

## 2. ECSTATIC READINGS IN SYRIAC METATHEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. THE ENABLING CAUSE

#### 2.1.1. Ascetic Practices

Syrian asceticism, as we saw in the introduction, is rich in severe methods of mortification. It is probably not an exaggeration to consider the Syrian tradition as the most rigorous of all Christian disciplines,<sup>2</sup> yet the most extreme manners and the cruellest exercises are not a general standard but rather belong to the domain of exceptional cases. This is pointed out in the writings of the official hierarchy, from the oldest to the latest sources: the canons of Bishop Rabbula (d. 435), a rigorous ascetic himself, do not allow all monks to carry iron chains, and Barhebraeus (d. 1286) opposed the practice of binding oneself for the night in a standing posture.<sup>3</sup> These and other severe forms of mortification continued to be practised until the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

However, if we wish to classify various ascetic practices as specific “ecstatic techniques”, it is to be admitted that the results are somewhat arbitrary, due to the *total* character of ascetic life. The concept of totality here indicates that the chosen mode of life is constant and unbroken: the stylites, for instance, never stepped back on the ground after having once ascended their columns. Totality also means that ascetic life, seclusion into silence, is both an outer and inner pursuit in which prayer and recitation, as well as reading and meditation, intermingle in order to constitute the actual reality of the ascetic’s life. Abstinence in the inner dimension means warfare against selfish thoughts and evil intentions.

The outer aspect of Syrian asceticism simply means abstinence in eating, sleeping, social relations and all sensual pleasure. These can be covered by the

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of the quotations from Isaac of Nineveh’s *Perfectione Religiosa* (ed. Bedjan) are my own (though often following Wensinck), but those from Isaac’s *Second Part* follow Brock’s translation unless otherwise indicated. The translations of the texts published by Mingana follow his translations with some alterations, the most noteworthy of which I point out in the footnotes. All English translations of John of Dalyatha are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For details, see: AbouZayd 1993, 235–260; Vööbus 1960: *History of Asceticism II*, 19–33.

<sup>3</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 50–51 (tr. 43); Vööbus: *Syriac Documents*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Chaillot 1998, 129.

general term *nezīrūtā*, ‘abstinence’, literally ‘Naziritehood’. The external exercises include silence (*šetqā*), fasting (*šawmā*), vigil (*šahrā*) and practices connected with prayer, the most important being prostrations (*būrākē*), the daily number of which might surpass 300.<sup>5</sup> These exercises can be referred to as ‘works’ (*‘amlē*), ‘labour’ (*puḥnānā*) or *dubbārē*, a term signifying, in the singular, ‘course’, ‘order’, ‘rule’, ‘custom’ or ‘manner of life’. In a general sense these practices function as a cause that enables the mystical experiences to occur, even though the actual causality is hardly ever expressed explicitly. Isaac of Nineveh does state that compulsory works (*‘amlē de-‘ešyānā*) cause a burning fervour (*rethā*) to be born in the heart.<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that in spite of the great admiration of fasting shown by the authors, it is practically never connected with the achievement of certain experiences, either as a prerequisite or as a cause, in the sources of the present study.<sup>7</sup> Isaac of Nineveh does mention in passing that “various beautiful things originate from it”.<sup>8</sup> The basic function of fasting, however, is on the prerequisite level. As soon as a man begins to fast, “his mind will yearn for intercourse with God”.<sup>9</sup> According to Isaac of Nineveh, fasting is inevitably the actual starting-point for all struggles against sin and sinful passions.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, fasting receives special attention only in the beginning of the way, as it slowly becomes a natural and obvious mode of life. The connection between experiences and fasting is perhaps mainly in the category of motivation: the one who is motivated to fast is eager for the higher experiences as well.

Seclusion in complete solitude can be perpetual or temporary. In the East Syrian tradition a period of seven weeks was favoured.<sup>11</sup> The character of the

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 10a, p. 207 (tr. 85); Brock: *John the Solitary, On Prayer*, 98; Vööbus: *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 105–108; Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 39 (tr. 43).

<sup>6</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 127. (Wensinck translates “From works performed by compulsion, in solitude there is born a blazing and immeasurable heat.” *Mystic Treatises*, 87.)

<sup>7</sup> Accidentally, there may be indirect correlations between fasting and mystical experience, as in the anecdote in which John the Seer, presumably speaking of himself, notes that a brother had gone two days without food or sleep when he was suddenly filled with unspeakable light. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 21 (15\*).

<sup>8</sup> ܩܘܪܕܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 239 (cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 161).

<sup>9</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 239 (cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 161).

<sup>10</sup> Isaac calls fasting “strengthening of all the virtues, the beginning of the struggle [...] the beginning of the way of Christianity, the father of prayer, the fountain of placidity, the teacher of quiet, and the forerunner of all good qualities”. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 238; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 160–161.

<sup>11</sup> The East Syrian tradition in general used to favour monasticism of the *laura* type, in which the monks lived in separate cells like hermits. The practice of seven weeks is connected with

exercise is shown by the recommendation by Dadišo' of Qatar that a beginner (*aḥḥā šārōyā*) undertaking the period of solitude of seven weeks "should never go out of the door of his cell, even one step, from the beginning of his solitude till its end, and should never converse with anybody."<sup>12</sup>

Since fasting and seclusion are not exactly methods but rather characteristics of ascetic life, they function as the basis from which the mystical attitude grows. The textual material in fact gives the impression that solitude is a basis that unavoidably causes one to reach the sphere of mystical experience. Indeed, the silent eremite life (*šalyūtā*) is said naturally (*keyānā'ūt*) to raise impulses in the soul that cause it to remain in wondrous ecstasy (*temhā*).<sup>13</sup> But if we wish to locate more specific methods, does the mystical literature relate certain ascetic practices to the specific mystical experiences? Compared with, for example, the ecstatic Kabbalah,<sup>14</sup> the lack of specific methods is striking. Perhaps surprisingly, breathing techniques or recommendations to use a particular Christian mantra seem to be absent from the Syriac metatheology.

Of all the external "methods" of mortification described in Syriac literature, the one that is mentioned explicitly most frequently in relation with mystical experience, seems to be, perhaps unexpectedly, seclusion in silence and solitude (*šelyā*).<sup>15</sup> Barhebraeus, for example, in his systematic presentation gives as the first and most important advantages of silence "spiritual joy" and "true knowledge concerning the divine nature".<sup>16</sup> It is to be stressed, however, that in Syriac metatheology the concept of silence (*šelyā*), like the Greek ἡσυχία, means much more than absence of sound: a way and attitude of life free of all restless and vain thoughts, i.e. calmness of soul.<sup>17</sup> The semantic field of *šelyā* also includes a slight nuance of secrecy, which in turn is closely connected – and etymologically identical – with 'mystical'. The breadth of the concept makes it difficult to consider silence a method or technique.

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the East Syrian liturgical calendar which consists of periods of seven weeks, of which the most important is the Great Lent (Mingana 1934, 76,78; Seppälä 1999, 362–363). For details of the calendar, see A. J. MacLean: *East Syrian Daily Offices* (Eastern Church Association, London 1894).

12 Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 9b, p. 207 (tr. 85). He does not say here that this is how it always happens, but this is his ideal as to how it should be.

13 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 127; Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises*, 87.

14 See Idel 1988, 13–54.

15 *Šelyā* has also been translated as 'retreat' (Widengren 1961, 174).

16 ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ [...] ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ ܩܘܘܨܐ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon* 3:3, 101 (tr. 87).

17 E.g. John of Apamea in Brock: *John the Solitary*, 98, 90. For silence in its basic sense the word *šetqā* is usually used.

However, the connection between silence and the mystical-ecstatic phenomena is explicitly presented in the texts as a causal one. According to Isaac of Nineveh, for example, the pacification of heart from the recollection of external things enables one to receive the mystical (or ecstatic, depending on the choice of translation) understanding of the words of Scripture.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, “to get drunk at all times by ecstatic impulses [...] is greatly promoted by solitude (*šelyā*).”<sup>19</sup> According to John of Dalyatha, “the area of wondrous visions is an area of ecstasy, and it is surrounded by the fence of silence.”<sup>20</sup> John of Apamea proposes ‘ecstasy of silence’ (*tahrā de-šetqā*) as the highest and purest form of consciousness, and he even declares that “God is silence.”<sup>21</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh goes on to describe ecstasy as an *inevitable* consequence of full seclusion in solitude.<sup>22</sup> He admonishes the hermits against scrutinising or sentimentalising about uncompromising solitude, for even the commandment “Love the Lord your God with your whole soul and with your whole heart” is fulfilled in solitude, for the latter part of the commandment implies that God must be loved more than the natural world, and this can be realised only through withdrawal from it.<sup>23</sup> One way of explaining the great admiration of silence as an ideal would be to pay attention to the cultural background whence it derives: the social values and customs of Oriental culture have much room for (idle) talk, so that withdrawal from the world may be stimulated to some extent by a certain psychological counter-reaction.

Account idleness (*beṭlānā*) the beginning of psychic darkness; verbal contacts (*‘enyānā de-mamlā*) as darkness beyond darkness; and the latter as the cause of the former.<sup>24</sup>

Even after making all these unambiguous statements, the strictest preacher of solitude seems to be Dadišo<sup>o</sup> of Qatar, who even goes on to claim that real spiritual experiences “have never been given and will never be given outside the cell and

18 כְּתִיבָהּ בְּפִי הַבְּרִיָּה וְיִשְׁמַע הַלֵּב [...] Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 52; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 37.

19 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

20 כְּתִיבָהּ בְּפִי הַבְּרִיָּה וְיִשְׁמַע הַלֵּב [...] Beulay: *Lettres*, 1:4 (p. 306–307).

21 כְּתִיבָהּ בְּפִי הַבְּרִיָּה וְיִשְׁמַע הַלֵּב Brock 1979, 90–91, 98–99 (Brock translates *tahrā* – ‘wondrous awe’).

22 “This first gift (i.e. ecstasy) is tasted through solitude (כְּתִיבָהּ). And those who, in service and observance, have abided within absolute solitude, must necessarily know it (literally: it is not possible that they do not know).” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 490; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 329.

23 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 312–313; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 208.

24 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 329. (Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 220, translates כְּתִיבָהּ בְּפִי הַבְּרִיָּה – ‘oral intercourse’).



Some spent the whole night reciting the Psalter, others used liturgical texts or Sacred Writ, singing hymns of praise, perhaps with mournful melodies, while others prayed the whole night with kneeling and prostrations. Most were accustomed to set themselves additional physical limitations by spending the night, for example, in a standing position without kneeling or genuflections – others maximised the number of their movements by kneeling and prostrating themselves. An ideal resting posture was to sit with one's back against the wall and face eastwards – and even while asleep the mind was not supposed to be 'idle' in relation to the spiritual pursuit.<sup>31</sup>

On account of these kinds of labour performed in wisdom, the holy ones are deemed worthy of the ecstasy (*temhā*) of divine revelation (*gelyānā allāhāyā*), which is high above fleshly thought (Isaac of Nineveh).<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that sleep, when it occurs, is by no means considered as leisure in relation to the ascetic struggle: dreams can in fact be used to measure the actual spiritual stage of the ascetic.<sup>33</sup> In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* it is stated that "even when the hermit is lying in sleep [...] his mind does not cease reciting the psalms."<sup>34</sup> Simeon the Graceful mentions a kind of half-sleep meditation, where the one who falls asleep is recommended to

throw sweet spices of prayers, psalms and spiritual theory on the censer of your heart, and meditate (*harog*) upon them while you are half asleep. When you wake you will feel the happiness (*hanni'ūtā*) that has wafted through your soul all the night.<sup>35</sup>

According to Simeon, this is also a way of being liberated from bad dreams.

Isaac of Nineveh, obviously speaking about himself in the third person, mentions a case in which meditation (*theoria*) on the things read in the evening continued during sleep and led to ecstasy (*tahrā*) that overwhelmed the sleeper so that suddenly he woke up "while his tears dropped as water and fell upon his

<sup>31</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 548–549; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, XXI, 368–369. See also Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 51 (tr. 43); Vööbus: *Syriac Documents*, 106; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 548–549, 551; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 368, 370.

<sup>32</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 549; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 369.

<sup>33</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 191b, p. 311 (tr. 54) On dreams, see Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 52–53 (tr. 44–45). The idea in question is a basic feature of Eastern Christian monastic thinking, in both the Oriental and Greek Orthodox traditions, up to the present time. For instance, the very same thought can also be found in the writings of Pope Shenouda III, the 20th-century leader of the Coptic Church. (Shenouda 1990, 13).

<sup>34</sup> Oliner: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 39 (29\*).

<sup>35</sup> ⲉϥⲓⲛⲁⲓⲉ ⲧⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲓⲥⲏⲥⲁ ⲛⲉϥⲁⲓⲛⲉⲣⲉⲃⲏⲥⲁ ⲛⲉϥⲁⲓⲛⲉϥⲉⲛⲓⲁ ⲛⲉϥⲁⲓⲛⲉϥⲉⲛⲓⲁ ⲛⲉϥⲁⲓⲛⲉϥⲉⲛⲓⲁ ⲛⲉϥⲁⲓⲛⲉϥⲉⲛⲓⲁ  
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173a, p. 292–293 (tr. 26).

breast".<sup>36</sup> Ecstatic experience may also take place during the night while one is between sleep and waking, "asleep though not asleep, and awake though not awake."<sup>37</sup>

It seems that the ascetics' nightly exercises were not completely subject to certain rules at the expense of intuition and inspiration. Isaac of Nineveh criticises those who concentrate in their prayers on the mere forms of words and on counting the number of prayers in order to observe a mere fixed programme. He considers the following of details to be a slavish rule that is utterly alien to the path of true knowledge, because it does not make allowance for divine activity. This is contrasted with the "rule of liberty", which consists in "unfailing observance of the seven offices", but every office can include variation in the number of Psalms and in prayers.<sup>38</sup>

One does not set a time limit for each of these prayers, nor does one decide upon specific words to use. Rather, one spends on each prayer as long as Grace provides the strength, asking whatever the pressing need of the moment may require, using whatever prayer one is stirred to use.<sup>39</sup>

According to Isaac, the illumined (*nehīrē*) and those endowed in insight (*yād'ay sukkālē*) are not concerned with the sequence and order of words.<sup>40</sup>

From the modern point of view, however, excessive wakefulness is an obvious explanation at least for the hallucinatory experiences, traditionally often attributed to demonic influence. The reports of ascetics' hallucinations include human voices or sounds of knocking heard in the empty cell, a sense of the walls and ground quaking, or even apparitions of dragons.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that the ascetic Fathers were surely not naïve in the understanding of the emotional forces behind the mental movements. On the contrary, it seems that sometimes they were even over-critical of their own motives, seeing vice where we would see weakness and weakness where we would see prudence. Due to their constant self-examination, they were well aware of the psychological processes functioning in the conscious and sub-

<sup>36</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 492; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 330.

<sup>37</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

<sup>38</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 14:34–35 (ed. 67–68, tr. 77–78) Yet this freedom is far from the kind of individual spirituality where one freely follows intuitive emotional impulses alone. Isaac does not mean that there was something wrong with the traditional forms of spirituality in the Church. According to him, those who "abandoned prayer's venerable outward forms, turning instead to their own rules and special customs" have gone astray because they have neglected Holy Communion, and the teachings of the Fathers (Brock: *Second Part*, 14:42).

<sup>39</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 14:35 (ed. 67–68, tr. 78).

<sup>40</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 14:38 (ed. 68–69, tr. 79).

<sup>41</sup> Olinde: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 47, 49 (35\*, 36\*).

conscious mind. To name the favourite example for modern readers, the desert Fathers did understand the surrogate effect of sexual energy, the burning of which functions in the psyche mixed with spiritual fervour, taking on the disguise of righteousness.

The lust of fornication hides in disguise, it does not appear distinctly, as passion is mingled with passion, and fervour with fervour, and love with love, and the pious brother cannot tell the love of (spiritual) labour from this other love.<sup>42</sup>

### 2.1.2. Recitation

Prayer (*selōta*) is of course a necessary prerequisite for spiritual experience, but I have preferred to include it under the category of recitation, since the recitation of the Bible, especially the “Psalms service” (*tešmeštā de-mazmōrē*), is the basic element of prayer in the entire Eastern Christian tradition, and one of the most essential monastic activities. It was a common practice to read the Psalter through daily,<sup>43</sup> so it is no wonder that it was customary among the Syrian monks and clergy to know the Psalms by heart.

The whole concept of praying in Syriac often in fact refers to the recitation of the Psalms, and the meditative (non-verbal) forms of prayer are preferably to be called by other names than prayer.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it would be difficult and somewhat arbitrary to draw exact distinctions between recitation and prayer. Prayer is described explicitly as one of the causes behind the experience.

At the time of prayer (*selōta*) it [= experience] is granted to those who are worthy. And the cause proceeds from prayer, for this glorious (gift) cannot be granted except at that moment.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 13 (9\*). A Greek parallel can be found in John of Climacus (*Ladder*, 15:45, pp. 177–178): “During the singing of the psalms we should examine, consider and observe what kind of *sweetness comes to us from the devil of fornication* and what kind comes to us from the words of the Spirit and from the grace and the power which is in them. Know yourself well, young man. For in fact I have seen men *pray earnestly* for their loved ones, men who thought they were fulfilling the requirements of love, when in reality it was the *spirit of fornication* that was *stirring them*.”

<sup>43</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 55 (tr. 47). As a curiosity I may remark here my own observation that the recitation of the whole Psalter takes about four hours.

<sup>44</sup> Namely, *hergā*, *renyā* (both usually translated as ‘meditation’), *thē’ōryā* (‘contemplation’).

<sup>45</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 171. Wensinck (*Mystic Treatises*, 116) translates ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ as “in prayer it has its starting point”. With the last words of the quotation Isaac in Tact contradicts himself (see p. 125–126), but here he argues that prayer is the time when a man is prepared and concentrated to look unto God.



Sahdona, a diligent utiliser of biblical discourse, states explicitly that the “work of reading the Scriptures”<sup>46</sup> fills one with joy and causes one “to be illuminated in prayer”.<sup>47</sup>

Anyone whose soul, after having laboured in reading and been purified by spiritual meditation (*hergā rūḥānāyā*), is fervent (*rāṭḥā*) with love for God (*be-ḥubbā d-allāhā*), will pray in a luminous manner when he turns to prayer and the Office.<sup>48</sup>

In the dynamics of recitation we may differentiate between two components, one positive and the other negative. On the one hand, during the reading one may depict before one’s eyes “the lovely beauty of the saints’ way of life” so that one becomes “fervent in spirit”.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, continual meditation upon the Scriptures makes one also “feel ashamed of oneself”. How do these relate to each other? Sahdona’s answer is, not surprisingly, that the aspect of repentance, strengthened by the comparison with the ideal self as reflected in the Scriptures, leads little by little to purification and illumination. The latter is described by Sahdona as the ability of the “eye of the soul”<sup>50</sup> to gaze upon God at all times, which in turn enables one to approach the essential light of the divinity.<sup>51</sup>

The vocal recitation could be accompanied by beautiful melodies, especially in the case of chanting the Psalms.<sup>52</sup> Since a melodic way of recitation is a source of pleasure, the danger of pride is present. One is advised to beware of the “demon of vainglory” while chanting, for the beauty may distract one’s concentration away from praise.<sup>53</sup> Evagrius’s advice is to read more slowly during moments of dejection, and faster when pride is threatening.<sup>54</sup> Recitation is to be performed irrespective of one’s mood. According to Barhebraeus, this is to be done “with understanding” but also without attention because “it leads to recitation with understanding”.<sup>55</sup>

Barhebraeus analysed the general structure of musical experience so that musical enjoyment (*hannī’utā*) consists of pain (*ḥaššā*) caused by the disappearance of beautiful sound and comforting pleasure brought by the following

46 Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. ܘܠܟܘܢ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ

47 Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. ܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ

48 Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. (Translation from Brock 1987, 223.)

49 Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. ܐܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ

50 The Eye of the *mind* (ܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) and that of the *soul* (ܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) are used interchangeably.

51 Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles* 8:52, 8:55.

52 E.g. Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 54–56 (tr. 46–47).

53 See below, p. 128.

54 Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 54 (tr. 46). (Quoting Evagrius, *Tractatus ad Eulogium*, PG 79, 1105 A.)

55 Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 61 (tr. 52).

sound.<sup>56</sup> Concrete ecstatic musical methods, however, are out of the question in the Christian context, due to the lack of instruments in the early Church and the suspicion of worldly music.<sup>57</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh states explicitly that recitation in solitude is a factor that enables man to be drawn into ecstasy (*tahrā*).<sup>58</sup> Dadišo' of Qatar tells of old men of prayer who in their vigils could recite hardly ten Psalms "on account of the wonders that happen<sup>59</sup> to them through divine grace: weeping, tears, sighs, spiritual thoughts,<sup>60</sup> divine consolations and revelations of the Spirit."<sup>61</sup> According to him, spiritual joy has been blended with the Psalms by the Spirit, and consequently one is encouraged to concentrate on their recitation: "If you become worthy of this, the life of solitude will not be tiresome for you."<sup>62</sup>

The mere possibility of varying experiences and ecstatic occurrences indicates a readiness to adapt one's practice of recitation according to circumstances. Isaac of Nineveh advises one to change the order of reading or to continue repeating the most significant verses for some time in order to preserve the meditative character of the recitation rather than mere mechanical repetition: "I do not wish to count milestones, but I seek to enter the Apartment."<sup>63</sup>

### 2.1.3. Meditation

Under the category of meditation I include the speechless ways of prayer, not called by the name of prayer in the Syriac tradition, and various intentional, reflective and introspective meditations that are an important factor behind the experience. Instead of separate practices or exact techniques of meditation, however, the stress in the discourse is on a permanent meditative attitude of life, 'continuous remembrance', one of the basic ideas of Isaac of Nineveh. This is approximately what we called 'mystical attitude' in chapter 1.2.2. The following

<sup>56</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 75–76 (tr. 64–65).

<sup>57</sup> For a clear synopsis and bibliography on music in the early Church, see Ferguson 1998, 787–790.

<sup>58</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 43; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Literally 'visit' (ܘܘܨܘܬܐ).

<sup>60</sup> Mingana translates as 'spiritual visions' (ܘܘܨܘܬܐ ܘܘܨܘܬܐ). *Sukkālā* is a general term for any mental movement, usually an 'act of understanding'. In our mystical contexts it is usually something given; perhaps a 'ray of understanding' might be an appropriate translation.

<sup>61</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 52b–53a, p. 245 (tr. 139).

<sup>62</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 21b, p. 219 (tr. 101).

<sup>63</sup> Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 548; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 367–368.

extract from Sahdona illustrates an ideal case of the one living in a contemplative attitude:

The stirrings of his soul are meditating (*rānēn*) on God continuously, and his heart is carried away (*heṭif*) towards Him. His body is sojourning on earth, but his mind (*madde'ā*) is living in heaven with Christ. His body has died away from this world and his soul burns with love of the heavenly ones. He stands amidst corporeal beings, but his mind (*re'yānā*) is moving swiftly among spiritual ones and is sanctifying (i.e. chanting 'Holy holy holy').<sup>64</sup>

The practice of meditation is usually not described in great detail, but the number of topics for meditation seems to be abundant. The recommended ones include the words of Scripture, the Cross and other key events of salvation history, the tribunal throne of Christ, sin, death,<sup>65</sup> God's creative and dispersive powers, the sufferings of the martyrs, the writings of the Fathers<sup>66</sup> and the lives of the saints – or simply, God. Also, the use of *imagination* to approach the divine realities, often suspect in the Greek Orthodox tradition, is encouraged by Isaac of Nineveh, who refers to spiritual meditation by the term *šeragrāgyātā*, the basic sense of which is fantasies and mirages. Isaac urges one constantly to practise *šeragrāgyātā* of the divine things for their fiery and purifying effects.<sup>67</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh portrays a living picture of the meditative consideration of death, presented as resulting in a silent state of ecstatic stupor. The meditation is twofold: in the macrocosmic dimension the focus is on the beauty and order of the creation, its sudden determination and the appearance of the new order; as for the personal level, one considers “how long the bodies remain mixed with dust, and how will that mode of life be, and in what kind of likeness that nature will rise”.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151.

<sup>65</sup> According to Isaac of Nineveh, “the fulfilment of life is meditation (ܠܠܘܟܢܐ, lit. ‘study’) upon death for the sake of God. This brings our mind near to union with God (ܠܠܘܟܢܐ ܠܠܘܟܢܐ).” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 462; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 310.

<sup>66</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 169a–169b, pp. 288–289 (tr. 20).

<sup>67</sup> ܠܠܘܟܢܐ ܠܠܘܟܢܐ ܠܠܘܟܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 122. (Wensinck translates “thinking of divine things”: *Mystic Treatises*, 82.) According to some Greek Orthodox claims, ‘contemplation’ in the Western sense is a “quasi-spiritual exercise” based on the “creation of images in the imagination”, while the Eastern *theoria* is seen as a purely imageless operation of the Holy Spirit. These polemics can be seen in the Introduction of the *Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian* (p. cxi) where the expression in question is translated “forming of vivid conceptions of divine subjects”. Accordingly, the use of *šeragrāgyātā* often seems to be negative in Syriac authors under Greek influence; e.g. Philoxène de Mabboug, *La lettre à Patricius*, 90, 92, 105 (834–837, 848–849). However, my impression is that the benefits of the use of imagination seem to remain somewhat obscure in the Greek tradition. (Logically speaking, the problem would have been avoided if Westerners had used the term ‘meditation’ instead of ‘contemplation’.)

<sup>68</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 257; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 172–173.

The most noteworthy aspect of meditation in the East Syriac tradition, however, is the mysticism of the Cross (*selībā*). One is recommended, especially when beginning to pray, to concentrate one's thoughts and meditate on the Cross. There is a rich field of ideas associated with the Cross, which as the sign of the death and resurrection of the Son of God symbolises the culmination of salvation history, and it is therefore an apt symbol for the whole of Christianity. In the Syrian tradition the understanding of the Cross, however, is developed even further, the Cross being considered not only as the means of redemption of mankind but also as the prototype of man, and even the foundation of the universe.<sup>69</sup> The eternal creative power is said to reside mystically in the Cross, the ark of the new covenant.<sup>70</sup>

The aim of the meditation of the Cross is to strengthen participation in both the Passion of Christ and the victory over death and sin accomplished by it.<sup>71</sup> To put it briefly, since in the divine economy all things have been accomplished through the Cross, it is through the Cross that all things may be acquired. When Dadišo' of Qatar issues instruction to recite prayers in front of the cross, he also outlines an explicit connection between the Cross and the mystical experience:

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 your wounds," until your heart is stirred (or 'awake') and burns in His love.<sup>72</sup>

*A Letter Sent to a Friend* includes a detailed description of an attack by the demon of distress and its expulsion by means of genuflection before the cross, followed by a mystical experience.

I only saluted the cross and made a genuflection before the cross. After a short time he was urged by the power of the cross and let loose my tongue, and I began to praise God. [...] I was filled with unutterable joy and gladness.<sup>73</sup>

Much more detailed descriptions of the methods, however, are not available.

The difference between the concepts of meditation and contemplation is clear in theory but obscure in practice. We may consider "meditation" as psychological

<sup>69</sup> Yousif 1990, 38. See also P. Yousif, *Le symbolisme de la croix dans la nature chez saint Ephrem de Nisibe, Symposium Syriacum 1976*, OCA 205, Rome 1978, pp. 207–227.

<sup>70</sup> Isaac of Nineveh, *Second Part*, Chapter 11 (ed. 43–52, tr. 53–62). According to Isaac, the same *shekhina* that was in the Ark of the Covenant resides mysteriously in the Cross.

<sup>71</sup> For Dadišo' on the cross, see Mingana 1934/Dadišo', pp. 136–138; for Stephen bar Sudhaila, see Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 35, 45–59; for Isaac of Nineveh, see Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 16; Wensinck: *Mystical Treatises*, 11; *Second Part*, Chapter 11 (ed. 43–52, tr. 53–62).

<sup>72</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 52b–53a, p. 244 (tr. 138).

<sup>73</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 32 (24\*).

activity directed towards spiritual realities with the help of the imagination and other psychic faculties, and “contemplation” as a higher state that is more passive and less intentional by nature, perhaps also more or less exceptional. The Syriac terms – mainly *renyā*, *hergā*, *tē’ōryā* – referring to meditation or contemplation are used quite hyponymously, however, and the authors have no desire to differentiate between them by assigning technical definitions to them.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, in the metatheologians’ perspective, contemplation is not an actual method to *produce* experiences but on the contrary, a state *resulting* from the experience itself: according to Dadišo’ of Qatar, the Lord Himself fills the soul with numerous spiritual visions, so that one’s mind rejoices in a meditative-contemplative operation consisting of

1. Meditation (*renyā*) on the greatness of the divine nature
2. Contemplation (*hergā*) of the glorious Trinity
3. Continuous support (*’udrānā*) of the Love of Christ and of the light of his divine glory
4. Meditation (*renyā*) on the hierarchies of angels
5. Cogitation (*’uhdānā*) on Paradise and on the ‘spirits of the perfected’<sup>75</sup>
6. Cogitation on the apparition of the Lord from heaven and on the ascension of the holy ones to heaven.<sup>76</sup>

Another main object of meditation is Holy Writ. In St. Ephrem’s *Paradise Hymns* there is a vivid, detailed and psychologically accurate description of the meditative process between the reading of the Scriptures and the spiritual rapture resulting from it.

Scripture brought me to the gate of Paradise,  
and the mind, which is spiritual,  
stood in amazement and wonder as it entered,<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Of these concepts, *renyā* is the most ordinary one (‘anxiety’, ‘thought’, ‘reflection’, ‘meditation’), *hergā* refers to active meditation (or ‘study’), and *tē’ōryā* is clearly the most abstract, due to its wide use, and therefore potentially the most mystical. The dictionary of Payne-Smith gives for *theoria* (ܠܘܓܘܪܝܐ, the Syriac form of the Greek θεωρία) the following basic meanings: (a) philosophical speculation, (b) spiritual contemplation, ecstasy, (c) concept, idea, view, (d) theory, inner meaning hypothesis, argument. Simeon the Graceful defines *theoria* as an “intelligible vision of the eyes of the soul” (Mingana 1934, 188b–189a), but he does not try to differentiate it from *hergā* or *renyā*. The main point in contemplation, according to Simeon, is not *what* is seen, but *how* it is seen.

<sup>75</sup> Mingana: ‘souls of the just departed’ (ܐܘܪܫܐܝܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ )

<sup>76</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 23a–23b, p. 220–221 (tr. 104; for more detailed instructions on prayer and meditations, see pp. 136–141).

<sup>77</sup> ܐܘܪܫܐܝܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ

the intellect grew dizzy and weak  
 as the senses were no longer able to contain its treasures,  
 so magnificent they were,  
 or to discern its savors  
 and find comparison for its colors,  
 or take in its beauties so as to describe them in words.<sup>78</sup>

It is important to realise that just as there is an organic connection between prayer and reading, so there is one between reading and meditation. A monk is supposed to read meditatively, not necessarily in large quantities. Attention should be concentrated not on the form of the words but on their content. According to the *Letter Sent to a Friend*, a word perceptible to the senses is empty without one conceivable by the mind. A brother is advised not to let his external tongue advance ahead of the mental tongue of the intellect, the application being that one may even be occupied with “one word of a psalm for seven nights and days”.<sup>79</sup> Simeon the Graceful gives a pithy definition of the contemplative approach to reading: “if the eyes of our mind are opened, every word contains a volume”.<sup>80</sup> But on the other hand, the outer verbal constructions are a necessary framework of spiritual insights: “a hymn perceptible to the senses is the prerequisite for the incorporeal chant”.<sup>81</sup>

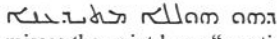
Isaac of Nineveh also gave a vivid description of the meditation on saints, in which the mind of the meditating person follows the holy men through the deserts and forgets itself; it seems to him that he is personally in the company of the saints and sees them manifestly. By remembering their tales and meditating upon them sleep is driven away, the spirit is strengthened and fears disappear. The mind is concentrated and it smoothly slides into the sphere of ecstatic phenomena: tears begin to flow, the heart burns with heat and the mind is intoxicated.<sup>82</sup>

One of the basic psychological characteristics of meditation is concentration (*kenīšūtā*), but even this is not seen as a psychological exercise or “method” but rather as a result of total withdrawal from the world. It is emphasised that the mind must be free of distraction caused by worldly things before entering the realm of mystical experience. This teaching is in fact characteristic of all Eastern Christian traditions: mystical experiences are seen to belong almost exclusively to

<sup>78</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:2. Translation according to Brock 1990, 109.

<sup>79</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 22 (16\*).

<sup>80</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 169b, p. 289 (tr. 20).

<sup>81</sup>  The translation by Olinder misses the point here: “emotional song is the prerequisite for the studied hymn”. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 22 (16\*).

<sup>82</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 555; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 372.

the world of the spiritual elite who have first abandoned the world and worldly thoughts.<sup>83</sup> The positive side of this “elitism” is that the intellect (*hawnā* or *madde 'ā*), after preliminary difficulties, “can easily be brought to concentration (*metkannes*) and be collected in the store-house of the heart after a long period of time, when it receives solid training.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, concentration is said to be facilitated by the occurrence of (the first) mystical experiences, indicating that the causality between them is understood as taking place in the reverse direction to what we might expect.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, we may quote the three prerequisite components that enable one to begin to gain experiences, as given by Isaac of Nineveh:

1. Good will directed towards God
2. Various exercises in solitude
3. Freedom from perversity (*lā-me 'aqqemūtā*) caused by total renunciation of the world.<sup>86</sup>

The first one is the most important since all the others are inevitably based on it; since the will is seen (especially in the Antiochene tradition) as the most central function in the inner man, it could also be given as one definition of “mystical attitude”. According to John of Dalyatha, the basic cause of all mystical gifts, and of purification, is constant yearning for and beseeching of the love of God. He calls this a “mother that gives birth to the new secrets of the new world”.<sup>87</sup> The second one has been treated above, and the third corresponds to the idea of concentration.

<sup>83</sup> Concentration in the sense of abandonment of worldly thoughts is in fact a prerequisite of prayer in general, and applies to all Christians; see Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 10–14 (tr. 9–12).

<sup>84</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 11 (tr. 10).

<sup>85</sup> “Especially, when it receives a small part of the sweetness of prayer, then, it climbs higher than anything on earth and heaven and [they know] that it hurries to wonder only at its Lord and to converse with him.” Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 11 (tr. 10).

<sup>86</sup> (1) ܠܗܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ, (2) ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ, (3) ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ... ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܢܐ  
Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 128; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 87. The basic meaning of *lā-me 'aqqemūtā*, albeit translated as ‘uprightness’ by Wensinck, is ‘non-perversity’.

<sup>87</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:9 (pp. 318–319).





deeper and more total than mere absence of physical sound.<sup>91</sup> According to Simeon the Graceful,

Prayer does not consist in learning (*yulpānā*), in knowledge or in words, but in an emptiness of the mind (*sefiqūtā de-madde'ā*) and peaceful and rational intelligence (*hawnā behilā we-hawnānāyā*), which is collected and quietened (*mešayyen*) by the stillness (*šetqā*) of the faculties (*zaw'ē*) and of the senses, resulting in a complete destruction (*'aṭyā*) of the thoughts and a complete rejection of all cares.<sup>92</sup>

All peace and consolation which a tongue is able to describe to others is imperfect: a mind (*hawnā*) teaches another mind in silence (*be-šetqā*).<sup>93</sup>

Since even the most analytical positive description of the indescribable always contains symbolic components, the two ways cannot be separated with absolute accuracy. This becomes evident when looking for the most reduced possible analytical description, the word 'ecstasy' itself. If a language lacks a word for ecstasy, one must be produced by adopting a symbolic sign in a somewhat technical use. (A good example of an "analytical sign" is provided by the word *hurma* and its derivatives in Finnish, since it does not seem to be derived from any natural phenomenon, and therefore is not a symbolic but a "pure" way of signifying an unusual state of consciousness.)<sup>94</sup>

If we consult the Latin-Syriac dictionary, it offers two terms for EXSTASIS: *ḥetīfūt*, derived from *ḤṬP*, 'to take by force', and *ḥezūqyā madde'ā*, 'departure of mind', an attempt to reach approximate to the idea of ἔκ – στασις.<sup>95</sup> In the sources of this study, however, *ḥetīfūt* is quite rare and *ḥezūqyā* is practically impossible to find in the context of mystical experience.

Instead, there are two Syriac words which are very widely used as an equivalent of 'ecstasy': *tahrā* and *temhā*.<sup>96</sup> They are translated 'ecstasy' by Min-

<sup>91</sup> "The soul [...] has no more no idea (ܐܘܢܐ) of itself, but is muzzled (ܐܘܢܐ) by/in ecstasy (ܐܘܢܐ) and silence (ܐܘܢܐ), nor it is allowed to return unto the means of knowledge." Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 360; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 242. "When man has been deemed worthy to receive this power within his soul, he abides only in ecstasy and silence." *Ibid.*, 489 (328).

