of the Kayanid dynasty, and so placed themselves within this chain.¹⁰³³ Crone argues that in this context, *xwarrah* functions as a spirit passing from one holy person to the next: in the *Dēnkard*, the mythical figures endowed with *xʷarənah* in *Zamyād Yašt* are recast as prophets, *vakhšvars*, bearers not of *xwarrah* but of spirit (*vākhš*).¹⁰³⁴ This idea of human figures, carrying the divine spirit, succeeding one after the other and culminating in a saviour became the way in which the Khurramīs conceived of their leaders in early Islamic Iran.¹⁰³⁵

There is one further particular connection between the Zoroastrian *xwarrah* and Abū Muslim: his followers claimed that when he was killed, he escaped death by reciting the greatest name of God and his spirit flew away in the form of a bird.¹⁰³⁶ Crone connects this tradition with the account in Yt. 19. 34 of the *xʷarənah* departing from

¹⁰³⁰ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 329.

¹⁰³¹ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 330.

¹⁰³² Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 332.

¹⁰³³ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 332.

¹⁰³⁴ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 333.

¹⁰³⁵ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 337.

¹⁰³⁶ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 335.

Yima as the *vareghna* bird, and points to the Sufi tradition of being transformed into a falcon as evidence of the continuing association of *xwarrah* and birds of prey.¹⁰³⁷

The survival of ideas of *xwarrah* into the Islamic period was not solely in the context of these heterodox groups that, having challenged ‘Abbāsīd power in the eighth century, continued to exist until at least the twelfth century.¹⁰³⁸ Famously, Ferdowsi emphasises the importance of *farr* in his account of the earliest kings in *Shahnameh*.¹⁰³⁹ In the later period, Abolala Soudavar shows the way in which the Mughal emperors justified their kingly authority in terms of light emanating from God, linked explicitly to the glory of the Kayanid kings.¹⁰⁴⁰ This is quite different to the way *xwarrah* seems to have been taken up as a legitimising factor among Abū Muslim’s followers, but does reflect the esteem placed on the Kayanid dynasty and their *xwarrah* by Muslim rulers in later centuries.¹⁰⁴¹

Crone’s study of Khurramism provides an interesting case study of the ways in which Zoroastrian thought continued to play an influential role long after the coming of Islam. The heterodox views associated with the Khurramīs show how syncretic forms of Islam developed in Iran, and particularly how the adaptation of the

¹⁰³⁷ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 335, n. 93.

¹⁰³⁸ Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 178.

¹⁰³⁹ D. Davis, trans. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, Penguin Classics (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 1, 4, 5. Ferdowsi also includes an account of Jamshid (Yima) losing *farr* because of his pride. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 8.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 7.

¹⁰⁴¹ See for instance, A. Amanat, ‘The Kayanid Crown and Qajar Reclaiming of Royal Authority,’ *Iranian Studies* 34 (2001), 17-30.

Zoroastrian *xwarrah* reflected a changing religious and political landscape. For the Khurramīs, disenfranchised and without political power, *xwarrah* came to be understood as a spirit passed from one leader to the next, culminating in the future saviour. The Mughals, on the other hand, claimed legitimacy in the same way as the Sasanians, connecting themselves directly to the *xwarrah* of the mythical Kayanid dynasty.

The Zoroastrian concept of *xwarrah* became part of the religious vocabulary for the non-Zoroastrian religions of the Sasanian Empire and continued to play a part in religious thinking long after its collapse. It shaped how Christians thought about the landscape and their place in it. *Xwarrah* was used to legitimise religious and political leadership well into the Islamic period, being a concept that could easily be adapted in various religious traditions. It assumed a particular function in inter-religious polemic, demonstrating the truth of one religion over another. This appropriation and adaptation of *xwarrah* in diverse religious contexts provides the background to the exploration of the way in which the Christian appropriation of *xwarrah* was expressed visually in concrete ways. The iconography of the stucco cross plaques of southern Mesopotamia and the Christian seals of the Sasanian period demonstrates a particular association by Christians of *xwarrah* and the image of the cross.

6.3 The Iconography of *Xwarrah* and the Cross

The iconography of *xwarrah* is a controversial subject in modern scholarship; the difference can be exemplified in the work of two scholars. The first of these is Soudavar, who has written extensively on the iconography of *xwarrah* and whose

work is widely cited. In his book, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship*, he argues that there are at least ten different symbols of *xwarrah* that are used regularly in Sasanian art, and that the multiplicity of these symbols indicates *farreh-afzun*, a Middle Persian term indicating an ‘increase’ or ‘abundance’ in *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁴² These symbols are the ram, the ribbon/ headband, the windblown headband, the shining disk, the radiating rings, a pair of wings, the pomegranate, the sunflower, the lotus and the pearl.¹⁰⁴³ Soudavar’s interpretation of some of these images comes from their connection to particular deities, and therefore, to *xwarrah*: for instance, he understands the sunflower as a symbol of Mithra, the lotus as a symbol of water deities, and the pearl as a symbol of the *xwarrah* kept underwater, reflecting the myth in Yt. 19.¹⁰⁴⁴ In the case of ribbons, especially those depicted in triumphal rock reliefs, he connects the concept of *dast*, ‘victory,’ with *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁴⁵ These associations lead Soudavar to identify a wide range of pre-Sasanian, Sasanian and post-Sasanian art with the concept of *xwarrah*, particularly where more than one of these images is used in the decorative scheme.¹⁰⁴⁶

¹⁰⁴² Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 16-19.

¹⁰⁴³ For a summary, Soudavar, ‘Vocabulary and Syntax,’ 425.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 52-56, 100-101.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 13.

¹⁰⁴⁶ For instance, the *apadana* at Persepolis where the lotus and sunflower are used as a repeated pattern. Soudavar understands this as reflecting the image of *xwarrah* arising from the waters.

Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 99.

The opposing approach is seen in the recent work of Michael Shenkar, who argues that a specific textual link is necessary to prove a connection between any given image and the *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁴⁷ This point needs to be given serious consideration, not least to avoid the excesses of a pan-*xwarrah*-ism in the treatment of the Iranian iconographic tradition.¹⁰⁴⁸ There are three specific examples in pre-Islamic Iranian literature where the *xwarrah* is described visually. Hence Shenkar suggests that it is only these three images that should be concretely identified as evoking the *xwarrah* in Iranian iconography.¹⁰⁴⁹

The first of these is a connection between the *xwarrah* and fire, as described, for instance, in the *Mihr Yašt* and in the story of Zoroaster's birth in *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*.¹⁰⁵⁰

¹⁰⁴⁷ M. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World*, *Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity* 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 132.

¹⁰⁴⁸ The Sasanian concept of kingship is one of the most widely studied areas in the field, and the sheer number of images and motifs associated with the royal *xwarrah* reflects the scholarly bias towards the study of kingship in the Sasanian period. See for instance, P. O. Harper and P. Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period: Royal Imagery* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981); Daryaei, 'Kingship in Early Sasanian Iran,' 60-70; S. Babaie and T. Grigor, eds., *Persian Kingship and Architecture: Strategies of Power in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Pahlavis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); M. P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran*, TCH (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁴⁹ Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 132.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Yt. 10. 127; *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*, 13. 1-2.

The second is the association between the *xwarrah* and the *vareghna* bird in *Zamyād Yašt*. In Yt 19. 31-44, the *x'arənah* is associated with the mythological king Yima, but departs from him after 'he began to find delight in words of falsehood and untruth.'¹⁰⁵¹ This departing is described as follows: 'The Glory hastened away from Yima, the son of Vivasvant, in the shape of *vārəynahe*.'¹⁰⁵² The feathers of this bird are given to Zoroaster when he asks Ahura Mazda for a remedy should he be cursed, and so the *vareghna* bird has an important place in Zoroastrian mythology.¹⁰⁵³ It is also significant in the iconographic tradition: long feathers are associated with royalty and victory.¹⁰⁵⁴

Lastly, the *xwarrah* is connected with a wild ram (*warrag*) in *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*.¹⁰⁵⁵ Ardašīr elopes with a favourite maid of the Parthian king, Ardawān, who pursues them. Ardawān learns that the couple were seen being followed by a large ram. His high priest informs him that this ram represents the royal *xwarrah* and that it had not yet joined with Ardašīr. The next day, however, Ardawān is told that the ram was seen on the back of Ardašīr's horse and the high priest confirms that the royal *xwarrah* had joined with Ardašīr and that Ardawān would no longer be able to

¹⁰⁵¹ Yt. 19. 34. This story is also related in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, where Jamshid loses *farr* because of his pride. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 8.

¹⁰⁵² Yt. 19. 35. Hintze translates *vārəynahe* as 'bird of prey.'

¹⁰⁵³ Yt 14. 34-36; S. K. Mendoza Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran* (Austin, TX: Texas University Press, 2011), 129.

¹⁰⁵⁴ A. S. Shahbazi, 'On *vārəyna* the Royal Falcon,' *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 134/2 (1984), 316.

¹⁰⁵⁵ F. Grenet, trans., *La Geste d'Ardashir Fils de Pâbag* (Die: Éditions A Die, 2003), IV. 8-24.

defeat him.¹⁰⁵⁶ In a recent article, Frantz Grenet has argued that an unusual seal depicting a standing human body with a ram's head, a flower in its left hand, is a depiction of the *xwarrah*; whilst this is a unique representation, rams are certainly a common image in Sasanian art.¹⁰⁵⁷

These texts provide the only explicit descriptions of the *xwarrah* in visual terms in pre-Islamic Iranian literature.¹⁰⁵⁸ Shenkar argues that consequently only these three images (fire, the *vareghna* bird, and the ram) can be identified concretely in the iconographic tradition with ideas of *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁵⁹ This, of course, stands in stark contrast to Soudavar's approach. The strength of Soudavar's argument lies in recognising the associative use of symbols and images, whether or not the use of a number of symbols indicated *farreh-afzun*.¹⁰⁶⁰ For example, he points to a stucco depicting a pair of wings in a pearl roundel with the monogram *afzun* and to a similar stucco combining a ram-head with a pair of wings and flying ribbons [Figs. 3, 4].¹⁰⁶¹ In the Armenian Christian context, the cross with stylised wings is known

¹⁰⁵⁶ *La Geste d'Ardashir Fils de Pâbag*, IV. 8-24.

¹⁰⁵⁷ F. Grenet, 'Some hitherto unrecognized mythological figures on Sasanian seals: proposed identifications,' in S. Tokhtasev and P. Lurje, eds., *Commentationes Iranicae. Vladimiro f. Aaron Livschits nonagenario donum natalicium* (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, 2013), 204.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Shenkar notes one other uncertain reading which seems to suggest the *xwarrah* transforms into some kind of monster. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 133, n. 757.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 132.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Soudavar, 'Vocabulary and Syntax,' 435.

¹⁰⁶¹ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 151, figs. 20, 21. See also St John Simpson's discussion of beribboned rams on stamped pots from Nineveh in St. J. Simpson, 'Rams, Stags and Crosses from Sasanian Iraq: Elements of a Shared Visual Vocabulary from Late Antiquity,' in A. Peruzzetto, F. D. Metzger and L.

as *p'ark' 'khāch'*, 'the glorious cross.'¹⁰⁶² The particular iconographic connection between *p'ark'* and the pair of wings suggests this belongs to a broader association of *xwarrah* and stylised wings in the Sasanian context. Shenkar's argument that a textual link is necessary to prove that any given image depicts *xwarrah* is important, particularly given the complexity of identifying deities in Iranian art.¹⁰⁶³ It is, however, possible to say more than Shenkar's methodology allows. Clearly, Iranian art employed multiple symbols and images to depict a range of related concepts to do with glory, fortune, victory, and authority. Stylised wings or ribbons may have been intended to recall *xwarrah* in the iconographic tradition without corresponding exactly to the divine being of the Avesta, who could more precisely be identified in images of fire, the *vareghna* bird, or the royal *xwarrah* in the form of a ram.¹⁰⁶⁴

Dirven, eds., *Animals, Gods and Men from East to West: Papers on Archaeology and History in Honour of Roberta Venco Ricciardi* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), 104. The symbol of a winged figure, known as the *farvahar* or *fravashi*, is common from the Achaemenid period and is thought to represent either Ahura Mazda or the *x'arənah*, though the identification of this symbol is highly contested. V. Sarkhosh Curtis, *Ancient Iranian Motifs and Zoroastrian Iconography*, in A. Williams, S. Stewart and A. Hintze, eds., *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 179.