<sup>92</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 193a–193b, p. 312–313 (tr. 57). Mingana's translation above may give a little too tough an impression. 'Emptiness' (ܐܘܢܐ) is not to be understood as a negative term, for in Syriac it is also used in the sense of 'freedom'. Accordingly, 'quietened' (ܐܘܢܐ) could also be translated 'calm' or 'pacify'. 'Destruction' is perhaps a little too aggressive a term, for Payne-Smith gives 'cancelling' and 'abolition' for ܐܘܢܐ.

<sup>93</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 196a, p. 315 (tr. 62).

<sup>94</sup> Toivonen 1981, 90.

<sup>95</sup> Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, pp. 225b & 228a.

<sup>96</sup> Vocalised *tehrā* in the West Syrian tradition. The adjective (passive participle) form *temihā* occasionally appears synonymously with *temhā*. The etymological background offers a functional possibility to translate *temhā* as both 'ecstasy' and 'astonishment' when they appear twice in the same sentence, as Wensinck does: "The mind absorbed in *ecstasy* (ܐܘܢܐ), the senses being at rest" is soon followed by "*astonishment* (ܐܘܢܐ) at these

gana and Wensinck; 'stupeur' and 'émerveillement' by Beulay, who regards them as "difficilement distinguable" from each other.<sup>97</sup> But curiously, the standard meaning of both is originally 'wonder', in the sense of astonishment and amazement. Most contexts would in fact admit the use of 'wonder' as well as that of 'ecstasy', but often a concept from somewhere in-between would be preferred. This ambiguity is due to the character of mental phenomena: when the sense of wonder grows strong enough it becomes ecstatic. At first sight their usages appear synonymous, but a closer look shows that *temhā* is used more often, and it seems to have a slightly wider usage in definitely non-ecstatic contexts.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, the relationship is rather one of hyponymy: the semantic field of *tahrā* is included in that of *temhā*. The close relationship between the words has also affected the manuscript tradition. In the letters of John of Dalyatha it may happen that when *tahrā* occurs in a sentence, another manuscript has *temhā* instead, and in a third one *temīhā* occupies the same position.<sup>99</sup>

How did the signs of 'wonder' actually end up signifying mystical experiences? The semantic history of the words *temhā* and *tahrā* in classical Syriac is discussed in more detail in Appendix 1 (p. 331–341), resulting in two answers. On the one hand there seems to be a semantic borrowing from Greek, where the word ἔκστασις has an equivalent double meaning, and on the other hand, there is an intra-Syriac development that can be illustrated with the aid of the poetry of St. Ephrem.

Regardless of the details of the semantic history, however, the nature of ecstasy in Syrian thought is to some extent characterised by the fact that it is expressed with words that originally meant 'astonishment'. Wonder can be regarded as the basic attitude when approaching the presence of God. The connection is also strengthened by a parallel phenomenon: the actual word for astonishment, *dummārā*, is in some cases, albeit rarely, used in a context where 'ecstasy' would also do appropriately. The following statement by John of Dalyatha is an obvious example of the word in an ecstatic context: "Ordinary thoughts are silenced by the power of your *dummārā*".<sup>100</sup> One of the dictionary meanings of *dummārā* (in Costaz) is, indeed, 'stupor'.

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things even when prayer is cut off" (*Mystic Treatises*, 328; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 490). The dictionary meaning of 'miracle' for *tehrā* seems not to be valid in the metatheological discourse.

<sup>97</sup> Beulay 1990, 397; Beulay: *Lettres*, 1:4 (pp. 306–307), 12:3 (pp. 336–337), 25:4 (pp. 384–385) etc. Brock gives 'wondrous awe' or 'wonder' for *tahrā* (cf. Brock: *Second Part*, 5:14).

<sup>98</sup> Usually when the root *THR* appears in non-ecstatic contexts, it is as the verb *tehar* (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 32). An example of the cases where *tahrā* clearly means more than 'wonder' in *ibid.*, 492. Non-ecstatic occurrences of both *temhā* and *tahrā* in *ibid.*, 98.

<sup>99</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, footnote 28, p. 306.

<sup>100</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 45:3 (pp. 452–453.)

On the other hand, there is a fundamental question: why not translate *temhā* and *tahrā* as ‘astonishment’ or ‘wonder’ rather than as ‘ecstasy’? Often both would in fact do, but frequently there are strong contextual reasons that favour the choice of ecstasy. The concept of ecstasy indicates an experience stronger than mere mystical feeling, even a certain uncontrollability. The factuality of ecstasy is proven in an empirical way in its different manifestations.<sup>101</sup>

A very illustrative difference can be found in the Syriac Life of John of Dailam (d. 738): when discussing an objective, outer cause of wonder, a miracle such as an earthquake, the word *tadmūrtā*, from the root *DMR* ‘to wonder’, is used, but a subjective inner wonder is described with the words *tahrā we-dummārā*.<sup>102</sup> Often, however, all these concepts overlap or are used interchangeably, which is due to the fact that on the psychological level, in the mental reality, the transition from astonishment to ecstasy (through “daze” or otherwise) is a stepless glide, but on the linguistic level the borderlines must be sharply drawn.

An interesting aspect of the concept of *temhā* is shown in its use in the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh where at least once *temhā* in the sense of ‘wonder’ is proposed as the reason for the *temhā* in the sense of ‘ecstasy’. The usage, occurring in a long and syntactically complicated group of sentences, is probably unintentional.<sup>103</sup>

Of the other terms, the most remarkable candidate for an analytical sign of ecstatic experience might be *bulhāyā*, which appears occasionally in the writings of John of Dalyatha, Isaac of Nineveh and Barhebraeus. Its basic meaning seems to be ‘horror’, from which it has developed the meanings of ‘paralysis’ and ‘astonishment’, on the one hand, and of ‘hastening’ on the other. It is translated into French by Beulay as ‘stupéfaction’ and into English by Brock accordingly as ‘stupefaction’.<sup>104</sup>

The term that perhaps occurs even most frequently in connection with mystical experiences, however, is *zaw’ā*, ‘motion’, ‘impulse’, which is a general term for all inner movements, mystical or natural, and for emerging mental effects but with no focus on any of their emotional or interpretative characteristics. Due to the stupefying character of the mystical experience, during the most forceful

<sup>101</sup> For details, see chapter 2.4.

<sup>102</sup> Brock: *Syriac Life of John of Dailam*, 137, 141, 146, 150. Brock, however, translates both as ‘wonder’.

<sup>103</sup> Namely, the one who receives in his mind the greatness of God, the glory of his nature and the wonder (*temhā*) of his works, [...] gets drunk every moment in the ecstasy (*temhā*) of the motions. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 171; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 254. Isaac’s syntax is often somewhat careless and imprecise, which is connected with the fact that at least some of his treatises were written by dictation.

<sup>104</sup> E.g. Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 112 (tr. 97); Beulay: *Lettres*, 2:4 (pp. 310–311); Brock: *Second Part*, 7:2 (ed. 19, tr. 24); Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 258.

experiences the impulses cease, which would actually justify the translation ‘trance’.<sup>105</sup> Yet there is no guarantee that any author, not to mention different authors, would employ even the concept of impulse in a precise manner, since the recognition of a part of the mental operation as an ‘impulse’ is not empirically verifiable but implies one or another kind of interpretation.

Because an analytical description given with one word is always allusive in nature and for that reason insufficient, those who aim to produce an analytical description must proceed by developing specifications of the inner processes during the experience, abstractions of the different parts of human mentality and their function in the experience, and definitions on the level of consciousness: how far the experience is under control. The problems here, for our taxonomy, are that even the most analytical descriptions include signs that could or should be taken as symbolic, and secondly, such abstractional discussions easily shift into interpretation rather than description – just as the interpretative elements penetrate into the experience itself – and the boundary between analytical description and interpretation is to be abstracted out of the discourse by a deconstructing approach that is sometimes completely contrary to the metatheologians’ own views (e.g. the discussion on *causa efficiens* below).

The Syriac descriptions that can be taken as representative of the analytical(ly intended) description of mystical experience seem to include the following characteristics – or “modes of appearance”, to use the term preferred by W. P. Alston:

- Totality: the subject is overwhelmed by the experience
- Involuntariness: it does not arise or operate under the control of the conscious will
- Restfulness
- A stunning and dazing quality, potentially leading to loss of the sense of identity or disorientation
- A feeling of joy or delight
- A sense of refreshment
- Warmth

The differentiation of qualities is partially arbitrary and discretionary since any quality may have an endless variety of modes according to its intensity: intense

<sup>105</sup> E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 53; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 37. “How many times the power of contemplation (*theoria*) [stimulated] by the Scriptures has silenced (*mešatteq*) and stupefied (*mebalhē*) him, also from prayer, and left him standing with no impulse!” (ܠܘܘܢ ܠܘܠܗܘܢ ܠܘܠܗܘܢ). “Their impulses are silenced in drunkenness” (ܠܘܠܗܘܢ ܠܘܠܗܘܢ ܠܘܠܗܘܢ) Beulay: *Lettres*, 25:4 (pp. 384–385).



This one light in singularity (*hedānāyūt*) of vision cannot be divided into any shapes (*eskēmē*) or figures (*demwātā*). I would also like to tell you that at that time there are neither different impulses (*zaw'ē*) nor different thoughts (*huššābā*) nor different meditations (*renyā*), but one single ecstasy (*tahrā*) which is higher than all meditations, impulses and thoughts.<sup>110</sup>

John of Dalyatha exhausts the negative way of expression in brief:

At that time (I am as if) without intellect, as if non-existent, standing without perceiving anything, without seeing, without hearing – only ecstasy and deep silence without impulses and without knowledge.<sup>111</sup>

The totality of the experience may cause the subject to lose interest or the need for ordinary physical necessities like sleep: “They do not remember sleep, in the manner of those who imagine themselves to have put off the body.”<sup>112</sup> Concentration on one thing evidently diminishes concentration on other things!

The aspect of involuntariness is also reflected in the use of the verbs describing the operation of ecstasy, or its commencement, in the subject. Namely, one may be ‘drawn’ (*metneged*) to ecstasy. Another interesting verb is *ethetef*, ‘become snatched’, used in the Peshitta account of Paul’s heavenly journey. The quality of snatchedness as a psychological feature indicates a sense of the more rapid motion of consciousness, which is very close to the whole idea of ecstasy, an extraordinarily smooth state of mind. The corresponding noun *hetēfūtā*, by its most literal definition, means ‘the act of being taken away by force’. It is translated ‘rapture’ by Wensinck and Brock, Payne-Smith gives ‘rapture’ and ‘ecstasy’,<sup>113</sup> and Beulay defines it as “le mouvement aboutissant à la stupeur”.<sup>114</sup>

The culmination of involuntariness is that the most forceful experiences seem to possess the subject so that it may even be difficult for him to escape from of his ecstatic condition: “ecstasy and wonder with rapture do not let one depart to the

<sup>110</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 155b, p. 274 (tr. 165). These two quotations illustrate the difficulties in translating Syriac psychological concepts. ܐܘܣܘܪܐ is first translated by Mingana as ‘consciousness’, then in the second extract as ‘thought’; ܐܘܨܘܪܐ is correspondingly first ‘thought’, then ‘contemplation’. Both roots refer to thinking, but *HŠB* is perhaps more active, *RNY* somehow more profound.

<sup>111</sup> ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ ܘܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ ܘܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ ܘܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ  
ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ . ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ . ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ . ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ  
ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ Beulay: *Lettres*, 16:2 (pp. 350–351).

<sup>112</sup> ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ ܘܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ ܘܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܘܩܢܐ. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 550. (Wensinck translates: “they do not remember to sleep. For they imagine themselves to have put off the body.” *Mystic Treatises*, 369)

<sup>113</sup> For examples of ܐܘܨܘܪܐ, see Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 156, 171; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 106, 116; Brock: *Second Part* 14:27 (ed. 65, tr. 75).

<sup>114</sup> Beulay 1990, 397.

world of shadow".<sup>115</sup> The most natural interpretation of this, however, is to see the feature as being caused by a decision of the will due to the pleasant nature of the experience, which in turn would justify our pointing out the *addictive* quality of the experience.

The uncontrolled nature of experience is evident, for example, in the definition of *tahrā* given by Isaac of Nineveh: "a state not under the control of the will of flesh and blood and the soul's impulses."<sup>116</sup> Thinking as a discursive process is in fact impossible in ecstasy, where all the movements of the intellect are silenced.<sup>117</sup> And not only the process of thinking but the mere reflection of images ceases: "the ecstasy of mind (*temhā de-re'yānā*) is free of all images".<sup>118</sup> John of Dalyatha states that "in the sphere of wonder and ecstasy there is no movement or any continual motion, either that of the soul, or that of the spirit."<sup>119</sup>

Loss of control may indicate, as the wording of a prayer by John of Apamea suggests, that during the experience in question one loses the sense of place.<sup>120</sup> Either the senses do not function normally, or their functioning is not apprehended normally by the subject. According to John of Dalyatha, when ecstasy takes place, prayer ceases and the sense of hearing no longer receives stimuli.<sup>121</sup> According to Isaac of Nineveh, the world is indiscernible<sup>122</sup> and the senses are at rest.<sup>123</sup> During the experience the physical senses and faculties are passive "as in sleep"

115 אַמִּיִּרָא סְגֻלָּתָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא לֹא זָבַח דְּנִפְסָא לִלְבָּא לְלֵאלֹהִים Beulay: *Lettres*, 25:4 (pp. 384–385).

116 אַמִּיִּרָא סְגֻלָּתָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא לֹא זָבַח דְּנִפְסָא לִלְבָּא לְלֵאלֹהִים Brock: *Second Part*, 14:24 (ed. 63, tr. 74).

117 חַבְּ אֶמְרָא לֹא זָבַח דְּנִפְסָא לִלְבָּא לְלֵאלֹהִים "Thoughts bound fast with the bounds of *temhā*." Brock: *Second Part*, 35:1 (ed. 139, tr. 151). אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא "In drunkenness movements (of the intellect) are silenced." Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:4 (pp. 384–385), 16:1–2 (pp. 354–355), etc.

118 אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא Brock: *Second Part*, XV:11 (ed. 76, tr. 87)

119 אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:1 (pp. 420–423).

120 E.g. Brock: *Syriac Fathers*, 346. "so that for a period of time he is where he knows not, being totally raptured and drawn towards you." For some reason, the modern edition of the Syriac text (*Malpānūtā d-abbāhāthā*, Bar-Hebraeus Verlag 1988) omits these ecstatic verses.

121 אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא Beulay: *Lettres*, 12:3 (pp. 336–337), אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא *ibid.*, 13:3 (pp. 344–345).

122 אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא . "The world is not at all visible for him because of the drunkenness in you." Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 504. (Wensinck translates: "he does not see the world at all because of his drunkenness in thee". *Mystic Treatises*, 339.)

123 אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא חַבְּ אֶמְרָא The senses are literally 'silenced'. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 489; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 328.

(‘Abdišo’ the Seer).<sup>124</sup> This is briefly expressed in a notion that in a strong mystical experience the mystic “goes out of his order” (*nāfeq men takseh*), an idea which essentially corresponds to the etymological meaning of ecstasy as ἔκ + στασις.<sup>125</sup>

Ecstasy by definition has a certain stunning character. This is described in a lively manner by John of Dalyatha, who makes it clear that the intellectual faculty becomes stupefied in ecstasy, and the sense of identity is lost in the experience.<sup>126</sup> The dazing effect of the ecstatic experience is also shown in the statement that when the ascetic is orientated in his mystical pursuit as he should be, ecstasy (*tahrā*) is the only thing that is able to calm down the psychological feeling of praise.<sup>127</sup>

Simeon the Graceful defines basic psychic restfulness as the sign of the coming of experience. Firstly “the outer senses and the inner passions become at rest”,<sup>128</sup> which is followed by the ‘spiritual impulses’ (*zaw’ē de-rūh*) and ‘mystical consolation’ (*būyā’ā kasyā*).

As we have already seen in connection with recitation, joy is a basic feature of the mystical experience in the Syriac sources. The joyous quality is occasionally presented in organic connection with ‘ecstasy’ by the use of expressions like ‘ecstasy in joy’ (*temhā dab-ḥaddūtā*).<sup>129</sup> It is possible to view joy either as the content of experience or as its product. Joy may overwhelm the whole body and “make the tongue silent”; a stronger joy may be expressed as ‘exultation’ (*rewāzā*).<sup>130</sup> In the mental reality the impression of joy is close to feelings of ‘delight’ (*bussāmā*) and ‘pleasure’ (*hannī’ūtā*).

[...] his body will be moved in weeping mingled with joy (*ḥaddūta*) that exceeds the sweetness of honey.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>124</sup> ܩܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ – “faculties (or: movements) of mind become silent and restful as in sleep”; Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 153b, p. 272 (tr. 162).

<sup>125</sup> Vööbus 1988, 332. (cit. Ms. Vatican Syr 124, fol. 314a.)

<sup>126</sup> ܠܡܢ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ – “My understanding is stupefied in the ecstasy in you”; ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ – “At that time I comprehend myself as if non-existent.” Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316–317).

<sup>127</sup> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ  
Beulay: *Lettres*, 31:4 (pp. 392–393).

<sup>128</sup> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ Mingana 1934/Simon, 169a, p. 288 (tr. 19).

<sup>129</sup> E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 12:8 (pp. 340–341).

<sup>130</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326. Further examples of intense experiences of joy on p. 150–155.

<sup>131</sup> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ . ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ  
ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ (Isaac of Nineveh). Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126;  
Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 85. For the use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, see p. 183.



[...] from time to time, from the plentiful rushing streams of inner movements (*huššābē*) (came forth something) that kindled him with its heat, and he was no longer able to bear that flame of joy (*haddūā*) [...]<sup>132</sup>

The experience may also have other emotional tones. Isaac of Nineveh knows a heart-rending, stabbing and painful emotion (*ḥarrīfūt ḥaššā de-nāsfā be-lebbā*),<sup>133</sup> an expression that seems to correspond closely to the pain of love experienced by the mediaeval Spanish mystics, especially the *arrobamiento* of St. Theresa of Jesus.

Qualities of the mystical experience resulting from meditation on death are defined as the spread of tranquillity (*šelyā*) in the soul, the disappearance of perception (*regeštā*) of physical things, and being *tehīr*, here to be translated perhaps as ‘wondering’ rather than as ‘ecstatic’.<sup>134</sup> The aspect of losing ordinary consciousness during the experience is expressed as being *de-lā nafšā*, ‘without self’ or ‘without soul’, a strong yet seldom used expression open to many interpretations, and as being ‘led away’ (*netdebar*) from all “motion of senses and impulses” (*mettezi’ānūtā de-regšē wad-zaw’ē*).<sup>135</sup> The corresponding qualities also occur as produced by solitude, albeit with different vocabulary: the mystic “loses (consciousness) of himself” (*tā’ē nafšeh*) and “forgets his nature” (*metnešē la-kyāneh*).<sup>136</sup> These expressions seem to refer in the first place to a static mode of being, but the ecstatic context actually allows them to be taken as qualities of specific mystical experiences as well. Correspondingly, the cessation of the experience may be described as “coming back to one’s self/soul” (*etā le-wāt nafšeh*).<sup>137</sup>

Warmth is a psychosomatic feature that is even more noteworthy in the original context – the cold caves amidst the rocks of Northern Mesopotamia.<sup>138</sup> When the images of warmth become strong enough, however, they are to be taken symbolically. In practice the dividing line between analytical and symbolical warmth is impossible to draw, since perhaps the most common word used in these

<sup>132</sup> סוכה וכן תקרא שגתא דגשיתא. דחצולמחב סוכה נח  
כשתבמאמח. מא דלר נצנד סוכה נחב דגשבו לחלמח  
סוכה נח Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

<sup>133</sup> Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 177; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120. The Greek word *κατάλυσις* would make a pithy equivalent to the term.

<sup>134</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 257–258; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 173.

<sup>135</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 258; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 173.

<sup>136</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

<sup>137</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 249; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 168.

<sup>138</sup> E. A. W. Budge, who examined monks’ caves in Mesopotamia in the late 19th century, saw “no marks of fire in any of the cells” (Budge 1893, clxviii) in spite of the fact that in December-February the temperature frequently drops below zero.

contexts, *reḥā*,<sup>139</sup> covers a wide area from warm heat to burning (or boiling!) fervour, and is generally used in the metaphorical sense. Almost the same applies to the root *HMM*, signifying temperatures from warm to hot, and symbolising fervent, violent emotions of zeal. Moreover, even the subject himself is hardly aware of whether his heat is mental or physical since during the experience it may be difficult to perceive the difference between the two dimensions.

If warmth is counted as being in the category of psychophysical phenomena, what then would be its merely psychic counterpart? Depending on its strength and intensity, I would suggest (one expressed as) 'consolation' (*būyā'ā*), the operation of which is described as delightful and refreshing (*metbassam*).<sup>140</sup> The expression has a slight nuance of interpretation, since in common thought the concept of consolation implies the existence of the *other* who does the consoling.

### 2.2.2. Symbolic Expression

A symbol has been defined as "an exact reference to something indefinite",<sup>141</sup> and there indeed seems to be a kind of tension always present in the semantics of symbolic expression. The concept of symbol has a twofold function: it may either reveal and illustrate or hide and confuse, depending on the purpose of the author, his method of application, the position of the recipient, and on the mechanisms among these three. The choice of the sign itself may be more or less arbitrary (symbols relying on resemblance are sometimes differentiated by calling them 'icons') but usually there is an analogous or metaphorical relationship behind the use of a symbol. Usually symbols are chosen from the imagery of the respective context, in this case Christian and Biblical.

Syriac theology enjoys a reputation for "symbolic thinking", which has often been contrasted with the "philosophical thinking" of Greek theology.<sup>142</sup> The most outstanding early Syriac theologians St. Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh and Narsai, were in fact poets. Symbolic language is a general Semitic phenomenon, abundant in the Hebrew OT itself, and the Syriac authors derived many of their images from the Syriac Bible. The Divinity as 'fire', the incarnation as 'clothing', anthropomorphisms and images of 'light', 'eye' and 'mirror' are common themes in

<sup>139</sup> E.g. Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 177; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120.

<sup>140</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 248; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 167.

<sup>141</sup> Tindall 1955, 6.

<sup>142</sup> The position has recently been challenged by U. Possek: *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*. (CSCO 580, 1999.)

Syriac literature. Brock, in his articles on the thought of St. Ephrem, speaks about 'divine descent' by a 'ladder of symbols'.<sup>143</sup>

For our topic this kind of ideological background provides space and freedom in the choice of signs, yet within the boundaries of biblical tradition. It is also clear that the ascetic authors are no poets: their language has neither the tendency nor the aim to produce aesthetic images for the sake of form.

In principle, mystical experience may be described with the help of any of the allegories or images derived from ordinary natural sensing, like that of tasting,<sup>144</sup> hearing ("sounds of spiritual beings")<sup>145</sup> or smelling ("the sweet odour, the perfume of which is ineffable").<sup>146</sup>

The category of tasting generates analogues of a more detailed nature, such as "the palate of his mind tastes the delight of these divine secrets."<sup>147</sup> In Syriac usage tasting is also a symbolic way of expressing perception in general, and, as a vital concept with a certain subjective ardour, it is very suitable for use with reference to a mystical experience. Tasting may be focused as 'sweet taste' (*te'āmtā ḥalūtā*).<sup>148</sup> The usual function of the concept of sweetness (*ḥalyūtā*) in the discourse is to activate the quality of pleasure and joy present in the experience and adjoin it to the symbolic parlance. The idea of tasting naturally gives rise to images of eating<sup>149</sup> and drinking, and the category of eating in turn produces further signs like 'nourishment' (*saybartā*)<sup>150</sup> or 'victuals' (*tūrsāyā*) to depict the mystical experience.<sup>151</sup> Accordingly, the image of drinking is naturally connected with the symbols of the cup, wine or fountain.

In preserved solitude this meditation (*renyā*) will pour endless pleasure (*hannī'ūtā*) into the heart and will quickly draw the mind towards unspeakable ecstasy (*temhā lā-*

<sup>143</sup> Brock 1984, 10–12, 24–48.

<sup>144</sup> E.g. Mingana 1934/Simon, 194b, p. 314 (tr. 59).

<sup>145</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 153b, p. 272 (tr. 162).

<sup>146</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 143b, p. 262 (tr. 148–149).

ܐܢܝܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܩܕܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ

<sup>147</sup> ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30\*). The analogy is further employed in p. 54 (40\*).

<sup>148</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 6–7; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 4.

<sup>149</sup> "Blessed be he who eats (ܐܘܩܠ) from these things continually." Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 163; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 110.

<sup>150</sup> ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢ

"Nourishment is given to the mind by the Holy Spirit mystically." Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 169 (158b, p. 277) The old Semitic form 'Spirit of holiness' is used here.

<sup>151</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 161a, p. 279 (tr. 172).

*metmallelānā*). Blessed is he to whom this fountain (*mabbō'ā*) has been opened and who drinks (*ešīr*) from it at all times, day and night.<sup>152</sup>

Of all the various ways of perception, the sense of touch seems not to be used to symbolise mystical experience. In its most concrete sense it is the least appropriate in terms of analogical symbolism when set in relation to spiritual phenomena. Somewhere between tasting, smelling and touching, however, is the image of breathing. Isaac of Nineveh writes about “breathing the ecstatic air of the new world”,<sup>153</sup> Philoxenus of Mabbug about “breathing the air that is above”,<sup>154</sup> and John of Dalyatha urges his reader to “breath the Spirit of life” (*sūq rūḥ ḥayyē*)<sup>155</sup> so that the Life may mingle with his material substance. The continuous breathing of the scent of the Beloved represents, for John, an ecstatic mode of being.<sup>156</sup> In this connection John also utilises the double meaning of *rūḥ* as ‘wind’ and ‘Spirit’, and the derivative of the same root ‘smell’ (*rīḥ*):

He inhales (*merīḥ*) your Holy Spirit like a child that breathes in (*sā'eq*) the smell of his parent, he exhales (*pā'eh*) the smell (*rīḥ*) of your Grace from his body like a child the smell of his nourisher.<sup>157</sup>

Blessed is he who breathes Holy (*rūḥ*) Spirit and who has mixed also the smell (*rīḥ*) of his own body into the one who has taken delight in his aroma.<sup>158</sup>

In spite of the fact that the fragrance is in the first place not a concrete fact but a symbolic sign of a spiritual phenomenon, *A Letter Sent to a Friend* contains a curious description of an olfactory mystic experience which claims that the quality of fragrance may cling to one's actual clothing (one way to explain the existence of objects containing *baraka!*) and therefore a lovely smell may be experienced in a concrete physiological way as well.

And from the heart of man comes forth a sweet smell, that the senses of a mortal body are unable to perceive, until the clothing and the whole body of man has that holy smell and has changed to its likeness.<sup>159</sup>

The ambiguity of the mystical-ecstatic phenomenon is illustratively shown by the fact that it may be referred to with symbols whose basic meanings are somewhat

<sup>152</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 258–259; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 174.

<sup>153</sup> ܩܘܨܬܐ ܝܘܨܦ ܕܩܝܘܢܐ (Isaac of Nineveh) Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 125. (Wensinck translates ‘wonderful air’ in *Mystic Treatises*, 85.)

<sup>154</sup> Philoxène de Mabboug, *La Lettre à Patricius*, 97 (842–843).

<sup>155</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 28:2 (pp. 388–389).

<sup>156</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 31:4 (pp. 392–393).

<sup>157</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:5 (pp. 474–475). Another word play is ‘child’ (*yālōdā*) – ‘parent’ (*yālōdā*).

<sup>158</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 38:1 (pp. 408–409).

<sup>159</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30\*).

antithetical, such as ‘fountain’ (*mabbō’ā*)<sup>160</sup> and ‘fire’ (*nūrā*),<sup>161</sup> and this may take place even in the same sentence:

Prayer becomes a gift of God when the spring (*mabbō’ā*) of the heart is kindled with the fire (*nūrā*) of love and with the wood of sacrificial labours (Simeon the Graceful).<sup>162</sup>

The symbol of a fountain is employed in the discourse to activate the joyous and refreshing qualities of the experience, the result being signs like ‘fountain of pleasure’ (*mabbō’ā de-hannī’ūtā*).<sup>163</sup> The joyous quality of the experience produces further symbolic signs that have adopted figurative characteristics such as ‘sun of joy’,<sup>164</sup> ‘flame of joy’<sup>165</sup> or ‘sparkling rays (*zelgē*) of joy’.<sup>166</sup>

The aspect of sensitivity and perhaps a certain irritation present in the mystical experience can be seen in the use of the term ‘tickling’ (*ḥuthātē*).<sup>167</sup> The function of tickling in the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh is that it is crucial in orientating the subject from the ‘world’ to occupy himself with the spiritual phenomenon. These ‘ticklings’, however, cannot be perceived without solitude (*šelyā*), emaciation (*nāḥōbūtā*) and attentive recitation – except in a deceptive way, where they soon change into ‘bodily’ (*gešīmē*) ones.<sup>168</sup>

Most of the qualities that we encountered in the previous chapter are present on the level of the symbolic expression as well, but in other, more refined forms. Even the loss of the sense of place, itself a result of the dazing quality of the experience, is expressed on the symbolic level by John of Dalyatha in a poetical fashion: “The earth that I used to walk on has vanished from before me.”<sup>169</sup>

What, then, would be the most suitable and functional linguistic icon of ecstasy, with sufficient ability to bear close resemblance? Perhaps the most accu-

<sup>160</sup> E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 259; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 174.

<sup>161</sup> E.g. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 159b, p. 278 (tr. 171).

<sup>162</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 193b, p. 313 (tr. 58). I have altered Mingana’s ‘mental labours’ (ܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ) to ‘sacrificial labours’, in accordance with to the Old Testament use of the word ܟܠܘܬܐ, ‘separation’.

<sup>163</sup> E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 58; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 41.

<sup>164</sup> ܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ – “the sun of joy shines into them”; Beulay: *Lettres*, 11:6 (pp. 334–335).

<sup>165</sup> ܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

<sup>166</sup> Isaac of Nineveh. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 125; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 84.

<sup>167</sup> ܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ “Pray God that He would allow you to perceive the ticklings of the Spirit”. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 218. (Wensinck translates as ‘spiritual allurements’, *Mystic Treatises*, 147.)

<sup>168</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 218; Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises*, 147.

<sup>169</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6. (This being, of course, only one perspective from which the sentence may be interpreted.)



For the path of the voices that batter his ears does not lead to his heart.  
 The gates of his ears are open to the other:  
 a word that entered by his ear  
 went out on the opposite by the other ear.  
 While his teacher supposes that he is listening to him,  
 he does not perceive that his warning is pouring forth outside,  
 because there is no place in his heart to receive [it].<sup>177</sup>

For full and congested and cramped is the spacious gulf of his reason  
 from one drop of the love surged and became a great sea.  
 Thoughts plunge in and arise like a sailor whose ship is wrecked.  
 Thought is afloat in waves of desires like a ship whose navigator has  
 abandoned it.<sup>178</sup>

In his *Book of Perfection* Sahdona gives a long description of earthly drunkenness in order to parallel it with the spiritual one. Here drunkenness and *temhā* are identified, and heat is attributed to both. Those who love God are likened to ‘drunkards’ (*rawwāyē*), and their observational capacity is described as extremely weak. The stress here is on the inner reality that a drunken person experiences at the expense of the external one:

Those who love God and are smitten with love for him are like people who are drunk (*rawwāyē*), for a drunk who is enflamed with wine is in a complete state of *temhā*: he walks on the ground, but is not aware of it; he stands among people, but he does not distinguish who they are. Often enough he may struck a blow, but he does not suffer anything; he may be insulted, but he is not offended; he may be praised, but is not puffed up by it – simply because he is incapable of understanding what he hears as a result of his great drunkenness (*rawwāyūta*). When a large number of people address him, he is not aware of it, for the awareness of his heart is snatched away (*hetīf*) as a result of the heat (*hammīmūtā*) of the wine which enflames (*sāgrā*) him. And when he sleeps on the floor, he imagines he is flying in the air.<sup>179</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh gives an expression of the same phenomenon in a more spiritual context, stressing the negative character of intoxication, the state in which the normal functions of the mind cease so that even the differentiation between mind and body is no longer sensed:

The mind is engulfed in ecstasy (*tahrā*) and the desired object of prayer is forgotten. The impulses are drowned in deep drunkenness and he is no longer in this world, and since then there is no longer discernment of body or of soul, nor recollection of anything.<sup>180</sup>

<sup>177</sup> ܠܠܗ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ

<sup>178</sup> Ephrem, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 1:13–14. Translation from McVey 1989, 264–265.

<sup>179</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles I*, 3:150. English translation (except the terms in Syriac) according to Brock 1989, 110–111. A similar description by John of Dalyatha in Beulay: *Lettres*, 37:4.

<sup>180</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 174; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 117–118: ‘engulfed’ – literally: ‘swallowed’ (ܠܠܗ). The last sentence is attributed by Isaac to Evagrius.

Other aspects of the experience are emphasised in the two clusters of concepts that are often connected with each other: those of heat and light, both occurring frequently in Syriac texts. Symbols of heat arise from the aspect of warmth in the mystical experience and they include ‘hotness’ (*hammīmutā*), ‘burning’ (*reṯhā*) and the more concrete signs ‘flame’ (*šūlhābā*) and ‘fire’ (*nūrā*).<sup>181</sup> Symbols of light include the concepts of ‘light’ (*nuhrā*, *nūhārā*),<sup>182</sup> ‘illumination’ (*nahhī-rūtā*)<sup>183</sup> and perhaps *šafyūtā*<sup>184</sup> in the sense of transparency. The difference between *nūhrā* and *nūhārā* is so slight that I have found no way to express it in English;<sup>185</sup> however, even in Syriac this difference is not discernible in unvowelized texts. The totality of the experience is often expressed with the symbolism of light: “And all my body together with my soul was one strong light.”<sup>186</sup>

The symbolism of fire has a rich number of subtexts, for it has deep roots in the Biblical tradition,<sup>187</sup> and in the Syriac Church it was further developed by St. Ephrem towards sacramental connections.<sup>188</sup>

In the labour of prayer there blazes up in the soul the fire (*nūrā*) of Christ’s love (*nūrā de-reḥmeteh da-mšihā*) and the heart becomes frantic (*šānē*) with longing (*reggetā*), and kindles (*mawqed*) all the members on flames (*šulhābē*); it exults with love and goes out of its order (John of Dalyatha).<sup>189</sup>

The image of fire is common in Sahdona, who employs a great deal of parallelism in his discourse, together with drunkenness as parallel modes of experience: “When he is drunk (*rāwē*) with the love (*hubbā*) of God and is inflamed (*šegīr*)

<sup>181</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 156a, p. 274 (tr. 165)

“love of God burns in the heart of a man like fire”:

ܩܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ

Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144a, p. 262 (tr. 149); ‘fiery impulse’ – ܩܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ.

<sup>182</sup> E.g. Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 23a, p. 220 (tr. 104); Brock: *Second Part*, 6:1 (ed. 16, tr. 20).

<sup>183</sup> E.g. Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 23a, p. 220 (tr. 104); Brock: *Second Part*, 6:2 (ed. 16, tr. 20).

<sup>184</sup> E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:5 (pp. 316–317), 51:13 (pp. 480–481) etc. Beulay treats John of Dalyatha’s *šafyūtā* as a technical term that is regularly to be translated *la limpidité*. In some contexts ‘brightness’ would make a nice, slightly poetic alternative, especially when the root occurs in the adjective *šāfyā*.

<sup>185</sup> In Finnish, at least, it is possible to differentiate between ‘valo’ and ‘valkeus’, approximately corresponding to *nūhrā* – *nūhārā*. (Cf. French ‘lumière’ – ‘lueur’.)

<sup>186</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 32 (24\*).

<sup>187</sup> “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29, Deut. 4:24, Gr. πῦρ καταναλίσκων, Peshitta:

ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ); “He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11, Luke 3:16).

In 2 Tim. 1:6 (“Fan into flame the gift of God”), however, is in the Peshitta the idea of fire (Gr. ἀναζωπυρεῖν) merely ‘stir up’ (*te’īr*).

<sup>188</sup> Yousif 1977, 241–246.


<sup>189</sup> Vööbus 1988, 332. (cit. Ms. Vatican Syr 124, fol. 314a.)