¹⁰⁶² Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 21. Soudavar cites personal correspondence with Prof. James Russell, thanking him for indicating this phrase to him.

¹⁰⁶³ M. Comparsi, 'The Representation of Zoroastrian Divinities in Late Sasanian Art and their Description according to Avestan Literature,' *ARAM* 26/1-2 (2014), 139-174.

¹⁰⁶⁴ It is, of course, worth noting that not every depiction of fire, birds or rams in Sasanian art should be interpreted as a manifestation of *xwarrah*.

6.3.1 *Xwarrah* and the Stucco Crosses of Southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf

In her recent unpublished doctoral thesis on Christian stucco decoration in Mesopotamia and the Gulf, Agnieszka Lic provides a comprehensive catalogue of stucco, dating from the sixth to the ninth century, that either has a visibly Christian motif (in most cases, the cross) or was found at an identifiably Christian site.¹⁰⁶⁵ In keeping with the dominant stucco ‘industry’ that typifies Mesopotamian plastic arts for millennia, the majority of the architectural decoration or decorative objects are stucco, though three small crosses known from Jabal Berri, and at Thaj and Al-Hinnah in the Gulf, are made of stone or bronze.¹⁰⁶⁶ Lic’s catalogue is an invaluable resource for the study of Christian iconography in the Sasanian and early Islamic periods.¹⁰⁶⁷

The stuccos in her thesis come from eleven sites across Southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, and includes a range of iconography. Many of the pieces are small or

¹⁰⁶⁵ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 12. Simpson discusses some of the stucco from some of these sites in St J. Simpson, ‘Christians on Iraq’s Desert Frontier,’ *Al-Rāfidān* 39 (2018), 14-21. He tends to err on the side of a slightly later, post-Sasanian dating for a number of these churches. See also, E. C. D. Hunter, ‘Veneration of the Cross in the East Syrian Tradition,’ *ARAM* 32 (2020), 309-324.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 12; D. T. Potts, ‘Nestorian Crosses from Jabal Berri,’ *AAE* 5 (1994), 61-65; K. Friestad, ‘Christianity in Beth Qatraye,’ Unpublished MPhil thesis (MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2016), 35.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 12. Lic notes the difficulties in dating stucco, but proposes a tentative chronology for the stucco found at Christian sites in the region. Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 182, 216-219.

fragmentary, which impedes easy identification, but there are some seventy-six crosses of various designs, fragments of scroll work, floral designs, and parts of decorative frames. Only one piece in Lic's catalogue, found at Choche at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, depicts a human figure, and thus can be regarded as exceptional.¹⁰⁶⁸

The stucco plaque crosses are broadly of four types. A number 'have noticeably splayed arms and the end of each arm is slightly curved and decorated with roundels.'¹⁰⁶⁹ Some crosses stand on a stepped base, a widespread feature in Byzantine iconography in the period, that possibly represents Golgotha.¹⁰⁷⁰

Examples of the foliate cross can be found, though the interpretation of the iconography in these is complicated by the fragmentary nature of the evidence.¹⁰⁷¹

The fourth type include crosses framed by wings or ribbons that rise upward from the base of the cross.¹⁰⁷² There are also two atypical examples from islands in the

¹⁰⁶⁸ A. Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration in Southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf Region, Sixth to Ninth Centuries: Catalogue*, Unpublished DPhil Thesis (University of Oxford, 2017), no. 1. The archaeological evidence from Choche suggests an earlier date for the site than the evidence from the Gulf churches. See M. Cassis, 'Kokhe, Cradle of the Church of the East: An Archaeological and Comparative Study,' *JCSSS* 2 (2002), 62-78.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 55.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 62. For examples of the cross on a stepped base in the East Syrian manuscript tradition, see the (unattributed) images in A. Royel, *Mysteries of the Kingdom: The Sacraments of the Assyrian Church of the East* (Modesto, CA: CIRED, 2011), 1, 31, 159, 347. Nasir Al-Ka'bi has classified the gypsum crosses from al-Hira into four groups, the most common of which is this stepped, 'Gogotha Cross.' N. Al-Ka'bi, 'A New Repertoire of Crosses from the Ancient site of Hira, Iraq,' *JCSSS* 14 (2014), 91-93.

¹⁰⁷¹ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 64.

¹⁰⁷² Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 220-240.

Gulf where the arms of the cross sprout leaves that seem to be supported by two 'feet' in the lower part of the design.¹⁰⁷³ It is also worth noting that these features identifying types of cross also appear alongside each other: one of the crosses from al-Hira stands on a stepped base, with ribbons rising upwards, and two roundels at the end of each arm.¹⁰⁷⁴ The stucco cross designs were clearly part of the broader iconographic repertoire of East Syrian art in this period, and there are similarities in these stucco designs with the bronze crosses found at Jabal Berri.¹⁰⁷⁵ These cross designs also spread far beyond Mesopotamia and the Gulf in the missionary territories of the Church of the East, for instance in the Anuradhapura Cross in Sri Lanka, and on the Xi'an stele in China.¹⁰⁷⁶ The iconography of the cross was the cardinal visual mode of identification of the Church of the East within and without its Sasanian context, being found in various contexts in Central Asia, northern Afghanistan, Mongolia and China.

¹⁰⁷³ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 65; Lic, *Catalogue*, nos. 91, 112.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Lic, *Catalogue*, no. 43.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Potts, 'Nestorian Crosses from Jabal Berri,' 61, 63.

¹⁰⁷⁶ See P. Mihindukulasuriya, *The 'Nestorian' Cross and the Persian Christians of the Anuradhapura Period* (Colombo: CTS Publishing, 2012); D. A. Johnson, 'Syriac Crosses in Central and Southwest China,' in L. Tang and W. Dietmar, eds., *Winds of Jingjiao: Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, *Orientalia – Patristica – Oecumenica* 9 (Vienna: LIT, 2016), 45; E. C. D. Hunter, 'The Persian Contribution to Christianity in China: Reflections in the Xi'an Fu Syriac Inscriptions,' in L. Tang and W. Dietmar, eds., *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in Central Asia and China*, *Orientalia – Patristica – Oecumenica* 1 (Berlin: LIT, 2009), 80-86.

Given the distinctive style of these crosses, there arises the question of how this iconography is to be interpreted. Lic rightly notes the Sasanian context for some of this iconography, and this section will further her argument that these artistic motifs are intended to associate the image of the cross with *xwarrah*.

A number of the crosses in Lic's catalogue are framed by symmetrical bands [Fig. 5].¹⁰⁷⁷ The archaeologists working at al-Qusur, Kuwait described a large stucco cross of this kind as showing a 'fountain of resurrection' motif, but there is no particular reason to think that these bands are connected to the depiction of water.¹⁰⁷⁸ Lic proposes seeing these decorative bands as the ribbons common in Sasanian art.¹⁰⁷⁹ She points to the use of ribbons as a motif in depictions of the king on Sasanian coins, stone reliefs, and silver plate [Fig. 6].¹⁰⁸⁰ A silver drachm of Vistahm shows a fire altar with two ribbons fluttering on either side [Fig. 7].¹⁰⁸¹ Such ribbons also

¹⁰⁷⁷ Lic, *Catalogue*, nos. 43, 48, 49, 51, 52, 89, 114.

¹⁰⁷⁸ V. Bernard, O. Callot, and J-F. Salles, 'L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweït: Rapport préliminaire sur une première campagne de fouilles,' *AAE* 2/3 (1989), 160-163; Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 220-221. Al-Ka'bi similarly designates the gypsum crosses at al-Hira of this design as 'Stream Crosses.' N. Al-Ka'bi, 'A New Repertoire of Crosses from the Ancient site of Hira, Iraq,' 93-94. Erica Hunter notes a couple of examples where Al'Ka'bi's categorisation is problematic. See Hunter, 'Veneration of the Cross in the East Syrian Tradition,' 314-315.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 224. Simpson, 'Rams, Stags and Crosses from Sasanian Iraq: Elements of a Shared Visual Vocabulary from Late Antiquity,' 104.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 234. See also, Harper and Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period: Royal Imagery*, 56-57; P. O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire* (New York, NY: Asia House, 1978), 110.

¹⁰⁸¹ P. Gignoux, *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sasanides de la Bibliothèque Nationale et du Musée du Louvre, II: Les sceaux et bulles inscrits* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1978), 63.

appear in stucco, for instance, alongside the image of a ram [Fig. 4].¹⁰⁸² A characteristic of these ribbons appears to be short horizontal lines, representing folds in the material.¹⁰⁸³ This motif is also used in Christian contexts. Lic notes the same ribbons, rising upwards with short horizontal lines, adorning the cross in two seals [Fig. 8], and on a coin of Yazdegerd I.¹⁰⁸⁴ It seems highly likely that in stucco where symmetrical bands rise up to frame the cross, this motif can be said to represent the ribbons common in non-Christian and Christian art in the Sasanian period.¹⁰⁸⁵ Lic connects the use of these ribbons to the iconography of *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁸⁶ The ribbons adorning the cross in these examples (from both Lic's catalogue of stucco and also the seals and coins she mentions) reflect a conscious association of the image of the cross with *xwarrah*.

Another similar group of stucco cross plaques depict the cross surmounted on stylised wings. It may be that some of the ribbon type crosses are in fact simplified winged crosses, though there are clearly different shapes involved in these two

¹⁰⁸² Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 229.

¹⁰⁸³ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 229.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 224-229 and figs. 117, 119, 121.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 230. There is little evidence for the suggestion that these bands reflect the foliate cross or that they are cornucopias. It may be that in the use of ribbons in the decorative scheme, a pre-existing foliate model was envisaged and the ribbons simply replaced the leaves. Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 232-233. Simpson, 'Rams, Stags and Crosses from Sasanian Iraq: Elements of a Shared Visual Vocabulary from Late Antiquity,' 104.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 233-240. See also, Simpson, 'Christians on Iraq's Desert Frontier,' 17.

types.¹⁰⁸⁷ For instance, Lic's catalogue nos. 48 [Fig. 9] and 89 depict wings beneath the cross that are more reminiscent of the wings in Sasanian iconography than the taller, thinner ribbon motif in nos. 43 [Fig. 5] and 47.¹⁰⁸⁸ The pair of wings is also a potent symbol of *xwarrah* as is abundantly clear from the Armenian *p'ark' khāch*, 'the glorious cross.'¹⁰⁸⁹ Lic argues strongly that the depiction of the cross alongside ribbon and wing motifs in these stucco plaques from southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf reflects a deliberate effort to show the cross as a symbol of glory and divine favour.¹⁰⁹⁰

Two additional motifs present on a number of the stucco crosses lend further support to Lic's argument. The first of these are the roundels used to decorate the ends of each arm of the cross [Fig. 10].¹⁰⁹¹ These crosses fall into two groups: those with three roundels at the end of each arm, and those with two.¹⁰⁹² Soudavar notes that a three-dot symbol is associated with the divine being Tishtrya who is, in Yt. 18.5-7, a

¹⁰⁸⁷ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 236-237. See also, M. Compareti, 'The Spread Wings Motif on Armenian Steles: Its Meanings and Parallels in Sasanian Art,' in M. Compareti, P. Raffetta, and G. Scarcia, eds., *ĒRĀN UD ANĒRĀN: Studies Presented to Boris Il'ič Maršak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (Venice: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2006), 203-204.

¹⁰⁸⁸ For examples of pairs of wings in Sasanian iconography, see Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, figs. 20, 21, 22.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 21.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 235-236.

¹⁰⁹¹ For instance, Lic, *Catalogue*, no. 49. This is almost universal in the stucco crosses that Lic catalogues.

¹⁰⁹² For those with three roundels, see for example, Lic, *Catalogue*, nos. 8, 9, 36; for those with two, see Lic, *Catalogue*, nos. 37, 38, 90.

companion to the *x^varənah*.¹⁰⁹³ As such, it appears on coins adorning crowns and fire altars.¹⁰⁹⁴ These three dots continue to appear on coins in the Islamic period, particularly alongside other symbols associated with Tishtrya, reinforcing the idea that this sign was considered auspicious.¹⁰⁹⁵ It may tentatively be suggested that the three roundels on the arms of the stucco cross plaques in Lic's catalogue were intended to evoke this auspicious symbol. It is also worth considering Soudavar's identification of the pearl as a symbol of *xwarrah*.¹⁰⁹⁶ Soudavar posits that the image of the pearl reflects the myth in Yt. 19 where the fiery *x^varənah* is kept underwater.¹⁰⁹⁷ In terms of Sasanian iconography, this is most commonly seen in the pearl roundel that frames other symbols of *xwarrah*, thus it is a prime example of Soudavar's visual *farreh-afzun*.¹⁰⁹⁸ In connection with this, the pearl has a particular place in Syriac theology: following Jesus' parable in Matthew 13, the pearl is a widely-used symbol of faith from the earliest period.¹⁰⁹⁹ The decorative ends of the

¹⁰⁹³ Soudavar, 'Vocabulary and Syntax,' 428.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Soudavar, 'Vocabulary and Syntax,' figs. 5, 9, 13.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Soudavar, 'Vocabulary and Syntax,' 428-429.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 52-56, 100-101.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 52-56, 100-101.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Soudavar, *Aura of Kings*, 17, 20. Lic suggests that the association of the cross with the image of the pomegranate and the anchor in no. 3 in her catalogue is a manifestation of this idea of a multiplicity of symbols indicating *farreh-afzun* in a Christian context. Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 240.

¹⁰⁹⁹ For instance the so-called *Hymn of the Pearl* in the *Acts of Thomas*, A. F. J. Klijn ed., *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 191; Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* are meditations on the pearl, J. T. Wickes, trans., *St Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith*, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 57; Abdisho's outline of the Christian faith is known as *The Pearl*. S. Brock, A. Butts, G. Kiraz, and L. Van

arms of these crosses may also suggest the pearl; thus synthesizing a symbol of *xwarrah* and a major motif of the Christian faith.

Secondly, a number of the crosses in Lic's catalogue are framed by an architectural arch or similar design.¹¹⁰⁰ Judith Lerner has argued that such frames on Sasanian seals act as an honorific device.¹¹⁰¹ This is, of course, not only a Sasanian phenomenon, but parallels the honorific use of decorative arches surrounding the cross on Palestinian ampullae studied by André Grabar, and it is also found in Greek and Syriac manuscript traditions.¹¹⁰² In the context of these Sasanian depictions of the cross, either on seals or in stucco plaques, and particularly in addition to the ribbons at the base of the cross, the arch serves to emphasise the cross as an object worthy of veneration.¹¹⁰³

Lic's work intimates that there was a conscious use of Sasanian motifs indicating *xwarrah* in the stucco cross plaques of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, achieved principally through the use of ribbons, floating upwards from the base of the cross.

Rompay, eds., *GEDSH* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), s.v. 'Abdisho' bar Brikha.' See also A. C. McCollum, *The Story of Mar Pinhas*, Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), 27.

¹¹⁰⁰ For example, Lic, *Catalogue*, nos. 37, 38.

¹¹⁰¹ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 7-8. Lerner does not draw on the concept of *xwarrah*.

¹¹⁰² A. Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre Sainte* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1958), 60. Clear examples of the honorific use of the arch from the manuscript tradition can be seen in the miniature of the Virgin and Child and in the arches over the evangelists in the Rabbula Gospels. See, Florence, Biblioteca mediceo Laurenziana, cod. Plut.1.56, 1v, 9v.

¹¹⁰³ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 7-8. Lerner does not draw on the concept of *xwarrah*.

There may have been further association with *xwarrah* through the pearl-like shapes adorning the ends of the cross arms, and with architectural frames indicating the significance of the cross. Lic concludes that in the context of the rise of Islam, Christian artistic production was repetitive and conservative, but also creative.¹¹⁰⁴ The emphasis on the cross alongside vines and other vegetation strongly suggests the burgeoning of an aniconic tradition of art among the Christian communities in the region.¹¹⁰⁵ This development may have come from within the Christian community, or it may have been imposed by the new Islamic authorities.¹¹⁰⁶ Whatever the case, the Christian stucco decoration of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf creatively used Sasanian iconography and motifs in a new context: the cross, rather than the figure of the king, was adorned with visual representations of *xwarrah*. This innovative and creative use of Sasanian iconography suggests that the physical image of the cross had assumed an importance as an object of veneration.¹¹⁰⁷

¹¹⁰⁴ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 271.

¹¹⁰⁵ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 271. Note, however, the use of figures on seals and in icons in the liturgy as described by Gabriel Qatraya. S. Brock, 'Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy,' *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 6/2 (2003), 201.

¹¹⁰⁶ Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 271. Note also the difficulties in dating stucco. Lic, *Christian Stucco Decoration*, 174.

¹¹⁰⁷ Hunter argues that the two 'genres,' i.e. moulded or incised, reflect a difference in function: the stucco cross plaques, she suggests, were used as a focus for devotional practice, like icons. Hunter situates this in the context of the devotional practices outlined by writers such as Isaac and Dadisho. Hunter, 'Veneration of the Cross in the East Syrian Tradition,' 316-317, 320. By the time of Abdisho wrote his theological treatise, the *Marganitha*, in 1298, the 'sign of the life-giving cross' is listed as one of the sacraments of the Church. Hunter, 'Veneration of the Cross in the East Syrian Tradition,' 316-317. Royel, *Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 45, n. 16. Abdisho's text on the sacramental character of the cross was translated in G. P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals*, ii (London: Joseph

6.3.2 *Xwarrah*, the Ram, and Seals depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac

Lic's argument for the creative use of Sasanian iconography of *xwarrah* in a Christian context derives from the work of Soudavar, with the association of images indicating *farreh-afzun*.¹¹⁰⁸ It stands in contrast to Shenkar's work on the Iranian iconographic tradition, which argues only for three very specific depictions of *xwarrah*.¹¹⁰⁹ Shenkar's argument is important, but there are clear examples of the evocation of *xwarrah* through the addition of wings or ribbons.¹¹¹⁰ It is possible, therefore, to distinguish between images evoking ideas of glory, fortune, and victory (wings, ribbons, etc.) and those three images (fire, the *vareghna* bird, and the ram) which specifically depict the divine being of the Avesta and the royal *xwarrah* as in *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*.¹¹¹¹ A group of Sasanian seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, which seem to connect the cross with the ram as an image of *xwarrah*, show yet a further way in which *xwarrah* was adapted and used in the East Syrian context, strengthening the idea that there was a deliberate iconographic association between the cross and the divine glory.

Masters, 1852), 404-405. This was, however, not always a normative understanding of the sacraments of the Church of the East. The younger contemporary of Abdisho, Patriarch Timothy II, gives a different list of sacraments in his tract *The Book of the Seven Causes of the Ecclesiastical Mysteries*. Royel, *Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 45.

¹¹⁰⁸ See page 325 above.

¹¹⁰⁹ See page 326 above.

¹¹¹⁰ See pages 325-329 above; This is particularly the case when seen alongside Matteo Compareti's work on Armenian steles, Compareti, 'The Spread Wings Motif on Armenian Steles,' 203-204

¹¹¹¹ See pages 326-328 above.

In 1977, Lerner compiled a catalogue of Sasanian seals that she identified as bearing distinctively Christian motifs.¹¹¹² A large number of the seals depict the cross either as the central or as a secondary motif, with two groups of seals being identified as showing the Visitation and the Entry into Jerusalem.¹¹¹³ One seal in the catalogue depicts a woman and an infant categorised tentatively by Lerner as the Virgin and Child, though representations of a woman and a child are not uncommon on Sasanian seals.¹¹¹⁴ However, the largest single group, comprising twenty-four seals, are those depicting the sacrifice of Isaac.¹¹¹⁵ Whether all these seals can be said to be Christian is debateable, given the importance of this episode in Jewish tradition.¹¹¹⁶ Gignoux, for instance, notes the depiction of Isaac bound on the altar at the synagogue at Dura-Europos, and he suggests that at least one of these seals should be considered non-Christian.¹¹¹⁷ Furthermore, two seals of indisputably Jewish origin

¹¹¹² Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 2.

¹¹¹³ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 3.

¹¹¹⁴ M. C. Root, 'Christian Seals. Judith A. Lerner,' *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40 (1981), 61.

¹¹¹⁵ Genesis 22; Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 14-15. Lerner revisited this group of seals in an article written some thirty years after her original catalogue and, as well as assessing scholarly discussions of her 1977 work, she includes adds another twenty-two Sasanian seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac to those she originally catalogued. J. Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited: Additional Observations on a Theme in Sasanian Glyptic Art,' in A. Hagedorn and A. Shalem, eds., *Facts and Artefacts: Art in the Islamic World. Festschrift for Jens Kröger on his 65th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 40.

¹¹¹⁶ The same arguments pertain to the seals depicting Daniel in the den of lions. Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 27.

¹¹¹⁷ P. Gignoux: 'Review of Judith A. Lerner: *Christian Seals of the Sasanian Period*,' *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 197/4 (1980), 469; The early date of this synagogue (244 C.E.) means that this is among the earliest extant Jewish paintings. E. Van den Brink, 'Abraham's Sacrifice in Early Jewish

showing the sacrifice of Isaac have been subsequently documented, indicating that the Jewish community in Babylonia used seals of this type.¹¹¹⁸ Rika Gyselen also provides evidence of two seals with small crosses, the inscriptions of which clearly indicate non-Christian ownership, and contextualises the representations of Abraham and Daniel against the backdrop of more ancient Near-Eastern motifs.¹¹¹⁹ This more recent scholarship highlights the complex relationship between Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian iconographic traditions in this period.

Lerner acknowledges that it is impossible to rule out Jewish origins for some of the seals of this group in her catalogue, but argues that depictions of the sacrifice of

and Early Christian Art,' in E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 140.

¹¹¹⁸ No. 16 in S. Shaked, 'Jewish Sasanian Sigillography,' in R. Gyselen, ed., *Au Carrefour des religions: Melanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux* (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1995), 239-256; No. 13 in D. M. Friedenberg, *Sasanian Jewry and Its Culture: A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009). The shortcomings of this latter work are clear from a number of reviews; see for instance those by G. Herman, 'Review: *Sasanian Jewry and its Culture: A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals* by Daniel M. Friedenberg,' *AJS Review* 34/1 (2010), 121-124, and C. Hezser, 'Sasanian Jewry and its Culture: *A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals* by Daniel M. Friedenberg,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 73/1 (2010), 107-108.

¹¹¹⁹ R. Gyselen, 'Un Vêtement Masculin «Archaïsant» dans le Glyptique Sassanide,' in N. Sims-Williams, ed., *Proceedings of the Third European Conference of Iranian Studies held in Cambridge, 11th to 15th September 1995, Part I: Old and Middle Iranian Studies* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1998), 43.

Isaac and of Daniel among lions are well known in Christian contexts.¹¹²⁰ Moreover, in some of the depictions of the sacrifice of Isaac, the scene includes one or more small crosses.¹¹²¹ In her 2006 article, Lerner revisited some of the opinions in her original monograph, particularly in light of Shaul Shaked's evidence of crosses adorning Jewish-owned seals.¹¹²² Nevertheless, she maintains that, given the importance of the image for Christians and Jews, the placement of crosses on seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac suggests Christian ownership.¹¹²³

Following Lerner, the use of the cross on these seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac may be linked specifically to Christian exegesis of Genesis 22. Gyselen has pointed to the possibility that the crosses may simply be a Sasanian decorative motif, but the explicit connection to Christian exegesis argued below implies that, at least in these cases, Christian ownership can be assumed.¹¹²⁴ Lerner's revision of her work recognises that a number of the seals in her original catalogue were probably Jewish rather than Christian, and in many cases it is impossible to tell.¹¹²⁵ What may be

¹¹²⁰ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 28. See also, Van den Brink, 'Abraham's Sacrifice in Early Jewish and Early Christian Art,' 140-151. Isabel Speyart van Woerden identifies 195 depictions of the Sacrifice of Isaac in the Late Antique period, and as Eddy Van den Brink notes, only three of these come from Jewish monuments. I. Speyart van Woerden, 'The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 15/4 (1961), 214-255.

¹¹²¹ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 35, 36, 37, 38, 44, 46, 48, 50 and 52. Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' nos. 3, 8, 10 and 11.

¹¹²² Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' 44-45.

¹¹²³ Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' 45.

¹¹²⁴ Gyselen, 'Un Vêtement Masculin «Archaïsant» dans le Glyptique Sassanide,' 43.