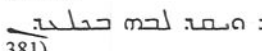


with the compassion (*reḥmetā*) of his Lord ...”<sup>190</sup> The most fervent advocate of fiery images is perhaps John of Dalyatha, who declares that when a person perceives the mystical experience, “his heart is enflamed and burns constantly”.<sup>191</sup> And further, “Then the blaze is kindled again in you. Your heart grows fervent and your flesh burns in its fervour.”<sup>192</sup>

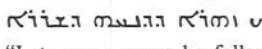
The symbol of light has the capacity to produce further images, such as Isaac’s ‘flower of the shine of truth’ (*zahrā de-denḥeh da-šrārā*). Accordingly, the description of participation in this experience belongs to the symbolism of ‘seeing’.<sup>193</sup>

The symbolism of light, often expressed as ‘shapeless light’,<sup>194</sup> which emphasises the non-physical character of the light in question, is one of the most distinctive features of the East Syrian authors, and for John of Dalyatha in particular it is a basic motif. His language is probably the most colourful in all Syriac metatheology; he develops the theme of light with more poetical expressions, such as ‘cloud of light’ (*‘arpelā de-nūhrā*),<sup>195</sup> and adopts further images like the ‘likeness of a sapphire’ (*sappilā*) and ‘colours of the shades of heaven’ (*gawnā da-krōmā da-šmayyā*) to signify the states of soul; to counterbalance the symbolism of light he may make use of the ‘darkness of the Glory’ (*‘amṭānā de-šubḥā*) of God, or praise the ‘bright darkness’ (*‘amṭānā nehīrā*),<sup>196</sup> he illustrates the “foaming founts springing up from an indescribable sea” with the “indivisible whirls of rays of light (*zallīqay nūhrā*)”.<sup>197</sup>

190  Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles* I, 3:151.

191  Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:1 (pp. 380–381).

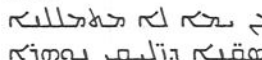
192 Beulay: *Lettres*, 29:2 (pp. 390–391).

193  “Let your prayers be followed by the works of excellence, that your soul might see the flower of the shine of truth.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 52; Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises*, 37.

194  E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 48:11 (pp. 504–505).

195 Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400–401). The symbol of a cloud, well known from Pseudo-Dionysius, does appear in other authors as well: E.g. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144b, tr. 150.

196 Beulay: *Lettres*, 48:11 (pp. 504–505), 48:12 (pp. 504–505), 36:5 (pp. 404–405), 46:3 (pp. 454–455). For the ‘vision of a sapphire’ there is a subtext by Evagrius (see *ibid.*, 17:2, p. 357).

197  Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:6 (pp. 424–425).

After this glorification the mind (*hawṇā*) is silenced and engulfed in the light of the vision (*ḥazzetā*) of sublime and immaterial contemplation (*te'oryā*) like a fish in the sea.<sup>198</sup>

Light is a symbol which by its mere existence implies something originating from outside of the subject. The experience is described both as full of light in itself and as movement towards light – one more inexact feature in the discourse.

Immediately after the mind has been illuminated and risen upwards, it becomes conscious of the rays of impassibility, and desires all the more earnestly to be drawn towards the shapeless eternal light (*nūhrā ityāyā de-lā demū*) (Simeon the Graceful).<sup>199</sup>

It is also a matter for discussion whether the *parole* on light reflects a quality of brightness in the analytical sense or whether it is rather a symbolic expression. 'Abdišo' the Seer tries to explain the vision (*ḥazzetā*) of mind in analytical terms: it has 'neither image nor likeness', for the mind 'does not know and does not distinguish its own self from the glory of that imageless light'.<sup>200</sup> He tells us that even the remembrance of that vision of light leads him to complete ecstasy, physical and psychic in nature. And moreover, 'Abdišo' also makes it clear that the light in question is not physical<sup>201</sup> light, just as the sound of spiritual hosts and conversations is different from our voices, and spiritual food is dissimilar to earthly food.<sup>202</sup> In other words, 'light' is to be understood as a symbolic concept rather than as an analytical one.

Since the interests of the metatheologians – with the possible exception of John of Dalyatha – were not in symbolism itself or in aesthetic qualities, they show no tendency to seek for especially peculiar symbols. Even the most extraordinary ones usually come from the religious context, which usually means a biblical subtext, such as the 'pearl' (*margānītā*), which occurs in a symbolic function in the New Testament<sup>203</sup> and in Syriac literature in general (symbolising Christ, the Word of God, faith, virginity and communion),<sup>204</sup> as well as in Manichaeism. Isaac of Nineveh employs it as a symbol of ecstasy received in prayer; in the same context he also employs the symbolism of spiritual swimming (*saḥwā*),

<sup>198</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:12 (pp. 514–515).

<sup>199</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 166b, p. 286 (tr. 15). Mingana translates  $\text{ܘܢܗܘܐ ܠܗ ܠܘܚܘܬܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ}$  as "a divine light which has no image"; the most literal equivalent for  $\text{ܠܘܚܘܬܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ}$  would be 'substantial light'.

<sup>200</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 149a–149b, pp. 267–268 (tr. 156).

<sup>201</sup> *estuksāyā*, literally 'elementary'.

<sup>202</sup>  $\text{ܠܘܚܘܬܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ}$  Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 152a, p. 270 (tr. 160).

<sup>203</sup> Matt. 7:6, 13:45–46, Rev. 21:21.

<sup>204</sup> Harviainen 1999, 342.

which is further connected with pearl-diving.<sup>205</sup> This is one part of his image of spiritual life as an ocean, from the depths of which one can encounter surprises of many kinds:

Numerous are the varying states (*šuhlāfē*) of this ocean. Who knows its labours and its multifarious pursuits, the wonderful pearls (*margānyātā tmihātā*) in its depth and the animals (*haywātā*) rising from it? (Isaac of Nineveh)<sup>206</sup>

These images fit well with Isaac's background in Qatar, the coast of which has been famous for its submarine treasures sought by divers.<sup>207</sup> The sea – a mysterious, non-exhaustible entity – was used as a symbol of God by John of Dalyatha, who also wrote a discourse on the 'spiritual sea'.<sup>208</sup>

Among curiosities we may encounter even more peculiar symbols, such as Isaac's 'harbour full of peace',<sup>209</sup> referring to an 'ineffable stupefaction (*bul-hāyā*)', John of Dalyatha's 'total living lustres' and 'statute of light'.<sup>210</sup> The more exotic the symbols become, the more difficult it is to retain the connection with the original experience, the result being a variety of possibilities as to how to interpret the images. The more extraordinary the symbol is, the more the signification of the expression is the product of a subjective interpretation. One might argue that not all of the above expressions have a mystical experience as their reference. The images in question, however, are in their context spiritual objects that are aimed at and yearned for by the authors. In this case the definition given above – "a symbol is an exact allusion to something indefinite" – is particularly true: mystical experience is at least as wide and elastic an entity as the heterogenic language that refers to it. Moreover, there is also a difference as to whether a symbol has as its reference a single mystical experience or the concept of mystical experience in general, and this is not necessarily reflected in the level of significance.

When symbolic description is separated from strict analogy, the discourse easily drifts to the aesthetic, from the strictly religious to the artistic. If this be the

<sup>205</sup> "During such acts (of worship) all of a sudden someone might sometimes discover a pearl (ܩܘܠܘܒܐ, Gr. μαργαρίτης)." Brock: *Second Part*, 14:24 (ed. 62, tr. 74), 34: 4–12 (ed. 136–138, tr. 148–150). The Syriac associations of *saḥwā* are different from the 'swimming' of more water-rich cultures: the semantic field of the verb *sehā* covers 'bathing' and 'baptism' as well.

<sup>206</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 179; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 121.

<sup>207</sup> Other marine images include the little boy being taught to swim (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 273; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 183).

<sup>208</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:8 (pp. 476–477), 50:14–15 (pp. 466–469).

<sup>209</sup> ܩܘܠܘܒܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܘܢܐ Brock: *Second Part*, 7:2 (ed. 19, tr. 24).

<sup>210</sup> Another possible way of translating ܩܘܠܘܒܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܘܢܐ is that suggested by Beulay: 'Les resplendissements de la Vie totale'. ܩܘܠܘܒܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܘܢܐ – 'la colonne de lumière'. Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:9 (pp. 426–429).

case, it should be possible to find descriptions that surpass the beauty of the reference, the experience itself. Especially in that case the symbols may operate regardless of the existence of mystical experiences as their reference. Perhaps an example of exaggerative symbolism might be seen in the image of ‘flying in a spiritual chariot’:

While astonished (*metdammar*) [with spiritual thoughts] he places his mind in the spiritual chariot and lets it fly and be occupied with all the holy fathers of all generations, the inheritance of whose behaviour he possesses. (Isaac of Nineveh)<sup>211</sup>

The following samples from John of Dalyatha are full of verbal jubilation with poetical archetypes such as abyss, pond, song, flames, thirst, breathing and flying:

You have thrown me into your abyss (*tehūmā*) in order that I might drink without measure; intoxication of your love (*rawyūt reḥmetāk*) is burning me, and behold, my heart is enflamed out of thirst for your pond (*peṣīdā*).<sup>212</sup>

Blessed is the one who spreads out his bed in the unceasing amazement of your mysteries, and stays in peace and silence (*šāii we-šāteq*) in ecstasy (*tahrā*) that is in them, and breathes from them fragrance of life (*rēḥ ḥayyā*) for the delight of his assiduous heart.<sup>213</sup>

My heart kindles from your love, and because of the flames (*šulhābā*) of its yearning it rises to fly from its position. My soul is thence as it was set in annihilation (*tullāqā*).<sup>214</sup>

Cause your hidden power (*ḥaylāk kāsyā*) to dwell in us, so that the senses of our soul (*regšay nafšāk*) may be strengthened, in order that our soul may mystically (*rā’zānā’it*) strike up a song filled with *tahrā* (Isaac of Nineveh).<sup>215</sup>

When the aesthetic values of the expression grow, the cognitive ones correspondingly lag behind, and understanding of the expression is more and more subjectively dependent on each reader’s personal experience and subtextual background. For example, what experience does Simeon the Graceful mean by saying: “Blessed is the soul which has eaten the ‘bread of angels’ (*lahmā de-mala’kē*) from the table of God”?<sup>216</sup> He seems to assume that the reader already knows

<sup>211</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 551–552; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 370. The image of ‘chariot’ (*markabtā*) happens to be thematically analogous and etymologically equivalent to the Kabbalistic *merkava* mysticism, but there is, of course, no reason to suppose any “influence” here. The same set of images is common stock and easily accessible to any poetical mind in each tradition.

<sup>212</sup> ܘܥܠܝܬܝ ܒܝܕܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܝ ܒܝܕܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܝ ܒܝܕܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܝ ܒܝܕܝܢܝܢܝܢ . Beulay: *Lettres*, 46:2 (pp. 454–455).

<sup>213</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:3 (pp. 474–475).

<sup>214</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 17:1 (pp. 354–355).

<sup>215</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 10:41 (ed.42, tr. 52)

<sup>216</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 171a, p. 290 (tr. 23). The word used of the ‘table’ (ܥܘܠܝܬܝܢ) often refers to the Communion table, the altar, but ‘bread of angels’ (ܠܚܡܝܢܢܝܢ) is not employed as a symbol of the Eucharist. It is a biblical image (Ps. 78:25) which in the Syriac

what it is all about, that he is one of those “who have tasted”. In other words, he uses a symbol that is unclear to outsiders, but potentially adequate to be a common code for mystics; others are dependent on their subtexts. In Christian theology bread as a biblical symbol of Christ is usually connected with the Eucharist, but in the discourse of ascetics this is not necessarily the case. In fact Simeon makes no mention of the sacrament of the Eucharist anywhere in his discourse. A more likely subtext for the concept of bread is the ‘spiritual bread’ (*lahmā rūhānāyā*) of Stephen bar Sudhaile’s *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, where the context reveals its meaning to be a symbol of divine help received in the spiritual ascent.<sup>217</sup> These kinds of “obscure” images, however, do not actually describe experience as an incident, but rather interpret it as a phenomenon by connecting it as part of a wider religious system of thought.

To make some concluding remarks, the symbolism of mystical experience is basically conventional and largely biblical but every now and then also “poetical” and of indisputable aesthetic value. Conventionality means in practice that inappropriate symbols like sexual or otherwise defiled images are absent from the discourse. Nevertheless, a fairly wide set of images can be used if they have sufficient analogous value: even a ‘dog’ can be used in a positive way as a symbol of the soul’s spiritual zeal.<sup>218</sup>

### 2.2.3. Poetical Expression

Poetical language differs from symbolic description only in the form of expression, the semantic mechanisms of symbolic allusion on the level of deep-structures being fundamentally similar. Yet poetry is characterised by a certain freedom of expression: the poetical approach allows more variation in the choice of symbolism, and the limitations set by the theological context are not in full force.

How, then, are mystical experiences expressed in Syriac poetry? Despite the abundance of *memra* and *madraša* poetry in Syriac literature, the vehicle of mystical discourse among the Syrian monks is almost exclusively prose. This fact is remarkable in itself, for it again shows that the metatheologians felt no need or desire to develop the forms of expression towards artistic purposes with aesthetic motives.

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version of Pseudo-Hippolytos refers to God’s will and acting in accordance with it. (Brock: *Some New Syriac Texts*, 177–199.)

<sup>217</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 39 (Syriac 35\*).

<sup>218</sup> Isaac of Nineveh adopts the ‘dog’ from Evagrius; Brock: *Second Part*, 17:3 (ed. 81, tr. 92).

Something, however, can be found outside the main streams of metatheological tradition. *The Odes of Solomon* (OS), a Jewish-Christian work from the second century AD, is exceptionally rich in this respect.<sup>219</sup> In the historical perspective OS forms a relatively detached phenomenon in Syriac literature (also by its poetical form, or lack of it), yet its topics and images are in fact surprisingly similar to those found in later Syriac literature, including the sources of the present study. For that reason I see a more detailed survey of the imagery of OS as being of relevance for our synchronic approach, even though this entails a brief excursion from the mainstream of our corpus. For the purposes of this chapter I shall also employ a reference from St. Ephrem's *Paradise Hymns*, which is undoubtedly one of the most fruitful sources from the golden era of Classical Syriac poetry in regard to expression of personal experience. And finally I shall make a brief excursion to a lesser-known epic of Rabban Hormizd.

The general atmosphere of OS is very charismatic. Primarily, we may differentiate three different ways in the expression of the mystical encounter:

1. Explicit: (symbolic) description of the encounter.
2. Implicit: aspects in telling-technique
3. Description of visions

The symbolism of OS operates in two directions: from man to God (we could name it "natural") and from God to man ("supernatural"). An example of the natural can be found in Ode 40, where from the heart of the Odist there 'wells up/forth' (*gāsē*) praise to the Lord "like a spring" (*mabbō'ā*). The Odist likens his praise to milk (*halbā*) and honey (*debšā*).<sup>220</sup> We shall, however, concentrate in the following on the "supernatural" case, the more "mystical" aspect of the two – although it is also important to note that the former leads to the latter.<sup>221</sup>

### 2.2.3.1. Symbols of Mystical Encounter

OS is full of imagery of God touching on the human soul. This experience is often described with imagery connected with water. For example, 6:8-12 depicts the

<sup>219</sup> A methodological note here to illustrate the *systematic* analysis; the selection of quotations has been made in two basic stages. First, from the whole discourse of OS I have selected all features that seem to include traces of *personal* experience. Thus most biblical allusions, for example, are omitted. Second, I exclude all expressions that seem to belong more to general religious experience. What remains then, should be the elements of expression of extraordinary "mystical experience". It is to be admitted, however, that there is no ultimately objective criterion for defining the exact course of decisions in either of these stages. The translations of OS are my own, usually representing a compromise between the ultra-literal solutions of Franzmann (1991) and those of Charlesworth (1973).

<sup>220</sup> OS 40:1–2.

<sup>221</sup> The Odist himself hints at this in OS 40:3–4.

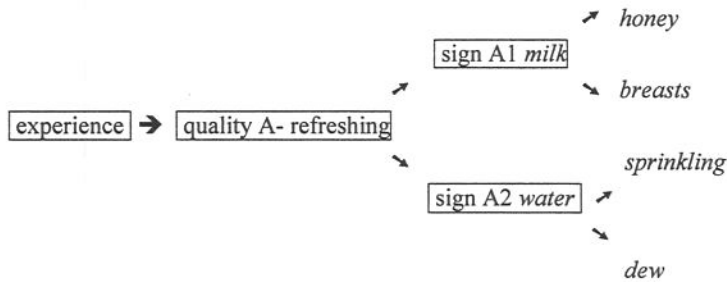
waters of the Lord as a flooding river which fills the whole earth. This liquid and refreshing character of spiritual experience fits well with the Syrian, Oriental, origin of OS – one might expect a Scandinavian to place more stress on the aspect of warmth in spiritual experience!

Ode 30 gives an exposition of this immaterial water. Its origins are in the “living spring (*mabbō’ā ḥayyā*) of the Lord”; it issued forth from the lips of the Lord (*sefwāteh de-māryā*). Its characteristics are described as “beautiful and fresh” (*šappir-ū we-nāqed*) and as “giving rest to the soul” (*wa-mnīḥ naḥšā*). These waters are also ‘sweeter’ (*bassīmīn*) than honey. Verse 6b reads “and from the heart of the Lord is its name”.<sup>222</sup> The ‘name’ is a broad concept in Syriac; especially in theological contexts it functions like a “totality of attributes” that often refer to a person’s “social surface”, i.e. image, reputation, hence even authority.

Other water-related symbols include dew (*ta’lā*)<sup>223</sup> and sprinkling (*resīsē*).<sup>224</sup>

Sprinkle (*rās*) upon us your sprinklings (*resīsayk*),  
open your abundant springs (*mabbō’ayk*)  
which flow milk and honey to us.<sup>225</sup>

If we try to reconstruct the semantic process of the formation of meanings behind the signs, the development might be illustrated as follows:



In this semantic process the character of experience is first recognised by the subject as something refreshing (A). The mind then searches for analogies for such experience in the natural world and finds one in the physiological experience of drinking. The object of the process of drinking, a drink, serves as an analogy for the spiritual experience. The signs of different drinks (A1, A2) may then be adopted into the discourse, and these in turn produce through associations new

<sup>222</sup> ܩܚܘ ܐܒܘܢ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ

<sup>223</sup> OS 11:14 “My face (ܦܢܝ) received dew.”

<sup>224</sup> OS 4:10, 35:1.

<sup>225</sup> OS 4:10.

images that lead the discourse in further directions. For example, sign 1 *milk* causes an association with the biblical images of ‘milk and honey’. It also opens another connection towards the feminine imagery of God.<sup>226</sup> Sign 2 *water* opens new water-like images, such as *sprinkling* or *dew*. In this way the discourse, all the time dependent on the subtextual capacity of the poet, develops towards its final form. This associative process, semiosis, plays a dominant role, especially in poetical discourse.

The nature of these different signs is symbolical and their character optional, i.e. they function as indicators of the same reality. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that water (‘sprinkling’) and milk are in fact identified with each other in explicit terms: “And He gave me milk, the dew of the Lord.”<sup>227</sup>

The imagery is by no means restricted to these “refreshing” cases. Since the main subtext of the Odist is the (Hebrew) Bible, most of the imagery is biblical. Ode 28 likens the inner experience to the presence of covering wings (*geppē*) and to the joy it brings to a leaping foetus (*‘ūla de-dā’eš*). Both are biblical expressions – the latter may even be the original Aramaic expression underlying the NT Greek.<sup>228</sup>

As the wings of doves over their nestlings,  
and the mouths of their nestlings toward their mouths,  
so also the wings of the Spirit over my heart.  
My heart is (continually) delighted and leaps for joy,  
like a foetus which leaps for joy in the womb of his mother.

In metatheological texts mercy (*rahmā*) is not necessarily a collective noun similar to the Western understanding of the concept of mercy. *Rahmā* seems to function as an indicator of the effects of grace, sometimes translated as ‘proceedings of grace’. Recognition of this sense is often facilitated by the use of the plural.<sup>229</sup>

<sup>226</sup> See OS 19:1–5, where the Holy Spirit (ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ) mixed (ܡܫܝܚܐ) the milk, which is therefore called a ‘mixture’ (ܡܫܝܚܐ). The grammatical gender of ‘Spirit’ in Syriac is feminine in origin.

<sup>227</sup> OS 35:5b. This heavenly milk (ܡܠܟܐ), immediately explained as the ‘dew of the Lord’ (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ), carries on the same analogy in its consequences: it makes the subject “grow up” and “rest”. Milk and water also come together in OS 4:10: “Sprinkle upon us your sprinklings, and open your abundant springs, from which flow milk and honey to us.”

<sup>228</sup> Luke 1:44. The same words are found in both the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels. It seems to be certain that the first chapters of Luke are based on Aramaic sources. See R. A. Martin (1987): *Syntax Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels*, 73–74, 89–90, 105.

<sup>229</sup> OS 14:9 “According to the multitude of your mercies, so grant to me.” (ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ). A similar expression in OS 16:7.



The famous Syriac imagery of clothing is fully represented in OS.<sup>230</sup> The Odist puts on or urges one to put on ‘mercy’,<sup>231</sup> a ‘seal’,<sup>232</sup> ‘holiness’,<sup>233</sup> ‘incorruption’,<sup>234</sup> ‘light’<sup>235</sup> and ‘joy’.<sup>236</sup>

The Lord renewed me with His garment (*ba-lbūšeh*),  
and gained me by His light (*nūhreh*)<sup>237</sup>

God’s action towards the human soul is depicted with verbs like ‘overshadow’,<sup>238</sup> and ‘renew’.<sup>239</sup>

### 2.2.3.2. Characteristics of the Encounter

So far we have dealt mainly with individual terms used of the experience. Next we may differentiate some more interpretative features in the expression of the encounter. The characteristics of the experience may be divided into seven basic qualities:

- (A) refreshment
- (B) intoxication
- (C) totality
- (D) rest
- (E) delight
- (F) pleasure
- (G) knowledge

The logical structure of the discourse might imply differentiation between the qualities included in the experience itself and the consequences resulting from it. The Odist himself, however, does not make clear distinctions in this respect, which is no surprise because in poetical language such distinctions are rather left hidden. We may consider features A–C (refreshment, intoxication, totality) as belonging to the first category; qualities D–G (rest,<sup>240</sup> delight, pleasure, know-

<sup>230</sup> For further details, see Brock 1982: *Clothing Metaphors*, and Seppälä 1999, 147–148.

<sup>231</sup> Or ‘goodness’ — ܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 4:6, 19:7.

<sup>232</sup> ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 4:8.

<sup>233</sup> ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 13:3.

<sup>234</sup> Or ‘imperishableness’ — ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 15:8.

<sup>235</sup> ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 21:3.

<sup>236</sup> ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 23:1.

<sup>237</sup> OS 11:11.

<sup>238</sup> ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 35:1.

<sup>239</sup> ܐܘܪܘܚܐ OS 11:11.

<sup>240</sup> Rest as a consequence in OS 30:3 (above). In OS 36:1 resting – in the Spirit of the Lord – is even portrayed as a “method” leading to spiritual uplifting.

ledge) seem to function in both, i.e. in the experience itself, and in the state following it.

The refreshing character (A) has already been mentioned above as perhaps the most typical quality of OS. It is something that can be found in classical Syriac poetry with images developed a few steps further. St. Ephrem, in his visions of Paradise, “swam around in its [of Paradise] magnificent waves.”<sup>241</sup> The utterly symbolic nature of the expression is here clarified by mixing it with other dimensions: drinking air and swimming in it:

How much the more, then, can this blessed air  
give to spiritual beings pleasure as they partake of and drink it,  
fly about and swim in it – this veritable ocean of delights.<sup>242</sup>

The intoxicating quality (B) leads the Odist to use an analogy, depicting himself as being drunk, an expression very familiar from Sufi poetry 800 years later. “I drank and got drunk (*rawwēt*), but my drunkenness (*rawwāyūtā*) was not without knowledge”.<sup>243</sup> This image, too, is not limited to OS in the field of Syriac poetry. We may find the following lines from St. Ephrem:

I forgot my poor estate,  
for it (i.e. vision of Paradise) had *made me drunk with its fragrance*.  
I became as no longer my old self,  
for it renewed me with all its varied nature.  
I swam around in its magnificent waves  
[...]  
*I became so inebriated* that I forgot all my sins there.<sup>244</sup>

St. Ephrem contrasts this spiritual inebriation with earthly nourishment; both sustain but one is deceitful, the other trustworthy:

The burden of food debilitates us, in excess it proves harmful,  
but if it be joy which inebriates and sustains,  
how greatly will the soul be sustained on the waves of this joy.<sup>245</sup>

All qualities operate in OS in the way described above, and thus each one could be arranged according to a similar scheme:

experience → quality B- intoxicating → sign B1 ܕܠܘܓ → further associations

<sup>241</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

<sup>242</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 9:16. English translation according to Brock 1990, 142.

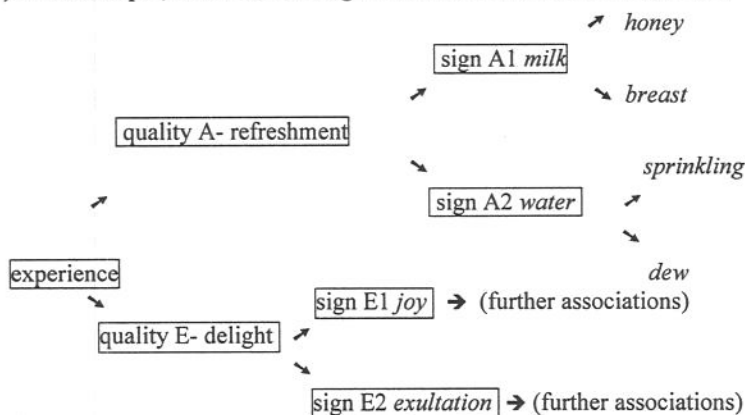
<sup>243</sup> OS 11:7.

<sup>244</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

The Syriac for the words in italics: ܕܠܘܓ [ܕ]ܘܪܘܫܐ and ܘܡܫܘܒܐ ܕܠܘܓܐ

<sup>245</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 9:23. English translation according to Brock 1990, 144.

These other qualities could, in turn, be combined in a single semantic chart (A, B ... X). For example, a chart including lines A and E would look like this:



As we have seen, totality (C) is generally considered to be one of the basic attributes of mystical experience in all religions. “Pure totality”, however, is somewhat awkward to express in itself alone. St. Ephrem expresses it beautifully through the refreshing and visionary characters in a hymn where he is swimming in the waves of Paradise:

Although I was not sufficient for all the waves of its beauty,  
Paradise took me up and cast me into a sea still greater.<sup>246</sup>

The theme of totality is also present in the discourse of OS.<sup>247</sup> Here also we may note an example of semantic cross-reference. The water-related images (in line A) may also be employed for the expression of this phenomenon: “My heart overflowed, it was found in my mouth, it dawned upon my lips.”<sup>248</sup>

Among the most essential qualities one may also find (D) ‘resting’<sup>249</sup> and (E) delight, expressed as ‘joy’<sup>250</sup> and ‘exultation’.<sup>251</sup> Closely connected with E we may add the quality of pleasure (F), expressed with vocabulary portraying love

<sup>246</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:5. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

<sup>247</sup> “In this way the Spirit of the Lord speaks in my members, and I speak in/by His love. For what is strange is destroyed, and everything is of the Lord” (OS 6:2-3).

ܡܢ ܡܢܗ ܡܠܠܐ ܡܫܗܝܗ, ܐܝܢܐ ܗܘܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܐ. ܡܢ ܡܢܗ ܡܠܠܐ ܐܘܪܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܗ  
ܡܢ ܡܢܗ ܡܠܠܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܗ, ܡܢ ܡܢܗ ܡܠܠܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܗ.

<sup>248</sup> ‘Overflowed’ (ܐܘܪܐ); literally ‘was caused to pour forth’. OS 21:8.

<sup>249</sup> ܢܝܫܐ OS 11:12, 28:3, 36:1, 37:4. *Neyāhā* is a broad concept indicating rest, calm, quiet, relaxation, satisfaction, pleasure, refreshment; often ‘(inner) peace’ would do well as a translation.

<sup>250</sup> ܡܢܗܘܐ OS 7:2, 23:1.

<sup>251</sup> ܡܢܗܘܐ OS 8:1, 23:4.

and tenderness. Ode 15:5b reads 'I was given pleasure (*etpanqet*) in His hands.' The verb *penaq* means 'treat with affection', 'cherish', or 'pamper'. (In later Syriac literature its derivative *mefanneqā*, 'one living in luxury' became a negative term, the opposite of 'anwāyā', 'ascetic'.) Charismatic character is further stressed by expressions like 'He filled me from His love' (not 'with' His love – in this way it is stressed that there is something to be transmitted; that something we call "mystical experience").<sup>252</sup>

Among these other qualities there is a certain "informative", almost "verbal" quality, extremely problematic to define or analyse, connected with prophetic phenomena and spiritual knowledge. The Odist likens himself to a harp played by the Spirit<sup>253</sup> – later on 'Harp of the Spirit' became known as a title of the most beloved Syriac poets (Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh and Narsai) – so that the Spirit of the Lord is speaking through him. Thus one feature of the experience in the OS is that in the mystical encounter something called 'knowledge' (*īda'īā*) is transferred. The concept of knowledge has exceptionally charismatic features in OS.<sup>254</sup> The Lord has made His knowledge great, and desires eagerly that it might become known.<sup>255</sup> The Odist urges his readers to 'accept the knowledge of the Most High'.<sup>256</sup> This knowledge is, however, more related to 'resting' than to normal investigative and discursive knowledge.<sup>257</sup> The prophetic quality of the experience may also be connected with the water-imagery: 'Speaking waters (*mayyā mallālē*) drew near to my lips'.<sup>258</sup>

<sup>252</sup> ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܘܢܐܘܫܐܘܢܐ OS 11:2.

<sup>253</sup> OS 6:1–2.

<sup>254</sup> The Odist has partaken of (11:4, 12:3) and received a conception of knowledge (15:5), in the end all shall partake of (7:24) it. Spiritual drunkenness is inferior to it (11:8), it has been given sincerely (17:13), opponents of the Messiah lack it (28:14, see also 18:12), those who know, understand and are not polluted (18:13). Ignorance has been destroyed, replaced by the knowledge of the Lord (OS 7:24). According to 34:5, the good tidings are in all simplicity declared to those without knowledge. This verse, it seems to me, has been mistranslated by previous translators, who have read the verb ܩܘܪܒܢܐ in *etpe'el* 'considered by' instead of *etpa'al* 'declared to'. (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܘܢܐܘܫܐܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܐܘܫܐܘܢܐ) This translation of mine is supported by contextual reading. The joyous message of the 34th Ode, parallel to that of Matt. 11:25, declares that the truth can be known by a simple and undivided heart. In verse 5 the message of verses 1–4 is declared to those who do not know, and the next line gives a parallel thought in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural: 'revealed for your salvation' (34:6).

<sup>255</sup> OS 6:6.

<sup>256</sup> OS 8:8. (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܘܢܐܘܫܐܘܢܐ) In 8:11 the Lord declares ,ܩܘܪܒܢܐ , "know my knowledge".

<sup>257</sup> OS 26:11–12. "Who is able to interpret the wonders of the Lord? For he who interprets will be destroyed, but what is interpreted will abide. For it suffices to know and to be at rest."

<sup>258</sup> OS 11:6. Since ܩܘܪܒܢܐ is also the Syriac equivalent of Greek λογικός, 'rational', there could be an alternative translation: 'mental waters'.

The Word of truth has filled me  
in order that I might proclaim it.<sup>259</sup>

In Him I have obtained eyes,  
I have seen His holy day.  
I have received ears,  
and heard His truth.<sup>260</sup>

The object or content of knowledge, however, is not mentioned – which is an effective way to underscore that those who know, know already, and those who do not, do not – except perhaps in 24:14 where it is referred to as *ḥasyūteh*, a term with no appropriate equivalent, usually translated as ‘His holiness’. It is implicitly obvious that the object of knowledge is the Lord Himself. The relation between these concepts might be best understood considering knowledge as a basic quality (G) that may culminate in prophetic speech.

### 2.2.3.3. Interpretation of the Relationship between God and Man

Yearning for the Unattainable is often a basic element in monotheistic mysticism. In this respect OS is quite exceptional: the general atmosphere is that of total fulfilment of all yearnings.<sup>261</sup>

The relationship between man and God is described as intimacy<sup>262</sup> and as *šawtāfutā*, a term meaning fellowship, participation and intercourse (with corresponding sexual connotations).<sup>263</sup> The Odist also boldly declares that he has been ‘mixed’ (*etmazget*) [with God], “since the lover has found the Beloved.”<sup>264</sup> The same verb (*mezag*) was later on used by St. Ephrem to describe the relation between the human and divine natures of Christ, but after the Council of Chalcedon (451) this idea was declared heretical.

The imagery of unification – not to mention ‘breasts’ of God – is exceptionally bold when considering the fact that the Odist seems to come from a more or less Targumic background.<sup>265</sup> It is also remarkable that the expressions of uni-

<sup>259</sup> OS 12:1. ܡܠ ܗܘܘܪܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ The last words could be translated as ‘speak it’ (i.e. declare the word), ‘speak him’ (i.e. declare the Lord) or ‘speak to him’. The translation of Charlesworth, “He has filled me with words of truth, that I may proclaim Him”, however, does not seem possible, for there is no ‘with’ (*b*) in the sentence, and Charlesworth’s argument for ‘Him’ (viz. lack of a point to indicate the feminine suffix) is also untenable because the masculine suffix may refer to the ‘word’ (ܘܫܘܒܐ).

<sup>260</sup> OS 15:3–4. The opening verse (ܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ) could also be translated ‘by Him...’

<sup>261</sup> Cf. OS 3:6–8, 8:3–5, 15:6–8, 23:1–4, 25:7–12.

<sup>262</sup> OS 21:7 – ܡܠ ܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ

<sup>263</sup> OS 4:9, 21:5.

<sup>264</sup> OS 3:7 – ܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ

<sup>265</sup> The influence of the Targums has been discussed by Harris-Mingana (1920, 171–174). The Targums are not quoted in OS as such, but a certain Targumic background can be seen in the

fiction were already employed in OS a couple of hundreds of years before the mystical theology of Evagrius and Pseudo-Dionysius, with its neo-Platonic overtones, made its way to the Syrian Orient.

Does OS give any hints as to how this unification takes place? A noteworthy point of encounter is praise, glorification, (*tešbōhtā*) which is not only something offered to God by man, but also something given by God: "His praise He gave us, for his name".<sup>266</sup> In 18:1 the Odist declares that his heart is lifted up in the Love of the Highest in order to praise Him.

The description of God is correspondingly bold. God is depicted as the 'Beloved',<sup>267</sup> a term characteristic of Sufi poetry 800 years later. The best-known way of describing God in OS, however, is the feminine imagery. God has even prepared His breasts that men might drink His holy milk.<sup>268</sup> In another famous verse the Odist declares:

The Son is the cup;  
and the one who was milked, the Father;  
and she who milked, the Spirit of Holiness.  
Because His breasts were full,  
it was necessary that His milk should not be cast out without cause.  
The Spirit of Holiness opened Her womb,  
and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father,  
and She gave the mixture to the world although they did not know.<sup>269</sup>

The step from analytical to more symbolical expression is sometimes clearly differentiated by the use of the comparative conjunction *ayk*. In this way God is compared to the 'sun' (*šemšā*).<sup>270</sup> This image is further explained in another Ode:

For He is my sun,  
His rays have lifted me up,  
His light has released all darkness from my face.<sup>271</sup>

God is also likened to *kelilā*, 'crown' or 'garland'. This image refers both to His action,<sup>272</sup> and also to Himself: this is shown in Ode 17, where it is stated that the

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treatment of expressions derived from the Hebrew Psalter in OS. For example, God is never called a 'rock'. The Odist also frequently uses the Targumic expressions 'it was revealed' (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ) and 'before' (ܩܕܡܐ) a person.

<sup>266</sup> OS 6:7 – ܐܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܝܢܐ. The concepts of praise and glory are closely connected in the Semitic languages: to 'praise' God means to 'glorify' him.

<sup>267</sup> Both Syriac terms for 'Beloved' are used in OS: ܐܘܪܘܢܐ in 3:5, 3:7, 7:1, and ܥܘܒܕܝܢܐ in 8:21. The most common terms for God in OS, however, are 'The Lord' (ܐܘܪܘܢܐ) with about 100 occurrences, and 'The Highest' (ܐܘܪܘܢܐ), which appears about 30 times.

<sup>268</sup> ܐܘܪܘܢܐ OS 8:14.

<sup>269</sup> OS 19:2–5.

<sup>270</sup> OS 11:13.

<sup>271</sup> OS 15:2.

crown is a living one.<sup>273</sup> The same theme is already present in the first Ode, preserved only in Coptic translation. The Coptic word used in 1:1 is ΚΛΟΜ, which also has the equivalent double meaning of ‘crown’ and ‘wreath’. The latter meaning, in fact, makes more sense in the context: ΚΛΟΜ is plaited for the Odist in 1:2, and verses 3-5 confirm that it is a living one, the Lord Himself.