¹¹²⁵ Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' 44.

proposed is that the crosses in the seals belong clearly to the Christian interpretative tradition.¹¹²⁶

In Lerner's catalogue of the seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, thirteen have at least one small cross in the scene. In two of these, there is a cross above the altar of sacrifice in the place of Isaac's body.¹¹²⁷ Three seals depict crosses above both the ram and the altar [Fig. 11].¹¹²⁸ One seal depicts a cross over the altar, but there is no ram in the image.¹¹²⁹ Nine seals just depict a small cross above the ram [Fig. 12].¹¹³⁰ The cross usually appears in connection with the altar or the ram (in three seals, both) and it will be argued here that this is significant: the crosses on these seals provide a visual example of Christian exegesis of the sacrifice of Isaac.

From earliest times, Christian exegetes have understood the sacrifice of Isaac typologically.¹¹³¹ Writers such as John Chrysostom saw Isaac as a type of Christ

¹¹²⁶ For an interesting study of the ways in which images can be understood as interpreting texts, see L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Images as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 71-92.

¹¹²⁷ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 44 and 46.

¹¹²⁸ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, no. 46; Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' nos. 3 and 8a. This last seal contains at least five small crosses, above the ram, between the ram and Abraham, above the altar and to the right of Isaac's body (which Lerner notes may be a stylised form of Isaac's head).

¹¹²⁹ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, no. 44.

¹¹³⁰ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 35, 36, 37, 38, 48, 50 and 52. No. 50 does not depict an altar. Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' nos. 10 and 11.

¹¹³¹ S. Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,' *Le Muséon* 99 (1986), 76-77.

because Isaac died and yet did not die, like Christ who died and yet lives.¹¹³² The Syriac tradition concerns itself with the miraculous origin of the tree and the ram, as is clear in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*.¹¹³³ The ram is also taken to be a type of Christ, and the thicket is a type of the cross:

‘the mountain threw up the tree, and the tree the ram, so that, through the ram which was suspended on the tree and became the sacrifice instead of Abraham’s son, that day of His might be depicted, when He was suspended on the wood as the ram, and tasted death on behalf of the whole world.’¹¹³⁴

From the fifth century, this exegetical emphasis became normative in the East Syrian tradition, with writers such as Narsai highlighting this by referring to the ‘lamb’ rather than the ‘ram’ in this episode.¹¹³⁵

In the depictions of the sacrifice of Isaac on the seals published by Lerner, the small crosses are associated solely with the two figures in the scene that are understood in the tradition as types of Christ: Isaac and the ram.

¹¹³² Brock, ‘Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,’ 78, n. 39.

¹¹³³ The miraculous origin of the ram is discussed in Jewish tradition. Brock, ‘Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,’ 78, 41.

¹¹³⁴ Cited in G. J. Reinink, ‘The Lamb on the Tree: Syriac Exegesis and Anti-Islamic Apologetics,’ in Noort and Tigchelaar, eds., *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretation*, 121.

¹¹³⁵ Reinink, ‘The Lamb on the Tree,’ 121-122.

The idea that the image of the cross can, in a mystical way, stand in for Christ in the liturgy and in prayer is one that has been discussed above.¹¹³⁶ The seals depicting a cross above an altar in the place of the figure of Isaac provide an iconographical representation of the same phenomenon: there is a strong connection made in Christian typology between the sacrifice of Isaac and both the crucifixion and the Eucharist.¹¹³⁷ In the seals depicting Isaac, he lies flung across the altar: Lerner notes that this is unknown in the earliest Christian depictions of the sacrifice and posits a uniquely Sasanian interpretation of the scene.¹¹³⁸ It may be that the substitution of the cross for Isaac's body on the altar reflects the spatial limitations of the medium, though this is clearly not a universal concern as the body of Isaac is depicted on some seals and in others, the altar appears without a cross or Isaac.¹¹³⁹ The use of a small cross above the altar in some of these seals is best understood in the context of the typological tradition in which Isaac prefigures Christ. In these cases, the cross stands for the person of Isaac and therefore connects this scene with the events of Christ's life.

¹¹³⁶ See the discussion of the cross in Isaac and Gabriel Qatraya in 4.4 above.

¹¹³⁷ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 44 and 46; for an example of the connection with the sacrifice of Isaac and the Crucifixion and the Eucharist, see R. M. Longworth, 'Art and Exegesis in Medieval English Dramatizations of the Sacrifice of Isaac,' *Educational Theatre Journal* 24/2 (1972), 119.

¹¹³⁸ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 21.

¹¹³⁹ For depictions of Isaac, see Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 31, 32, 33, 34; for an altar without a depiction of the cross or of Isaac, see Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 (though here the altar is interestingly cruciform,) 43, 47, 49, 51, 54, 55. Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' no. 3 depicts Isaac on the altar with a cross above.

The use of the cross above the image of the ram is also typological. The connection between the ram and Christ is one of the principal exegetical approaches to this narrative in the Syriac tradition.¹¹⁴⁰ Brock notes that one widespread interpretation, found for instance in Origen, holds that Isaac and the ram represent a combined type of Christ: Isaac corresponding to Christ's divinity, and the ram to his humanity.¹¹⁴¹ Origen writes,

‘One aspect of Christ, therefore, is from above; the other is received from nature... Christ suffered, therefore, but in the flesh; and he endured death, but it was the flesh, of which this ram is a type... But the Word continued “in incorruption,” which is Christ according to the Spirit, of which Isaac is the image.’¹¹⁴²

The typology associating the ram and the thicket with Christ and the cross, noted above in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, becomes the standard way of interpreting the sacrifice of Isaac in East Syrian exegesis.¹¹⁴³ The depiction of the cross above the ram on these seals provides a visual evocation of this typology which sees Christ prefigured in the ram [Fig. 12].

¹¹⁴⁰ Brock, ‘Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,’ 77.

¹¹⁴¹ Brock, ‘Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,’ 77. For the outworking of Origen's exegesis in art, see C. Hezser, *Bild und Kontext: Jüdische und christliche Ikonographie der Spätantike* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 57-59.

¹¹⁴² R. E. Heine, trans., *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), VIII, 9.

¹¹⁴³ Reinink, ‘The Lamb on the Tree,’ 121.

The iconographic function of the cross above the ram is clearly different to that of the cross above the altar, however, since the cross never replaces the depiction of the ram. Lerner argues that one of the reasons for the popularity of seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac and Daniel and the lions is that these episodes resemble traditional Sasanian motifs.¹¹⁴⁴ She points particularly to the image of a figure between lions and the priest before the altar in Sasanian iconography.¹¹⁴⁵ In addition to this, it seems likely that the image of the ram in seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac also accounts for their popularity.¹¹⁴⁶ Depictions of rams are very common in Sasanian art, particularly because of their association with the royal *xwarrah* as seen in *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*.¹¹⁴⁷ It is plausible, therefore, that the ram on seals showing the sacrifice of Isaac were popular, partly because of the evocation of the *xwarrah*, thus strengthening Lerner's argument that these seals were common because of their use of Sasanian motifs. Similarly, the identification of the ram as a

¹¹⁴⁴ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 28.

¹¹⁴⁵ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, 28.

¹¹⁴⁶ See Friedenberg, *Sasanian Jewry and Its Culture: A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals*, nos. 30, 31, 32, and 33 for Jewish and non-Jewish seals depicting rams. For a general discussion of the significance of rams in Sasanian art, see C. J. Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp Seals in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), 91-92. Friedenberg includes three seals of the Islamic period depicting the sacrifice of Isaac (nos. 49, 50 and 51). All three include the ram, and no. 50 includes a six-pointed star where a cross might be found in the Sasanian seals. Simpson draws attention to a class of late-Sasanian pots found across northern Mesopotamia decorated with animals (including beribboned rams) and motifs that could resonate across different religious communities, thus accounting for their wide circulation. Simpson, 'Rams, Stags and Crosses from Sasanian Iraq: Elements of a Shared Visual Vocabulary from Late Antiquity,' 109-110.

¹¹⁴⁷ *La Geste d'Ardashir Fils de Pâbag*, IV. 8-24.

symbol of the *xwarrah* meets Shenkar's criteria that such iconographic symbols are rooted in the Persian textual tradition.¹¹⁴⁸

On this basis, the small cross above the ram in some of these seals is of particular significance.¹¹⁴⁹ It would seem that in these cases, unlike in the substitution of Isaac for a cross, there is an interplay between the cross as a sign of Christ's victory and the ram, a type of Christ's sacrifice and also a Sasanian motif for *xwarrah*. There is a deliberate juxtaposition of the ram and the cross, which draws on the Christian exegetical tradition. The significance of the ram as an image of *xwarrah* may account for the popularity of this motif generally, and the connection between the cross and the ram (and therefore *xwarrah*) could indicate an association of these images (and ideas) specific to their Sasanian context.

Origen's typology, associating Isaac with the Word and the ram with Christ's human nature, was not universal, and the typology can also be found in reverse. For instance, it became common in the Greek tradition due to the similarity between κριος and κυριος.¹¹⁵⁰ In Syriac, this is seen in a homily of Narsai, where he writes,

¹¹⁴⁸ Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 132.

¹¹⁴⁹ Lerner, *Christian Seals*, nos. 35, 36, 37, 38, 46, 48, 50 and 52. It is worth noting that there are no references to the use of the cross in depictions of this scene in other media: this seems to be unique to Sasanian seals. Van den Brink, 'Abraham's Sacrifice in Early Jewish and Early Christian Art,' 140.

¹¹⁵⁰ This is clear as early as the *Fragments* of Melito of Sardis (d. 180), who in *Fragment XI* emphasises the cultic aspect of the Crucifixion by reference to the binding of Isaac and to the sacrificial lamb of Isaiah 53. 7. He writes, Ἐν γὰρ ὁ κύριος ὁ ἄμνος ὡς ὁ 'κριός' ('For the Lord was a lamb like a ram') and 'καὶ ὁ ἄμνος τὸν κύριον ἐμπεποδισμένον εἰς σφαγήν' ('and the Lamb, the Lord, fettered for slaughter'). Text and translation cited in P. N. De Andrade, "'A Model of Christ':

‘The dumb ram rescued Isaac through the (divine) command, whereas He (Christ) will be rescued by the Hidden Power dwelling within Him.’¹¹⁵¹

This may provide additional theological substance to the association of the ram, as a symbol of *xwarrah*, with the cross in the interpretation of this episode on Sasanian seals.

This identification of the image of the cross with Sasanian *xwarrah* on seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac reflects a broader Christian appropriation of Sasanian culture from within the Persian Empire. Like Payne’s discussion of *xwarrah* and Mount Bisutun in relation to the narrative of the martyrdom of Mar Pethion, the explicit association of the cross and the ram on these seals points to another way in which Christians adopted and used *xwarrah* in the Sasanian world.¹¹⁵² It is in this broader context that the iconography of the stucco cross plaques of southern Mesopotamia should be interpreted. Similarly, this nexus of religious and cultural ideas serves to contextualise further Isaac of Nineveh’s homily on the cross.

Melito’s Re-Vision of Jewish Akedah Exegeses,’ *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12/1 (2017), 15-16.

¹¹⁵¹ Cited in Brock, ‘Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,’ 78, n. 38. Reinink disagrees with Brock’s interpretation of this passage of Narsai. Reinink, ‘The Lamb on the Tree,’ 121, n. 67.

¹¹⁵² Payne, *State of Mixture*, 60-61.

6.4 *Xwarrah* and the Cross in II. XI: Situating Isaac's Writings in the Sasanian World

Attempts on the part of Christians in the Sasanian Empire to associate the image of the cross with the iconography of *xwarrah* are shown graphically in the use of the Sasanian ribbon motif on the stucco plaque crosses of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. Similarly, the popularity of the sacrifice of Isaac motif on Sasanian seals appears to have been at least in part due to the association of the image of the ram with *xwarrah*. This intersected with the Christian exegetical tradition that saw the ram as a type of Christ, and facilitated the visual connection of the cross to the ram seen on some of these seals.

This association of the cross and *xwarrah* might be applied to situate Isaac of Nineveh in the context of the post-Sasanian world in which he lived. The material evidence associating Christian images with the iconography of *xwarrah*, points to a polemical context reflected in written sources, including Isaac's writings and the East Syrian martyr acts.

6.4.1 Anti-Zoroastrian Polemic

The works of Isaac of Nineveh make no explicit reference to Zoroastrian belief or practice, though he does write about 'pagans.' In II. XI. 8, Isaac writes that 'death which reigns over all has now proved easier, not only for believers, but also for

pagans [ܣܢܦܐ] as well.’¹¹⁵³ The term used here for pagans is a generic one, meaning ‘heathen, pagan, Gentile.’¹¹⁵⁴ In this passage, Isaac contrasts Christians and non-Christians as a way of showing the universal scope of the salvation wrought through the cross. Often Zoroastrians are called ܡܓܝܐ, ‘Magians,’ but there are numerous examples from the Persian martyr acts of Zoroastrians being referred to by the term ܣܢܦܐ and Zoroastrianism as ܣܢܦܐܗܐ.¹¹⁵⁵ Whilst Isaac may not have had a specific religious group in mind here, it is worth noting that there is sufficient evidence for the designation of Zoroastrians as ܣܢܦܐ in other Christian works to consider the possibility that Isaac intended to include them in his discussion of salvation history.¹¹⁵⁶ Given the religious and cultural milieu in which Isaac grew up, his use of ܣܢܦܐ may have encompassed Zoroastrians.

¹¹⁵³ II. XI, 8.

¹¹⁵⁴ J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903; repr. 1967), 149; M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns / Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 473.

¹¹⁵⁵ *Martyrs of Mount Ber’ain*, 1, 108; *History of the Holy Mar Ma’in*, 77.

¹¹⁵⁶ In addition to the Persian Martyr Acts, see two examples from the Synod of Ezekiel in 576 in J. B. Chabot, ed. and trans., *Synodicon orientale, ou, Recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris: Impr. nationale, 1902), 376, 386. In his assessment of the worldview of Christians in the Sasanian Empire, Brock wrote: ‘The world is divided, not between Rhomaye and Persaye, but between the ‘People of God’ and those outside, barraye (or, less frequently, ‘pagans’ hanpe).’ S. Brock, ‘Christians in the Sassanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties,’ in S. Mews, ed., *Religious and National Identity: Papers Read at the Nineteenth Summer Meeting and the Twentieth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, *Studies in Church History* 18 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 13. There is also an instance in the *Chronicle of Arbela*, where it is said of the Sasanian Emperor Peroz I that ‘although he was a

In his work, *Tradition and Formation of the Talmud*, Moulie Vidas suggests that Isaac's treatment of the recitation of the psalter can be seen in the context of the debates over the practice of recitation among Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in Late Antiquity.¹¹⁵⁷ He reads Isaac's descriptions of the arduous recitation of the psalter (II. XXI, 1) and his explicit criticism of 'those who read just for the sake of recitation' (II. XXIX, 10) alongside the *Life of Isho 'sabras*, who, upon his conversion, learns to recite the Psalter but in doing so '[makes] an industrious performance, moving his neck back and forth, as the magi do.'¹¹⁵⁸ Vidas situates Isaac's discussion of monastic recitation in the wider context of Christian and Jewish polemic that mocked the Zoroastrian practice of recitation (ܠܗܘܢ ܠܩܝܐ) for being vacuous and merely performative. He argues that polemical references to Zoroastrian practices of recitation found in the Talmud and among East Syrian writers were used to define the boundaries of acceptable praxis in their own communities.¹¹⁵⁹

pagan (ܡܢܗܘܢ), he greatly helped Christians during his lifetime.' Cited in S. Minov, *Memory and Identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures: Rewriting the Bible in Sasanian Iran*, *Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture* 26 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 231.

¹¹⁵⁷ M. Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 150-166.

¹¹⁵⁸ Cited in Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 163. For Isho'yahb's *Life of Isho 'sabras*, see J-B. Chabot, 'Histoire de Jésus-Sabran: écrite par Jésus-yab d'adiabène,' *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires* 7 (1897), 485-584. For this story, see also R. Kipperwasser and S. Ruzer, 'Zoroastrian Proselytes in Rabbinic and Syriac Christian Narratives: Orality-Related Markers of Cultural Identity,' *History of Religions* 51/3 (2012), 209-213.

¹¹⁵⁹ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 173-175.

A further polemical arena emerges in Isaac's strong emphasis on God's love for all of creation. This reflects the challenge to Zoroastrian cosmology posed in East Syrian hagiographical writing which has been previously discussed,¹¹⁶⁰ which sought to contend that God is the sole creator and that it is God's providence that directs creation.¹¹⁶¹

The divine love for creation is an important theme for Isaac, and it is therefore unsurprising to find it in his homily on the cross in the *Second Part*: 'Blessed is He who willed to manifest openly, at this time, the eternal love which He has for creation.'¹¹⁶² For Isaac, God is

'that Father whose strong and immeasurable love surpasses the love of all fleshly fathers and who has power to supply us with all things above what we ask and think.'¹¹⁶³

¹¹⁶⁰ See above, section 6.2.2.2

¹¹⁶¹ That Isaac knew this body of literature can be seen in III. XII, where Isaac catalogues the sufferings of the martyrs. Some of these come from the *Paradise of the Fathers*, and whilst some are sufficiently general as to be unidentifiable, the opposite is also the case. For instance, Isaac cites the cruelly specific fate of Tarbo and her companions in III. XII, 47. This text includes many of the characteristics of anti-Zoroastrian polemic in the Persian martyr acts, including trial at the hands of a Mobed and refusal to worship the sun. The martyrs bodies are sawn in half and suspended on the two sides of the road used by the king and his entourage on the way to his summer residence. For the text, see Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, ii, 254-260.

¹¹⁶² II. XI, 9.

¹¹⁶³ I. 361.

God's love, furthermore, shows no partiality:

‘He has a single equal love which covers the whole extent of rational creation, all things whether visible or invisible: there is no first place or last place with Him in (this) love for any single one of them.’¹¹⁶⁴

It is a love that is eternal and unchanging:

‘Even if there was a time when creation did not exist, yet there was never a time when God did not have love for it.’¹¹⁶⁵

God's love is intimately connected to the divine economy. Isaac argues that God's love leads to the creation of the world and to the unfolding plan of redemption:

‘The reason for the existence of the world and the coming of Christ into the world is one: the manifestation of the abundant love of God who made both to take place.’¹¹⁶⁶

In III. V, Isaac describes God's loving purpose for creation as a kind of deification:

‘And behold: creation has become ‘God’... He has united creation to His Essence, not because He needed to but to draw creation to Him that it might

¹¹⁶⁴ II. XXXVIII, 2.

¹¹⁶⁵ III. V, 1.

¹¹⁶⁶ *KG*. IV, 79. This is further expounded in II. XXXVIII, 1-2.

share in His riches, so as to give it what is His and to make known to it the eternal goodness of His Nature.’¹¹⁶⁷

Significantly, this love for all of creation is to be mirrored in the life of the ascetic. In a famous passage, Isaac recalls one of the Fathers being asked:

‘And what is a merciful heart? He replied: The burning of the heart unto the whole creation, man, fowls and beasts, demons and whatever exists... at all times he offers prayers with tears... even in behalf of the kinds of reptiles, on account of his great compassion which is poured out in his heart without measure, after the example of God.’¹¹⁶⁸

This notion of loving even demons lies behind the traces in Isaac of a belief in universal salvation, attracting a certain amount of scholarly attention. Sabino Chialà has suggested that this was the source of controversy addressed by Daniel bar Tubanita in his work opposing Isaac’s theological vision.¹¹⁶⁹ In the light of the

¹¹⁶⁷ III. V, 5, 14.

¹¹⁶⁸ I. 507-508.

¹¹⁶⁹ S. Chialà, ‘Two discourses of the ‘Fifth Part’ of Isaac the Syrian’s Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?’, in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 128-131. See also, A. Fokin, ‘Apocatastasis in the Syrian Christian Tradition: Evagrius and Isaac,’ in H. Alfeyev, ed., *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2015), 132-134; and I. L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 120 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 758-763. This emphasis explains Isaac’s enduring popularity as

suggestion that Isaac should be read in the context of the post-Sasanian world, it may be that this particular and repeated emphasis on God's impartial, eternal love for creation is a response to the Zoroastrian division of the created order into good and evil. The doctrine of *Apokatastasis* that Isaac inherits from Origen via Evagrius, may have had a strong appeal in response to the *Weltanschauung* of the Sassanian, Zoroastrian context in which he lived.

The basic principle that some animals are 'beneficent' (Middle Persian, *gōspand*) and that some are 'malevolent' (Middle Persian, *xrafstar*) lies at the heart of Zoroastrian attitudes towards the created order: forms of classification are given in the Young Avesta and in a variety of Middle Persian texts.¹¹⁷⁰ 'Beneficent' animals included cattle, dogs, birds and fish, whereas 'malevolent' animals tended to be those that could harm or seemed repulsive to human beings, such as insects, snakes, frogs, but also wolves, elephants, bears, monkeys and lions.¹¹⁷¹ Texts such as the

a spiritual writer, and his use in contemporary Christian environmental ethics. B. V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014) pp. 187-202; The following blog contains a discussion of whether or not Isaac would have used Styrofoam cups had they existed:

<http://pemptousia.com/2015/08/styrofoam-and-saint-isaac-the-syrian-toward-an-orthodox-environmental-ethic>. Accessed 21/06/2018.

¹¹⁷⁰ M. Moazami, 'Mammals iii. The Classification of Mammals and the Other Animal Classes according to Zoroastrian Tradition, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2015, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mammals-03-in-zoroastrianism> (accessed 27/07/2020).

¹¹⁷¹ Moazami, 'Mammals iii.'

Vidēvdād and the *Šāyast-nē-šāyest* describe the killing of malevolent creatures as part of the cosmic struggle against evil and as a sacred obligation.¹¹⁷²

With this in mind, as Payne argues, the account of Anahid's body being protected by wasps in the *Martyrdom of Mar Pethion, Adurohrmazd and Anahid* should be read.¹¹⁷³ Creatures considered malevolent by Zoroastrians, and moreover, creatures it is considered a religious duty to exterminate, are subject to the will of God and work for the protection of his saints.¹¹⁷⁴ This may also provide the context for saints in East Syrian hagiography who tame lions, though this is also a common trope in western hagiography and in non-Christian literature.¹¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the Sasanian context may have facilitated a particular reading of such miraculous power over wild creatures.

¹¹⁷² R. Foltz, 'Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals,' *Society and Animals* 18 (2010), 371-372.

¹¹⁷³ See pages 315-316 above.

¹¹⁷⁴ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 76.

¹¹⁷⁵ *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 52. For non-Christian literature, see the story of Androcles in Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, V, 14. The lion-taming hero is also a feature of ancient Mesopotamian literature, and is seen in *Gilgamesh* where both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are renowned for their skill in chasing off and killing lions. See B. A. Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 212 (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005), 155. The image of the lion hunt becomes an important part of royal ideology and propaganda in the Mesopotamian context, and endures into the Sasanian period. Harper and Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period: Royal Imagery*, 139. The royal ideology behind hunting lions would seem to reflect a different attitude to the relationship between power and creation than is seen in texts where the saints tame lions, as in *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*. Christian use of the motif is likely shaped by passages of Scripture such as Isaiah 11. 6; 65. 25 and Daniel 6. 20-23.

Isaac's account of what it means to have a merciful heart in I. 507-508 addresses this same concern to show God as sole creator. God, and the saints who imitate him, love the whole of creation, including 'demons and whatever exists' and even reptiles.¹¹⁷⁶ The categorisation of the created order into 'beneficent' and 'malevolent' animals is broken down by Isaac's emphasis on the love of God for all creatures. Similarly, the Zoroastrian notion of participating in a cosmic struggle against evil is subverted by Isaac through his suggestion that even demons are worthy of the love of God and of the believer.

Another aspect of this polemic is seen in the Persian martyr acts. Most often, Zoroastrians are accused of sun worship, as is seen in *The Martyrdom of Bishop John and of the Priest Jacob* and in *The Martyrdom of Bishop Narseh and of Joseph his Disciple*.¹¹⁷⁷ In some cases the disputation reflects a more sophisticated engagement with Zoroastrian thought. For instance, in the *Martyrdom of Mar Pethion, Adurohrmazd and Anahid*, the hagiographer displays an unusual knowledge of Zoroastrian cosmology, referring to Zurvanite beliefs.¹¹⁷⁸ Similarly, in the *History of Mar Qardagh*, the holy man Abdisho gives a nuanced philosophical defence of Christianity, including a declaration that even the elements have an origin and that God is sole creator.¹¹⁷⁹ This particular emphasis is also seen in *The History of the*

¹¹⁷⁶ I. 507-508.

¹¹⁷⁷ Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, iv, 128-130; Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, ii, 284-286.

¹¹⁷⁸ Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, ii, 592

¹¹⁷⁹ *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 32.