His love has nourished my heart,  
unto my lips He has fed (*gāšē*) His fruits<sup>274</sup>

One aspect of God in OS is beauty. Since in the Syriac language and in Syriac thinking, however, beauty and goodness are strongly identified in a way very similar to that in Greek, it is actually a matter of choice as to whether *yā'yūtā* should be translated ‘beauty’ or ‘goodness’.<sup>275</sup> In favour of the former we can find the expression *šappīrā*, ‘the beautiful one’, used of God’s acting in human souls, producing harmony of mind – but it is also used in the sense of ‘good’ as well.<sup>276</sup> However, God is not only milk and honey, but – to use the biblical expression<sup>277</sup> – a ‘burning fire’ as well. Ode 39 is a powerful and beautiful presentation of the destructive aspect of His presence – but even here the water-symbolism is employed, the power of the Lord being compared<sup>278</sup> to mighty rivers that destroy all except the faithful.

Mighty rivers are (like) the power of the Lord,  
they bring those who despise him head downwards.  
And they entangle their steps,  
destroy their fords.  
And they snatch their bodies,  
corrupt their souls.<sup>279</sup>

272 OS 5:12 “like a crown (ܐܬܗܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ) He is on my head”.

273 OS 17:1.

274 OS 16:2. Since the verb ܩܐܡܝܘܘܢ literally means ‘to vomit’, the idea seems to be that the Lord (or ‘Love’) feeds the Odist directly from His mouth. This maternal image also enriches our picture of the early Syriac feminine imagery of God. The possibility does not appear in the English translations: ‘poured out’ (Mingana 1920), ‘poured unto’ (Charlesworth 1973), ‘belched up’ (Franzmann 1991).

275 OS 12:4, 15:7, 16:5, 16:17.

276 OS 34:3 ܐܠܗܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܐܢܗܘ ܕܐܝܘܒ ܕܗܐܠ ܘܨܘܒܐ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥ.

277 Heb. 12:29.

278 The Syriac verse in question (OS 39:1) reads ܕܐܡܢܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥ. The level of analytism vs. symbolism of the expression is further dimmed by a grammatical possibility existent in the Semitic languages, i.e. that of omitting the word “like” in a comparison (a more familiar example is ܥܪܘܠܝܡ ܥܠܝܢ ܩܕܝܫܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ in Ps. 45:6(7), which in most Bible translations is “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever”, but in the Finnish translation it reads: ‘Sinun valtaistuimesi on niin kuin Jumalan’, ‘Your throne is like God’s’.

279 OS 39:1–3.

#### 2.2.3.4. *The Poetic Subject as an Indicator of Unification*

One of the striking features of OS is a certain inconsistency in the narrative. The subject of a verse is often problematic to define; the possibilities remain manifold even after the vocabulary is grammatically analysed. This had led scholars to divide some odes into sections where "Christ speaks" and others where "the Odist speaks".<sup>280</sup> With this kind of simplification, however, something is lost from the general impression. This 'something' could be called "the beauty of obscurity".

The obscurity of the subject, moreover, does not seem to be a consequence of clumsiness of style but an intentional effect. This functional poetic device has not been recognised by many Western scholars who have tried to force the Odes into strict "either-or" logic in a very unfruitful way. The effect, however, has been recognised by the Swedish translators:

Den kristne identifieras med Kristus till den grad att man inte alltid säkert vet vem det är som odet talar om, och detta antyder ett slags mystisk Kristusfromhet.<sup>281</sup>

Intentionality itself, however, is a relative concept in poetry: an inspired writer is never fully conscious of all aspects or changes in his telling. Moreover, "meaning" cannot be constituted by the writer alone, but to some extent by the recipient of the data as well. For example, in Ode 41 the subject is clearly the Odist in verses 1-7. Then, line 8a 'All those who see me, will marvel', seems, *after* a logical analysis of the entire Ode, to be the beginning of the words of Christ. For anyone who in his recitation arrives at verse 8, however, the whole attitude and attention are still concentrated on the human subject of verses 1-7. In this way line 8a may also serve as an expression of the consequences of mystical experience – unification – when read in the sense that it is a believer speaking. This means that OS also gives the reader plenty of opportunities to identify himself with Christ.

Examples may be found in several odes. Ode 15 clearly consists of words of man praising God, but in the middle of it the words of verse 9 seem to be uttered by Christ. In Ode 17 the subject seems to be man in verses 1-5, and Christ in 6-16. It is, however, possible to interpret at least verses 1 and 5 with reference to Christ

<sup>280</sup> The divisions made by Harris-Mingana (1920) in Odes 8, 10, 17, 22, 28, 31, 36, 41 and 42 are reproduced in Charlesworth's edition (1977); in the Swedish translation (Beskow 1980) these divisions are omitted. See Franzmann 1991, 4; further reading in Aune, D. E.: *The Odes of Solomon and Early Christian Prophecy*, *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982), 435–460, and Aune, D. E.: *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (Michigan, 1983). Due to the non-canonical character of OS there has been no enthusiasm to produce any redaction theories to explain the variation.

<sup>281</sup> Beskow & Hidal 1980, 91. "The Christian identifies himself with Christ to such an extent that it is not always sure who is it that the ode is talking about, and this hints at a kind of mystical Christ-piety."



and 7-9a with reference to man. In Ode 36 the subject changes smoothly from man to the Son of God around the third verse. In Ode 42 the first verse is spoken by the Odist, but the sixth verse cannot be spoken by anybody but Christ. Where did the switch occur? Here verses 3-20 seem to be spoken by Christ. There is, on the other hand, the possibility of a believer identifying himself with the subject at least in verses 3-5a and 10.

The change of subject as it takes place in three odes can be illustrated as follows:<sup>282</sup>

Ode 10	Ode 29	Ode 36
1 man (Son)	1 man	1 man
2 man (Son)	2 man/Son	2 man
3 man/Son	3 man/Son	3 Son
4 Son	4 Son/man	4 Son
5a Son (man)	5a Son/man	5 man
5b man (Son)	5b man/Son	6a Son/man
5c Son	6 man	6b man
6 Son	7 man	7 man/Son?
	8 Son	8 Son/man?
	9 Son/man	
	10 man/Son	
	11 man	

The rotation is considerable, especially since OS contains no elements of dialogue poems (otherwise much beloved in Syriac literature). In many cases the subject might, of course, be identified in a different way from that suggested above, but the main point remains unquestioned: the subject changes without warning and without clear points of change.

The production of this kind of classification, however, presupposes certain dogmatic dispositions in the questions (1) how evident imperfections we are willing to attribute to Christ (the perfect man!), and (2) how bold expressions we dare to attribute to the human subject (made divine!). The further we dare to go, the more “mystical” the contents seem to become. This is an illustrious example of how mystical meanings are constituted *into* texts in the reading-process.

<sup>282</sup> The numbers of the verses in question in vertical columns; where both subjects are possible, the more probable is given first. The one in brackets is less probable than the one after the diagonal line.

A further feature to be noted is that occasionally the discourse may also take place between God the Son and God the Father.<sup>283</sup> Ode 28, for example, seems to be a charismatic effusion by a man resting in the bosom of God. From the ninth verse onwards, however, the ode is clearly Messianic. In the light of these latter verses the first eight verses could also be read as the speech of the Son tenderly describing His close relationship with the Father. Or, on the other hand, most of the latter verses could be read according to the human perspective of the previous verses. Thus 'my birth unlike theirs'<sup>284</sup> could be read as referring to either the physical birth of Christ or to the spiritual birth of the Odist or of any believer.

Moreover, it is important to note that the "mystical" way of reading is not arbitrary, for the subject-play seems to be intentional. The Odist occasionally declares his unification plainly, as we have already noted. He is also aware of his prophetic status in entirely explicit terms: "The Spirit of the Lord is speaking in me".<sup>285</sup>

Similar reflections appear in a number of particular expressions. For example, 'servant' at the end of the afore-mentioned Ode 29 seems to refer, on the one hand, to Christ, and to the believer on the other.<sup>286</sup>

#### 2.2.3.5. Visions

Visions constitute a special category in mystical language. There are not many criteria, however, to outline any semantic processes or formation of meanings in this case. The basic way to differentiate visionary language from a spiritual discourse is the explicit demand in the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular.<sup>287</sup> For example, "I behold a dwelling there and a tabernacle of light" in the Paradise hymns of St. Ephrem.<sup>288</sup> The curious aspect in such expressions is that they may give an even more profound impression when there is no actual visionary reference behind them, but they represent the "beholder's" ability to see when there is nothing to see.

<sup>283</sup> Ode 22 is basically a thanksgiving Psalm addressed by the Son to the Father, his protector in Sheol. At the end of the ode, however, the subject seems to be a human one.

<sup>284</sup> OS 28:17. *אֲנִי לִבְרֵאשִׁית, לִבְרֵאשִׁית אֲנִי*.

<sup>285</sup> OS 6:2. Divine inspiration is claimed in at least eight different places: 10:1-2, 11:6, 12:1, 15:5, 16:5 ("I open my mouth, and His Spirit will speak in me"), 17:5 ("And the thought of truth led me"), 36:1 and 42:6 where the risen Christ declares: "I arose and am with them, and I will speak by their mouths."

<sup>286</sup> "And I gave praise to the Most High, because He has made great His *servant* and the son of His maidservant" (OS 29:11). Most scholars and commentators remain silent about the ambiguity; some have chosen to support one or other of the possibilities. Charlesworth 1973, 113.

<sup>287</sup> The classical example being Ezekiel 1:4 (וַיֹּאמֶר וַיְהִי רֹחַ סַעְרָה בָּאָה מִן־הַצָּפוֹן), traditionally considered as the starting-point of the Jewish *merkava* mysticism.

<sup>288</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 8:3. English translation according to Brock 1990, 131.

The presence of (the Spirit of) the Lord is occasionally described with expressions indicating a visionary encounter, also in OS.

And I was lifted up by the light,  
I passed before His face.<sup>289</sup>

I went up into the light of Truth, as into a chariot.<sup>290</sup>

Ode 38 starts with a solemn declaration: "I went up to the light of Truth as into a chariot", and contains a vision of a corruptive couple, a bride and bridegroom imitating the Beloved and His bride with their own feasts and wines.

OS also contains descriptions of visions of Paradise, a famous topic in latter Syriac literature and a basic element of the theological thinking of Syriac authors.

And He brought me to His Paradise,  
wherein are the riches of the Lord's delight.<sup>291</sup>

This theme is further developed in the Paradise hymns of St. Ephrem. His vision develops as a result of reading the sacred Scriptures and meditating upon them.

Both the bridge and the gate of Paradise  
did I find in this book. I crossed over and entered;  
my eye indeed remained outside but my mind entered within.  
I began to wander amid things not described [lit. 'unwritten']  
This is a luminous height, clear, lofty and fair:  
Scripture named it Eden, the summit of all blessings.  
There too did I see the bowers of the just [...] <sup>292</sup>

Paradise raised me up as I perceived it,  
it enriched me as I meditated upon it; <sup>293</sup>

The spiritual character of Paradise is expressed beautifully in OS by transferring (should we say, transplanting!) human beings among the vegetation:

Blessed are they, Lord,  
who are planted in your earth,  
those who have a place in your Paradise. <sup>294</sup>

Eastern theology in general, and theological/liturgical poetry in particular, operates in a way that could be described as timeless or synchronic. In other

<sup>289</sup> OS 21:6.

<sup>290</sup> OS 38:1. (ܐܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ)

<sup>291</sup> OS 11:16.

<sup>292</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 5:5–6. English translation according to Brock 1990, 103–104.

<sup>293</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

<sup>294</sup> OS 11:18.

words, X can be connected with Y regardless of their difference in time or space, if they have a common element in substance. Poetic language is full of such associations. Therefore, ‘Paradise’ and ‘crown’ are joined by the Odist who urges: “come into His Paradise, make for yourself a crown (*kelilā*) from His tree.”<sup>295</sup>

Is there something to be deduced about the experiences themselves behind the words? Due to their visionary and prophetic character, they clearly belong to the “mystical”. That the ecstatic quality is present in them is revealed by images of drunkenness, even though it is not a central theme or motive for the Odist, and even less for St. Ephrem.

#### 2.2.3.6. Charismatic Themes in the Epic of Rabban Hormizd

As a curiosity, we may note a less known poetical work which constitutes a peculiar tribute to a 7th-century saint, Rabban Hormizd. The text was written perhaps in the 14th century by the otherwise unknown Sergius of Azerbaijan, and was probably meant to be recited at Rabban Hormizd’s feast. This gigantic (3496 lines) epic is arranged into 22 ‘gates’ according to the letters of the Syriac alphabet, so that every line of each ‘gate’ ends with its corresponding letter. This difficult system led the author to use uncommon words and derive new nouns and verbal forms from existing roots. Since the epic repeatedly deals with charismatic topics, one might expect to find peculiar expressions for the mystical experience.<sup>296</sup>

Often the images correspond to those found in other works, yet there are several less customary features as well. Rabban received ‘joy’,<sup>297</sup> the “extent of which the tongue of flesh cannot relate”.<sup>298</sup> He remained in ‘wonderment’ (*tedmōrtā*),<sup>299</sup> and in ‘ecstasy’ (*tahrā*) for three hours.<sup>300</sup> Experiences are caused by the ‘mercies’ (*rahmē*) of Jesus, and these were abundantly ‘flashing’ (*ettabraqw*) like thunder upon Rabban.<sup>301</sup> Another somewhat rarer expression is that the

<sup>295</sup> OS 20:7. ‘Wreath’ is also, of course, a suitable translation here.

<sup>296</sup> Especially Rabban Hormizd’s legendary encounter with Mar Sylvanus is portrayed in great charismatic detail; it is reputed that the latter’s soul delighted (ܪܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) in ‘divine visions’ (ܪܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) Budge 1894, line 1061 (p. 50). Budge 1902, 366.

<sup>297</sup> ܪܥܝܢܐ Budge 1894, line 677 (p. 34). Budge 1902, 345. ‘Joy’ resulting from ecstatic experience, see also line 1093 (p. 52).

<sup>298</sup> ܪܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ Budge 1894, line 678 (p. 34). Budge 1902, 345.

<sup>299</sup> ܪܥܝܢܐ Budge 1894, line 1087 (p. 51). Budge 1902, 368.

<sup>300</sup> Budge 1894, line 1091 (p. 52). Budge translates ܪܥܝܢܐ as ‘wonderment’, which is nevertheless also the way he renders ܪܥܝܢܐ above (1902, 368).

<sup>301</sup> Budge 1894, line 3122 (p. 151). Budge (1902, 492) translates ܪܥܝܢܐ as ‘shone’.

Holy Spirit ‘adorned’ (*sabbet*) him.<sup>302</sup> Christ “filled him with the Spirit and all gifts”,<sup>303</sup> and the experiences he enjoyed enabled him even to blow ‘fiery flashes’ against devils.<sup>304</sup>

The leading quality of the mystical experience in the Epic is warmth, which culminates in the “flaming fire of his love of Jesus our Lord”,<sup>305</sup> and is identified with the fire which Christ was to cast into this world.<sup>306</sup> Rabban Hormizd became “flaming and burning”.<sup>307</sup> “He was warmed (*eṭḥamem*) with the love of Jesus as with a flame of fire (*nabraštā de-nūrā*).”<sup>308</sup>

The image of union occurs several times. Rabban used to delight in ‘divine union’ (*meḥaydūtā allāhāyā*);<sup>309</sup> he was ‘united (*meḥayyed*) unto Him’<sup>310</sup> in prayer. Nevertheless, the same verb is used in the Epic even of the fellowship of monks who were ‘united’ (*eṭḥayyedw*) and ‘intermingled’ (*etmezagzagw*) together in ‘one soul and one body’.<sup>311</sup> The brothers also ‘mix’ (*ḥallet*) and ‘mingle’ (*mazzeg*) their love with the love of their Lord.<sup>312</sup> Furthermore, the light is ‘united’ (*eṭḥayyed*)<sup>313</sup> to Rabban’s soul.

A large proportion of the experiences are visionary in character. Christ filled Rabban with ‘revelations’ (*gelyānē*)<sup>314</sup> and ‘visions of the spirit’ (*ḥezwānē de-rūh*)<sup>315</sup>; ‘he shone (*nehar*) and was illuminated (*ettanhar*) by the visions of the

302 Budge 1894, line 2227 (p. 107). Budge 1902, 437.

303 ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ, Budge 1894, line 661 (p. 33). Budge 1902, 344–345.

304 ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ

ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 672–673 (p. 33). Budge (1902, 344) translates: “And suddenly lightning, which was full of fiery rays; He breathed on the camp of the foul devils which were in ambush.”

305 ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 515 (p. 26). Budge 1902, 336.

306 “The Fire that our Lord cast” (ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ). Budge 1894, line 516 (p. 27). Budge 1902, 336. Luke 12:49.

307 ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 517 (p. 27). Budge 1902, 336.

308 ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 2404 (p. 116). Budge 1902, 447.

309 ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 671 (p. 33). Budge 1902, 344.

310 ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 670 (p. 33). Budge 1902, 344.

311 Budge 1894, line 1242 (p. 59). Budge 1902, 377. ܕܘܨܘܪܐ seems to be Sergius’s own derivation of the root *MZG*.

312 Budge 1894, line 1281 (p. 61). Budge 1902, 380.

313 Budge 1894, line 676 (p. 34). Budge 1902, 345.

314 Budge 1894, line 2249 (p. 108). Budge 1902, 438. Sometimes the expression ‘divine revelations’ (ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ) is used. Budge 1894, line 1242 (p. 59). Budge 1902, 377.

315 Budge 1894, line 2249 (p. 108). Budge 1902, 438.

Spirit (*hezway rūhā*)<sup>316</sup>; he was even ‘fattened’ (*metpaṭṭam hwā*) with ‘revelations’ (*gelyānē*)<sup>317</sup> What, then, did these revelations entail? The author does not go into detail. Things revealed include ‘corporeal and incorporeal’, ‘secret things’ (*rāzē*) and ‘hidden mysteries’ (*setīrātā*).<sup>318</sup> There is also a description of the appearance of light. During a *theoria* an ‘unsettling light’ (*nūhrā de-lā āreb*) started to ‘blaze’ (*azleg*).<sup>319</sup> The vision consisted of a ‘pillar’ (*ammūdā*) of light which ‘illuminated’ (*manhar*) and ‘shone’ (*mazleg*).<sup>320</sup> Besides the light, there was also ‘an unvanishing odour’.<sup>321</sup>

The cause of the experiences is more frequently than in any other source named simply as ‘Jesus’. Sometimes the causes are referred to in a more ambiguous way: they spring up (*nebīg*) from the ‘hidden power’ (*haylā kasyā*) which in turn is received in the ‘secrets’ (*rāzē*),<sup>322</sup> a term which can refer either to the Sacraments, especially Holy Communion, or to the secrets revealed in the revelation. The very broadly used concept of ‘contemplation’ (*te’oryās*) is mentioned as having been caused by ‘bestowal’ (*šukkānā*) of the Spirit,<sup>323</sup> a word which comes from the same root as Hebrew  $\text{תָּתַן}$   $\text{תָּתַן}$ ; in Syriac it means ‘gift’, especially ‘spiritual gift’.

We may also note the exceptionally rich variety of expressions indicating the cessation of mystical experience: “he returned to his mind”;<sup>324</sup> “mind (*hawwā*) returned to its taste (*ta’meh*)”,<sup>325</sup> “his mind returned to him”,<sup>326</sup> and perhaps the strongest one, in the case of three hours of ecstasy: “they came back to themselves”.<sup>327</sup>

316 Budge 1894, line 3123 (p. 151). Budge 1902, 492. Also, in line 2249 (p. 108) Christ filled him with revelations and visions ( $\text{ܪܘܚܢܐ}$ ).

317 Budge 1894, line 1063 (p. 50). Fattening is a typical Semitic expression of welfare, translated “fed abundantly” by Budge (1902, 367).

318 Budge 1894, line 1117 (p. 53). Budge 1902, 370.

319 Budge 1894, line 1187 (p. 56). Budge 1902, 374.

320 Budge 1894, line 1215 (p. 58). Budge 1902, 376.

321  $\text{ܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ}$  Budge 1894, line 1189 (p. 56). Budge 1902, 374.

322 Budge 1894, line 1290 (p. 62). Budge 1902, 380. In line 1073 this power hidden in him ‘restored the dead to life’.

323 Budge 1894, line 1075 (p. 51). Budge 1902, 367.

324  $\text{ܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ}$  Budge 1894, line 1198 (p. 57). Budge (1902, 375) translates “returned to himself”. The return is here caused by the ‘Grace of Jesus the Lord’.

325 Budge 1894, line 1118 (p. 53). Budge (1902, 370) translates “their understanding returned unto its power of discerning”. The return is here caused by the ‘divine action’ ( $\text{ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ}$ ).

326  $\text{ܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ}$  Budge 1894, line 1076 (p. 51). Budge 1902, 367.

327  $\text{ܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ ܕܘܕܘܪܐܝܢܐ}$  Budge 1894, line 1092 (p. 52). Budge 1902, 368.

The result of this parade of experiences is that Rabban Hormizd “ascended the lofty grade of spirituality and became magnified”; his whole being became ‘fire in fire’ (*nūrā be-nūrā*) like a cherub (*ba-dmōt kerōbā*).<sup>328</sup> He also reached his ‘perfection’ (*gemīrūtā*)<sup>329</sup> And finally, the author turns the charismatic language towards the reader by exhorting that “by his guidance let us suck the milk of the Spirit (*heleb rūh*)”.<sup>330</sup>

Several features of the syntactic and semantic deep-structure of the discourse in the epic may be illustrated by means of the scheme outlined in figure below, based on the following verses.

(lines 1061-70:)

And his soul used to refresh itself in divine visions,  
 he continually took delight in contemplations,  
 he was enriched with revelations at all times.  
 He was led by the divine providence,  
 Three days he sat in the cell close to the community,  
 the brethren having completed the compline and the first *kathisma*,  
 and the reader having sat down to read the commentary on Genesis to the brethren,  
 the mind of Mar Sylvanus was carried away in contemplation,  
 all the things to come and hidden secrets were revealed to him,  
 and he learned the meaning of the hidden secrets of the new world.

(lines 1075-77:)

And by the bestowal of the Spirit having enjoyed the contemplation,  
 his mind returned to him again by the power of Grace  
 and he understood the mysteries and the hidden things he had learned.

*Charismatic terminology and relations in lines 1061-1077 of the ‘Epic of Rabban Hormizd’. The concepts shown by the context are in square brackets.*

<i>SUBJECT</i>	<-----	<i>EXPERIENCE</i>	<-----	<i>CAUSE</i>
	RELATION:		RELATION:	
<i>hawnā</i>	carry away	<i>te'oryā</i>	[revealing]	
[Sylvanus]	enjoyment	<i>te'oryās</i>	donation	<i>rūhā</i>
[Sylvanus]	feeding	<i>gelyānā</i>		
[Sylvanus]	learning	<i>hezwā</i>		
<i>naḥṣā</i>	enjoyment	<i>hezwā allāhāyā</i>		
<i>hawnā</i>	carry away	<i>te'oryā rūhānūtā</i>	settling	gift ( <i>mawhabtā</i> )
[Sylvanus]	return	<i>hawnā</i>	powerful	<i>ṭaybūtā</i>

328 Budge 1894, line 1164, 1167 (p. 55). Budge 1902, 373.

329 Budge 1894, line 1196 (p. 57). Budge 1902, 374.

330 Budge 1894, line 3105 (p. 150). Budge 1902, 491.

The last case is a curiosity, essentially different, albeit parallel in its syntactic structure, the interesting thing being that it shows that the cessation of ecstasy may also be viewed as sent by God. As the table shows, the cause is often left unmentioned, perhaps because it is too self-evident; the anthropological terminology referring to the subject is not always used in a completely logical way; the effects of experience are manifold and many-sided.

Finally, we may make a few concluding remarks on the poetic expression of the mystical experience. The semantic mechanisms in the expression of the experience do not differ essentially from those of Syriac prose. The choice of signs, the vocabulary, of OS, or that of St. Ephrem, is not radically different from other Syriac sources of this study, all the basic imagery of mystical experience appearing in the poetic form. The peculiar feature of OS is its flickering play with the subject, taking place somewhere beneath the grammatical level of the text. The epic of Rabban Hormizd contains a few extraordinary words and expressions, mostly rare forms of the roots commonly used in mystical contexts, but mostly the approach is based on the use of quite conventional expressions.

### 2.3. INTERPRETATION

In the previous chapter the focus was essentially on the expression of whatever takes place in a single experience. We shall now move on to a more abstract level, aiming to outline the interpretations that operate with the general nature of experience, and to make some deductions as to the position of experience in relation both to God and to the subject.

#### 2.3.1. Language and Interpretation

Before considering the problem of interpretation it is necessary to point out certain observations concerning the mechanisms in the use of language. The very differentiation of expression and interpretation, seemingly a modern one, was in fact already observed by John of Dalyatha:

To express the modality of the revelation of God in sanctified minds (*madde'ē meqaddešē*), is not allowed for the tongue. But the interpretation (*pūšāqā*) of the great mystery is appointed for pure and illuminated minds. It is, however, immersed in silence.<sup>331</sup>

<sup>331</sup> The first phrase literally: "to tell the howness of revelation"; Beulay: *Lettres*, 1:4 (pp. 306–307).



The problems of signification that we encountered on the level of expression are reflected on the level of interpretation so that the signs of inner states may be in almost free variation. The problem was also realised by Isaac of Nineveh; in his discussion of the prevailing conceptual confusion, he attempted to produce a basic division into “spiritual” and “psychic” levels.

The holy fathers are accustomed to designate all profitable emotions and all spiritual working by the name of prayer. [...] Sometimes they designate by spiritual prayer (*ṣelōtā rūḥānāyā*) that which they sometimes call contemplation (*tē'ōryā*), and sometimes knowledge (*īda'tā*) and sometimes revelations of intelligible things (*gelyāne de-metyad'ānūtā*). Do you see how the fathers change their significations of spiritual things? This is because naming can be established with exactness only in the case of things of this world. The things of the new world do not have a real name, but only a simple cognition (*īda'tā pešūtā*), which is above all names, signs, forms and colours.<sup>332</sup>

For this very reason there is not, and cannot be, any completely objective way to understand the mystical accounts. A reader must interpret subjectively what idea is signified by what sign. In other words, it is impossible to put together categories consisting of all occurrences of a certain term without including cases where the same term is used with a different meaning. Similarly, it is probable that a single author may employ several terms to refer to the same state of being, the result being that their semantic fields interpenetrate.

In the case of terms referring to concrete realities it is usually possible to make reasonably sharp distinctions between the various meanings of one word, and to decide whether a usage is a variation on the basic meaning or a completely different one (even though etymologically speaking the origin of the different meanings are often in the varying usages of the original basic meaning). In the case of abstract terms, however, the difference between the divergent meanings and varying usages regularly seems to be stepless and indefinite.

The process of interpretation operates on various levels. Even a one-word sign of the experience may be interpretative. The most imprecise interpretative concept to signify mystical experience and in that sense the most general one (albeit not by its frequency) is the overall term ‘the good’ (*tābtā*),<sup>333</sup> the use of which implies that a conception of good and bad is being applied, the experience, of course, being interpreted into the former. What makes this sign more interpretative in comparison with the signs indicating ‘warmth’, for instance? Could one not say that the signification of the experience as ‘warm’ implies a conception of the corresponding disposition of warmth and coldness, and an interpretation

<sup>332</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 168–169; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 114. *Metyad'ānūtā* is the opposite of sensual perception: “conceivable by the mind; intellectual, spiritual, immaterial, mystical.” Payne-Smith, 316.

<sup>333</sup> E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 58; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 41. “His knees are not able to lean on the earth before that exultation. It is that *good* which is exuding in his body.”

that attaches the experience to the former category? I would argue that there is a difference, albeit not necessarily a precise one, and it is in the fact that 'warmth' is a more objective quality, as good and bad are related to values and are therefore more dependent on subjective interpretation. One may verify and possess empirical certainty of the feeling of warmth, but not of "goodness".

In the verbal field it is completely possible, and presumably not infrequent, that the interpretation is inspired by the symbol itself, regardless of its original reference in the mental dimension. The concept of fountain, for example, is a very fruitful one for interpretation, since it implies a certain notion of creativity and vitality; God Himself is often designated the source of life, the 'spring of all worlds' (*mabbō'ā de-kul 'ālmē*).<sup>334</sup> John of Dalyatha pulls these strings together by declaring that "I stupefy myself (*tāhar bī enā*) and exult spiritually, for in me there is a source of life (*neb'ā de-ḥayyē*)". He considers this to be the ultimate end of the incorporeal world.<sup>335</sup>

### 2.3.2. Classification of Experiences

Once the experiences are expressed, whether analytically or symbolically, the expressions are open for various discursive plays in the verbal field, regardless of their original reference. For example, the contradiction between certain symbolic expressions can be put to discerning use by a skilful author such as John of Dalyatha, who draws a functional synthesis between the symbols of fire and water: "A blaze (*ṣalhebītā*) has kindled in my kernels, and the springs (*me'īnē*) have gushed out to moisten my flesh so that it might not be burnt up."<sup>336</sup>

The notion of inexpressibility is in fact an interpretative feature itself, indicating inability or unwillingness to employ a more revealing expression, as we have discussed above. Consequently, it is also possible to interpret the inexpressibility as being caused by some of the elements that we encountered on the level of expression. For example, we once again face the concept of joy in the category of interpretation in expressions such as (joy) "makes the tongue silent" and is "inexpressible".<sup>337</sup> The former remark may also be interpretative if the relation between joyous experience and silence is *de facto* mere correlation without causality, and the minimal significance of the latter expression is that the joy in question cannot be reproduced for sensation by means of discursive description. The notion of inability of expression actually implies lack of awareness of all the mental processes taking place during the experience, which in turn provides

<sup>334</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:8 (pp. 476–477).

<sup>335</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 27:1 (pp. 388–389).

<sup>336</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316–319).

<sup>337</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

processes taking place during the experience, which in turn provides various possibilities for understanding the concepts, and especially extraordinary ways to draw causalities between the recognised aspects of the experience. For instance, Isaac of Nineveh states that “enjoyment envelops the whole being in rapture without your perceiving it”, as if one could enjoy something without being aware of it!<sup>338</sup>

Single experiences may, in principle, be arranged into sets of similar or parallel experiences, and the naming of these sets produces technical terms for various types of experience. In the Syriac sources of this study, however, very little attention was paid to the classification of different experiences and their relation to each other. As far as I can see, different types of inner states are not classified with technical terms in Syriac metatheology, perhaps with the exception of *maggenānūtā*. In fact the very word closest to the concept of ‘state’ (*mešūḥūtā*)<sup>339</sup> is seldom used.

Why then should we not classify *temhā* and *tahrā* as “technical terms”? The answer depends on the definition of technicality. The terms are used with such high frequency that there is inevitably some conventionality in their usage. But the concept of “technical term”, as I see it, indicates that the position of the particular term in the discourse should have a certain inherent value and be the starting-point. This, however, is not the case in our textual material, where *temhā* and *tahrā* are not given any technical content; their specific features in relation to other experiences or states are not specified, and the metatheological discourse contains no explicit or implicit attempt to distinguish between them. As noted above, especially *temhā* does appear in positions where the original meaning, ‘wonder’ or ‘amazement’, is definitely the only possible translation.<sup>340</sup> The same is true in the case of ‘drunkenness’, which may also be used in a negative sense as a symbol of the effects of passions.<sup>341</sup>

Consequently, there are no actual theories of various states. On the contrary, the totality and all-assimilating nature of the experience is more stressed, at the

<sup>338</sup> ܕܠܟ ܝܘܢܝ ܪܠ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

<sup>339</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 152b, p. 271 (tr. 160); Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug sent to a Friend*, 55 (40\*).

<sup>340</sup> E.g. “striking our enemies with amazement”; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 242; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 163.

<sup>341</sup> “Send aid to (my) scattered impulses which are drunken (ܦܘܪܝܢ) with the multitude of the passions.” (Brock: *Second part*, 5:4, ed. 6, cf. tr. 7.) ‘Drunkenness’ is also used by him in a negative sense as a symbol of the ‘sight of men’. (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 132; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 90.)

expense of special features: its contents may be described as sour and sweet, fiery and watery,<sup>342</sup> and above all wordless.

Nevertheless, the source material does contain several means of arranging mystical experiences in quite a general way. A simple way to divide them into two categories is based on the presence or absence of a visionary aspect in shapeless and visionary experiences. This does not take us very far, however, since there are very few cases in which something actually seems to have been seen.<sup>343</sup> The boldest Syrian seer is surely the author of *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, who declared that he had seen Paradise and the Tree of Life with his own eyes.<sup>344</sup> Still even he, among all the other metatheologians, considers shapeless experiences to belong on a higher grade.<sup>345</sup> For the same reason, however, it is also possible that the *parole* on the visions of Paradise does not signify a concrete visionary experience; seeing in the physical sense is not considered necessary, since it cannot offer greater certainty than inner intuition (or whatever it is called). In other words, when claiming to have 'seen' something the author may have simply meant 'being certain'.

Another basic way to outline main types for the inner phenomena is the division into psychic and spiritual, behind which lies the standard classification in Syriac metatheology, i.e. the threefold division of spiritual life into physical, psychic and spiritual stages.<sup>346</sup> The psychic and spiritual are thoroughly discussed by Isaac of Nineveh. His criterion of differentiation is very interesting, albeit perhaps a little frustrating for us. Namely, all phenomena that include thoughts, and that are for that reason expressible verbally, belong to the psychic (*naṣṣānāyā*) – for example, “prayers of fervour (*reṯḥā*) and understanding” (*īda 'tā* lit. 'knowledge'). In the spiritual (*rūḥānā*) stage there is a thought-free silence, so that prayer, strictly speaking, is not even possible. Concerning the ecstatic phenomenon, this means that the more ordinary joyous ecstatic experiences are

<sup>342</sup> For example: “As long as this *fire* works inwardly, a current of thoughts breaks forth like a spring of *water*.” Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30\*).

<sup>343</sup> The concept of 'revelation' (*gelyānā*) does not necessarily refer to visions; it is rather a general term for inner spiritual insight, a kind of “partial illumination”. See below, chapter 2.5.2.

<sup>344</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 87 (79–80\*) “I say with boldness that I have seen with my own eyes the things which I am telling; for I have seen Paradise and the Tree of Life, and have mystically and divinely been made partaker in its living and life-giving vitality.”

<sup>345</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 118 (107\*) Here the shapelessness is connected with the general disappearance of shapes in the neo-Platonic eschatological vision. “For, when the mind is accounted worthy of these things, it will not see by vision (ܦܘܠܘܣܐ), nor by 'form' (ܦܘܠܘܣܐ); and it will no longer ascend and descend, and will no more see above and below; for then, the shape of the world passes away, and (the Mind?) is no longer limited but limits all.”

<sup>346</sup> For more details, see p. 159–161.

preceded by and inferior to the more uncommon, total and silent ecstatic experience. “The sight (*hezātā*) during prayer is more excellent than the delight (*hannī’ūtā*) during prayer, as an adult man is superior to a little boy.”<sup>347</sup>

Truly ecstatic experiences, in which “the body is as lifeless”<sup>348</sup> – an expression which justifies the translation ‘trance’ – belong to a rare state after prayer, identified with the wordless state of ‘pure prayer’ (*selotā dekītā*, which usually does not seem to indicate ‘trance’, however). This ultimate mode of being has no more prayers, tears, emotions, yearnings, applications, power or freedom, for prayer by definition entails intention, reaching something, and turning away from something, which is no longer the case in the state of pure prayer.<sup>349</sup> Since this ‘prayer of spirit’ (*selotā de-rūh*), however, originates in ordinary prayer, continues Isaac, it is commonly but carelessly called ‘prayer’. This is connected with Isaac’s doctrine of the corporeal, psychic, and spiritual stages. In the psychic stage there is freedom, but the spiritual man’s will and nature do not rule but are ruled, which culminates in his ignorance of whether he is in the body or not. Consequently, it is impossible to pray a spiritual prayer, for in this perspective prayer and spirituality are concepts that are mutually exclusive! In this way the discourse of Isaac has developed a new technical term, ‘spiritual prayer’, by defining its meaning as something clearly distinct from the general connotations of ‘prayer’. Yet for this very formal similarity of the concept Isaac does not recommend the term of ‘spiritual prayer’: the condition in question should, according to him, rather be called the ‘child of pure prayer’.<sup>350</sup>

Isaac’s use of the concept of prayer here seems to be somewhat unequalled in earlier monastic thought. His approach, curiously, is perhaps at least to some extent due to a mistranslation in the Syriac version of Evagrius that Isaac was reading. The result, however, is an original, and not illogical, line of thought.<sup>351</sup>

<sup>347</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 164; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 111. Brock: *Second Part*, Chapter 32 (ed. 130–131, tr. 142–143).