Holy Mar Ma'in where Benjamin, teacher of Mar Ma'in gives an account of creation:

‘God, along with the Child who issues from him, and his holy angels... made heaven and earth, the sea and the dry land, the sun, the moon and the stars, light and darkness, day and night, wild and tame animals, creeping things and winged birds, and everything that goes about in the world.’¹¹⁸⁰

East Syrian hagiographical material provides ample evidence for Christian polemic that condemned Zoroastrians for misdirecting their worship to created beings and not to the one who created them.¹¹⁸¹ This polemic asserts that the God of the Christians is the sole creator and the one who guides and sustains all of creation. It is borne out in texts where creatures considered malevolent to Zoroastrians are obedient to the saints, and in disputations where the martyrs assert the supremacy of God's providence.

This is also the same polemical context that facilitated the Christian adoption of the iconography of *xwarrah* on the stucco cross plaques of the Gulf and Southern Mesopotamia. The wings and the ribbons associated with the sun, the *xwarrah* of

¹¹⁸⁰ *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 19-20. See also *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, 26, and *Story of Mar Pinhas*, 10.

¹¹⁸¹ R. Payne, ‘Les Polémiques Syro-Orientales contre le Zoroastrisme et leurs Contextes Politiques,’ in F. Ruani, ed., *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, Études syriaques 13 (Paris: Geuthner, 2016), 241.

kings, and even Ahura Mazda, are applied instead to the cross.¹¹⁸² For Christians in the Sasanian world, worship and veneration are to be directed away from created beings, and directed to God, the sole-creator.

Isaac's strong emphasis on the divine love for creation, and his connection of creation and the plan of redemption, even the deification of creation, enables him to offer an alternative theological approach to this same set of concerns. For Isaac, God's love for creation is equal and eternal.¹¹⁸³ The ascetic is to show love for all creation by praying even for demons and those creatures considered evil.¹¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Isaac affirms the essential goodness of creation by suggesting that God unites creation to the divine essence.¹¹⁸⁵ Creation has its origin in God's love, and God's providential love guides creation to its fulfilment.¹¹⁸⁶ This particular strand of thought, so striking in Isaac's writings, can be read as part of a wider Christian polemic that sought to challenge Zoroastrian cosmology and assert the Christian God as sole creator and guide of creation. Isaac's homily on the cross, which praises God 'who willed to manifest openly, at this time, the eternal love which He has for creation,' is part of this theological enterprise.¹¹⁸⁷

¹¹⁸² Sarkhosh Curtis, *Ancient Iranian Motifs and Zoroastrian Iconography*, 179

¹¹⁸³ II. XXXVIII, 2.

¹¹⁸⁴ I. 507-508.

¹¹⁸⁵ III. V, 5, 14.

¹¹⁸⁶ II. XXXVIII, 1-2.

¹¹⁸⁷ II. XI, 9.

6.4.2 The Power of the Cross over Nature

It has been argued previously that Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* can be read in the context of anti-pagan polemic among Christian authors in the Graeco-Roman world and in the Near East.¹¹⁸⁸ In particular, examples of the image or the sign of the cross being used to expel demons proved the truth of Christianity.¹¹⁸⁹ By extension, there is also a way in which this polemical trope can be seen to reflect Christian polemic against Zoroastrian belief and practice. In II. XI, 7, Isaac describes the power of the cross has over nature:

‘Through the power of the Cross many have restrained wild animals, have acted boldly in the face of fire, have walked on lakes, have raised the dead, have held back plagues, have caused springs to flow in parched and wild terrain, have laid a boundary to the seas...’¹¹⁹⁰

These miracles break the boundaries of ‘normative’ behaviour and have a revelatory aspect, with Isaac asserting that through the cross, the true knowledge of God is made known to all people. Following a passage in which he has summed up various aspects of the Christian faith, he writes,

‘These are they mysteries which the holy form [ܟܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ] of the Cross bears: it is the cause of the miracles which the Creator performs through it in

¹¹⁸⁸ See 2.2 above.

¹¹⁸⁹ See page 53 above.

¹¹⁹⁰ II. XI, 7.

the entire world... His intention was to give to all, by means of this form, knowledge of His glory [ܡܫܚܐ]'¹¹⁹¹

This revelatory aspect of the cross in Isaac's thought is related to the association of the ram and the cross in the seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, discussed above.¹¹⁹² The image of the cross is used to signify the typological interpretations of the ram in the Christian exegetical tradition: the cross indicates that the ram is not simply a ram, but stands for Christ. As Isaac indicates in II. XI, the image of the cross is a window into the whole of salvation history.¹¹⁹³

There are various accounts in East Syrian hagiographical material where a miracle is performed by the saint making the sign of the cross, some of which have parallels with the miracles described by Isaac. In this body of literature, miracles are used to prove the truth of Christianity over Zoroastrianism and, like Payne's example of Christian appropriation of the *xwarrah* of Mount Bisutun, this polemic asserts the Christian claim on the physical landscape in which Persian Christians found themselves.¹¹⁹⁴

One common set of miracles concerns healing. In the *History of Mar Yawnan*, a monk is healed after Mar Yawnan washes a cross with water and gives the brother the water to drink, a practice reminiscent of *hmana*, the use of the dust gathered from

¹¹⁹¹ II. XI, 30.

¹¹⁹² See 6.3.2 above.

¹¹⁹³ See also I. 544: 'The cross is the gate of mysteries.'

¹¹⁹⁴ See 6.2.2.2 above.

holy sites.¹¹⁹⁵ In *The Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, Mar 'Abda reattaches the leg of the young nobleman Mihrnarse by the power of the cross:

‘he took the leg, cold and dead, brought it up to the place from which it had been detached and, without any medicament or unguent, he attached it and joined it up with the sign of the Cross which has dissolved our death and revived our nature to immortal life.’¹¹⁹⁶

Mihrnarse is then raised from the dead. This miracle is part of the chain of events leading to the conversion from Zoroastrianism of the three youths at the centre of story.

The *History of Mar Qardagh* contains a couple of passages where the cross is invoked and the miraculous occurs. Firstly, there are two occasions where Qardagh ‘sealed himself with the sign of the Cross’ causing Satan to change form and flee. In the first of these, Satan appears as an old man, cursing Qardagh and asking why he has abandoned him and gone after Christ. At Qardagh’s prayer, he changes into a

¹¹⁹⁵ S. Brock, ‘The *History* of Mar Yawnan,’ in in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murhiki, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *An Anthology of Syriac Writers from Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 39 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015), 24. Later in the narrative, the saint heals a lion with dust from the ground over which he makes the sign of the Cross. *History of Mar Yawnan*, VIII, 9. This connects with the reference in II. XI, 7 to saints who subdue wild beasts by the power of the cross. For other examples of saints befriending wild animals in the East Syrian tradition, see *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 52.

¹¹⁹⁶ *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, 17.

black serpent and slithers off into the crevice of a rock.¹¹⁹⁷ The second time, Satan appears as a magus, saying, ‘Qardagh, my son, why have you deserted me and gone over to my enemies?’ Again, Qardagh seals himself with the cross and prays, and Satan ‘became like an old Ethiopian with his hands placed on his head, wailing and weeping as he ran away.’¹¹⁹⁸ The appearance of Satan as a Zoroastrian priest makes the polemical aspect of this encounter clear.

One further example from the *History of Mar Qardagh* shows the power of the cross over the natural order:

‘One day when Qardagh was going out to the stadium to play ball... holy Abdišo came to meet him... Then holy Abdišo, burning with the zeal of God, raised his hand and traced the sign of the Cross... and when they arrived at the stadium and began to strike the ball while racing along on horses, the ball stuck to the ground. And they were unable to move it from its place.’

Qardagh orders his soldiers to move the ball, and when they find they cannot, one of the soldiers says, “When we were getting ready to mount, I saw the man raise his right hand, and he made the shape of the cross of the Christians...”¹¹⁹⁹

This is perhaps one of the most distinctive miracles of the East Syrian hagiographical tradition, and Joel Walker shows how this passage subverts the expectations of the

¹¹⁹⁷ *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 36-37.

¹¹⁹⁸ *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 42-43.

¹¹⁹⁹ *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 25-26.

performance and recognition of heroic deeds in the Iranian epic tradition.¹²⁰⁰ In addition, this miracle serves to highlight the point Isaac makes in II. XI. 7: the miracles of the saints show the power of the cross over the created order.

Isaac refers to various kinds of miracles concerning water in II. XI. 7:

‘many have... walked on lakes... have caused springs to flow in parched and wild terrain, have laid a boundary to the seas, have commanded the surge of mighty rivers...’¹²⁰¹

In the acts of Mar Shalita, the saint comes to the Tigris and sees its waters surging, and seeing no boat, he makes the sign of the cross on the water and walks on the waves as on dry land.¹²⁰² The particular emphasis Isaac places on miracles involving water (and indeed the reference to fire in the same passage) may reflect the Zoroastrian ritual context.¹²⁰³ The Christian subjugation of nature by the power of the Cross, which Isaac describes in II. XI. 7, is closely connected to Payne’s argument that hagiography was a means of asserting a uniquely Christian relationship with the physical landscape of the Sasanian world.¹²⁰⁴

¹²⁰⁰ Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 140-142.

¹²⁰¹ II. XI, 7.

¹²⁰² P. Bedjan, ed., *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, i (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1890), 458.

¹²⁰³ Payne, *State of Mixture*, 31.

¹²⁰⁴ See 6.2.2.2 above.

The parallels between Isaac's description of the miracles performed by the power of the cross and the various East Syrian *acta* discussed here show that Isaac's homily can be read in a specifically Zoroastrian polemical context. The examples here are limited to those in which the sign of the Cross is used, but there are a wide range of other miracles in these texts which assert the power of God over nature.¹²⁰⁵ The list of miracles in II. XI. 7 articulates the power of the cross over the natural world, and so reflects the wider transformation of Christian attitudes towards the land in the light of Zoroastrian belief and practice. II. XI. 7 provides further evidence of the Christian claim on the physical landscape in the post-Sasanian world, seen above in the appropriation the notion of the *xwarrah* of the land, and of ideas of the saints as mediators of an increase in prosperity. Here, Isaac understands the image of the cross to facilitate this process: the cross, by its power over nature, is the primary way in which Christians can assert themselves over the physical (and indeed sacred) landscape around them.

6.5 Conclusion

Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* points to the veneration due to the cross on account of the mysteries it symbolises. It also has a polemical aspect. An earlier chapter of this thesis situated II. XI in the context of anti-pagan polemic and the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition, and again this thesis has shown the ways in which Isaac's homily can be understood to indicate the boundaries of Christian

¹²⁰⁵ Gignoux, 'Une Typologie,' 512-514.

orthodoxy.¹²⁰⁶ Isaac's writing should also be interpreted in the context of the post-Sasanian world into which he was born and educated. The two themes of the eternal love of God revealed in the cross and the power of the cross over nature in II. XI have strong parallels in the East Syrian martyr acts, which reflect the Christian claims to the true religion against the Zoroastrian priesthood and the Sasanian state. The way in which Isaac uses the image of the cross is part of a broader engagement with and appropriation of Sasanian culture, seen particularly in the use of *xwarrah* among Christians and other non-Zoroastrian communities of the Empire. This is clear from the martyr acts and in the archaeological record. The iconography of *xwarrah* came to be associated with the image of the cross in the stucco plaque crosses of the Gulf region and in a group of seals depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, thus crossing religious boundaries. The ways in which the Church of the East used the image of the cross to assert its faith within a specifically Persian, Zoroastrian context, offers the foundation to interpret Isaac's homily II. XI in light of the post-Sasanian world in which he lived.

¹²⁰⁶ See 2.5 and 3.3 above.



Fig. 3. Sasanian stucco plaque, c. 6th century.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Accession No. 32.150.48. The monogram *afzun*,
adorned with wings and encircled by pears.



Fig. 4. Sasanian stucco plaque, c. 6th century.
The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.
Inv. 228840. Ram with wings and ribbons.



Fig. 5. Stucco cross plaque
National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad
(uncatalogued).
Al-Ka'bi, 'A New Repertoire of Crosses
from the Ancient site of Hira, Iraq,' fig. 7;
Lic, *Catalogue*, no. 43.



Fig. 6. Sasanian Plate, c. 399-420 C.E.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Accession No. 1970.6. Yazdegerd I, adorned with
ribbons, slaying a stag.



Fig. 7. Silver drachm of Vistahm, c. 594 C.E.

B. R. Nelson, ed., *Numismatic Art of Persia: the Sunrise Collection. Part I, Ancient – 650 BC to AD 650* (Lancaster: Classical Numismatic Group, 2011), 376.