<sup>348</sup> According to a more static interpretation, however, such expressions could be taken to mean simply that the body is dead to the passions, and the flesh does not resist the spiritual activity.

<sup>349</sup> “It would be a blasphemy if there was found among the creation somebody who says that spiritual prayer can be prayed at all.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 168; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 114.

<sup>350</sup> ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 170–175; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 115–118.

<sup>351</sup> This curiosity was first noticed by I. Hausherr in his article “Par delà l’oraison pure, grâce à une coquille. A propos d’un texte d’Evagre” in *Revue d’Ascétique et de la Mystique* XIII, no. 50, 1932 (see pp. 186–188). The Greek original of the verse of Evagrius reads, in Hausherr’s translation, “La prière est un état de l’intellect qui ne s’avère que sous la seule lumière de la Sainte Trinité”, but in the Syriac version the verb in italics is *metpasseqā*: “Prayer is a state of intellect (*hawnā*) that is not cut off except by the single light of the Holy Trinity by the

When the emotional occurrences have been signified verbally and arranged into mystical states, the next step would be the portrayal of spiritual life as a system of different stages in which the abstracted states are placed in turn. The orders of various states and their arrangement into separate stages of spiritual life may, however, easily become more or less arbitrary: theoretical systems directed by literary motifs tend to disengage themselves from the existential reality. Therefore it is important to make it clear that the various stages do not essentially rule each other out but rather they interpenetrate one another. In *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, for example, it is stated that those who are still at the 'bodily stage', which in the East Syrian monastic reality corresponds to the coenobite period of the novitiate, do every now and then receive joy, knowledge, conviction of the remission of sins, or the gift of tears.<sup>352</sup>

Syrian metatheologians are not especially fond of producing systematic classifications. Authors acquainted with the thought of Evagrius could relate the experiences into divisions arising from the Evagrian system. In the basic scheme of John of Dalyatha the world of experience is divided into three spheres: purity, serenity and a third one, each being symbolised by a cosmological image. The first is that of 'impassible purity of soul' (*dakyūtā de-lā ḥāsōšūtā de-naḥšā*) which is characterised by the contemplation of the corporeal beings and symbolised by the light of the moon. The sphere of serenity (*atrā de-šafyūtā*), or the sphere of 'serenity of the intellect' (*šafyūtā de-madde'ā*), is characterised by the contemplation of the incorporeal and symbolised by the stars; in it the workings of Grace are manifold. The third one seems to lack an actual name, being referred to only as 'the one above both'; it is characterised by the vision of the Light of the Holy Trinity and symbolised by the light of the sun. In biblical language, according to the allegorical interpretation, it is the 'Promised Land'. The experiences are related to this model so that in the first sphere the mind (*hawnā*) appears clothed in shapeless light, in the second sphere the vision is a fiery one, and in the third sphere the vision is of crystal light.<sup>353</sup>

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means of ecstasy (*tahrā*).” Beulay 1990, 217–218. Isaac does not actually quote the passage but has a similar expression in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 174.

352 ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ – “God constantly visits them in his Grace”; Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 9 (6\*).

353 Beulay: *Lettres*, 48:4–13 (pp. 500–507; the connections with Evagrius are pointed out in the footnotes). The author of this particular letter is, according to Beulay, not John but rather Joseph the Seer. The use of the name *atrā de-šafyūtā* seems to cover the third sphere as well. For a synopsis of the thought of Evagrius, see A. Louth: *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981), 101–113. A corresponding division occurs, for example, in Philoxène de Mabboug: *La lettre à Patricius*, 74 (820–821). We may here remark the free use of symbolism: an earthly concept such as ‘crystal’ may be used to signify a state higher than the one designated with a more immaterial concept of shapelessness.

John of Dalyatha in particular is fond of designating the inner states in a very charming way with the concept of *atrā*, ‘area’ or ‘sphere’. The concept of sphere creates – literally – more space around the concept by referring both to the state and to its context. The actual significances of John’s frequent references to different spheres, modes that are entered in the mystical pursuit, are open to our meta-interpretation. One may either attempt to reconstruct a logical system of various spheres, or to view the spheres described with different vocabulary as merely varying ways of expressing the same reality, or to be exact, expressing its overlapping aspects. To designate a concept as a ‘sphere’ is also one way of abstracting the discourse about the actual concept. “Blessed is the one who knows the ‘sphere of knowledge’ (*atrā de-īda’tā*) and understands that there are no knowers.”<sup>354</sup> Thereby the author may sign non-discursive intuitions as the ‘voiceless sphere’ (*atrā de-lā qālā*),<sup>355</sup> an oppressive condition as the ‘sphere of robbers’ (*atrā de-gayyāsē*),<sup>356</sup> a joyous quality as the ‘sphere of joys’ (*atrā de-ḥaddewātā*),<sup>357</sup> and a certain feeling of alienation (in relation to the present world) as a ‘sphere that is not mine’ (*atrā de-lā dīlī*).<sup>358</sup> Accordingly, the ecstatic experience itself can be depicted as the ‘sphere of wonder and ecstasy’ (*atrā de-dummārā wad-tehrā*).<sup>359</sup> In the upper spheres the dominant feature is unification (see below, p. 136-138). On the other hand, John also discusses spheres that have no actual names, for instance “the sphere that is preserved from alien perception”.<sup>360</sup> The lack of a name indicates a certain lack of artificiality in the discourse, which is not directed by the vocabulary.

In addition to the general divisions presented above, individual authors have several minor classifications. For instance, from the discourse of the cosmic rising in *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* we may note the three upper stages of the individual’s evolution: love, unification and intermingling (*ḥubbā – ḥadyūtā – ḥebīkūtā*).<sup>361</sup>

The most profound classification of mystical experiences into different stages can be found in ‘Abdišo’ the Seer’s *Book of Answers*. He describes “the workings of grace of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” as eleven different stages (*ṣuḥlāfā*) that constitute a somewhat unique series in the whole Syriac corpus. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the stages are not given any actual names,

<sup>354</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 38:2 (pp. 408–409).

<sup>355</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 39:4 (pp. 414–415).

<sup>356</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 39:4 (pp. 414–415).

<sup>357</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424–425).

<sup>358</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 39:10 (pp. 418–419).

<sup>359</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:1 (pp. 422–423).

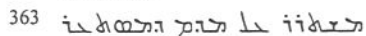
<sup>360</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424–425).

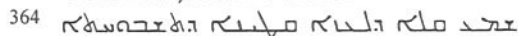
<sup>361</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 119–130 (108–118\*); Widengren 1961, 196.

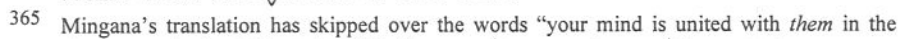
nor is their number restricted to ten, twelve or any other sacred number. These features show an evident reluctance to engage in theoretical speculation, but on the other hand this discursive abstinence does imply concentration on the reality of experience.<sup>362</sup>

1. The stage of complete physical and psychical rest (*neyāhā*). During this period one must keep one's quietude and not commune with anyone, and try to "respond to what is being done".<sup>363</sup> 'Abdišo' gives a biblical parallel to this stage: the mind (*hawwā*) is baptised with the same baptism with which Moses was baptised at Mount Sinai.
2. The stage of 'workings of intuitions' (*ma'bdānwātā de-sukkālē*) during which one must keep on preserving quietude, not allowing one's mind to leave the inner gate of the heart, and especially being on one's guard against distraction of mind, images (*demwātā*) and understandings that are subjectively composed (*merakkeb sukkālē*). Practices such as recitation of Psalms and prostrations before the Cross are recommended.
3. The stage of the 'love of Psalms and of recitation' (*reḥmetā de-mazmōrē wad-qeryānā*), in which one must beware of the demon of vainglory who 'accompanies this stage'. The motive of recitation should be love of God alone. If the mind is free from vainglory one can reach the next stage.
4. The stage of the 'flow of tears' (*terī'ūt dam'ē*) and continual prostrations (*mappūltā ammīntā*) before the Cross. This is a boundary between purity (*dakyūtā*) and serenity (*šafyūtā*).
5. The stage of contemplation (*tē'ōryās*) of divine judgement and providence. This produces love for one's fellow-men and continual prayer (*bā'ūtā ammīnūtā*) for their conversion. Men are seen inwardly: not as just or unjust, bond or free, male or female, but in the likeness of the image (*demūtā de-šalmā*) in which they were created; Christ is seen in all.
6. The stage of impulses (*nebhē*) of light and fire (*nūhrā da-mmazgā*) stirring and rising (*nābhīn we-sālqīn*) in the heart (*be-gaw lebbā*), during which the Spirit operates in the senses of smell and taste.
7. A higher state of 'hearing the voice of a fine sound of glorification';<sup>364</sup> psychic and physical capacities do not suffice for their description, since the stage belongs to the sphere of the world to come. The stage includes contemplation of the 'cloud of the intelligible Cherubim' (*'enānā da-krōbē metyad'ānē*); the mind hears their voices and is united with them in glorious praise. 'Abdišo' also gives a biblical reference for this stage: the intercession of the Holy Spirit referred to by Paul in Rom. 8:27.<sup>365</sup>

<sup>362</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 158b–161a, pp. 277–279 (tr. 169–173). The stages are not numbered by the author, and the division between stages seven and eight is somewhat indistinct, so the number might in fact be ten, but the author does not express an opinion on this matter.

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<sup>365</sup> Mingana's translation has skipped over the words "your mind is united with *them* in the glorious praise [or: highest glory]" (), referring to the *intelligible Cherubim*, and the phrase 'after this Glory'.



8. After the glory of the previous stage the mind is silenced and swallowed up in the light of the vision of lofty and sublime contemplation.<sup>366</sup> The mind is mingled (*metħallat*) with the divine visitation (*sā'ōrūtā*), so that it is "not distinguished from the sea in which it swims". The sense affected is that of sight.
9. The stage of clothing oneself with fire (*lābšā leh le-bar-nāšā nūrā*), in which one sees oneself, not as a material body, but as fire. One also receives knowledge concerning the world to come. 'Abdišo' 's portrayal of this stage is, exceptionally, based on the writings of Palladius and Evagrius, fiery appearance being a literary topos in hagiography. The senses affected are those of sight and touch.
10. The stage 'inexpressible in a letter',<sup>367</sup> in which one feels joy and sheds tears without knowing the reason why. The senses of smell and touch are active, as well as those of sight and touch, but the distinction between the senses is somewhat blurred.
11. The stage of 'flow of spiritual speech' (*terī'ūt mamlā rūḥānā*), during which 'the second sense' (i.e. hearing) is active.

If we wish to find actual technical terms for the mystical states, the most potential candidates appear in the writings of Isaac of Nineveh. There are terms which have a close to technical sense, due to their quite rare and specific usage, but they do not necessarily refer to mystical or ecstatic states. As an example of "semi-technical" terminology we may note the word 'abandonment' (*meštāqbānūtā*), a negative term which denotes not an actual withdrawal of God but a subjective feeling of God's absence. It could in fact be translated 'absence', or even more poetically as 'eclipse', adapting Martin Buber's concept of the eclipse of God. The state is further commented on by Dadišo' of Qatar, who understood the "withdrawal" itself as an act of God (through an angel) in order to keep the ascetic in balance with occasional spiritual defeats.<sup>368</sup> The actual "technicality" of the concept, however, is a matter of definition, but it is to be stressed again that usually the discourse is not built around the term. Even *meštāqbānūtā* in its context is not a starting-point for the discourse, nor is anything systematic developed around it, but the terms occur scattered throughout the discourse.

A clear exception to this rule, however, is the term *maggēnānūtā*, 'overshadowing',<sup>369</sup> which is discussed by Isaac in a separate chapter. The term has an

<sup>366</sup> ܩܪܝܢܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܐܘܪܝܫܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ  
ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ

<sup>367</sup> The "name" of the stage could not be less technical: "another state that cannot be written in a letter" (ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ).

<sup>368</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 45b, p. 237 (tr. 126). For this reason, "withdrawal" becomes a sign of the action of God!

<sup>369</sup> ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ Brock: *Second Part*, Chapter XVI (ed. 77–79, tr. 88–90) For a full discussion on the background and use of the term, see Brock 1988, 121–129. Besides referring to incarnation, *maggēnānuta* is used in Syriac literature with reference to the Eucharistic epiclesis and the activity of Holy Spirit at Pentecost; it also occurs in the context of baptism and in contexts indicating divine protection and sanctification.

interesting two-dimensional biblical<sup>370</sup> background. *Maggenānūtā* is a derivation of the verb *aggen*, whose two most important usages in the Syriac Bible are Luke 1:35 “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Most High will *overshadow* (Gr. ἐπισκιάσει) you”, and John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and *dwelt* (Gr. ἐσκήνωσεν) among us (or: in us!, *aggen ban*)”. The term and its (technical) usage remained exclusively Syriac, for the chapters explaining *maggenānūtā* are absent from the Greek translation of Isaac.

In the Discourses of Isaac of Nineveh *maggenānūtā* indicates operation on two levels: the practical and the “mystical”. The former protects and the latter bestows a heavenly gift. The mystical *maggenānūtā* was fully experienced by Mary and partially by the saints; it is not, however, an exact truth but rather a revelation that makes manifest certain hints and signs, corresponding to human capacity. It is a gift, but humility is the key to its perseverance.<sup>371</sup> In spite of the “technical” character of the term, its semantic field is left very open. (Technicality does not necessarily indicate a narrow, exact use.) The only differentiation Isaac dares to make is that *maggenānūtā* is not ‘knowledge’.<sup>372</sup> Dadišo’ of Qatar employs the same term twice, referring to the gifts of the Holy Spirit,<sup>373</sup> and Simeon the Graceful once, obviously in the “mystical” sense.<sup>374</sup> In his letters John of Dalyatha exhorts: “Let the fragrance of your limbs waft like spices from the place where you lie by (means of) the *maggenānūtā* of the All-Holy.”<sup>375</sup> Thus *maggenānūtā* is a general term for the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Since *maggenānūtā* is not used in order to differentiate one specific type of state from others, what then is its function? Instead of specifying, it rather provides a theological connection with biblical thought and therefore in the discourse it implicitly justifies the very existence of the experiences.

Since a genuine spiritual experience, according to the biblical wording, implies the participation of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is a Person of the Divinity, there is an ontological dilemma here: how can a human being participate in God’s Person? In the Greek tradition an answer was later developed into the

<sup>370</sup> Is. 38:6, Jer. 17:17, Zech. 12:8, Ps. 138:7.

<sup>371</sup> Brock 1988, 122–123. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 103, 160; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 70, 109.

<sup>372</sup> Brock 1988, 122–123. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 160. (Wensinck translates the term as ‘inspiration’, *Mystic Treatises*, 109.)

<sup>373</sup> “... *visitation* of the Holy Spirit and gifts from the spiritual treasures.” Mingana 1934/ Dadišo’, 11a, p. 208 (tr. 87). “The power of the Spirit derives from [...] *maggenānūtā*.” Dadišo’: *Commentaire du Livre d’Abba Isaïe*, 218.

<sup>374</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 195b, p. 315 (tr. 61). “When the Grace *overshadows* the pure souls of the holy ones, it resides and shines over the soul, and thus (the soul) shines by the *overshadowing* of Grace.”

<sup>375</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 13:2 (p. 342). English translation according to Brock 1988, 124.

full and accurately formulated doctrine of the divine energies, while the Syrians seem to have left the question somewhat open. (On unification, see below, p. 136-138.)

### 2.3.3. Causa Efficiens

The question of the very existence of an effective cause outside the subject and his inner experience is provided with both explicit and implicit answers in the discourse. All authors hint, at least implicitly, that real and pure experience is not a product of one's own physical or mental exercises, but something given from without. This also becomes clear from certain signs with which the experience is connected. The most obvious in this sense are 'visitation' (*sā'ōrūtā*)<sup>376</sup> and 'gift' (*mawhbtā* or *šukkānā*),<sup>377</sup> which imply the existence of a visitor and a giver. "Blessed is the man who has been found worthy of this divine visitation."<sup>378</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh states plainly that ascetic exercises (*'amlē*) are able to produce a state over the passions (*lā-ḥāšōšūtā*), physical mortification and repose of thoughts (*nawḥā de-ḥuššābē*), but they are not able to bring about the peace (*šaynā*) or tranquillity (*behilūtā*) that belongs to the "mystical".<sup>379</sup> The breadth of the concepts indicates that the phenomenon interpreted as being caused from without covers a wider field of inner operation than merely extraordinary peak-experiences. Isaac also makes a distinction between 'spiritual perception' (*margešānūtā de-rūh*) generated by means of meditation (*hergā*) and that generating spontaneously by itself.<sup>380</sup>

<sup>376</sup> The semantic field of *sā'ōrūtā* does include the meanings of 'operation' and 'action' as well. The semantic history of the mystical usage may be traced back to the oldest Syriac literature. Already in the Psalms of Solomon *sā'ōrūtā* is used as a kind of technical term referring to the presence of God, who visits the righteous, taking away their sin (3:8, 3:14, 9:8); He reveals himself by His *sā'ōrūtā* (10:5), which is based on grace (11:2), and in the end Israel will walk in the *sā'ōrūtā* of the Glory of God. (11:7). In my Finnish translation of PS I have rendered *sā'ōrūtā* in 11:7 as 'läsnäolo', i.e. 'presence'. (Published under the name Viitankantajamunkki Pietari, *Salomon laulut* [Valamon luostari 2000], 122.). The Greek version has ἐπισκοπή, which, curiously, looks like a mistranslation of *sā'ōrūtā*.

<sup>377</sup> E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 86; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 58.

<sup>378</sup> ܘܒܠܝܢ ܠܘܚܘܢܘܫܘܬܐ ܠܘܠܐ ܠܘܠܐ ܘܠܘܠܐ ܘܠܘܠܐ, Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 144b, p. 263 (tr. 149). Mingana's translation reads "Blessed is the son of man" For a detailed discussion of the *bar-naša* problem see M. Casey 1998: *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* (Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 102), 32–50.

<sup>379</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 248; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 167.

<sup>380</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 7:1 (ed. 19, tr. 23). The former brings the soul joy and exultation; the latter falls upon the soul every now and then, after the soul has been purified in the exercise of the former; the first occurrences of the latter are the sign of entering the 'spiritual' stage.

Isaac also emphasises that the experiences do not arise as a result of investigation (*'uqqābā*) or at will, but they fall on human nature all of a sudden (*men šel*),<sup>381</sup> the subject being unaware of them until they appear<sup>382</sup> and uncertain of the reason why they occur.<sup>383</sup> The transiency and passivity of the experience, emphasised by James, could not be expressed more explicitly than by Isaac here. The occurrence of pure experience is not a matter of choice. Isaac criticises those who claim to be able to “pray ‘spiritual prayer’ whenever they like.”<sup>384</sup> Isaac even goes on to state that the phenomenon does not take place at all if it is purposely willed and actively sought!<sup>385</sup> He also rejects the possibility of reproducing or reactivating them by stating that when certain experiences are sought again, they are to be found “cooled and insipid by their taste”.<sup>386</sup>

Isaac tells an illustrative story about a brother who was leaving his cell “in order to be occupied with idle things”. He had already put the key in the lock of his cell, when suddenly “Grace visited him there, so that he returned immediately”.<sup>387</sup> For this reason Isaac states that if a brother neglects a congregational service or does not open his door for a visiting brother, he must not be blamed, for he is being visited by Grace.<sup>388</sup>

In brief, the quality of surprise means that despite all the ascetic struggle the experience is not sensed as an outcome or result of a man’s own spiritual progress.

The order of revelation (*gelyānā*) is not the same as that a man deepens his emotions (*zaw’aw*) by the study of wisdom and by intellectual labour so as to reach some understanding, development and contemplation (*theoria*) of something by mental wandering (*pehyā*) after these things.<sup>389</sup>

<sup>381</sup> The Syriac idiom *men šel* happens to have a very appropriate etymology, for it literally means ‘from silence’. Cf. Brock: *Second Part*, 18:20 (ed. 91, tr. 101).

<sup>382</sup> ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 124; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 84.

<sup>383</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 34:2 (ed. 135, tr. 146–147).

<sup>384</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 171; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 116. On the concept of pure prayer, see below, p. 125–126.

<sup>385</sup> “They do not happen at will, nor when one is seeking.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 163; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 110.

<sup>386</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 131; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 89. The same thing could be said concerning the most vivid aesthetic experiences.

<sup>387</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 178; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120.

<sup>388</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 178; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120–121.

<sup>389</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 154–155; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105. Wensinck translates ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ as ‘mental investigation’, omitting ܘܢܘܩܩܒܐ, which I understand here to signify the process of searching (knowledge) and thereby ‘development’.

The actual identity of this *causa efficiens*, however, remains to some extent unidentified in the metatheological discourse. This can be seen as a result of two separate phenomena. On the one hand, the identity of the *causa efficiens* as the Christian God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is so self-evident that it does not need to be explained or even mentioned, and on the other, the exact nature of God had been so thoroughly examined in dogmatic theology, with all of its schismatic consequences, that the ascetic authors were in custom of avoiding dogmatic statements, both intentionally and unintentionally. Lack of speculation on the Divine Being is connected with the humble ideals of Christian asceticism; monks are critical of their experiences and careful not to “over-explain” them in general, and in particular not to misinterpret God for their own experiences’ sake. And ironically, the ascetics’ surrender to orthodox doctrines happens to make the metatheological readings more suitable for a non-Christian readership without orthodox subtexts.

Therefore the discourse is to a surprising degree free of speculation concerning the roles of the different Persons of the Holy Trinity in the experience. The Person implied by the theological context is the Holy Spirit, described by John of Dalyatha as the preparer of the mysterious ecstatic fragrance: “It is prepared by your Holy Spirit (*rūḥāk qaddīšā*), the Guardian of the purity of his lovers.”<sup>390</sup> Generally speaking, however, there is a great variety of expressions referring to the *causa efficiens*. The most common ones refer to the Holy Spirit or to the Son, or to Grace, their common attribute, in various combinations: ‘Spirit’, ‘grace of the Holy Spirit’, ‘Jesus’, ‘mercy of Jesus’ (*raḥmaw de-yeššū*),<sup>391</sup> ‘grace of Christ’ or ‘grace’ (*ṭaybūtā*) which very often occurs alone.<sup>392</sup> The paradoxical Christian understanding of God as Unity and Trinity makes it possible to use the terminology referring to God (*allāhā*) or His Persons in a very vital way – or very carelessly, if we approach the material with logical demands.

<sup>390</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:3 (pp. 474–475).

<sup>391</sup> “Thirst after Jesus, that he may make you drunk with his love.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 34; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 24. Budge 1902, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-Idta*, fol. 31b.

<sup>392</sup> Cf. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 158a, p. 276 (tr. 169). Isaac of Nineveh heads his discourse on various experiences as “working that is from Grace” (ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܡܝܢ ܗܘܨܘܪܐ) (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 489), translated ‘influences proceedings from Grace’ by Wensinck (*Mystic Treatises*, 328). The word ܐܘܨܘܪܐ, (also indicating ‘goodness’) has an independent charismatic function in Syriac. In the Peshitta of 2 Cor. 1:11

ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܢܐ ܡܢ ܡܘܨܘܪܐ corresponds to εἰς ἡμᾶς χάρισμα. In the canons of Rabbula (d. 435) monks are forbidden to distribute oil – except those who have an evident charisma (ܐܘܨܘܪܐ). (*Synodicon I*, 19:7) Later on the same term was used to indicate a charismatic mixture made of dust from a martyr’s or apostle’s grave, water and oil, used as a remedy for various diseases and infertility. (Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 600–601.)

Due to the self-evident character of the *causa efficiens* it can even be left completely unmentioned, which makes the language produce the impression of the experience as a “subject” acting almost independently in the mental world.

‘Abdišo’ the Seer gives a theological interpretation and explanation of the very existence of the visions of *shapeless* light. He admits that Christ did appear in material shapes and images to the ancient Patriarchs and prophets, but since He has now appeared conclusively in the flesh to renew all material beings he no longer appears in material images. ‘Abdišo’ goes on to declare that if all our knowledge of Christ and of his vision in our hearts were to reach only the stage of material likeness, Christ would have died in vain without profiting us at all. His thought seems to be that knowing (or admitting) the existence of Christ’s manhood as a physical reality is not sufficient to profit anything because the purpose of the Incarnation was to connect man and supramaterial divinity, first in Christ himself, and then in those who are in Christ. The idea is similar to the Greek concept of θεώσις, although the word itself remains unspoken. (The notion is also in complete contradiction with the traditional polemic conceptions of “Nestorianism”.)

The most philosophical sign occurs in the discourse of *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* where the cause of mystical experience is named in accordance with the neo-Platonic tone of the book as *ūsyā*, ‘substance’, ‘essence’.<sup>393</sup>

More aesthetic or poetic signs for the *causa efficiens* include love and beauty. According to Sahdona, fervour of spirit is set on fire by love (*ḥubbā*).<sup>394</sup> John of Dalyatha in particular emphasises the beauty (*šufrā* and *pa’yūtā*) of the divine Glory as an effective cause of the experience.<sup>395</sup> The concept of beauty can be connected with the images of light, fire or drunkenness; it may intoxicate (*rāwē*),<sup>396</sup> stupefy (*etbalhī*) or inflame (*eštahab*).<sup>397</sup> When one gets drunk with the Love of God, one’s “heart is illumined by His beauty (*nehar be-šufreh*)” and one’s “eyes are blinded by His light”.<sup>398</sup> Due to its potency, beauty is presented as a basic level of the ecstatic mood that prevails when praise ceases, and due to its intoxicating capacity, it may even have an addictive quality: the intoxicated are

<sup>393</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 39 (35\*).

<sup>394</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:68. (Tr. Brock 1987, 229.)

<sup>395</sup> ܘܟܝܢ ܘܢܦܫܐ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ – “They stupefy themselves in your beauty.” Other examples in Beulay: *Lettres*, 7:2 (326–327), 10:1 (330–331), 12:2 (336–337), ‘ecstasy of *tehrā de-šufreh* 31:4 (392–393), 36: 2 (402–403), 51:7 (476–477). For ܘܟܝܢ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ, see *ibid.*, 25:4 (384–385), 51:10 (478–479): “indescribable ecstasy in the glory of the splendour of your beauty.”

ܘܟܝܢ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ ܘܢܫܘܒܐ  
<sup>396</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 182b, p. 302 (tr. 40).

<sup>397</sup> “Blessed is he who is stupefied in/by the beauty of these things”, Beulay: *Lettres*, 38:2 (408–409); “you are enflamed of his beauty”, *ibid.*, 28:1 (pp. 388–389).

<sup>398</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400–401). Or: “in His light”.

“considered as madmen, for they are swallowed in the desire of beauty which captivates the thoughts.”<sup>399</sup>

This use of the vocabulary shows that “God” was sensed as love, grace and goodness. The Syriac terms intermingle here: *ḥubbā* is in principle equivalent to ‘love’, but the vocabulary derived from *RHM* corresponds equally to love, grace and mercy, while *ṭaybūtā* signifies goodness, grace and benefit.

Perhaps the most honest attempt, however, to define the *causa efficiens* is an apophatic way of leaving the question open: “now and then something<sup>400</sup> entices your mind and lifts it up to the region of unutterable light”.<sup>401</sup> A certain insecurity and irregularity in the *causa efficiens* of the experience underlines its vital nature, which is the feature that makes it easy to interpret as being dependent on the encounter with the *personal* Divine Being. It is not uncommon to encounter in the texts utterances such as: “Man does not know the reason for this joy, he only knows that he is rejoicing.”<sup>402</sup>

What is surprising about the onset of the experiences is that they can be caused, or interpreted as being caused, by any small thing that may be more or less insignificant *per se*. Isaac of Nineveh describes a case where a monk was suddenly overcome by an inner motion so that he startled and sat down in a moment when there was no actual reason to exhibit any special behaviour. When laughed at by others, the monk said that he became afraid – not of the motion that he had but of the fact that so often negligence in small things leads to significant losses in great things. This once more underlines the total character of the ascetic pursuit.<sup>403</sup>

Under the category of *causa efficiens*, however, there is also something less self-evident: dualistic features that present the causes of certain experiences as features of the dark side. According to ‘Abdišo’ the Seer, during prayer the soul (*naṣṣā*) is like a ship and the mind (*hawnā*) like a captain, and the impulses stirred in the soul are like winds: some favourable, some not. The favourable ones are homogenous (*pešīte*, ‘simple’), but the non-favourable are heterogeneous (*merak-kebē*) material compositions.<sup>404</sup> ‘Abdišo’ elsewhere divides these two – albeit

<sup>399</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 47:4 (pp. 458–459).

<sup>400</sup> The Syriac has in fact a zero morpheme here; ‘something’ as the subject is the translator’s addition, but it does accurately emphasise the Syriac syntactic style of frequently leaving the subject unmentioned, which often forces the translator to produce more exact information than the original text actually contains. This is especially problematic in the mystical texts in that in comparison with historical narrative they contain very little obvious implicit information.

<sup>401</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 58 (43\*).

<sup>402</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:16 (pp. 516–517).

<sup>403</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 289–290; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 193.

<sup>404</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 154a–154b, pp. 272–273 (tr. 163).

using different terminology – into two categories: ‘idol-like shapes’ (*demwātā petkaryātā*)<sup>405</sup> and ‘substantial shapes’ (*demwātā qenūmyatā*).<sup>406</sup> The ‘idol-like shapes’ proceed from sexual lust and anger, manifesting themselves in material images of women, animals and landscapes, whereas the ‘substantial shapes’ consist of spiritual images proceeding from vainglory. In these demons appear as bright angelic beings.<sup>407</sup> The *Letter Sent to a Friend* also warns of the attacks and images, corporeal and incorporeal *theories*, produced by demons in the “psychic stage”.<sup>408</sup> Demons, therefore, are considered to be one source of mystical experience, especially of the visionary kind.

This leads us to examine the nature of the devil in Syriac metatheology. Curiously enough, Isaac of Nineveh gives, on the one hand, an extremely modern definition: “Satan is a name of the deviation of the will from the truth, but it is not the designation of a natural being”,<sup>409</sup> but on the other hand, he is concerned with the methods employed by Satan in cunningly tempting ascetics.<sup>410</sup> If Isaac really stands behind both definitions, and if the former is interpreted literally,<sup>411</sup> the whole teaching concerning demons is set in a new light: certain parts of the man’s will are, as it were, separated outside the ego and called demons so that the struggle might be conceived as one against an adversary on the other side, and hence more easily motivated. In the categories of the present study this means that if Satan is understood as a real spiritual being, it may be the *causa efficiens* of the experience; if not, as a psychological enabling cause.

These two positions, however, are not necessarily completely irreconcilable, if we think of Satan’s nature as an *angelic* being. In the Mediterranean cultures it was widely believed that in the soul there is a stepless continuum (what we would call the subconscious) to one’s own guardian angel, who could be considered as

<sup>405</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157b, p. 276; Mingana translates as ‘material images’ (ibid, 168).

<sup>406</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 158a, p. 276; Mingana’s translation (ibid, 168) is somewhat misleadingly ‘personal images’.

<sup>407</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157b–158a, p. 276 (tr. 168).

<sup>408</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 55 (41\*).

<sup>409</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 189; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 128. The sentence includes a word-play: ‘deviation’ – ܩܘܘܠܘܢܘܘܢ and ‘Satan’ – ܩܘܠܘܢܘܢ.

<sup>410</sup> E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 269–280; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 180–88.

<sup>411</sup> The former definition is probably adopted from Pseudo-Dionysius, but it is still a part of Isaac’s own discourse. In its context, however, the notion may refer to the *origin* of evil in the ontological sense, not necessarily to the non-existence of Satan as a (personal) being. In this perspective the idea is that (the tendency to do) evil does not actually exist (in God), Satan being the name of a being who took upon himself actions that have no actual substance. (Cf. note 3 in *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 133). For further reading, see J. Martikainen: *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*. (Åbo akademi, Åbo 1978).



the real self.<sup>412</sup> In this view, the angelic activity is on the fringes of personality; the Christian imagination usually places angels closer to the divine realm. The Syriac authors also reflect such conceptions. Simeon the Graceful draws a parallel between the Lord as the ascetic's comforter and the angels serving him, thereby indirectly indicating that the same action could be accurately described as divine or angelic activity.<sup>413</sup> This is in accordance with the general orthodox conception of angels as somewhat impersonal instruments of God. Accordingly, angelic beings have access to the soul by its lower parts that belong to the subconscious.

Occasionally the (genuine) experience is explicitly interpreted as coming through an angel, or resulting from the proximity of an angel.<sup>414</sup> According to Dadišo' of Qatar, the duties of the guardian angel include enlightenment of the soul.<sup>415</sup> The angels act from a divine sign in a way that enables man to feel his love towards God and to rejoice in his mind, or in a way that his mind is reinforced and strengthened, so that he does not feel alone. The feeling of the presence of the Other is perhaps the most important aspect, if we consider the concrete context of the experience, the absolute loneliness of the cell. And on the other hand, the angels in turn profit by following the hermits' spiritual victories in the ascetic struggle.<sup>416</sup> In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* the guardian angel kindles fire in the heart so that it becomes drunk with joy and tears run without measure.<sup>417</sup> Angels are also considered to deliver knowledge to men that they first perceive and acquire themselves. The speculation on the role played by angels in the experience reaches a culmination in an actual neo-Platonic vision recorded by Isaac of Nineveh. In this vision no-one is able to move towards the Good or be illuminated without the intercession and transmission of the (angelic) beings on a higher level in the hierarchy of the spiritual order.<sup>418</sup>

John of Dalyatha has an interesting section where he portrays the mystical experience as participation in the supernatural angelic parlance in which the mind

<sup>412</sup> A common belief from the Eastern Mediterranean cultures before the Christian era, also to be found in Gnosticism and Manichaeism. See the chapter 'Invisible Friend' in Brown's *Cult of Saints*. The classic example of an ego-angel is in Acts 12:15.

<sup>413</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 179b, p. 299 (tr. 35). "A monk who crucifies himself to the world [...] the Lord is his comforter and consoler, and [...] he will be served by angels."

<sup>414</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 18:19–20 (ed. 90–91, tr. 101).

<sup>415</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 30b, p. 229 (tr. 113). Dadišo' asserts that his teaching on angels is derived from the Psalter. Yet the crucial section – "With each one of us is an angel who follows us, accompanies us, guards us, delivers us, prays for us, illuminates our mind and fills it with spiritual visions, and comforts us in secret" – has only a very slight parallel in the canonical Psalter (91:11–12).

<sup>416</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 46a–47a, pp. 237–238 (tr. 127–128).

<sup>417</sup> Olinger: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 39–40 (29\*).

<sup>418</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 196–199; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 133–134.

(*hawṇā*) is first raised to a sphere (*atrā*) where the hosts of angels of light fly in unceasing movement, where it may be in contact with them by 'subtle whispers' (*le 'zē qaṭṭīnē*) in a 'non-fleshy tongue' (*leššānā lā-besrānā*), and at times reach a 'unity' (*hadyūtā*) which is described as indescribable.<sup>419</sup> John calls the state in which the subject is stupefied together with the Angelic beings 'the sphere of the cloud of light' (*atrā de- 'arpelā de-nūhrā*).<sup>420</sup> Probably John is here talking about the same matters as Dadišo' above, John's expression merely being superior in aesthetic standards.

An analytical approach to the question of *causa efficiens* is to be found in the *Letter Sent to a Friend*, where the possible sources of inspiration are differentiated as follows (in the logical approach, however, a), d) and e) would belong in the category of the enabling cause):

- a) Serenity of mind
- b) A guardian angel: fiery experiences
- c) The grace of the Holy Spirit: experiences of shapeless light
- d) Reading
- e) The natural seed in one's heart: the thought of the soul is "like a ship on the water"
- f) A demon<sup>421</sup>

The process of interpretation also applies to the various psychological qualities of the experience in the process where they are connected with the *causa efficiens*. The primary quality of pleasure, for example, which was modified as 'sweetness' on the level of symbolic expression, is further focused on the level of interpretation as the 'sweetness of Christ' (*ḥalyūteh da-mšīḥā*).<sup>422</sup>

Correspondingly, the analogous symbol of drunkenness can be described as taking place in an immediate relationship with God, as 'drunkenness in you', or through His attributes, especially love: 'drunkenness of His love' (*rawwāyūt raḥmeteh*).<sup>423</sup>

John of Dalyatha connects the symbol of breathing with wider theological implications by identifying the object of breathing with the One who is the source of all breathing, and the whole process is interpreted as being ultimately an operation of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>419</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424–425).

<sup>420</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 47:6 (pp. 458–459).

<sup>421</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 37 (28\*), 40 (30\*).

<sup>422</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 17 (tr. 14).