Fig. 8. Seal

The Louvre, D. 283

R. Gyselen, *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sasanides de la Bibliothèque Nationale et du Musée du Louvre, I: Collection générale* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1993), 155, pl. XLII. 60.15. Cross with ribbons, enclosed by an arch.



Fig. 9. Stucco cross plaque

Al-Ka'bi, 'A New Repertoire of Crosses from the Ancient site of Hira, Iraq,' fig. 12; Lic, *Catalogue*, no. 48.



Fig. 10. Stucco cross plaque

Current location unknown, photographed by Martina Müller Wiener in 2015 at al-Hira. Lic, *Catalogue*, no. 49.



Fig. 11. Seal impression.

Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' no. 3. The Sacrifice of Isaac, with crosses above the ram and the altar.



Fig. 12. Seal impression.

Lerner, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac Revisited,' no. 11. The Sacrifice of Isaac, with a small cross above the ram.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the theological and mystical impulses of Isaac's world through the lens of his homily on the cross. The religious environment in which he grew up profoundly shaped Isaac's thought. Far from being a mystical writer unconcerned with the controversies of his day, he was actively polemical and his worldview was formed in response to the diverse religious traditions of Late Antique Mesopotamia. The concentric circles in the modern image of Isaac from the Taizé community are symbolic of the complex and multi-layered influences with which he engaged and responded.¹²⁰⁷

As a cornerstone of orthodox spiritual and ascetic writing, Isaac's influence has radiated outwards, penetrating far beyond the Church of the East. His emphasis on divine love surmounted theological divisions in Antiquity, and his transmission in the Chalcedonian Orthodox world left its mark in modern times on Dostoyevsky, and from there Karl Barth and twentieth-century Protestant theology. Over and above portraying Isaac solely as the solitary-loving ascetic who eschewed controversy, this thesis has clarified his role as a theologian and polemicist, who drew on the religiously diverse landscape of Mesopotamia in his time.

Isaac's thought can be contextualised within the porous boundaries between communities in Late Antique Mesopotamia. Similar concerns for eschatology, ascetic practice, the Temple and revelation, emerge in Jewish apocalyptic literature

¹²⁰⁷ Fig. 1. See Introduction.

and the Hekhalot texts; substantiating Mary Hansbury's conviction that Isaac's writings have important connections with the Jewish mystical tradition.¹²⁰⁸

Isaac's homily on the cross also reflects the broad adoption of the Zoroastrian concept of *xwarrah* among the non-Zoroastrian religions of the empire. The archaeological record shows how the iconography of *xwarrah* came to be associated with the cross in the stucco plaque crosses of the Gulf, and Isaac certainly knew these images. The way in which Isaac attributes miracles to the cross parallels the polemical use of the cross in the Persian martyr acts. Furthermore, his focus on divine love for all creation can be read as anti-Zoroastrian polemic that intends to show the Christian God as sole creator and alone worthy of worship.

Against the backdrop of Late Antique cosmology, Isaac's II. XI sets out to demonstrate the consummate power of the cross over the natural world and the forces of evil. His work has much in common with a range of Greek and Syriac hagiographical writing, as well as with texts such as the *Julian Romance* and the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*. These texts demonstrate the widely-held view that demons inhabited the natural world as well as pagan statues. In common with these texts, Isaac shows the power of the cross as a means of exorcism: 'Satan himself and

¹²⁰⁸ M. Hansbury, 'Remembrance of God and its relation to Scripture in Isaac III including Insights from Islamic and Jewish Traditions,' in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 93-121.

all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the Cross, when it is depicted by us against him.¹²⁰⁹

Isaac's writing is heir to the long tradition amongst Syriac writers linking the cross and the Ark. Ephrem and the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* associate various Temple furnishings (including the poles of the Ark) with Christ's Passion.¹²¹⁰ In the *History of the Likeness of Christ*, the Jewish leaders appeal to the imagined power of the Ark over the miraculous icon of the cross, mirroring Isaac's own assertion that the divine presence has passed from the Ark to the cross.¹²¹¹ Isaac's homily belongs to a tradition of Syriac and Greek anti-Jewish writing that was particularly prominent in the seventh century, and his line of argument has much in common with these *Adversus Judaeos* texts. Furthermore, Isaac appeals to the scriptural veneration of the Ark as a defence against the accusation of idolatry: as Moses and 'the People' bowed down before the Ark, so Christians worship the cross.¹²¹² This exegetical argument continues to be used by Christian writers in the Islamic period.¹²¹³

¹²⁰⁹ II, XI, 8.

¹²¹⁰ Walters, J. E., trans., *Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 30 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), V, 6, 9; E. A. W. Budge, trans., *The Book of the Cave of Treasures: A History of the Patriarchs and the Kings their Successors from the Creation to the Crucifixion of Christ. Translated from the Syriac Text of the British Museum MS. ADD. 25875* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1927).

¹²¹¹ II, XI, 4.

¹²¹² II, XI, 13.

¹²¹³ For this theme in John of Damascus, Theodore bar Koni, Isho'yahb bar Malkon and the eight-century anonymous *Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and an Arab Notable*, see C. Tieszen, *Cross Veneration in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 29, 77, 104, 120. See

Isaac was acutely aware of contemporary controversies, despite his profoundly mystical sentiments. His emphasis on cross veneration also serves to highlight his anti-Messalian writing: II. XI provides the theological justification for the physical practice of cross veneration, which is a safeguard against the heresy of those who rejected outward forms of worship. He also engaged in the Christological disputes that divided the churches. Isaac asserts that the metal plate covering the Ark is a type of Christ's humanity. This typology is unique to East Syrian writers because of its Christological implications. Whereas modern scholars, notably John Behr and Hilarion Alfeyev, have tried to minimise Isaac's dyophysite Christology, this is an untenable interpretation. Isaac's application of the Ark-Cross typology in II. XI places him clearly in the specific exegetical and Christological tradition of the seventh-century Church of the East.

Isaac was born and educated amidst a great flourishing of intellectual life in Beth Qatraye in the seventh century. The comparison of Isaac's writings on cross veneration with those of his contemporaries from the region firmly situate him in this environment. When considered alongside the writings of Dadisho, it becomes clear that Isaac's thought developed in the context of the reformist monasticism promulgated by Abraham of Kashkar. Both writers explore the idea of the crucifixion of the intellect and the solitary life, making use of the Syriac translation

also, H. Teule, 'Išo'yahb bar Malkon's Treatise on the veneration of the holy icons,' in M. Tamcke, ed., *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, Beirut Texts and Studien 117 (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007), 157-170; S. Griffiths, trans., *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons Written in Arabic by Theodore Abū Qurrah, Bishop of Harrān (C.755-830 A.D.)*, Eastern Christian Texts in Translation (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 54, 58.

of Abba Isaiah, a writer of central importance to the reformist movement. Gabriel Qatraya's liturgical commentary reflects a different genre of writing and set of concerns to Isaac's ascetical homilies. Nevertheless, the physical image of the cross signifies the presence of Christ and is a locus of Christological thought from both Isaac and Gabriel.

7.1 Implications for Future Research

This thesis has offered a preliminary account of the importance of understanding Isaac in the multi-confessional and multi-religious environment of Late Antique Mesopotamia. Similar contextual studies with different foci could bear much fruit in helping scholars to understand Isaac better as a theologian and polemical writer, particularly in relation to Christian-Jewish discourse, mystical traditions, exegesis and apocalyptic.

Isaac's writing on Gehenna has been well-surveyed in modern scholarship, and his universalism may have been controversial in his own day.¹²¹⁴ However, chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis touched on Isaac's writing on Gehenna in relation to both Jewish mysticism and anti-Zoroastrian polemic. This apocalyptic theme in Isaac parallels the way in which mystical experience leads to a deeper knowledge of the created order in texts such as 3 Enoch, and Isaac's writing on Gehenna emphasises God's

¹²¹⁴ See S. Chialà, 'Two discourses of the 'Fifth Part' of Isaac the Syrian's Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?', in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi, and H. Al-Thani, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 128-131.

love for all creation rather than the Zoroastrian division of creation into good and evil. The implications of this are beyond the scope of these chapters, but it is an area in which the approach taken in this study would be beneficial.

Unlike with Ephrem, to date there is no detailed work on Isaac and anti-Judaism, no doubt because of his relatively peaceable sentiments concerning the honour due to all people, including the Jews, in I. 55. Isaac's writing on the cross has much in common with the widespread genre of anti-Jewish writing in the seventh century, and his Ark-Cross typology is reflected in poetry, exegesis and in polemical tales. Passages like I. 55 cannot be taken for granted. Significant work remains to be done in this area.

Similarly, this thesis has broader implications for the study of the eighth-century East Syrian mystics who followed Isaac. For instance, chapter 5 briefly considered Joseph Hazzaya's *On Providence* against the background of Jewish apocalyptic, and a contextual study of the apocalyptic portion of *On Providence* is highly desirable. The eighth-century mystics of the Church of the East lived in a world where Jewish mysticism was taking on new forms and in which Sufism emerged.

In his 2017 monograph, Jason Scully identified a significant gap in the scholarly literature on Isaac, writing that 'more work needs to be done on the theological currents that Isaac is responding to in his writings.'¹²¹⁵ There is still more to be done, but this thesis has opened up new ways of reading Isaac of Nineveh. It has shone a

¹²¹⁵ J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017),

xxiii.

light on the wide range of 'theological currents' with which Isaac engages, from demonology and cross veneration to ascent mysticism and anti-Zoroastrian polemic. His writings can no longer be separated from the theologically and religiously diverse world of Late Antique Mesopotamia.

17 לחמתה לא יתעורר לך אדם ויחיהו לך שוהו לך. מה דמלין חלמי ארזי מן

חשבתה לך כל ארבה, דחיתתה חתמה סתת מן: ארזי מן דכפתי ארזי דחשבתה

חשבתה. מן חשבתה חתמה. חשבתה חלמי לך שוהו לך חתמה חשבתה חשבתה. ארזי חשבתה

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27 מן הדין כי חזקת הבעלות נשענת על חזקת הבעלים וכללית
היא חזקת הבעלים * וכללית היא חזקת הבעלים *
הבעלים * *

28 אולם חזקת הבעלים אינה חזקת הבעלים אלא חזקת הבעלים
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29 ולפיכך חזקת הבעלים אינה חזקת הבעלים אלא חזקת הבעלים
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30 כללית היא חזקת הבעלים * כללית היא חזקת הבעלים *
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31 תיב טו מו אלמא מו דמי כתיבא אעתיבא חב וכו דפית ל איווה לה טחא דל
חבטאמחא : ויז איער כחב חמא ד מי פחאמח דמח חב חב דזי נכתיבא חבטאמח
אמי לזחב חמא ד אסחחח *

32 תו לח כתיבא דמחחחח דאסחחח * עמי כאלמא מו דחיל ל חב מו חב * חב
חבטאמח דזחב. לה חבטאמח מו דמחחחח דחב לה * טא חבטאמח דאח חב ל ט
חב דחבטאמח. כתיבא דחבטאמח דחב חבטאמח.

33 חבטאמח מו אלמא מו דלחחחח חב חב חבטאמח דחב לה : חב חבטאמח מו חבטאמח
אמח דחב חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח *

34 חבטאמח מו איווה דמחחחח דמי לזחב חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח
: חבטאמח מו חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח *

35 לח מלחחחח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח חבטאמח
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Appendix 2

A translation of Isaac's homily on the cross in the *Second Part* (II. XI).¹²¹⁷ Italics in the body of the text, with the exception of the title, indicate scriptural quotations.

XI

On the contemplation of the mystery of the Cross; and on what power it conveys in an invisible way in its visible form, and on the vast mysteries of God's governance which were performed in the ancients, and the summing up of this in Christ our Lord; (and how) the all-powerful Cross conveys the sum of this.

1. In what sense, and whose type is it that the image of the Cross depicts for us — this (image) which is held in great honour by us, and which is gladly venerated by us with love and insatiable desire; whose story is known to and repeated by, as it were, the whole world?
2. How the divine power mysteriously resides in it — just as God is wont to do in every generation as an indication of the wonderful (character) of His power, in that He places His honoured name in an awesome way upon corporeal objects in every generation, manifesting in them wondrous and magnificent things to the world, granting by their means great benefits to humanity — (all this) we will describe, as

¹²¹⁷ S. Brock, trans., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part.'* Chapters IV-XLI, CSCO 555 (Leuven: CSCO, 1995), 53-62.

far as possible, in simple words, concerning the glorious eternal power which is in the Cross, so that it may be realized that it is God who carries out and performs everything, in everything, amongst those of old, and amongst those of latter times, and for ever.