<sup>423</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400–401); Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151

(ܪܘܘܘܝܘܬ ܪܚܡܬܗ).

When they breath on that unified sphere which unifies the divided beings, they are breathing the Invigorator of mind and soul in unity higher than them with that pleasant breath (*nešmā*) that is stirred by the Paraclete.<sup>424</sup>

The *parole* on *causa efficiens* helps us to recognise in the discourse the entities deserving to be included within the concept of mystical experience. If an abstract entity X is reputed to have been “suddenly given by God”, the most plausible interpretation is that X is an “experience” because it appears suddenly, and “mystical” since it is interpreted as being of divine origin. (The psychological accuracy of the reference is not our actual concern, since we are dealing with the parlance only.)

Finally, we may point out that the role *causa efficiens* need not be over-emphasised either, since there is also an aspect of liberty in ecstasy (*tahrā*), which can be seen in the fact that John of Dalyatha uses the root in the imperative when addressing his fellow-monks: “Get stupefied (*tehar*) in love of God towards us”.<sup>425</sup>

#### 2.3.4. Causa Finalis

The category of final cause contains the discussion concerning the results and functions of mystical experience. The *result* can be understood as the continuum of the enabling cause of the experience, showing forth its purpose and outcome in the empirical world, while the *function* is connected with the *causa efficiens*, for they are both characterised by the idea of purposeful intention. Any more detailed treatment of the problem, however, is relative and dependent on the choice of paradigm. The objective perspective of the scientific approach is again in contradiction with the principles of the discourse itself. Namely, there are things that, objectively speaking, belong in the category of *causa efficiens* – e.g. contemplation and remembrance of God that may appear as psychological methods – but in the discourse of the ascetics themselves these are rather portrayed as consequences caused by the Divine action and in that sense they may be seen as the *causa finalis* of the mystical experience.

In the following I shall discuss the *causa finalis* of the mystical experience from three viewpoints: the relation to the Divine in synchronic terms (ontological function), the relation to the Divine in diachronic terms (eschatological function) and the relation to the empirical world (social function).<sup>426</sup>

<sup>424</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:6 (pp. 424–425).

<sup>425</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:1 (pp. 380–381). The use is also remarked on by Beulay (1990, 397.)

<sup>426</sup> The psychological function is absent here since the main psychological qualities have been described above, and it would be somewhat arbitrary to differentiate qualities *present* in the

### 2.3.4.1. Ontological Function: God and Man

Extraordinary experiences are not seen by the metatheologians as objects of intrinsic value, worth pursuing as goals in themselves but in the wider context, the totality of which is the crucial aspect and elementary dimension. The ontological function of the experience seems to be understood by the Syriac authors in two ways. On the one hand, it is seen as a kind of point of spiritual transition within the process of reaching a higher level in spiritual growth, and on the other hand, as a manifestation of the fact that the higher level has already been attained. In any case, it is clear that experiences are not unattached “peaks” but part of a new, more spiritual state of being.

The theological interpretation of this is likeness to or even unification with God, in one sense or another. John of Dalyatha defines the end of all spiritual activities, and of the solitary life, as a state where one has become ‘divine’ (*allāhāyā*) and ‘alike with God’ (*dāmē l-allāhā*).<sup>427</sup> Or to express the desired state more poetically, the person who experiences it has become a “mirror (*maḥzūtā*) in which the invisible is seen”, and “Christ shines forth” in him.<sup>428</sup>

The Syriac terms used of the actual unification are *ḥedāyūtā*<sup>429</sup> and *ḥūdāyā*,<sup>430</sup> as well as *ḥulṭānā*, ‘mingling’,<sup>431</sup> and their verbal equivalents – in fact the boldest terminology available. According to Sahdona, love can make man a ‘mansion of the Trinity’ (*awwānā da-tlūtāyūtā*), and man can mix (*meḥallet*) and unite (*meḥayyed*) with God through Love, and harmonise His will as one with Him.<sup>432</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh several times mentions ‘complete mingling with God’ (*ḥulṭānā gemrā da-b-allāhā*),<sup>433</sup> albeit without speculation as to the ontological nature or exact meaning of the term. The concept of unification appears and disappears in the discourse, with its various signs, as if its reference was generally

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experience from the emotions that follow from it and thereby function as its aim or purpose, since this differentiation is not made explicitly in the sources.

<sup>427</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 13:1 (pp. 342–343).

<sup>428</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 14:2, 4:9 (pp. 344–345, 318–319). For further discussion of the problem of unification with God in the Syriac context, see Beulay 1990, 465–487, and on the ‘vision of God’ on pp. 423–464.

<sup>429</sup> E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 29:1 (pp. 390–391), 40:1 (pp. 422–423), 40:6 (pp. 424–425). Widengren vocalises the word as *ḥadyūtā*.

<sup>430</sup> E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:16 (pp. 480–481).

<sup>431</sup> E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:1 (pp. 380–381).

<sup>432</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles II*, 4:3.

<sup>433</sup> ܠܗܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ Brock: *Second Part*, Chapter 35 (ed. 139, tr. 151), 19:6 (ed. 93, tr. 104) etc.

understood. The terminology as such is analytical in nature, most expressions even being derived from the numeral ‘one’ (*had*), but since the concept of unification does not seem to have been in any way problematic in Syriac discourse, it seems that the notion was generally understood as a symbolic expression. In the Christian context, moreover, the concept of ‘union’ (*hūyādā*)<sup>434</sup> can be focused with the help of a Pauline subtext, the idea of becoming a member of the body of Christ.

My Lord, make me a member in the body of your Only-begotten One, so that I may perceive the secret of union (*hūyādā*) with you, as far as my weak nature allows.<sup>435</sup>

Ecstasy and unification go together in many religious traditions – which is due to the psychological quality of stunning totality wherein distinctions are not sensed – and the Syrian one is no exception. John of Dalyatha shows in quite bold terms how unification results from the ecstatic experience:

Bear constantly in your spirit (*hawnā*) [...] the ecstasy (*tahrā*) of his Greatness, until it becomes glorified in His glory and transformed into (His) image, and you shall become a god in God (*allāhā b-allāhā*). (Then your spirit) has reached the likeness of its Creator and likened to Him in union (*hadyūtā*).<sup>436</sup>

The concept of union obliterates the difference between subject and object, which in turn opens the possibility of likening symbols of the experience to its Giver. This effective stylistic device is employed by John of Dalyatha, who explicitly identifies the concept of gift (*mawhabtā*) with God himself: “Blessed are your lovers who are continually glorified in your beauty, for you give yourself as a present.”<sup>437</sup> Accordingly, John ultimately proceeds to declare God to be ‘food’, ‘drink’, ‘joy’, ‘exultation’, ‘clothing’, ‘the abode’, ‘the sun’ and ‘daytime’ for those who remain in wonder and ecstasy at His mysteries.<sup>438</sup>

Unification, as an interpretation, seems to be a consequence of the quality of totality present in the experience. John of Dalyatha describes how the mind is stupefied by the unifying effect:

In the beginning, my mind (*hawnā*) being not accustomed, it happens that when the Light of the Holy Trinity shines in incomprehensible simplicity into the mind which is deprived of apprehension (*īda’iā*) because of the stupefaction in the Light of Life, and

<sup>434</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318–319).

<sup>435</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318–319).

<sup>436</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 29:2 (pp. 390–391).

<sup>437</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:7 (pp. 318–319).

<sup>438</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:3–4 (pp. 474–475).

when the mind perceives the unifying exultation, the mind is assailed by the fear that this might not happen to him ever again.<sup>439</sup>

It must be stressed too, however, that unification is not among the most frequently used images for the mystical experience. The main exception to this rule is *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, which is actually constructed on the theme of cosmic ascent towards unification (*hedāyūtā*)<sup>440</sup> with the Essence.<sup>441</sup> This latter, however, is the very expression in which the limits of traditional theological thinking are exceeded, according to which unification should not be considered as substantial. According to Barhebraeus, the entity that is united (*methallaṭ*) in God (*b-allāhā*) in prayer is *hawnā*, usually translated as ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’.<sup>442</sup>

The variation in the understanding of these images is often to some extent dependent on the use of the preposition *b<sup>e</sup>*, which has both instrumental and locative functions in the Semitic languages. In the former case the translation would express an act, in the latter a state. Both alternatives make sense, but the latter does so in a more profound way:

	<i>Instrumental</i>	<i>Locative</i>
<i>ḥaddūtā da-b-allāhā</i>	joy (because) of God	joy in God
<i>hergā da-b-allāhā</i>	(continuous) meditation on God	meditation in God
<i>renyā da-b-allāhā</i>	(end of prayer is:) reflection on God	reflection in God

Also, the ‘recollection’ (*‘uhdānā*) of God, sometimes defined as ‘continuous’ (*ammīnā*), is described more as a state of being than as an act: it is caused by the action of the Spirit in man,<sup>443</sup> it may be increased in the soul by constant prayer and reading,<sup>444</sup> it burns inside<sup>445</sup> and it can even be stored up in the soul.<sup>446</sup> These images imply that something more than a human activity, a “method”, is referred to. In other words, the concept of recollection refers both to active recollecting and to states to which the active recollection leads.

<sup>439</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:3 (pp. 422–423).

<sup>440</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 40 (36\*).

<sup>441</sup> See the extract on p. 147.

<sup>442</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 17 (tr. 14). ܠܗܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ Teule’s translation for *hawnā*: ‘intellect’. The sentence in question is a quotation from John of Dalyatha (one example of the literary interaction between East and West Syrians).

<sup>443</sup> ܠܗܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 156b, p. 275, (tr. 166).

<sup>444</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 30:4 (ed. 123, tr. 135)

<sup>445</sup> “All parts of the soul become hot as by fire [...] Such is the recollection of God.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 512; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 344.

<sup>446</sup> Isaac of Nineveh recommends that one be full of recollection so that during sleep one might receive gifts from the Grace of God when it visits and examines him. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 493; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 330.

When man gazes at the infiniteness of God which is clothed in all and goes through all, the continuous remembrance (*'uhdānā*) (becomes) very strong: it exterminates the passions, expels the demons, enlightens the mind and purifies the heart.<sup>447</sup>

Some of the boldest interpretations concerning the subject of experience occur, perhaps surprisingly, in Sahdona's writings. He indicates that the real subject who is praying is the Holy Spirit: "you should realise that the Spirit of God is playing on your tongue, and singing his melodies in your mouth."<sup>448</sup> Therefore he has a good basis for advising the one praying "not to be proud over the Spirit who speaks in you" since he is only a harp in the hands of the musician.<sup>449</sup> These ideas also have a biblical reference in St. Paul's teaching on the activity of the Spirit in Christian believers.<sup>450</sup>

The main principle of the interpretation of ecstatic experience within the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh can be defined as the disappearance of the sense of the subject-object structure between man and God, even though Isaac gives no exact definition of this unity. The actual 'unification' is mentioned by Isaac only when he quotes Dionysius the Areopagite (*hedāyutā*) or Evagrius (*le-methallātū*).<sup>451</sup> Yet in connection with the highest experiences Isaac rejects the use of terms that refer implicitly to subject-object structure, for example 'praying', which indicates one person praying and another being prayed to.<sup>452</sup> The basic themes presented by Isaac on the psychological level are to be found in *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* as cosmological applications.

Description of the Godhead based on the experience is an extremely interesting topic. In this respect we may firstly note the use of very intimate expressions. Isaac of Nineveh speaks of God as 'Beloved' (*hebībā*)<sup>453</sup> and 'Friend' (*rāhmā*)<sup>454</sup> with whom it is possible to "discuss in silence".<sup>455</sup> And on the other hand, the

447 . ܘܢܫܘܐ ܐܢܘܢ ܕܠܐ ܡܫܝܒܘܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐ ܕܠܒܘܕ ܠܘܠ ܫܚܘܒܐ ܕܘܠܐ .  
 ܠܒ ܐܢܘܢ ܕܡܘܠܐ ܕܡܘܠܐ ܕܡܘܠܐ ܕܡܘܠܐ ܕܡܘܠܐ ܕܡܘܠܐ ܕܡܘܠܐ .  
 . Beulay: *La Collection des Lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 50:4 (pp. 464–465).

448 .ܘܢܫܘܐ ܐܢܘܢ ܕܠܐ ܡܫܝܒܘܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐ ܕܠܘܠ ܫܚܘܒܐ ܕܘܠܐ . Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:79. (Translation in Brock 1987, 235.)

449 Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:80.

450 Rom 8:26. The image of a musical instrument occurs in a similar context in 1 Cor 13:1.

451 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 169, 462; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, xlv, 115, 310.

452 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 170–175; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 115–118.

453 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 261; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 175.

454 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148. The same word is also used of the holy ones who are 'friends of God'. *Ibid.* 427 (*ibid.* 286.)

455 ܘܢܫܘܐ ܐܢܘܢ ܕܠܐ ܡܫܝܒܘܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐ ܕܠܘܠ ܫܚܘܒܐ ܕܘܠܐ . 'Converse/intimacy with God' is almost a technical expression. S. Brock gives examples of its occurrences in Syriac literature; see the note in Brock: *Second Part*, 30:1–3 (ed. 122, tr. 134).

solitary one with no worldly cares is a 'friend of God' (*rāhmā d-allāhā*).<sup>456</sup> In historical perspective this is not an invention of the mystics: the term 'Beloved' (*ḥebībā*) is applied to God in the Odes of Solomon, and to the Son in the writings of St. Ephrem.<sup>457</sup> John of Dalyatha, moreover, calls God 'the Beautiful One' (*ṣappīrā*).<sup>458</sup>

From these terms of intimacy the discourse proceeds towards an even more daring topic, that of seeing God. Isaac of Nineveh boldly declares: "It is not possible for you to love God, if you have not seen Him."<sup>459</sup> Seeing, however, means for him not vision but knowing God, as he later explains, referring to a way of knowing deeper than the discursive sense. Nevertheless, he elsewhere states that without the distraction of earthly cares and with at least some mindfulness in vigil, the mystic can "ascend to God to be in delight, and he will easily observe (*metbaqqē*) that Glory".<sup>460</sup>

The search of explicitly mentioned phenomenal qualities for the Divine Being<sup>461</sup> based on the vision of Him is not as fruitful a pursuit as one might expect. It may well be true that the characteristics of the Divine Being are brought *to* the description of experience rather than derived *from* it. This fact as such justifies us in considering the topic in the category of interpretation.

The phenomenon of "seeing" God seems to merge into the total character of the experience. In the highest spiritual sphere of 'Abdišo' the Seer the human mind is not able to differentiate even its own nature from the light of the Holy Trinity, but it perceives only the immaterial glory of the Saviour, the Lord Christ, whose appearance was transformed in his Resurrection into ineffable Glory, which is far above his material flesh, which he took from human beings for their salvation.<sup>462</sup> In the thinking of John of Dalyatha the topic is treated by exploring the limits of language with paradoxical descriptions: "His shape (*demūtā*) is not a shape"; before the glory of God "knowledge is taken away from those who have

<sup>456</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 150; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 102.

<sup>457</sup> Ephrem: *Hymnen de Fide*, III:1.

<sup>458</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 13:3 (pp. 344–345). The word is an adjective in form, but is here used as a noun.

<sup>459</sup> ܐܠܠܗܐ ܐܚܝܒܐ ܘܢܘܨܝܘܢܝܘܢܐ . ܐܠܠܗܐ ܐܚܝܒܐ ܘܢܘܨܝܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܠܒܕܝܐܝܘܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 222; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 150.

<sup>460</sup> ܟܠܗܘܢ ܘܟܠܗܘܢ ܗܘܘܢ ܘܟܠܗܘܢ ܗܘܘܢ ܠܒܕܝܐܝܘܢܐ ܐܠܠܗܐ ܐܚܝܒܐ ܘܢܘܨܝܘܢܝܘܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 134; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 91.

<sup>461</sup> How God is actually viewed in the metatheological works deserves a systematic study of its own. Besides the use of the general concepts of mercy and love, the emotional qualities of the mystical experience are not, it seems to me, explicitly projected as qualities or attributes of God in an exact way. Indirectly the view of God and the whole world-view are surely strongly influenced by the authors' experiences.

<sup>462</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 150a–152a, pp. 268–270 (tr. 157–160).



knowledge, and sight from the seers by the greatness of knowledge and the ecstatic force of true vision (*tehīrūt ḥazzetā šarrīretā*).<sup>463</sup>

Sahdona uses the expression “lives in us and is seen by us”<sup>464</sup> as a continually increasing effect of purification and illumination in contact with God’s Spirit and His writings. Sahdona boldly declares, “He can be seen by us in the Spirit even now, if we wish.”<sup>465</sup> Yet he also states that God is “hidden in the loftiness of his hiddenness in the inaccessible light of his nature”.<sup>466</sup> The idea seems to be that seeing does not imply an object. Under the burning influence of love one is all the time ‘beholding God’.<sup>467</sup>

The intimate imagery leads the discussion to man’s identification with God, and to the application of the divine names to man. The use of bold terminology is not necessarily problematic for orthodox theology, for concepts like ‘divine’ have been generally understood as having a different reference when applied to man than when used of God. In his *Hymns on Paradise* St. Ephrem leads the reader to the threshold of the concept of deification, *theosis*, but leaves the word itself unmentioned. Namely, he first compares body, soul (*naḥšā*), spirit (*tar’ūtā*) and divinity (*allāhūtā*) with each other, and then he concludes: “In the end the body will put on the beauty of the soul, the soul will put on that of the spirit, while the spirit shall put on the very likeness of (God’s) majesty (*demūtā de-rabbūtā*).<sup>468</sup> The analogy, however, is not completed with the term implied by the first part, perhaps because the Syriac word for ‘divinity’, *allāhūtā*, is used of the Godhead, or of pagan deities, so that it was sensed as being unsuitable for use with reference to man. There does exist a literal equivalent for *theosis* in Syriac, *metallāhānūtā*, but it is extremely seldom employed in discourse.<sup>469</sup> The word ‘god’ itself, however, can be used in a metaphorical way, as it is by Isaac of Nineveh when he states that “(ascetic) labours and humility make man a god (*allāhā*) on the

463 Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:7 (pp. 476–477). Beulay’s edition has a misprint here: ܕܢܘܠܡܐ instead of ܕܢܘܠܡܐ.

464 ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܢܘܠܡܐ (or alternatively, “lives in us and is visible to us”). Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:57.

465 ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܢܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:6. (Brock 1987, 204.)

466 ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܢܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:6. (Brock 1987, 204.)

467 ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܢܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ ܕܘܠܡܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles I*, 3:147. The expression of ‘looking at’ (ܕܘܠܡܐ) reads in Sahdona’s Arabic version: *in kunta fī allāh tanzhur* [...]; Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles IV*, p. 105.

468 Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 9:20. *Tar’ūtā* also means ‘intelligence’, ‘thinking’.

469 An instance in Simeon the Graceful in Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a.

earth.”<sup>470</sup> The adjectival use is also conceivable: when the holy men are called ‘divine’ (*allāhāyā*),<sup>471</sup> the idea of *theosis* is present.

#### 2.3.4.2. The Eschatological Function

The mystical experience itself can be viewed as the aim of the whole ascetic life and its practices. It is stated that as long as the solitary monk remains in the ecstatic state “he is not in need of the performance of the offices, nor is he in the need of reading, for all this is the work of the merchant, up to the time when the costly pearl falls into his hands.”<sup>472</sup> This is not because of the emotional content of the experience but because of (the interpretation of) the Divine reality present in it – or beyond it, to use a more apophatic expression.

When interpreted in the wider theological context, however, the experience is even more than the goal of asceticism. The eschatological function of the experience is revealed by adopting the ontological function of the experience on the chronological axis, connecting the experience with salvation history. In this perspective the experiences are interpreted as a foretaste of the states of the world to come and of life in its angelic mode. In fact the main purpose of Christian asceticism is spiritual perfection, transformation into man’s final heavenly character. “Continuous drunkenness in ecstatic impulses”, in the words of Isaac of Nineveh, is “as in the life after resurrection”.<sup>473</sup> This kind of imagery also stresses the unity and continuity between this life and the hereafter, at least implicitly. “The mind”, according to Simeon the Graceful, has tasted partially here, and when it has become free of the density of the body, (it will taste) completely.”<sup>474</sup>

This means that the experience itself may be expressed with signs that contain eschatological components. For instance, John of Dalyatha speaks of ‘emotions of the new world’ (*nebhē de-’ālmā hedattā*).<sup>475</sup> Correspondingly, the experiences that are opposite to the foretaste of heaven may be designated as the opposite of heaven: John of Dalyatha calls the ‘veil of passions’ ‘dark hell’ (*gēhannā*).<sup>476</sup>

470 גַּלְגַּל הַתְּהוֹמָהּ . אַלְמָא בְּבִינָא כְּזוּרָא לְבִינָא Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 95; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 64.

471 E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 124–125; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 84–85.

472 Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 42 (31\*). Here the mystical experience is expressed by the symbol of a ‘pearl’.

473 אַבְטָא הַבְּחִי הַכּוּרָא (Lit. ‘order’) הַבְּעוֹרָא סַבְחָא Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

474 Mingana 1934/Simon, 194b, p. 314 (tr. 59).

475 Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:5 (pp. 316–317).

476 Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318–319).

Isaac relates that those who experienced this foretaste could become so overwhelmingly enraptured by it that they were no longer aware of their physical being, their “coat of flesh”. “On account of the delight and the joy of their heart [...] they imagine themselves to have put off the body and to be already in the state which comes after the resurrection.”<sup>477</sup> Or the same sense of totality expressed in other words yet with the same eschatological nuance in the interpretation: during the experience “it seems as if the kingdom of heaven were nothing else but this”.<sup>478</sup>

The encounter with of the world to come in the ecstatic experience can also be depicted in very concrete, even visionary terms, like those employed by ‘Abdišo’ the Seer when enumerating the consequences of ecstasy (*temhā*) as follows:

mingling (*hulānā*) with spiritual orders (*tegmē*), vision (*hazzetā*) of the souls of the holy ones, vision of Paradise, eating from its tree of life, and intimacy (*enyānā*) with the holy ones who dwell in it, together with other ineffable things.<sup>479</sup>

If we reverse the perspective, this position also means that the world to come is more or less co-equal to the state of total ecstasy. Isaac of Nineveh stresses that the ecstatic states are entirely free of memories of worldly thoughts, and accordingly, the state of being in the world to come is free of passionate psychological movements and even memories of the past world. The result actually comes close to a Christian version of Nirvana, yet the distinction of personalities remains. “The holy ones do not pray prayers in the new world. When the mind has been engulfed by the Spirit, they dwell in ecstasy (*temhā*) in that delightful glory.”<sup>480</sup> Yet the idea of the world to come as a non-verbal entity is well in line with Ephrem’s non-physical Paradise and its immaterial pleasures that cannot be accurately described employing the concepts of this world.<sup>481</sup> Moreover, Isaac states that the heavenly mansions promised in John 14:2 are not locations but different spiritual levels, according to which the inhabitants enjoy their portion of glory.<sup>482</sup>

<sup>477</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 550; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 369.

<sup>478</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

<sup>479</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157a, p. 275 (tr. 167).

<sup>480</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 170; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 115.

<sup>481</sup> Ephrem, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 11:3–9. Ephrem’s ideas, however, have sometimes been confused with an “Islamic” conception of Paradise filled with virgins (E.g. Palva 1998, 180). This conclusion was originally based on the misinterpretation of one verse (7:18, see Brock’s comment in *Paradise Hymns*, 193).

<sup>482</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 86; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 58.

And finally, Isaac's eschatological vision is embedded in love. He describes beautifully how the Creator made this world in Love, sustains it in Love, and will bring it to completion in Love.

In love did he bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during this its temporal existence; in love He is going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state (*šuhlāfā tehīrā*), and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised. And since in the New World the Creator's love rules over all rational nature (*keyānā melīlē*), the ecstasy (*temhā*) at His mysteries that will be revealed (then) will captivate to itself the intellect of (all) rational beings (*hawnā da-mīlīlē*) whom He has created so that they might have delight in Him, whether they be evil or whether they be just.<sup>483</sup>

If these ideas are developed to their logical end, the result is the ultimate disappearance of distinctions; the boundaries of heresy are crossed at the point at which personalities cease to exist. This kind of climax and the logical fulfilment of all eschatological visions, however, is to be found only in the revelatory *Book of Holy Hierotheos*, where the eschatological vision culminates in full ontological harmonisation of the Creator and the creation in a most neo-Platonic fashion:

Orders that are above pass away, and the Distinctions that are below are abolished, and Everything becomes One thing: for even God shall pass, and Christ shall be done away, and the Spirit shall no more be called the Spirit, for the names pass away and not the Essence (*Ousia*); for if distinctions pass, who will call whom? And who, on the other hand, will answer whom? For One neither names nor is named. This is the limit of All and the end of everything.<sup>484</sup>

#### 2.3.4.3. *The Social Function*

One of the paradoxes of metatheology is that in spite of all appreciation of solitude the social function of the experience is positive: it is considered to cause strong love and a merciful attitude towards all men.

Love is characterised by a non-judgemental attitude. As long as the hermit is under the influence of the spiritual experience, "there is before his eyes no sinner in creation, but all men are regarded by him as righteous."<sup>485</sup> This feeling may even intensify to become ecstatic itself: "man becomes drunk, as with wine, with the love of men, because all actions of men, whether of sinners or of righteous men, and whatever they do, all of them, are seen by him with the eyes of the *theoria* (of the corporeal things)." And correspondingly, when man regards the

<sup>483</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 38:2 (ed. 148, tr. 160).

<sup>484</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 133 (120–121\*).

<sup>485</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30\*).

feeble deeds of his fellow-men and is moved thereby, this may in turn cause the fire of love to fall into his heart.<sup>486</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh does see the commandment to love God as implying withdrawal from men, as we have seen above, but he goes on to state, somewhat surprisingly, that the commandment to love one's fellow-men is included in the very same commandment. According to the reasoning of Isaac, love of man is a consequence of fulfilling the command to love God.

Do you want to acquire the love of your fellow-man, according to the commandment of the Gospel, within yourself? Withdraw from him. Then the flame of love will burn in you and you will be eager to meet and see him as (if he was) a vision of the angel of light.<sup>487</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh even claims that without drunkenness in God (*rawwāyūtā da-b-allāhā*) it is impossible to receive the pure love (*ḥubbā šafyā*) that man by nature lacks. This love and compassion for all creation is total towards sinners as well as animals.<sup>488</sup> On the other hand, Isaac also states that “the key of divine gifts (*šukkānē*) unto the heart is given through the love of the neighbour”.<sup>489</sup> This creates a paradoxical circle, very typical of eastern Christian thought: one needs spiritual experience in order to be able to love, yet one must love in order to be able to receive the experience. We might say that this circle is closed in terms of logic and self-supporting in terms of vitality.

If you are desirous of tasting the love of God, my brother, ponder and meditate with understanding<sup>490</sup> on the things that belong to Him, and which have to do with Him and His holy Nature: meditate and ponder mentally, cause your intellect to wander (on this) all your time, and from this you will become aware how all the parts of your soul become enflamed in love, as a burning flame alights on your heart, and desire (*raḥmā*) for God excels in you; and out of the love (*ḥubbā*) of God, you will arrive at the perfect love of (your fellow) human beings (Isaac of Nineveh).<sup>491</sup>

A third sign of the working of the Spirit in you consists in the kindness (*meraḥmānūtā*) which represents within you the image (*dūmyā*) of God, through which, when your thought extends to all men, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of water, as if all men were dwelling in your heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them,

<sup>486</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 54 (40\*).

<sup>487</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 313; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 208–209, translates the end: “thou wilt run to see him as if thou wouldst see the angel of light.”

<sup>488</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 10:35–36 (ed. 40–41, tr. 49–50).

<sup>489</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 330; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 221. The word ܩܘܢܝܐ is very suitable with reference to spiritual gifts, since it comes from *ŠKN*, the root of the *šekinah*.

<sup>490</sup> ܩܘܢܝܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܩܘܢܝܐ

<sup>491</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 10:29 (ed. 39, tr. 48).

while you pour your kindness on all. [...] you do not think evil of anyone, but you do good to all men, both in your thought and in your deed ('Abdišo' the Seer).<sup>492</sup>

On the other hand, however, ecstatic phenomena do have some consequences with a somewhat negative social function as well. Ecstasy is reputed to make the subject who undergoes it to become alienated from the world. Here the allegory of wine can be continued to its consequences: getting drunk makes one forget the world (and sin) and causes apathy towards it.<sup>493</sup> The result of this is an ability to adopt a haughty attitude towards earthly passions<sup>494</sup> and it makes the mystic regard the whole "world" from an outsider's point of view:

Through your love may my life become inebriated (*nerwōn*), so as to forget the world and its affairs (Isaac of Nineveh).<sup>495</sup>

Blessed are those who are drunk of your love, my God, for through their drunkenness in you they have become possessed by madness (*šānyūtā*), and they have forgotten the things previously necessary for them (John of Dalyatha).<sup>496</sup>

From the concept of madness we can smoothly proceed to discuss the question of the outer manifestation of the experience.

## 2.4. MANIFESTATION

### 2.4.1. Physiological Manifestations

In the Syriac tradition mystical experiences are not restricted to the mental or psychological aspect only, but are manifested outwardly as well. In the doctrinal perspective this view presupposes a holistic and non-dualistic anthropology in which the mind and body are not separated, for this enables both to participate in the experience so that all the inner impulses exercise a certain influence on the physiological reality as well. Consequently, the physiological aspect of experience is in principle empirically perceptible, due to the force of spiritual experience which "palpitates through the whole body".<sup>497</sup> The physical aspect of man,

<sup>492</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 156b, p. 275 (tr. 166).

<sup>493</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 511, 543; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 344, 364.

<sup>494</sup> ܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܒܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ "They despise the stinking desire in the intoxication of their love"; Beulay: *Lettres*, 11:4 (pp. 332–333).

<sup>495</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 10:41 (ed. 42, tr. 51).

<sup>496</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 326–327.

<sup>497</sup> ܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܘܬܐ The verb also means 'to glide', 'stir'. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486. (Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326, translates: 'flows through the whole body').

however, may have difficulty in adjusting itself to the presence of the spiritual reality, which is regarded as something purer and stronger in nature. Isaac of Nineveh, who bases his teaching on love, expresses this as follows:

Love is something hot by nature. And when it alights on anyone without measure, it renders that soul as it were mad. Therefore the heart that perceives (Love) cannot contain and bear it without unusual excessive variations becoming manifest in it. And these signs it publishes in a perceptible way, openly.<sup>498</sup>

In short, the mystical experience applies to the physical aspect and operates in the whole body (*be-kulleh gušmā*).<sup>499</sup> The result may be, curiously enough, that the character of manifestation is described as analogous to mental disease. Madness indicates a disability – in this case a disability of the mental faculties to control the force and pressure of the experience. According to Isaac of Nineveh, the bodies of those who cannot stand what is unusual will begin to move (*mezi'*, 'be moved') during moments of joyous tears.<sup>500</sup> Barhebraeus, who approached the subject systematically, collected the following samples on the "madness" of the experience :

For, sometimes, through the Spirit, (joy) will emerge from the heart without a clear cause and make a person joyful to the extent, that, if somebody unacquainted saw that perfect solitary (*ṯhidāyā gemirā*) or heard his voice, he would think him to be mad (*šenyā*).<sup>501</sup>

... in (prayer) the intellect is commingled with God and becomes the likeness of its maker, the recipient of His gifts and the fount of His mysteries. [...] Through (prayer) it is made worthy to behold His glory and to abide in the cloud of light of His greatness ('*arpelā de-nūhārā de-rabbōteḥ*) within the place of the spiritual beings, in stupefaction (*bulhāyā*) and silence (*šetqā*), void of motions (*zaw'ē*), in ecstasy (*temhā*) and is in wonder (*tāher*) at the many splendoured rays of light dawning upon it, and these are the life and delight of the spiritual beings.<sup>502</sup>

Sometimes, a person will be on his knees during the preparation of prayer, his hands outstretched towards heaven, his eyes fixed upon the cross and, so to say, his whole motion stretched towards God in supplication. And at that moment all of a sudden a fountain of delight will spring up from his heart, his limbs (*haddāmaw*) will relax (*metrašlīn*), his eyes will be closed, his face bowed towards the earth and his thoughts

498 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148.

499 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 58; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 41.

500 ܠܗ ܡܫܚܘܢ ܡܢ ܗܘܐ ܕܠܗ ܡܫܚܘܢ . ܘܡܢ ܠܗ ܡܫܚܘܢ  
Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 85.

501 Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 16 (tr. 13–14). The root ṢNY means transformation: alteration in general and in the direction of mental illness in particular. The quotation is taken from John of Dalyatha; his Syriac original is edited by B. Colles in his unpublished dissertation *The Mysticism of John Saba* (Melbourne, 1963), 41, 184.

502 Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 17 (tr. 14). The quotation is from John of Dalyatha (Colles: *The Mysticism of John Saba*, 74, 206.)

will be confused (*meštagnēn*), so that even his knees cannot remain down on the earth at the joy of the blessing surging in his heart.<sup>503</sup>

The most interesting single term here is *metrāšlīn*, which literally signifies that the limbs become ‘paralysed’ or ‘relaxed’ – an obvious expression of a physiological reaction, the exact nature of which remains concealed from us.

The operation of the experience – joyous in its psychological quality – in the physical faculty is described with the verb *nāšfā*, a polysemous concept that signifies ‘hissing’ (as by snakes), ‘shrieking’, ‘raging’ and ‘dilating’. All of these possible translations make some sense, varying the significance into a more or less symbolic way of expression, and applying a more or less radical character to the experience.

The slightest physiological signals mentioned in the texts are accelerated breathing, ‘sighs’ (*tenhātā*),<sup>504</sup> red colour on the face and a rise in body temperature.<sup>505</sup> Alongside these, Isaac of Nineveh mentions loss of fear (*qenṭā*), bashfulness (*kuḥḥādā*) and stability (*suttātā*), these being replaced by impetuosity (*ḥēfā*) and disorder (*duwwādā*); the body reacts like a ‘wanton’ (*zallīlā*)<sup>506</sup> or ‘mad’ (*šenē*) person.<sup>507</sup> To these we may add a certain enlightened outlook; Simeon the Graceful, for example, mentions an ‘illuminated face’.<sup>508</sup>

Are there signs of the physical reactions that are clearly uncontrolled? Evidently, during ecstatic moments hermits could occasionally lose their balance and fall to the ground. This fact, which is not surprising if we consider the combination of physical weakness and spiritual fervour, has been documented quite unquestionably:

One does not know how to control (*la-mṭakkāsū*) one’s senses from the intensity (*ma’bdāmūtā*) of the joy and the jubilation of the heart, for no man is able to endure (*mesaybar*) the working of this fiery impulse (*zaw’ā nūrānā*). Therefore, as soon as this fiery impulse expands in the soul, a man falls (*nāfel*) to the ground and eats its dust like bread, because of the ardour (*reḥā*) of divine love and the heat and burning of its fervour (*šulhābā we-yaqdānā de-ḥammīmūteh*) (‘Abdišo’ the Seer).<sup>509</sup>

<sup>503</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 16 (tr. 14). The extract is taken, in slightly modified form, from Isaac of Nineveh (*Perfectione Religiosa*, 58).

<sup>504</sup> ܬܢܗܳܐܳܬܳܐ Mingana 1934/Simon, 194a, p. 313 (tr. 58); Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 491; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 329.

<sup>505</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148.

<sup>506</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148. Wensinck translates ܙܠܠܳܝܳܠܳܐ as ‘concentration’, ܕܘܘܘܘܳܐܳܕܳܐ as ‘disturbance’.

<sup>507</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

<sup>508</sup> Or ‘enlightened appearance’ (ܠܘܘܳܐ ܡܚܳܕܳܘܳܬܳܐ) Mingana 1934/Simon, 199a, p. 318 (tr. 66).

<sup>509</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144b, p. 263 (tr. 149). Translation mine.



Sometimes it stirs up hot and fiery impulses (*zaw'ē ḥammīmē we-nūrānē*) in his heart through the love of Christ. Then his soul is enflamed (*meštalhab nafseh*), and his limbs are paralysed (*meštarrī haddāmaw*) and he falls on his face (*nāfel 'al appaw*). Sometimes he generates a fervent heat in his heart and his body and soul are enkindled so that he assumes that every (part) of him is consumed by the burning, except that which is in the heart (John of Dalyatha).<sup>510</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh relates how “they leave their Psalms every now and then and fall on their faces on account of the power of the gladness moving in their soul.”<sup>511</sup>

The problem of the interpretation of such passages, however, is how to differentiate between descriptions of incidents of ecstatic, uncontrolled falling and portrayals of enthusiastic series of prostrations, perhaps slightly exaggerated. The crucial expressions *nefal* and *remā* (*'al appaw*) may be used in both active and uncontrolled cases: the mystic ‘throws himself’ or ‘is thrown’ to the ground. It is the context where the decisive expressions are found. The most explicit in this respect are expressions such as “not knowing how to *control* his senses” or “paralysis of limbs” that clearly indicate uncontrolled ecstasy. What actually did happen may remain beyond our knowledge, but if the textual material is read without presuppositions as to the tranquil, thoroughly controlled character of hermit life, it seems evident that the phenomenon of ecstatic falling was well known among the hermits in these monastic circles.