3. We do not speak of a power in the Cross that is any different from that (power) through which the worlds came into being, (a power) which is eternal and without beginning, and which guides creation all the time without any break, in a divine way and beyond the understanding of all, in accordance with the will of His divinity.

4. What then? The limitless power of God dwells in the Cross, just as it resided in an incomprehensible way in the Ark which was venerated amidst great honour and awe by the (Jewish) People, performing by it miracles and awesome signs in the midst of those who were not ashamed to call it 'God', that is, they would gaze upon it in awe as though upon God, because of the glory; of God's honoured name which was upon it. This (Ark) was not only honoured with this name by the (Jewish) People, but by foreign peoples, their enemies: *'Woe to us, for the God of the People has come to the camp today'*.¹²¹⁸

That power which existed in the Ark (of old) is believed by us to exist in this revered form of the Cross, which is held in honour by us in great awareness concerning God.

¹²¹⁸ An adaptation of I Samuel 4. 7.

5. What then was in the Ark to make it so awesome and filled with all manner of power and signs, apart from the Jar of Manna and the Tablets of the Law which Moses wrote, and Aaron's staff which sprouted? Did not Moses and the People prostrate before the Ark in great awe and trembling? Did not Joshua son of Nun lie stretched out on his face before it from morning until evening? Were not God's fearful revelations manifested there as if to (provide) honour for the object, seeing that the Shekhina of God was residing in it? This (Shekhina), which now resides in the Cross, has departed from there (sc. the Ark) and has resided mysteriously in the Cross.

6. The power of this Shekhina manifests itself in the Cross in no lesser a way by means of mighty signs than at that time there — indeed (they occur) even more so here. Were not all the things described in Acts as having occurred through the hands of the Apostles greater than those of old? Anyone who does not accept the latter will not believe the former either.

7. Through the power of the Cross many have restrained wild animals, have acted boldly in the face of fire, have walked on lakes, have raised the dead, have held back plagues, have caused springs to flow in parched and wild terrain, have laid a boundary to the seas, have commanded the surge of mighty rivers to flow after them, have reversed the course of water.

8. Why do I speak of these things? Satan himself and all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the Cross, when it is depicted by us against him. And listen to what is greater than all these things: in that ministry (of the Old Testament), for all the signs

and wonders that took place in their presence, they were unable to eradicate even the smallest kind of sin, whereas in the ministry that takes place with the Cross, sin has become like a spider's web on which a heavy object is hung and it no (longer) succeeds in standing up. And as for death, which had been so fearful for (human) nature, now even women and children can hold up their heads against it. Death which reigns over all has now proved easier, not only for believers, but also for pagans as well: fear of it has been greatly diminished from what had been the case previously.

9. Revered is He who altered His decree against us by means of the reconciliation which He himself effected on our behalf. Blessed is He who willed to manifest openly, at this time, the eternal love which He has for creation.

10. In front of that wooden construction in which it is said that God's Shekhina existed, adoration filled with awe was offered up continuously to God by Moses and all the People.

11. How was it that God said in the Law to the People through Moses, '*Do not worship the work of human hands or any image or likeness*',¹²¹⁹ yet the Ark was built with the hands of carpenters and the Tablets were hewn by Moses's hands from the mountain and inscribed by his own fingers? Was it not because they applied the name of idols to the former things that they received punishments, whereas in the case of the latter objects the power of God was manifested in them openly, seeing

¹²¹⁹ An adaptation of Exodus 20. 4-5.

that the glorious and revered name of God was set upon them. (Thus) they received benefit and salvation through them, and fearful supernatural signs were performed in them.

12. Here too, in the case of the Cross, the moment this form of the Cross is depicted on a wall or on a board, or is fashioned out of some kind of gold or silver and the like, or carved out of wood, immediately it puts on, and is filled with, the divine power which was residing there at the time, and (so) it becomes a place of God's Shekhina, even more so than in the Ark. Just as the ministry of the New Covenant is more honourable before God than the things which took place in the Old Covenant, just as there is a difference between Moses and Christ, just as the ministry which Jesus received is more excellent than the one which was given through Moses, and just as the honour of a human person is greater and more excellent in His creation than (that of) dumb objects — so is this form of (the Cross), which now exists, much more honourable because of the honour of the Man whom the Divinity took from us for His abode; and because this divine good pleasure which is in this Man who completely became its temple is different from the metaphorical good pleasure which of old was in those dumb objects in which was the shadow of these things to come in Christ.

13. In similar fashion, if we attributed any other name to an artefact of this shape, when we worshipped it we would have received punishment as did of old those who exchanged the worship of God for (that of) idols. But now, it is because it is in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity dwells, of whom things are spoken continuously in the Old Testament, whom *the twelve tribes, holding to this hope,*

*hope to reach by means of assiduous prayers day and night.*¹²²⁰ All these things we understand: whenever we gaze upon this image in the time of prayer, or when we show reverence to it, because that Man was crucified upon it, we receive through it divine power, and we are held worthy of assistance, salvation and ineffable good in this world and in the world to come — that is to say, in the Cross.

14. Even in the case of the metal leaf which was placed above the Ark there, which was fashioned out of gold, and in which the power of God was openly manifested, whenever the priest entered there he did not dare raise his eyes and examine it, in that the awesome Shekhina of the Divinity was in it, and (so) its appearance was more fearful and held in greater honour than any of the other objects which formed part of that ministry.

15. Now the orthodox Fathers say that that leaf depicted the symbol of our Lord's humanity. If then the type is so awesome, how much more the explanation of the types, and the very archetype to whom belong (all) symbols and types. But there, in that ministry, severity and great fear made their demands; here, by contrast there is gentleness. For there, anyone who made bold to act carelessly towards those symbols, types and figures, would immediately incur punishment — as happened with those who were burnt up by the fire of their censers.

16. But (because) here grace without measure has been poured out, and severity has been swallowed up by gentleness, and familiarity of speech has entered in and a

¹²²⁰ Acts 26. 7.

(kind) of carelessness has been born — not that it is real carelessness, far from it!, but rather an abundance of familiarity of speech. (And) familiarity of speech is in the habit of chasing away fear, thanks to the abundant kindness of God which has come upon us at this time.

17. For true believers the sight of the Cross is no small thing, for all symbols are understood to be contained in it. But whenever they raise their eyes and gaze on it, it is as though they were contemplating the face of Christ, and accordingly they are full of reverence for it: the sight of it is precious and fearful to them, and at the same time, beloved. And because they are children, they have all the more familiarity of speech towards Him — just as (ordinary) children customarily have familiarity of speech with their parents, as a result of confidence in (their) love.

18. And whenever we approach the Cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ: this is what it seems to us in our faith in Him.

19. And through our drawing near to Him, and at our gaze towards Him, straightaway we travel in our intellects to heaven, mystically. As though at some sight that cannot be seen or sensed, and out of honour for our Lord's humanity, our hidden vision is swallowed up through a certain contemplation on the mystery of faith.

20. As a result we are not ashamed to call Him both Lord, Saviour and God as well, it being our duty to offer our prayer to Him as Creator.

21. All this do we believe to belong to that Man whose (Cross) is revered and honoured by us in His name and because of Him. And (likewise with) all the things which are attributed to Him: just as we do not hesitate to call the humanity of our Lord — He being truly Man — ‘God’, and ‘Creator’ and ‘Lord’; or to apply to Him in divine fashion the statement that ‘By His hands *the worlds were established*¹²²¹ and everything was created’. For He to whom all these things apply willingly dwelt in Him, giving Him the honour of His divinity and authority over all, because of the benefits which creation was about to receive through Him, whose beginning occurred on the Cross for it. He even bade the angels worship Him, according to the words of the blessed Paul: *introducing the Firstborn into the world, he said ‘Him shall all the angels of God worship’*.¹²²² He granted to Him that He should be worshipped with Him indistinguishably, with a single act of worship for the Man who became Lord and for the Divinity equally, while the (two) natures are preserved with their properties, without there being any difference of honour.

22. For we believe that all that applies to (the Man) is raised up to (the Word) who accepts it for Himself, having willed to make Him share in this honour. All this is made known to us in the Cross, and through this affair which unbelievers consider so contemptible, we have acquired an accurate knowledge of the Creator.

23. In Christ all rational beings have truly been deemed worthy of the Creator's love and of love for one another — (this applies) equally to angels and human beings, for (the purpose of) the single confession of the one God, Lord of all.

¹²²¹ Hebrews 11. 3.

¹²²² Hebrews 1. 6.

24. For the Cross is Christ's garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the divinity. Thus (the Cross today) serves as a type, awaiting the time when the true prototype will be revealed: then those things will not be required (any longer). For the Divinity dwells inseparably in the Humanity, without any end, and for ever; in other words, boundlessly. For this reason we look on the Cross as the place belonging to the Shekhina of the Most High, the Lord's sanctuary, the ocean of the symbols (or, mysteries) of God's economy.

25. This form of the Cross manifests to us, by means of the eye of faith, the symbol belonging to the two Testaments, as has been shown above in due place. Moreover, it is the (final) seal of the economy of our Saviour.

26. Whenever we gaze on the Cross in a composed way, with our emotions steadied, the recollection of our Lord's entire economy gathers together and stands before our interior eyes.

27. He, *in whom the entire fulness of the Divinity dwells in bodily form*,¹²²³ goes around as an ordinary human being to the door of sinners, *'despised and most lowly of people, having no (outer) splendour or appearance'*,¹²²⁴ as the prophet Isaiah says.

28. O wonder! The Creator (clothed) in a human being enters the house of tax collectors and prostitutes, and when they turn towards Him — through His own action — He was urging them, providing them, by means of His teaching, with

¹²²³ Colossians 2. 9.

¹²²⁴ An adaptation of Isaiah 53. 2-3.

assurance of reconciliation with Him. And He sealed the word of truth with true testimonies, consisting in miracles and signs. (Thus) the entire universe, through the beauty of the sight of Him, was drawn by His love (or, in love of Him) to the single confession of God, the Lord of all, and (so) knowledge of the one Creator was sown in everyone.

29. And finally, those who received His teaching were confirmed in the hope that He gave them, thanks to His sealing His words to them with His very own blood.

Through His death and resurrection He confirmed the twelve men who had been chosen, through the foreknowledge of God, out of the entire race of Adam for this ministry. Then, amid ineffable splendour (the Father) raised Him to Himself to heaven, to that place which no created being had trod, but whither He had, through His own (action), invited all rational beings, angels and human beings, to that blessed Entry, in order to delight in the divine light in which was clothed that Man who is filled with all that is holy, who is now with God in ineffable honour and splendour.

30. These are the mysteries which the holy form of the Cross bears; it is the cause of the miracles which the Creator performs through it in the entire world. Such is (the form of the Cross) which is joyfully revered and held in honour by us, while the reason for it was eternally marked out in the mind of the Creator, for His intention was to give to all, by means of this form, knowledge of His glory, and the liberation which He was going to take, through its means, for all humanity.

31. Blessed is God who uses corporeal objects continually to draw us close in a symbolic way to a knowledge of His invisible (nature), sowing and marking out in our minds the recollection of His care for us which has been in operation throughout all generations (thus) binding our minds with love for His hidden Being by means of shapes that are visible.

32. Let our hearts rejoice in the mysteries of the faith which we hold; let us exult in God who is so concerned with us. Let us enter, in our mind's contemplation, into this amazing action He has taken for us. Let us rejoice in the hope that has been revealed to us, the children of Christ, in the Mystery of the New Covenant which we have received at His hand.

33. (How much) to be worshipped is the God who, for our salvation, has done everything in the world to bring us close to Him, before (the time when) what has been prepared will be revealed, (namely the place) where we shall receive the good things that are appropriate for the children of God.

34. (How much) to be worshipped is the symbol of the power of the Cross, seeing that it has given to us all these things, and through it we have been deemed worthy of the knowledge of angels — (that is), through the power by which all created things, both visible and invisible, were created.

35. Worthy of all manner of praise, exaltation and glory is the divine Nature which created us and which has given us all these things — and is going to give us (others): to Him be worship, honour, and exaltation for eternal ages, amen.

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