Whether a certain expression refers to something that happens under the control of the will or to an uncontrollable occurrence, is in essence a parallel case to the difference between the conscious and the unconscious, and the definitions are therefore more or less discretionary. The centre of personality directs the effects of the experience to the physical organs, causing movement and other reactions. In the mental reality there are hardly clear boundaries between controlled and uncontrolled reactions. Impulsive and inspirational acts may be defined (and sensed) as partly controlled.<sup>512</sup>

One of the clearest indications of incidents of uncontrolled fallings is to be found in *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, where the author states that it often happens that a man falls to the ground, and “he cannot rise, because no body can endure this joy”. This experience is accompanied by lack of the need for sleep or bodily

<sup>510</sup> Vööbus 1988, 332 (cit. Ms. Vatican Syr, fol. 170b)

<sup>511</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 550; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 369.

<sup>512</sup> An example of an experience that is mostly controlled yet strongly inspired can be quoted from Isaac of Nineveh: “Then, all of a sudden, he might leave the service, fall on his face, and beat his head on the earth approximately a hundred times ardently and severely, on account of the fervour which Grace had kindled in his heart.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140 (cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 95–96.)

nourishment, “because the body is nourished together with the soul by spiritual nourishment (*tūrsāyā rūḥānā*).”<sup>513</sup>

As we have seen, the linguistic significations of ecstasy may produce opposite entities such as water and fire. The same can also be said of the physiological signs. This applies at least in the case of *silence* and *elevation of the voice*, and perhaps even in the case of tears and laughter. Isaac of Nineveh tells of a hermit who could not bear the flame of joy<sup>514</sup> so that he elevated his voice because “he could not restrain himself”.<sup>515</sup> Yet silence, too, can be a manifest outcome of inner ecstasy (*tahra*), which may seize the monk’s tongue and “not allow him to speak”. It is explicitly stated that this happens “involuntarily”.<sup>516</sup>

The most important phenomenal feature, however, is that of tears (*dem’ē*), an indicator of strong emotional charging. The sources are filled with allusions to weeping, and even when after excluding a certain amount of the hyperbolism of oriental homiletics, the phenomenon seems to be remarkable enough. Different ways of weeping have been divided into categories which are very similar from writer to writer, although they appear under different names.

On the quantitative basis, tears have been divided into those that ‘visit’ occasionally, several times a day, and those that flow unceasingly<sup>517</sup> and continuously.<sup>518</sup> According to Isaac of Nineveh, it happens many times a day that a brother is surprised in his cell by a visitation of Grace; during these periods of “tears without measure” nothing could make him leave his cell or receive visitors even if he were given “the kingdom of the world”.<sup>519</sup> The purpose of continuous tears is in their causes (‘sweetness of revelation’, ‘love and humility of God’),<sup>520</sup> and in their effects, which may be described as purifying.

On the qualitative basis, tears can be divided into *tears of repentance* shed over one’s own sins (i.e. sorrow for one’s sinfulness) and *tears of grace* that are poured into the soul as a spiritual gift. The division is mentioned, albeit in slightly

<sup>513</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30\*–31\*).

<sup>514</sup> לר תצבע סמא תביל גושברו לצולמכר סר תר גהאמל Literally: “that flame (arising) from joy”; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

<sup>515</sup> חסר גלס תרס סמא גרסא גרסא גרסא Literally “was not able to hold himself (or: his soul)”. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

<sup>516</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 42 (31\*).

<sup>517</sup> חסר גלס Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 128; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 87 etc.

<sup>518</sup> אר-תורא. According to Isaac, the state of tears may last about two years! Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 86.

<sup>519</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 177; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120.

<sup>520</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 58 (tr. 49).

different ways, by Sahdona,<sup>521</sup> Dadišo',<sup>522</sup> and 'Abdišo', who describes the former as flowing from sorrow and the latter from joy.<sup>523</sup> *Tears of joy* and *tears of sorrow* appear in the 4th-century Liber Graduum, where they are provided with a biblical justification based on John 16:20.<sup>524</sup>

According to Isaac of Nineveh, the tears of sorrow caused by sin must be experienced first. They make the body lean and burning with heat, and they often cause pain in the marrow. Tears of grace, on the contrary, "make the body fat" (a Semitic expression of welfare), they flow spontaneously, moistening the whole face, and change the aspect of the face due to happiness. These tears of joy are "sweeter than honey".<sup>525</sup> On the importance of these "given" tears Isaac notes that they are the only physical manifestation that one should request.<sup>526</sup>

According to Sahdona, tears of repentance are necessary for spiritual life. Joyful tears are caused by remembrance of God, which in the case of perfect ones grows fervent with love so that one "who burns with love cannot avoid tears when looking at God".<sup>527</sup> Sahdona proceeds by encouraging his readers to pour out every day "wine (*hamrā*) and anointing (*mešhā*) of pure tears".<sup>528</sup>

According to a further interpretation – perhaps a somewhat loose one in the discourse – the thoughts inspired by the guardian angel come with "tears without measure", but those coming from Grace "work without tears".<sup>529</sup> The charismatic, supernatural nature of the tears is emphasised by the notion that a mere natural inclination towards weeping does not deserve praise more than the actions of irrational beings.<sup>530</sup>

In this way the discourse on weeping has made tears the subject of multiple interpretation. The tears have also been related to Evagrius' threefold division (see above, p. 122, and below, p. 160–161), where they function as a separator located above the sphere of purity but below the sphere of serenity.<sup>531</sup>

<sup>521</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 9:45.

<sup>522</sup> ܠܒܪܗܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 12b, p. 210 (tr. 89).

<sup>523</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 155a, p. 273 (tr. 164).

<sup>524</sup> Liber Graduum, 18:1.

<sup>525</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126, 245–246; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 85, 165.

<sup>526</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 49; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35.

<sup>527</sup> ܡܗ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 9:44, 9:45, 9:81.

<sup>528</sup> ܡܗ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 9:47.

<sup>529</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (29\*).

<sup>530</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 57 (tr. 49); Isaac of Nineveh, *Second Part*, 18: 4–17.

<sup>531</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:8 (pp. 512–513). For Evagrian scheme, see *Kerubin silmin*, 217–220.

Spiritual joy (*haddūtā*) and happiness (*bussāmā*)<sup>532</sup> are considered as the aim and sign<sup>533</sup> of the ascetic life. Dadišo' of Qatar defines the aim of solitary asceticism as experience of the joy caused by the presence of the Lord and the sweetness of his victory.<sup>534</sup> Actual laughter, however, is not viewed in a favourable light, mainly because of its frivolous connotations. It was noted already by St. Ephrem that "Jesus did not laugh on earth but cried".<sup>535</sup> But on the other hand, there is a joyous aspect in the spirit of asceticism as well. According to Isaac of Nineveh, for example, the joyous tears of grace cause joy to "diffuse over the face".<sup>536</sup> It is difficult, however, to think of a joyous face except with a smile and perhaps with moderate laughter! This produces a strange conclusion: laughter as an esoteric aspect of Oriental Christian mysticism. This does in fact find some distinct support in John Climacus, who states that a man who stands and recites the Psalms may be moved "sometimes to laughter and sometimes to tears"<sup>537</sup> because of vainglory. The remark is a most interesting one, since it indicates that if laughter during prayer could grant honour and (vain) glory to a monk, it must have been considered as a genuine spiritual effect by some at least.

The external manifestations of mystical experiences are so interesting a topic that their occasional mention in the texts usually raises more new questions than it provides satisfying answers. One of the basic problems is how to determine when a phenomenon is mentioned because it is typical, and when because of its exceptional nature?

One example of the problem is the duration of ecstatic experiences, on which subject the sources offer very little information. The existing data refer to especially long or frequent experiences. Isaac of Nineveh mentions ecstasies that lasted for three or four days;<sup>538</sup> one lasting for hours does not seem at all excep-

<sup>532</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 155a, p. 273 (tr. 164).

<sup>533</sup> 'Aim' and 'sign' are expressed in Syriac by the same word (*nīšā*).

<sup>534</sup> Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 13a, p. 210 (tr. 89).

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Literally: "He is fully satiated by the joy of the face of his Lord and by the sweetness of the victory of His right (hand). This is a solitary (*ihīdāyā*), and this is the sign (aim) of eremitism (*ihīdāyūtā*)." On spiritual joy, see also *ibid.*, 93 (15b, p. 213) etc.

<sup>535</sup> Vööbus 1960, 278–286.

<sup>536</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 246; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 165.

<sup>537</sup> John Climacus, *Ladder* 21:7 (in some translations 22<sup>nd</sup> Step), p. 202.

<sup>538</sup> The reference to a case of ecstasy lasting four days is derived from perhaps legendary tradition concerning St. Anthony. (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 261; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 175.) The case of three days, on the other hand, seems to indicate personal experience on the subject. Brock: *Second Part*, 6:4.



physical reactions. “How many times have vomitings<sup>545</sup> taken place after this fight and done damage to the brain!” The author describes the hour of such demonic attacks as harder and more bitter than the fire and torture that the martyrs had to undergo. Extreme asceticism and rigorous fasting will surely produce painful physiological reactions of many kinds, but the fact that ordinary natural sicknesses are not meant here, is implied by the advice not to leave one’s cell nor let others come in during this kind of violent attack.<sup>546</sup>

#### 2.4.2. Verbal Manifestation

The Syriac mystical tradition places stress on the silent, non-verbal character of the experience to the extent that there seems to be no room whatsoever for verbal manifestation. On the contrary, the effects are quietening in nature. Isaac of Nineveh, for example, mentions as a sign of ‘enlightenment of the mind’<sup>547</sup> that the “tongue stands still and his heart becomes silent”.<sup>548</sup> Consequently, we find no Syriac equivalents for the “ecstatic utterances” familiar from Sufism (if we do not interpret the loose reference to the lifting up of the voice, mentioned in the previous chapter, as such).

There is no rule without an exception, however. The most interesting anomaly is to be found in the writings of ‘Abdišo’ the Seer. He mentions ‘a burst of spiritual speech’ (*terī’ūt mamlā rūḥānā*) as a product of ecstasy (*tahrā*), but the nature of this interesting phenomenon is, unfortunately, left unexplained in his text.<sup>549</sup> The safest explanation for the expression is that *mamlā rūḥānā* refers to the recitation of prayers that flow fluently when one knows a sufficient number of prayers by heart so that one need not concentrate on the act of reading or on the wording in general, yet the mystical context favours a somewhat more extraordinary interpretation. The expression ‘burst of spiritual speech’ would be apt with reference to glossolalia, but this possibility does not seem to be very likely, since such a phenomenon would probably have required further explanation in the context and further discussion elsewhere.

<sup>545</sup> The meaning of ‘vomiting’ may perhaps seem quite unusual for the word ܩܘܡܘܬܐ, the literal meaning of which in Syriac (and Talmudic Aramaic) is ‘ascents’ and thereby ‘steps’, the usual word for vomiting being ܩܘܡܘܬܐ. The verb ܩܘܡܘܬܐ, however, has the meaning of ‘bring up, vomit’. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 34 (25\*).

<sup>546</sup> One is instead encouraged to increase the recitation of the Psalms and the reading of the sufferings of the martyrs, and genuflection before the Cross. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 34–35 (25–26\*).

<sup>547</sup> ܩܘܡܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܡܘܬܐ – one of the seldom used signs of mystical experience.

<sup>548</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 6: 2, 4 (ed. 16, 17, tr. 20, 21).

<sup>549</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157a, p. 275 (tr. 167).

And moreover, the reference is not the only one. In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* the author adds to the experiences produced by the guardian angel “a swift burst of speech”,<sup>550</sup> and to those proceeding from Grace “a burst of speech without interruption”,<sup>551</sup> images indicating a spontaneous or somehow uncontrolled verbal flow. This latter gift is permanent, valid day and night, and in it “secrets are revealed” in a way which cannot be learnt from books or from others.<sup>552</sup> This seems to refer to a form of prophecy, perhaps even to the gift of interpretation of tongues.<sup>553</sup>

However, it is not an insignificant matter here that the letter in question as well as the writings of ‘Abdišo’ quoted above, should both probably be attributed to Joseph the Seer. But on the other hand, we know for certain that the phenomenon is not his private pursuit only, since we can also find in another East Syrian work from the same period, *The History of Rabban Hormizd* (approximately 7th century), the following encounter:

After discussing an hour about the world of judgement [Mar Sylvanus and Rabban Hormizd] began to speak also with new tongues (*lammallālū be-leššānē ḥaddetē*) concerning the new and glorious world. And in accordance with the Divine Providence which investigates all, they both were suddenly clouded over (*et’arpalw*) in contemplation (*tē’oryā*) of existing things, both corporeal and incorporeal. And they were gazing at ethereal (*qaṭṭīnā*) and spiritual (*rūḥānāyā*) intuitions (*sukkālē*), and secret things (*setīrātā*) and hidden mysteries (*rāzē genīzē*) which were revealed unto them there by the mercy of Jesus. Then their thoughts settled (*šeknāt*) on them again, and their understanding (*hawṇā*) returned to its own character (lit. ‘taste’).<sup>554</sup>

The *History of Rabban Hormizd*, however, has so much imbedded material of a legendary nature that the historicity of the event is not the most certain. But what is interesting here, is that the existence of the story does in any case indicate that speaking with new tongues was considered at least an ideal possibility in the Syrian Orient shortly before the time of Joseph the Seer. Presumably the ‘new tongues’ were taken as a biblical topos from Mk 16:17, but at any rate the remark is important since such references are rare in the history of the Church.<sup>555</sup> Never-

<sup>550</sup> ܠܘܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (29\*). The burst does not last long because “it is restrained by the fervour from the touch of the guardian angel.”

<sup>551</sup> ܠܘܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (30\*).

<sup>552</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (29\*–30\*).

<sup>553</sup> 1 Cor. 12:10, 28–31.

<sup>554</sup> Budge 1902, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-Idta*, fol. 31a–31b.

<sup>555</sup> For further discussion of charismatic phenomena in the Early Church, see McDonnell, K. & Montague, G. T., *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Evidence from the First Eight Centuries*. (The Liturgical Press, Minnesota 1991.)

theless, if glossolalia did exist in the Syrian Orient c. 700, it must have been a well-kept secret, a kind of esoteric feature in the lonely prayers of the most charismatic hermits.

We may conclude this chapter by noting the existence of a peculiar form of verbal manifestation that may be called “syntactic manifestation”. John of Dalyatha, likely the most enthusiastic author in our Syriac corpus, has a few ecstatic features even in his syntax. Firstly, a good portion of the discourse of his fervent letters is directed to Christ in the second person: “My understanding is stupefied in the ecstasy in you”.<sup>556</sup> Secondly, he uses interjections as if his mystical experience were bursting from his pen: “How stupefying (*temihā*) is the Love (*raḥmetā*) that leads us to him!”<sup>557</sup> Or he may combine both stylistic devices: “How stupefying is your clemency, our God!”<sup>558</sup> Sometimes the subject is moaning as if his discourse was suffocating: “(My) reed (*qanyā*) is burnt up by the force of your fire, my right hand has ceased to write, and my eyes are consumed by the rays of your Beauty.”<sup>559</sup> His enthusiasm is also shown by the use of a series of exclamations: *rāz lī, rāz lī, rāz lī*, “the secret is mine” or “the secret (is) for me”.<sup>560</sup> This kind of *parole* would in fact well deserve to be counted in the category of “ecstatic utterances”, and it again shows John’s literary talent.

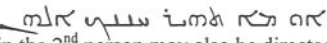
### 2.4.3. Visions

In the approach adopted in this study mystical experiences are treated as a single mental phenomenon, the parts of which are constituted into separate entities on the level of the verbal discourse, where the constituents are adopted as parts of theoretical presentation, which may be more or less systematic in character and largely symbolic in nature. In this perspective the differences between the various experiences in the mental dimension lie in the intensity of the experience.

Visions, however, constitute an exceptional category of their own. The reason why I place them under the heading of manifestation is that hallucinatory visions might be considered as a *subjective manifestation* of the experience. The difficulty here, however, is in the differentiation of the symbolic descriptions of mystical phenomena with visionary vocabulary from visions where there really is something to “see”, an object of the vision, whether illusory or not. As noted

<sup>556</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316–317).

<sup>557</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:5 (pp. 316–317).

<sup>558</sup>  Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:2 (pp. 380–381). The interjections in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person may also be directed to the ‘world’ (*ibid.*). See also 40:4.

<sup>559</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316–317).

<sup>560</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400–401).



above, it seems that the numerous references to the 'shapeless light' are to be taken as symbolic expressions of non-visionary reality. Most references to "visions and revelations" do not really seem to imply any object that is actually seen, as the information is delivered in a more immaterial way. Especially the imagery of light and brightness probably does include examples of non-symbolic usages referring to the visionary experiences, but it is impossible to differentiate between them if the context does not point this out explicitly.

Moreover, the difference between visionary and non-visionary sensing may be difficult or even impossible to recognize even by the subject of the experience in his conscious mental reality. "I know that I saw and heard, but about what I saw or about what I heard, I do not know anything to tell you."<sup>561</sup>

Nevertheless, there are a few indisputable cases where monks claim to have had visionary experiences in the basic sense of the word:

I saw as it were the palm of a hand that took from my head what seemed a heavy stone, and at the same moment that weight was lightened for me.<sup>562</sup>

Visionary seeing may be perceived with the physical eyes so that the sight is likened to hallucinations or illusions, or it may take place as an inner vision in "the eye of the mind", something like a dream seen while awake.

The whole problem, however, is de-emphasised in the discourse, because an illusory character is frequently attributed to the visionary experiences due to their possible origin as demonic deception, as the interpretation of such experiences often suggests: apparitions in the likeness of stars, an arch of clouds (rainbow), a throne, chariots or fiery horses are considered as likely "deceit of the demons."<sup>563</sup> Genuine revelations and visions, according to *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, come in sensual form only as long as one is in a "psychic state" on one's path, as was the case with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and other righteous men before the Law was given.<sup>564</sup>

Since seeing, or beholding, God is a symbolic expression indicating mental orientation towards God, 'vision' may consequently function as a general term for this orientation. For example, John of Dalyatha addresses God with the words: "Every moment You console with Your vision (*hezātā*)."<sup>565</sup> The more interesting

561 ܩܘܠܘܼܬܘܼܢ ܕܥܠܘܼܗܐ ܕܩܘܼܪܥܘܼܢܐ ܕܩܘܼܪܥܘܼܢܐ ܕܩܘܼܪܥܘܼܢܐ ܕܩܘܼܪܥܘܼܢܐ ܕܩܘܼܪܥܘܼܢܐ  
Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 21 (15\*).

562 Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 32 (24\*).

563 Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:24 (pp. 518–519; The author of this particular letter was possibly Joseph the Seer.)

564 Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 51–52 (38\*).

565 Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:5 (pp. 474–475).

and illustrative point, however, is the way in which he continues his discourse, giving an indirect definition of the constant vision:

When he is eating, in his food he sees You; when he is drinking, in his drink You are sparkling; when he is crying, in his tears You are shining. Everywhere he looks, there he sees You.<sup>566</sup>

This shows that the concept of vision means a ceaseless intention to think of God, to meditate on Him through every particular concrete object. This is probably the closest we can approach to a pantheistic experience in Syriac metatheology, but the emphasis of the expression may be viewed either as active and subjective (i.e. the transcendent God is introduced in the creation by the subject's meditative effort) or as passive and objective (i.e. the omnipresent God is perceived in the creation in the contemplative vision). The reading is open to both interpretations.

Vision in this broad sense is also identified with ecstasy by John, who declares: "Blessed is he who carries your ecstasy (*tahrāk*) in his heart at all times, for he sees (*hāzē*) you in himself at every moment."<sup>567</sup>

## 2.5. THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The discussion on experiences is very seldom an independent topic in the discourse, where personal experiences are usually presented in a more indirect way. Usually the expressions and interpretations of mystical experiences occur in connection with topics of a more general nature, the most important of which concern the varying phases of man's progress on the spiritual path, or more philosophical issues that adapt the anthropological, cosmological and epistemological postulates and premises of the discourse.

### 2.5.1. The Metatheological Context: The Course of the Ascetic's Path

Ascetic life is not stagnant in nature, but strongly intentional: negligence is among the hermits' most dangerous enemies – and not the least frequent, it might be added, due to the monotonous character of their daily routine. For this reason the Fathers urge discernment. One should not observe one's practices merely for the sake of tradition.<sup>568</sup> When this progress is described with at least a degree of

<sup>566</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:5 (pp. 474–475).

<sup>567</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 47:8 (pp. 460–461).

<sup>568</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 108 (tr. 93), quoting Isaac of Nineveh (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 466.)

systematic thought, the result is a portrayal of an ideal way of spiritual progress culminating in perfection. The schedule of this progress also functions as the context of ecstatic experiences that becomes parsed into part of a chronological axis. Due to their non-speculative approach, however, the ascetic authors were not specialists in producing detailed systems.

The traditional pattern of spiritual life in three stages (corporeal, psychic, spiritual) is usually taken for granted, and it appears in most authors. It is in harmony with the biblical anthropology of St. Paul, but seen in historical perspective it is in more agreement with Alexandrine than Antiochene thought.<sup>569</sup> In fact, this division does not take us very far, since in the metatheological discourses the psychic stage seems to be the basic state of a monk, the corporeal being his past, and the spiritual, albeit the most interesting one, is more like an ideal goal. The position is illustrated by the *Letter Sent to a Friend*, which is dedicated to the subject of the three stages, but only 4.5% of its contents deals with the spiritual stage, and the discourse dealing with it is quite apophatic. Already before the spiritual stage there is to be differentiated a state of purity, beginning at the end of the psychic stage, which according to the author of the letter can be recognised by two signs: the first is that during the recitation (of the Psalms) ‘ecstatic wonder’ (*tehrā*), ‘flames of fire’ (*šalhebītā de-nūrā*) and joy fall into the heart so that the hermit has to stop reading. The second is that the remembrance of God dwells constantly in the soul and the “tongue of the mind stammers<sup>570</sup> a secret endless prayer” in the heart.<sup>571</sup> The former phenomena, however, occur outside the state of purity as well.

John of Dalyatha observes the tripartite division with the following emphases: the corporeal (*pagrānā*) stage entails refusal or denial of corporeal comfort. The psychic (*naḫšānā*) stage is characterised by penitence, the intention to renew one’s life with the help of both dimensions of asceticism, the outer and the inner. The spiritual (*rūḥānā*) stage consists of purity (*dakyūtā*), a total liberation from passions, and limpidity (*šafyūtā*), which is defined by Beulay as “une

<sup>569</sup> This division is found in almost all Syriac authors writing on spiritual topics, and it is in accordance with St. Paul’s tripartite anthropology. The Antiochene school, however, and early Syriac authors like St. Ephrem prefer bipartite anthropology: corporal and spiritual (or: material and immaterial; outer and inner; the first substance being that of animals, the latter that of angels). See Seppälä 1999, 115–116. Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 130; El-Khoury 1982, 1359–1363.

<sup>570</sup> The nature of the prayer may be clarified by the use of the verb *lagleg*, obviously an onomatopoeic word.

<sup>571</sup> This would be a pithy description of the aim of Byzantine hesychasm as well.

sorte de transparence qui permet à l'esprit de l'homme de recevoir les révélations des mystères de Dieu et du monde nouveau".<sup>572</sup>

Simeon the Graceful presents the way of the ascetic as consisting of seven phases, and the role of spiritual experience obviously grows towards the end.<sup>573</sup>

1. The noviciate (*šarwāyūtā*) – obedience in everything one is ordered to perform.
2. Change of habits, qualities, manners and ways of conduct.
3. Struggle against the passions through the fulfilment of the commandments.
4. Labours of discernment (*pūrsānā*), understanding of hidden powers.
5. Contemplation (*tē'oryā*) of the high and incorporeal beings.
6. Contemplation of and wonder (*tā'ar*) at the secrets of the Godhead.
7. Secret working of grace, occasional submersion in divine love.

'Abdišo' the Seer portrays the ascetic's progress as three phases that are usually called 'stages' (*mešūhtā*), 'orders' (*taksā*, from the Greek τᾶξις), 'levels' (*dargā*) or 'spheres' (*atrā*). The concepts are used quite irregularly and even interchangeably, or they may be omitted completely. 'Abdišo' seems to avoid strict logic in the terminology: his purpose is to help his reader forward, not to provide him with a system – an annoying fact for a scholar.

Yet if they need to be arranged in relation to each other, I would suggest that the contents of the phases in 'Abdišo's' discourse be understood as a threefold scheme expressed in two different series that interpenetrate and overlap each other as presented below. The series on the left is more on the background of the discourse, functioning as a subtext for the series of 'spheres'.<sup>574</sup>

	Corporeal stage	⌵	
	⌵	Sphere of purification	⌵
	Psychic stage	⌵	
ecstatic visitation	⌵	Sphere of serenity	⌵
	Spirituality	⌵	
		Sphere of perfection	⌵

<sup>572</sup> Beaulay 1990, 35. For the three stages in the discourse of Joseph the Seer, see Brock 1987, 314–315, and my book *Kerubin silmin*, 237–238.

<sup>573</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 167b–168a, p. 287 (tr. 17).

<sup>574</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 145a–151a, pp. 263–269 (tr. 150–158). The use of concepts is not ultimately logical. For example, 'corporeality' (⌵) is described as both ⌵ (145b) and ⌵ (147a); the psychic stage as both ⌵ (145b) and ⌵ (145a).

The ‘corporeal’ is a basic stage, from which one rises to the stage of ‘purification’ (*dakyūtā*).<sup>575</sup> It includes prayers, ascetic exercises and good works in order to be freed from passions. Purification leads to and culminates in the soul’s ‘natural state’ (*taksā keyānā*) – i.e. natural in relation to God – where “prayers resembling fiery perfumes arise in the heart purifying and cleansing the soul”,<sup>576</sup> enabling it to perceive a spiritual vision (*hezātā*). The way forward proceeds through ecstasy, a ‘wondrous visitation’ (*sā’ōrūtā temihā*).

From this opens a new ‘sphere of serenity’ (*atrā de-šafyūtā*), which includes unceasing prayer, a vision of spiritual knowledge hidden in the creation, unending joy, peace and certainty, that in turn produce love and compassion towards all. The mental resources reserved for the struggle against weakness and passions are here idle and therefore prayer is no longer needed (which is in accordance with the teachings of Isaac of Nineveh). For our theme it is interesting to note that the ecstatic phenomena seem to belong to this middle stage. ‘Serenity’ itself may grow into ‘complete serenity’, an expression approximately synonymous with ‘the stage of true serenity’ (*mešūhtā de-šafyūtā šarriretā*), in which there is a vision in the shape of a heavenly ‘crystal light’ (*nūhrā da-grustallos*).<sup>577</sup>

The highest possible stage is that of ‘spirituality’, a term employed by ‘Abdišo’ interchangeably and quite synonymously with ‘perfection’. In its vision one cannot distinguish shapes and likenesses, “nor does the mind know (*yāda*) and distinguish (*pāraš*) its own self (*qenōmeh*) from the glory of that shapeless light (*šubhā de-nūhrā hū de-lā demū*)”.<sup>578</sup>

According to Barhebraeus, in the highest stages voices and words pass away, and the mind deals only with spiritual meanings. While still moving upwards one must enter the ‘divine cloud’.<sup>579</sup> The note on the ‘divine cloud’ seems to reflect a subtext from the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, referring to the ascent towards the Deity as described there.

The foremost Syriac source for speculations on mystical ascent is certainly the *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, whose discourse, however, operates on such an abstract, timeless and ideal level that the individual experience does not take shape in the midst of the stream of dream-like visions. (One could, of course, consider the whole book as representing an outlook derived from mystical experience.) The main theme of the work, the cosmic rise of the mind (*hawnā*), is

<sup>575</sup> Mingana translates ܩܘܕܫܘܬܐ as ‘purity’ according to the standard basic meaning of the word. The sense of ‘purification’, however, is evident from the context. The word is derived from the basic stem, which also has the meaning of ‘to become pure’.

<sup>576</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 147b–148a, p. 266 (tr. 154).

<sup>577</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 149a, p. 267 (tr. 155–156).

<sup>578</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 149b, p. 268 (tr. 156).

<sup>579</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 60–61 (tr. 52).

embedded in the vision of the cosmological structure that consists of neo-Platonic ideas on emanation combined with the biblical material, and the outcome is a very charming context for any mystical experiences, open to many interpretations.<sup>580</sup>

### 2.5.2. Metatheological Anthropology

The anthropology of the Syrian metatheologians deserves a study of its own, based on a systematic analysis<sup>581</sup> of the Syriac anthropological concepts, Syriac being exceptionally rich in terms that refer to the inner man. The large number of words with similar equivalents pose difficulties for translators:

<i>naḫšā</i>	soul, self	<i>rūḥā</i>	Spirit, wind
<i>maddē'ā</i>	mind, spirit, understanding	<i>melletā</i>	logos, intellect
<i>hawnā</i>	spirit, mind, intellect	<i>tirtā</i>	the innermost, consciousness
<i>tar'itā</i>	mind, intellect, thinking	<i>qenōmā</i>	self, substance, person
<i>re'yānā</i>	mind, intellect, thought, consciousness	<i>yānā</i>	substance, self

It seems to me that it is most reasonable to regard these terms not as psychic entities but as abstractions of mental functions. Namely, the emotional or epistemological qualities of the subject's mental functions are abstracted on the linguistic level into the "sub-subjects" given above, but since the mental operations are indefinite and lack exact criteria of identity, the identities of these sub-subjects are correspondingly inexact, the result being a multitude of varying translations for the above concepts.

Instead of a systematic anthropological survey, however, we shall here make only a few remarks relevant to our topic. The basis of metatheological anthropology could be taken from the following points in the writings of Simeon the Graceful. Inside a man, according to him, there is a bright, ineffable and immaterial mirror (*maḥzītā*), a picture and dwelling-place of God wherein His Spirit establishes Himself in baptism. Since the creation of the world mystical knowledge has been implanted in human nature; it can be activated by purification and prayer, which make one conscious of the spiritual nature of the world and know

<sup>580</sup> I have made a more detailed synopsis of the thought of the *Book of the Holy Hierotheos in Kerubin silmin*, 221–225.

<sup>581</sup> Such systematic contextual analyses, however, will be feasible only after the editions of Syriac literature have been made available in electronic form. This process has hardly begun and will surely take at least a few decades, but once it is completed the comprehensive results will be attainable with such moderate effort that at the moment it does not in fact seem reasonable to carry out such projects. (Unfortunately, this is true of the studies of Syriac mystical vocabulary as well!)

things of both the past and the future, those near-by as well as those far-away, and secret mysteries become comprehensible.<sup>582</sup> Anyone who purifies this mirror

will see all the spiritual powers which accompany the natures and the affairs of this world, whether they be far or near, through the sublime rays that emanate from it, as if they were set in array before his eyes; and will contemplate them without any darkness, by means of the inner power (*ḥaylā kāsyā*) of the Holy Spirit, which dwells and works in the creation.<sup>583</sup>

Where then does the mystical experience take place? John of Dalyatha states precisely that the body (*paḡrā*) and the soul (*naḡṣā*) are able to enjoy the mystical experience equally (*ṣawyā'ī*) but it is the *hawnā* (spirit, mind) alone that is the recipient of the perception of the experience in question.<sup>584</sup> This definition is sufficiently holistic to exclude the dualistic implications, but it also preserves the apophatic aspect of the experience by leaving the kernel of the process outside the mere psychic (conscious) aspect of man.

The most frequently used “sub-subjects” of the mystical experience seem to be *hawnā* and *madde'ā*, which probably implies a certain influence of Greek sub-text (mainly Evagrius), for both terms function largely in a way corresponding to the Greek *voûs*, since the most Semitic way of expressing the innermost part of man, the very essence of one's personality, would be simply ‘heart’, which appears frequently in the discourse. The authors may operate in various dimensions by activating varying (sets of) terms, thereby describing the same psychological reality in different ways.

Heart-centred anthropology is a common trend in Semitic thought and hence a biblical pattern as well. The heart is the centre of a person, a kind of connector between the physiological and mental aspects, for it is seen to belong to the former by its material and to the latter by its nature. Through the heart the experiences perceived spread to the limbs and produce various manifestations.<sup>585</sup> The mystical experience may take place in the heart of man that may be “suddenly opened by Grace”.<sup>586</sup> “I know one brother, whose heart [...] was suddenly opened

<sup>582</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 195a–196a, pp. 314–315 (tr. 60–61).

<sup>583</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 195b, p. 315 (tr. 60–61). Mingana's translation ‘inner power’ (ܫܘܠܬܐ ܚܝܠܐ) could as well be translated ‘hidden power’, ‘secret power’ or ‘mystical power’; an alternative suggestion for “contemplate them without any darkness” is “observe them without veil” (ܫܘܠܬܐ ܚܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ).

<sup>584</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 34:2 (pp. 398–399).

<sup>585</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148.

<sup>586</sup> Isaac of Nineveh. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 547; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 367.

and filled with an unspeakable light.”<sup>587</sup> The opening of the man’s heart vividly portrays the psychedelic character of the mystical experience.

When the discourse moves in more dynamic terms of function, the heart of man is his free will, which is able to change ‘passions into virtues and virtues into passions’.<sup>588</sup> Freedom of the human will is a basic component of, and a central theme in, Syriac theology, and it is also connected with purification: the first goal is that of impassibility, the second is freedom. The sinful passions, desires, are defined outside real humanity, and the function and aim of the freedom of will is to be liberated from them.

Probably the deepest and most original analyst of the human mind among the Syrians was Isaac of Nineveh – and therefore occasionally the most difficult as well. Often we may trace behind his, and other East Syrian authors, parlance the Platonic three-fold division of the activities of the soul, which has two different series as its Syriac equivalents, although these do not dominate Isaac’s anthropology entirely, for it frequently operates with the concept of ‘heart’ as well:<sup>589</sup>

		either:	or:
Reasonable	λογιστικός	ܟܠܠܘܬܐ	ܟܠܠܐ ܟܠܠܐ
Passionate	θυμοειδής	ܟܠܠܐ	ܟܠܠܐ
Desiring	ἐπιθυμητικός	ܟܠܠܐܝ	ܟܠܠܐܝ

The rationality (*melilūtā*) of the human mind consists of two different capacities, the intellectual capacity (*haylā melilā*), limited by nature, and the understanding (*yaddū’tānā*) capacity whereby nature may become perfect. The former seems to be the discursive faculty which *handles* information, but the latter *produces* it by what Isaac would consider “inspiration”, and where we would perhaps rather talk about imagination and creativity. The latter is also the more experiential capacity, and Isaac hints that it is the area where the joyous experiences occur. Isaac consciously leaves something unsaid here, remarking only that this applies in a mystical way (*rāzā’ūt*) to a few men in the present time, but only in a state called *šunnāyā*, translated ‘trance’ by Wensinck but literally meaning any transformation from one mode of being into another. This happened “to the primeval rational

<sup>587</sup> Presumably John the Seer is here speaking of himself. Oliner: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 21 (15\*).

<sup>588</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 199b, p. 319 (tr. 67). Perhaps the most sophisticated model of will-centred anthropology (and cosmology) is that of A. Schopenhauer (1788–1860), an ascetic of a kind, who identified the Kantian ‘das Ding an sich’ with the Will in his classic work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819).

<sup>589</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 17:1, 19:2 (tr. 91, 103).



beings without trance”, asserts Isaac in a mysterious tone, “but for us it is an annihilation (*buṭṭālā*), because of the sickness of our flesh.”<sup>590</sup>

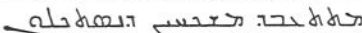
It must be admitted, and even stressed, that a certain insecurity and obscurity in the parlance belongs organically to the subject since there always remains an apophatic dimension to the experience. John of Dalyatha, after describing what has taken place during the experience in the angelic realm, states that those who undergo the experience “are unable to comprehend anything of what operates in them.”<sup>591</sup> In admitting that not all knowledge of the nature of experience can be derived from the experience itself, he implicitly admits that existing knowledge is (at least to some extent) produced independently of its expression and description, that is: on the level of interpretation.

### 2.5.3. Metatheological Cosmology

The cosmological position of our authors is, not surprisingly, God-centred, but the discussion functions in two directions and dimensions. The basic perspective opens towards the immaterial kingdom of heaven, the ‘world of light’ (*‘ālmā denūhrā*),<sup>592</sup> but on the other hand, the discourse also operates with the creative role of God in the present cosmos, particularly emphasising the active creative process by which the world is sustained. The latter leads to the assertion that God may be seen beyond or through any *natural* phenomenon – a suitable definition for the contemplative attitude. This does not reach a pantheistic extent, however, since God in his Essence is all the time considered as being beyond his Creative Power, although this is not always expressed explicitly.

The cosmological postulates of the discourse also include the position taken on the classical question concerning the nature of the created world, whether it is “good” or “evil”. The answer must be read between the lines. Due to the lack of abstract questioning in the discourse of the Syriac Fathers, their standpoint could be understood as a kind of meliorist existentialism: the abstract ‘world as such’, its goodness and evil nature, is an uninteresting and even unanswerable question and therefore outside the discourse: the goodness and the evil exist in man and in his perspectives only; they are attributes of man, not of the world. For this reason withdrawal from the world means in the first place withdrawal from thoughts that are not in accordance with the divine will, and this is reflected in outer withdrawal from impulses that function as stimuli for sin.

<sup>590</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 208; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 140.

<sup>591</sup>  Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424–425).

<sup>592</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 15:2 (pp. 348–349).

For our topic, however, the most important observation is that it is the experience of the subject that determines whether one's perspective is coloured with good or evil.

When grace visits us, the light of love of our fellow-men which is shed on the mirror of our heart is such that we do not see in the world any sinners or evil men; but when we are under the influence of the demons we are so much in the darkness of wrath that we do not see a single good and upright man in the world (Simeon the Graceful).<sup>593</sup>

#### 2.5.4. Metatheological Epistemology

Let no one think about reaching Knowledge by diligent inner working (*hūfātā*) and human thinking (*renyā*), for this happens by spiritual operation so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any psychic thought (*huššābā nafšānāyā*) nor of those things which are perceivable by the senses (Isaac of Nineveh).<sup>594</sup>

Mystical knowledge (*īda'tā*), gnosis, is often presented as a consequence of experience, which raises many questions. What is the content of gnosis and how does it relate to ordinary knowledge? It has already become clear, at least implicitly, that the emphasis of gnosis is beyond words, and indeed it is not "knowledge" in any usual epistemological sense: it may be without any actual discursive content. The problem is further obscured by the fact that the ascetic authors usually employ the vocabulary connected with rationality in quite a careless way: for them 'reason' means 'thinking', and 'reasonability' correspondingly the 'ability to think'. For modern readers, however, 'reason' has more to do with logical reasoning, discursiveness and argumentation. Nevertheless, since it is evident from the majority of sources that mystical experiences do have a certain informative quality and consequently instructive character, it is necessary to discuss the topic from this perspective, too, yet bearing in mind that according to the metatheologians themselves, the contents of gnosis cannot be known by reading, i.e. their reference is not attained by treatment of verbal entities.

The sources show that mystical knowledge, gnosis, is not a product of exercises in "angelic life" but a gift of Grace: even the pure angels are unable to stir 'divine revelation' (*gelyānā allāhāyā*) from themselves without divine Grace.<sup>595</sup> On the other hand, the gift is not separate from the ascetic struggle. According to *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, the gifts of 'sight of itself' (*hezātā da-qnōmeh*) and 'intuitions of the natures of the created beings' (*sukkālē da-kyānā da-beryātā*) are

<sup>593</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 179a, p. 298 (tr. 35).

<sup>594</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105.

<sup>595</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 161; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 109.

given to the mind when one has stood firm against the physical attack of the demons.<sup>596</sup>

The *causa efficiens* of mystical knowledge is essentially the same as that of mystical experience: it may be God, perhaps focused as the Holy Spirit, or an angel. Isaac declares that “the mind (*hawnā*) will see hidden things (*kasyātā*) when the ‘Holy Spirit’ (*rūḥā de-quḏšā*) begins to reveal to it heavenly things”.<sup>597</sup>

A wider epistemological context is provided in the writings of Simeon the Graceful, who outlines a kind of mystical epistemology. He understands the difference between ‘natural knowledge’ and ‘supernatural knowledge’ with the aid of ascetic practice, i.e. in relation to the purification of various parts of the mind: there is no “secret knowledge” without freedom from sin. A proper term for this might be *ascetic pragmatism*.<sup>598</sup>

One way to understand mystical knowledge is to view it as a static, enduring form of what ecstasy represents dynamically, as a certain emotional peak. Isaac of Nineveh urges one to stay in solitude and in silence, unaffected by sensual impulses. Then

the intellect (*re'yānā*) rises above the existence, and the body ceases from tears and of perception and movement, besides natural vitality (*ḥayyūt keyānāytā*). For that knowledge (*īda'īā*) does not submit to take the appearances of the things of the sensible world as its companion.<sup>599</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh draws a connection between ecstasy and mystical knowledge which he gives an eschatological interpretation, describing ‘ecstasy in the divine nature’ (*temhā de-‘al keyānā allāḥāyā*) as ‘a revelation of the new world’.<sup>600</sup> Sahdona, too, makes an explicit connection between ecstatic experience and mystical knowledge:

<sup>596</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 35 (26\*), translates “nature of the forms of creation”.

<sup>597</sup> ܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܕܐܢܗܘܐ ܕܘܨܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܢܘܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126–127; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 86.

<sup>598</sup> According to C. S. Peirce (1839–1914), the father of *philosophical pragmatism*, the meaning of abstract and intellectual concepts is exhausted by the effects they exert, or are able to exert, on human experience and actions. See W. B. Gallie, *Peirce and Pragmatism*, Penguin 1952; A. J. Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism*, Macmillan 1968.

<sup>599</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 49; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35.

<sup>600</sup> ܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܕܐܢܗܘܐ ܕܘܨܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܢܘܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ ܕܕܘܚܕܐ Brock: *Second Part*, 8:4 (ed. 22, tr. 27).

And he meditates in wondrous ecstasy (*rānē be-tahrā temihā*) on the Glory of God, and he examines wondrously the great depth of his secret wisdom, and he is stunned (*tāmeḥ*) marvellously by the riches poured out by His Goodness.<sup>601</sup>

According to 'Abdišo' the Seer, prolonged ecstasy introduces to the soul spiritual contemplation (*tē'ōryā rūḥānītā*) concerning the vision (*hezātā*) and intuitions (*sukkālē*) of the past and future worlds,<sup>602</sup> operating with secrets of the future (*gestā de-rāzē da-tīdātā*). The immaterial impulses during prayer are inward spiritual knowledge hidden in the nature of creation, 'ecstatic intuitions' (*sukkālē tehīrē*) of the incorporeal, and the sight of divine providence.<sup>603</sup> 'Ecstatic wonder of the Wisdom of God' (*tahrā de-ḥekmeteh d-allāhā*) makes the intuitions (*sukkālē*) of the judgement and providence (*ḏīneh da-mfarnesānūteh*) of God shine in the soul.<sup>604</sup> Other epistemological consequences of ecstasy (*temhā*) include

knowledge of both worlds, the one that has passed and the one that shall pass, and also the consciousness of the secrets of future things, together with a holy smell and taste; (the hearing of ) fine sounds of the spiritual minds (*madde'ē*): joy, jubilation, exultation, glorification, chants, praises, and hymns of magnification.<sup>605</sup>

Simeon the Graceful describes spiritual knowledge as "a word of the Lord through the revelation of the Spirit",<sup>606</sup> this prophetic intuition belongs to the stage after sin has been abandoned and the commandments fulfilled. When purification has been reached, one is able to "see in one's mind spiritually all the visible things which are seen by others materially."<sup>607</sup> In other words, one has a pure perspective, an undefiled pure way of viewing.

He will survey all the present creation and the worlds that have passed or are still standing, the years of the world with all the events that occurred in it, and the men with their wealth and their power, the revelations (*gelyānē*) of the benefits (*tābtā*) which were bestowed on the judgements of the Fathers and of God.<sup>608</sup>

<sup>601</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151.

<sup>602</sup> ܪܬܝܘܢ ܪܫܘܢ ܠ ܪܫܘܢ ܕܪܫܘܢܝ ܪܫܝܢܘܢ ܪܫܝܢܘܢ ܪܫܝܢܘܢ ܪܫܝܢܘܢ  
Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 144b, p. 263 (tr. 150). This spiritual contemplation is likened to a 'cloud' (ܪܫܘܢ). The use of this image may arise from the twofold meaning of the particle ܠ 'above', 'concerning'.

<sup>603</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 154b, p. 273 (tr. 164), 275 (tr. 167). For the term *sukkālē*, see below note 619.

<sup>604</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 148a, p. 266 (tr. 154). Mingana translates as "Ecstasy in the Wisdom of God".

<sup>605</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 157a, p. 275 (tr. 167).

<sup>606</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 165b, p. 285 (tr. 14).

<sup>607</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 165b, p. 285 (tr. 14).

<sup>608</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 166a, p. 285 (tr. 14).

Here Simeon goes into greater detail than the authors in general. He tells us that when the illuminated one sees a plant, he does not look at it as a product as an agriculturist does, nor as medicinal roots like a physician, but instead he pays attention to the ‘spiritual natures’ (*keyānē de-rūh*) of the plants, and to the secret power that is hidden in everything and works in everything”.<sup>609</sup> This power is identified with ‘the divine Providence’ (*beḥlūtā d-allāhā*).<sup>610</sup> Moreover, the mind of man will be able to see

incorporeal beings who are above, and to look, through its own theory and in an immaterial way, at their hierarchies, their ranks, their faculties, and the unspeakable modulations of their glorifications, and to imitate them by the help of God in the measure of its power.<sup>611</sup>

The contents of “gnosis”, therefore, are not only spiritual vista but understanding of the vitality and order of the whole Creation and of the causalities between the Creator and the creature, and among the created. It seems correct, to sum up, that what is called (mystical) knowledge is actually a new perspective into the old reality, opened up by the mystical experience. Consequently, when such understanding of the causalities of creation has been achieved, some knowledge or understanding of the future may be derived by a mere process of deduction.

The one who has obtained mystical knowledge is usually called *yaddu t’ānā*; the most usual meaning of this term is perhaps ‘expert’ and the literal meaning parallel to the Arabic *‘arīf* as well as to the Finnish *tietäjä*, all three being participles meaning ‘knower’.<sup>612</sup> Simeon the Graceful actually calls himself a ‘gnostic’ (*ihīdāyā gnōstīqā*).<sup>613</sup> The use of the word, however, does not imply “gnosticism” as opposed to the Christian Church.<sup>614</sup>

Transmission of knowledge is also an indefinite issue. It is covered by the concept of *gelyānā*, usually translated ‘revelation’ and thereby easily understood as a form of vision. Revelation, however, is a wider concept than mere visual experience: it may function as a general term for inner enlightenment. “Revelation (*gelyānā*) is silence of intellect”, says Isaac of Nineveh, the author with the most profound approach to the subject.<sup>615</sup> Isaac sharply differentiates higher forms of

<sup>609</sup> ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ Mingana 1934/Simon, 166a, p. 285 (tr. 14).

<sup>610</sup> ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ Mingana 1934/Simon, 166a, p. 285 (tr. 14–15).

<sup>611</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 164b–166b, pp. 284–286 (tr. 12–15).

<sup>612</sup> Mingana translates it as ‘Illuminated man’. Mingana 1934/Simon, 174b, p. 294 (tr. 27).

<sup>613</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 200b, p. 320 (tr. 69).

<sup>614</sup> This is evident since Simon was writing centuries after the heyday of the actual Gnostic movement, and the Gnostic movement did not have a monopoly on the use of the Greek word γνῶσις, ‘knowledge’.

<sup>615</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105.

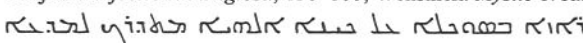
knowledge from visions and revelations. The phenomenon of revelation (*gelyānā*) is divided by Isaac of Nineveh into six basic types based on biblical examples:

1. Non-ecstatic revelation perceived with the senses:
  - a) material – the burning bush.
  - b) immaterial – Jacob’s ladder, the light that blinded St. Paul.
2. An ecstatic vision (*hezwā*) perceived psychically – Ezekiel’s chariot, Isaiah 6:1.
3. The mental act of being carried away (*heṭūfyā re’yānāyā*) – St. Paul’s journey to the ‘third heaven’.
4. The rank of prophecy (*taksā nebīyūtā*) – Balaam.
5. Through understanding (*mestaklānūtā*) – Col. 1:9, Eph. 1:17-19.
6. In the likeness of a dream (*ayk de-ḥelmā*) – Joseph, Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph the husband of Mary.<sup>616</sup>

Isaac argues that by the biblical examples one may conclude that all the revelations that God has given for the guidance of mankind have come through images (*demwātā*), especially to those who are “of simple understanding and of small insight”. Nevertheless, divine comfort and instruction destined for individuals are received without images, by intelligible apperception (*margešānūtā metyad’ānītā*), which is the perfection of knowledge, the highest form of understanding. Revelation, however, is inferior to knowledge for three reasons: it is dependent on recipient, symbolic in nature (i.e. it only refers to the truth partially), and the inspiration provided by it is transient. This is why it should not, according to Isaac, be called ‘knowledge’ but ‘overshadowing’ (*maggēnānūtā*). Real ‘knowledge’ is concerned with metaphysical issues such as God’s foreknowledge, His incomprehensible nature, His various qualities, and understanding of the mysteries of His will concerning mankind. These are attained by the ‘intellect’ (*madde’ā*) that attains ‘insights into the divine nature’,<sup>617</sup> whereas many of those who have received a revelation have known God as children only.<sup>618</sup>

A single entity of “active” mystical knowledge is often – especially by Isaac of Nineveh – called *sukkālā*, the most literal meaning of which is ‘understanding’ or ‘intellect’. Yet in most contexts it is clearly something that is conveyed to man from above, and the certain definiteness in the meaning of the concept is shown

<sup>616</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 156–160; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 106–108.

<sup>617</sup>   
Literally ‘mysteries of understanding’. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 160; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 109.

<sup>618</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 159–161; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 108–109.

by its use in the plural (*sukkālē*), which makes 'intuitions' a good rendering.<sup>619</sup> The ecstatic quality present in its acceptance is reflected in the use of the terms *tahrā dab-sukkālā* and *sukkālē tehīrē*, and these offer many possibilities for translators: the former is translated 'ecstatic understanding' by Wensinck, the literal composition being 'ecstasy (wonder) that is in understanding', and for the latter Wensinck gives 'wonderful intuitions', but in principle 'ecstatic intuitions' would do as well.<sup>620</sup> The sweet taste of mystical experience is reputed to stupefy (*matmehīn*) the soul with *sukkālē*.<sup>621</sup>

The many-dimensional essence of mystical knowledge gave rise to further interpretations. Simeon the Graceful presents a tripartite division of spiritual life as "three intelligible altars" of mystical knowledge, corresponding to the mysteries of Friday, Saturday and Sunday (referring to Christ's Passion, descent to the nether world and Resurrection). The first altar is the mystical knowledge of works (*īda'tā de-sū'rānē*), corresponding to the mystery of Friday, signifying the practical fulfilment of the commandments. The second altar is the knowledge of contemplation (*īda'tā de-tē'ōryā*), illuminative in character, and described as "the key to the mysteries of God that are hidden in the natures of the created beings". The last altar is the mystical knowledge of hope (*īda'tā de-sabrā*), the living altar of Christ, corresponding to the mystery of Sunday: the mind is united to Christ for ever as Christ is united to the Father.<sup>622</sup>

Simeon the Graceful also beautifully describes the consequences of the experience of shapeless light by placing his stress on mystical knowledge, the basic idea of which here is the awareness of the divine mysteries:

The (illuminated mind) desires to be drawn towards the shapeless eternal light (*nūhrā ītyāyā de-lā demū*) and towards the divine knowledge (*īda'tā ītyāytā*) which transcends all intelligence. Grace will then dwell in that impassibility, and (the mind) will be conscious (*margeš*) of the sublime and endless mysteries which are poured out by the Father and Source and all the lights, which shine mercifully on us in the secret likeness (*demūtā genīzetā*) of His hidden Goodness; and the mind will be impressed by them, with the likeness (*demūtā*) of the glory of goodness, as much as it can bear, according to its expectation, its eager longing, and the measure of its growth in spiritual exercise.

619 The term has been translated as 'intellections' (Beulay), 'Einsicht' (Bunge), 'understanding' (Wensinck), 'ecstatic understanding' (Mingana) and 'intuition' (Teule). 'Abdišo' the Seer uses the plural *sukkālē* ('intuitions') in the same way as Isaac of Nineveh. In my project of producing a Finnish translation of Isaac's works I have produced an apt equivalent from a slightly poetical expression *ymmärryksen säteily*, 'radiation of understanding', which expresses well the supernatural, given and rather definite character of these intuitive understandings.

620 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 52, 20; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 37, 14.

621 Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 6–7; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 4.

622 Mingana 1934/Simon, 183b, p. 303 (tr. 41–42).

It will then avow immediately that it understands that everything is vanity when compared with one thing: the Highest Divinity.<sup>623</sup>

'Abdišo' the Seer, on the other hand, states explicitly that in the highest sphere of spirituality there can be no vision or contemplation of either corporeal or incorporeal beings, nor any vision concerning divine judgement or Providence; there is no impulse or understanding whatsoever concerning anything that exists – only the vision of the Redeemer. The vision is completely 'spiritual' and has no forms (*eskēmē*) or likeness (*demūtā*).<sup>624</sup>

Do Simeon and 'Abdišo' disagree? Since they happen to employ quite divergent vocabulary in treating the topic, there are no absolutely explicit disagreements, but implicitly there is an evident discord in emphasis. Simeon receives mystical 'knowledge', but for 'Abdišo' gnosis remains on a lower level, his aim being to portray an experience of a more absolute kind. Yet they may refer to the same reality, Simeon only from a wider perspective and therefore with a wider reference for concepts such as *īdā'tā*. In other words, 'Abdišo' may approach a similar experience with a more focused perspective, while Simeon adjoins to his portrayal some of the (psychedelic) consequences of the experience. Or they may speak about experiences of divergent intensity, 'Abdišo's' vision being more concentrated. Or the reason could be seen in the different use of the concept of *demūtā* ('likeness' or 'image'), which 'Abdišo' seems to understand as an analytical concept, while Simeon treats it more as a symbolic one.

The different tones of the language of 'Abdišo' and Simeon illustrate how any discourse on gnosis is inevitably bound to a subjective perspective, but also how the reader of the texts has the keys of interpretation with which the meaning can be modified in accordance with one's own paradigm.

## 2.5.5. Some Remarks on the Theological Context

### 2.5.5.1. On the Dogmatic Position

The emphasis we have placed on experiences raises many questions in relation to the Christian theological framework. How are they related to dogmatic theology? What is their role in Christian life? Why would a Christian actually need supernatural experiences?

<sup>623</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 166b, p. 286 (tr. 15).

<sup>624</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 150b–151a, p. 269 (tr. 158–159).

לדע לי למתן כראיה דזשטאלט שאז דערק. לר האסיון  
 דערקער סלר דערק זעק סלר דערק סלר דערק



The importance of spiritual experiences for ascetics may be illustrated with the opinion of Isaac of Nineveh, who declares that even the ability to perform miracles and raise the dead would be nothing if one had lost the sense and reality of the mystical experience.<sup>625</sup> This is so simply because what we call “experience” is for Isaac no less than the active presence of the Divine.

‘Abdišo’ the Seer interprets the effects of the Spirit in man as actualisation of the potency existing in man: he defines the ‘fiery impulse’ (*zaw’ā nūrānā*) as a “spiritual key (*qelidā rūḥānā*), which opens before the mind (*hawnā*) the inner door (*tar’ā gawwāyā*) of the heart (*lebbā*), and makes manifest to it the spiritual abode (*atrā*) in which dwells Christ our Lord within us.”<sup>626</sup>

How do these ecstatic readings relate to the official theology of the Syrian churches? Since the sources of this study are not far-removed in time from the golden era of Christological schisms and dogmatic speculations, it is even a little surprising that the metatheologians are free of practically all schismatic speculation. The discourse, both in its methods and aims, is quite removed from the Christological questioning and dogmatic theology which had divided the Church and had therefore been attached to all their members, including our sources. Consequently, no real disagreements on dogmatic matters arise, and neither do the ascetics seem to have any need to justify their position as members of a particular confession.<sup>627</sup>

The same applies to the use of the texts during history. It is typical that the “Jacobite” copyists adopted “Nestorian” metatheological works as such, changing only a few names in the texts: the quotations of Theodoret of Mopsuestia, for example, were allowed to remain in the text but under the name of St. Cyril of Alexandria.<sup>628</sup> The same tendency took place in the Greek translation of Isaac of Nineveh.<sup>629</sup> On the other hand, Barhebraeus quotes the *Ladders* of John Climacus openly – the wounds perhaps already being healed by his time.<sup>630</sup>

<sup>625</sup> Isaac does not, of course, use the concept of “mystical experience” but discourses here about “intimacy of the love of Christ with all its extraordinary consequences”, a good definition of Christian mystical experience. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 488; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 327.

<sup>626</sup> Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144a, p. 262 (tr. 149).

<sup>627</sup> Yet the leaders of the Church could use theological points as means to justify their distrust of certain metatheologians (Sahdona, Joseph the Seer and Isaac of Nineveh; see above, pp. 19–20, 23).

<sup>628</sup> Mingana 1934, 74–76. The procedure is a good indication of the fact that the essence of the disagreements was not in the content but in the persons!

<sup>629</sup> See the introductions of Wensinck’s *Mystic Treatises* (p. xviii) and *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (p. lxxviii).

<sup>630</sup> E.g. Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 111 (tr. 96).

### 2.5.5.2. *The Bible*

We have already seen examples of how the description of experiences is conditioned by biblical language. This happens both unconsciously and consciously; the subjects had read their Bibles and therefore the biblical images are amongst the most natural modes of expression, and this tendency is strengthened by the fact that the more biblical a description is, the more trustworthy it is considered.

But in order to realise and understand the experiential nature of the language it is essential to point out that the descriptions are not actually derived *from* the Bible. In fact the biblical justifications usually appear in other contexts than in descriptions of the highly mystical experiences. Many common terms like 'fire' or 'light' naturally do have parallels in the Bible, but it would be quite unreasonable to suggest "influences" – i.e. that the authors would not have been able to employ these concepts if they were not to be found in Sacred Writ.

If we examine more closely the technique applied by the metatheologians to the interpretation and quotation of the Bible, it seems that all the authors quote it quite freely (usually probably by heart); sometimes a quotation seems to be more an exposition of the verse than an actual quotation. A few times even sayings of unknown origin are introduced by the words "it is written", as if they are authoritative. Moreover, the biblical passages are picked up and used without concern as to their context – in accordance with apostolic and Jewish exegetical traditions (e.g. St. Paul himself).

As a historical note we may also remark here that when the ascetics quoted the Bible in an approximately exact way, until the 5th century they often used the harmonised Gospel, the Diatessaron (*ewangelyōn damḥalleṭē*), when the more official translation of the Church was already the Old Syriac version of the Gospels (*ewangelyōn da-mfarrešē*), and accordingly, signs of the use of the Old Syriac version may be found until the 8th century, while the Church had long ago adopted the Peshitta, the "Vulgate of the East".<sup>631</sup> This phenomenon is largely explained by the tendency to quote by heart, which enabled the old forms to survive in the kerygmatic tradition.

The interpretation of the Old Testament, especially when the Scripture is not in line with the principles of the New Covenant, functions in an allegorical way. For instance, passages referring to warfare and fighting are commonly taken as indicators of the inner battle against sinful passions in order to gain spiritual victories.<sup>632</sup> A certain historical sense, on the other hand, is to be seen in the fact

<sup>631</sup> Vööbus 1951, 44, 97–98, 102–106.

<sup>632</sup> E.g. the use of Gen. 48:22 by Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 9.

that the Bible is quoted as “the word of a prophet” or of an apostle (not by a collective name like “the word of God”).

The dynamic understanding of the Scriptures is also demonstrated by Isaac of Nineveh’s teaching on the Lord’s Prayer.

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.<sup>633</sup>

In other words, it is the sense that is given, not the precise sequence of words for recitation. (This aim in fact happens to have been confirmed by the textual history of the prayer itself, since the original Aramaic wording was, curiously enough, not preserved in the early Church.<sup>634</sup>)

A certain independence of metatheological thinking from the biblical framework is reflected in the fact that the experiences are not made especially “biblical”, and neither is the discourse categorically forced within the limits defined by the biblical set of verses. ‘Love of money’,<sup>635</sup> for example, is not considered as ‘the root of all evils’, as St. Paul suggests, but the hierarchy of passions is based rather on an exhaustive survey of a person’s own experience of his passions, and consequently the love of money is seen more as a consequence than as a cause.<sup>636</sup> It is even a little strange that the apostles’ ecstatic experiences or charismata are quite seldom referred to.<sup>637</sup> Isaac of Nineveh discusses the ecstasy of Peter,<sup>638</sup> and also refers to the experience of the prophets in a general way:

Because the prophets were in ecstasy when revelations happened to them, they did not perceive any of the usual things, not even necessary thoughts under the control of the will, nor anything perceptible by the senses.<sup>639</sup>

The most famous biblical parallel, however, is St. Paul’s heavenly journey (2 Cor. 12:2-4). Isaac of Nineveh classifies Paul’s experience as ‘psychological rapture’ (*heṭūfyā re’yānāyā*), and concentrates on discussing the inexpressibility of the

<sup>633</sup> Brock: *Second Part*, 14:36 (ed. 68, tr. 78).

<sup>634</sup> The existing Aramaic (=Syriac) versions are translations from the Greek. The traces of the original can be seen behind the differences between the two canonical versions, where the double meaning of the Aramaic \**hawbā* is rendered ‘sin’ by Luke (11:4) and ‘debt’ by Matthew (6:12).

<sup>635</sup> 1 Tim. 6:1. The Greek original for ‘love of money’ is φιλαργυρία, the Peshitta reads  
ܠܘܒܐ ܕܡܢܐ.

<sup>636</sup> For example, Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 34b, p. 232 (tr. 119). “Love of money [...] does not fight against anyone who has conquered his belly and is endowed with generosity.”

<sup>637</sup> Acts 2:2-4, 13 and 1 Cor 12:1, 6-11 and chapter 14.

<sup>638</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155, 173; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105, 117; Acts 10:10.

<sup>639</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105.

experience recounted by Paul. Isaac argues that everything that it is possible to hear with one's ears can be expressed verbally as well.<sup>640</sup> And consequently,

Paul did not hear through sensible voices or through material forms but in mental impulses (*zaw'ē de-tar'ūtā*), being snatched away (*ba-ḥṭufyā*) from the body, his will having no share with it.<sup>641</sup>

'Abdišo' he Seer even claims that the actual function of the journey was to show that "things revealed to the mind in the state of perfection cannot be constructed linguistically".<sup>642</sup> But *A Letter Sent to a Friend* goes even further, albeit in a different direction, by even revealing the very 'secret' that St. Paul left unexplained, and which has for that reason puzzled Christians in all ages – the secret is that St. Paul had seen Jesus in his divinity.<sup>643</sup>

The use of the Old Testament, according to the Eastern Christian tradition, includes typological elements. The biblical scenes and stories are used as typological prefigures of the New Covenant. Accordingly, metatheological authors sometimes use biblical figures to illustrate various aspects of ascetic life. A suitable example of the mystical experience is to be found in the life of Moses.

As the blessed Moses, when he stood in the cloud six days – which constitute the number of days in which the world was made by the wise Creator – had no definite prayer (*selōtā glūtā*), but only spiritual vision and sight (*ḥawrā wa-ḥzātā de-rūḥ*) of the creatures of God the Lord of all, together with communion (*'enyānā*) and conversation (*ṣewādā*) with the greatness of that high and sublime Being whose name is holy and whose dwelling-place is holy ('Abdišo' the Seer).<sup>644</sup>

The three stages of spiritual life are often connected with a biblical framework by assigning them biblical parallels: the corporeal stage (*pagrānūtā*) is symbolised by the Exodus from Egypt and the journey in the desert; the psychic stage (*naḥṣānūtā*) is parallel to the crossing of Jordan, the fight with the habitants representing the fight with demons; the spiritual stage (*rūḥānūtā*) corresponds to the entry to the "glorious Zion".<sup>645</sup>

<sup>640</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 50, 158; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35, 107.

<sup>641</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 50; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35.

<sup>642</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 152a–152b, pp. 270–271 (tr. 160):

(ܪܘܚܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ).

<sup>643</sup> Olinger: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 60 (44\*). It is interesting here that both this letter and the previous reference attributed to 'Abdišo' are considered to have been written by the same author, Joseph the Seer. Yet the claims are not necessarily in contradiction, for 'Abdišo's comment refers to the *account* of the journey, and the *Letter* to its actual course.

<sup>644</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 146b, p. 265 (tr. 152).

<sup>645</sup> Brock 1987, 314–315.

To sum up, the use of biblical images shows that the biblical cases are employed more as additional illustrative material offering parallels than as a starting-point to justify the writer's position; they were not even arranged as reconstructed starting-points to function as the coulisse for spiritual doctrine. This also shows us something about the understanding of Holy Scripture which differs from the Islamic or Jewish conception of the nature of revelation, as well as from the traditional Protestant understanding of Christianity as *sola Scriptura*.<sup>646</sup> Despite the extensive use of the Bible, there was evidently no theological need to prove all the aspects of thought and practice as being mere derivatives from the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, this does not indicate an arrogant attitude towards the Bible, which was certainly considered as sacred 'books',<sup>647</sup> yet not so much as an authority from outside but as an elementary part of the common tradition – tradition inspired by God. For example, the writings of Sahdona contain biblical allusions to the extent that the discourse is like a biblical collage, yet he does not aim to derive his teachings on prayer and vigil *from* Holy Writ but explains them with reference to the practices of the early Church: "This (vigil) is also what the apostles used to do when they gathered together, spending the entire night in praise, prayer and addresses to the faithful."<sup>648</sup> The biblical characters were understood not only as objects of imitation but also as being "of us".

It is also to be noted that the symbolism of the biblical images often fits excellently and fuses naturally with the metatheological discourse: for example, John of Dalyatha makes an adaptation from Psalm 34:9: "Taste, my brother, see the sweetness (*halyūtā*) of our good Father."<sup>649</sup>

The free approach to the use of the Bible is especially typical of monks and hermits. When Philoxenus, the bishop of Mabbug, identifies the precious jewels mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:12, with vocabulary already familiar to us, as "pure thoughts and holy ideas, a mind that stirs completely in the Spirit, which bears in its impulses at all times the wonder of God (*tahrā d-allāhā*) and admiration (*dummārā*) for the greatness of His Being, and a spirit (*hawnā*) which preserves silence trembling before the inexplicable and inexpressible mysteries of God",<sup>650</sup> the approach of his interpretation here is slightly more "biblical" than that of the other metatheologians, for his presentation is constructed in such a way that the truths in question are to a greater extent derived from the Bible.

<sup>646</sup> This is worth pointing out, since the East Syrian tradition has sometimes, in the spirit of missionary romanticism, been considered a kind of forerunner of Protestantism, "an anti-papal pro-scriptural Church of the East".

<sup>647</sup> ܠܘܩܝܢ 'writings', e.g. Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a, 286 (tr. 16).

<sup>648</sup> Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:68. (Tr. Brock 1987, 229.)

<sup>649</sup> ܠܘܩܝܢ ܠܘܩܝܢ ܠܘܩܝܢ ܠܘܩܝܢ ܠܘܩܝܢ ܠܘܩܝܢ ܠܘܩܝܢ Beulay: *Lettres*, 7:2 (pp. 326–327).

<sup>650</sup> Philoxenus: *Discourses*, 8 (tr. 6).

Another interesting topic for a more detailed survey might be to analyse the use of the concept of ‘mercy’ in metatheological texts. The words for mercy (*raḥmā* and *reḥmetā*) mean ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ rather than mercy in the juridical sense, which is illustrated by the fact that the corresponding verb (*reḥam*) may have God as its object, and usually the word is in the plural (*raḥmē*) when the “mercies” are described as proceeding from God, which already indicates that it concerns the particular influences of Grace. The problem of “juridical understanding” is caused by traditional Protestant thinking, where human acts of asceticism are set in opposition to true Christianity based on “grace” in the juridical sense. Nevertheless, Oriental metatheology sees human purification as being at the most another side of truth. According to the 9th-century East Syrian monastic author Thomas of Marga, it is impossible for ascetic practices to possess any intrinsic spiritual value or automatic merit deserving of reward, for many poor people actually undergo the same practices merely due to necessity.

For the happiness of that world is not given for the sake of labours, but is bestowed upon holy men by Divine Grace, for the wages which are laid up there are in proportion to the righteousness of God, and the [merits of the] labours of holy men are completely put out of sight by the Grace of God. So then, my beloved, let us not imagine that the little work which we do [here] can justify us before God.<sup>651</sup>

### 2.5.5.3. *Martyrdom*

According to Simeon the Graceful, God has implanted in all intelligible natures something of the divine Goodness so that they may all long for the love of God, ‘Light above all light’.<sup>652</sup> The scheme is fulfilled by connecting the notion with the idea of incarnation:

The one who loved us and came down from the height of His goodness to the lowliness of our humility, in order to raise us from earthiness to spirituality by mixing the divinity (*ḥelīūtā d-allāhūtā*) that is in us with the Highest Divinity (*rēsūt allāhūtā*).<sup>653</sup>

The main point and central topic of Syriac metatheology seems to be the same as that of “official” dogmatic theology: manhood and divinity. The perspectives, methods and aims differ fundamentally, however. In metatheology the aim is not the production of ontological definitions of Christ by human means but the

<sup>651</sup> Thomas of Marga: *Book of Governors* 6:14, 377–378 (text), 644 (translation).

<sup>652</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a–167b, pp. 286–287 (tr. 16). The expression may reflect a Pseudo-Dionysian subtext.

<sup>653</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a, p. 286 (tr. 16); Mingana gives ‘intercourse’ for ܠܚܠܘܬܗ and ‘contemplation’ for ܠܚܘܬܗ.

deification of one's own humanity by Christ's means: the basis of Christian asceticism is in the fact that the glory of resurrection implies death and suffering.

In early Christianity to follow Christ meant to suffer, the possibility of actual martyrdom being frequently present in a cultural context that was non-Christian and sometimes anti-Christian. Persecutions ceased but the ideals did not change; they only took different forms. Since Syrian Christianity is largely an outgrowth of the Antiochene tradition, it is appropriate to quote here Ignatius of Antioch, who crystallised the ideal of martyrdom in his Letter to the Magnesians in the solemn words: "unless we willingly choose to die through him in his passion (πάθος), his life is not in us."<sup>654</sup> "The bishop of Syria", as he was wont to call himself, prepared for his own martyrdom in Rome (c. 110) by writing his Epistle to the Romans, famous for its yearning for death.

Suffer me to be food for the beasts, through whom I can attain God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb, and leave nothing of my body, so that when I fall asleep, I may be not burdensome to anyone. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not even see my body.<sup>655</sup>

Now I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing of things seen or unseen envy me my attaining to Jesus Christ. Let there come on me fire, and the cross, and struggles with the wild beasts, cutting, and tearing asunder, rackings of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil, may I but attain to Jesus Christ.<sup>656</sup>

This ideal remained the *primus motor* of Oriental Christianity for centuries, and metatheological thinking was based on this same tradition. Among the sources of this study it is especially *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*<sup>657</sup> and Isaac of Nineveh who describe the spiritual progress as 'ascension on the cross' (*massaqtā la-zqīfā*), where the body goes through crucifixion and the mind rises to the sphere of higher experiences.

The greater the sufferings of Christ become in us, the greater is our consolation (*būyā'ā*) in Christ. Consolation means contemplation (*tē'ōryā*), which renders the sight (*hezātā*) of the soul possible. It is not possible that our soul produce spiritual fruits, unless our heart becomes dead for the world. For the Father raises the soul that has died the death of Christ, in contemplation of all the worlds (Isaac of Nineveh).<sup>658</sup>

Isaac of Nineveh notes that when the martyrs received a spiritual revelation concerning the date of their execution, they often used to spend their last night

<sup>654</sup> Ign. Magn. 5:2. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 200–201.

<sup>655</sup> Ign. Rom. 4:1–2. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 230–231. I have slightly altered Lake's translation.

<sup>656</sup> Ign. Rom. 5:3. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 232–233.

<sup>657</sup> Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 2:21–24; Vööbus 1988, 158–159.

<sup>658</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 544; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 365.

standing in prayer praising God joyfully without tasting any food, in this way preparing themselves to receive the crown. Isaac urges his brethren to keep this preparatory state perpetually. He calls the ascetic pursuit ‘invisible martyrdom’ (*sāhdūtā de-lā methazyā*) in order to receive the ‘crown of holiness’ (*kelilā de-qaddīšūtā*).<sup>659</sup> *A Letter Sent to a Friend* similarly promises the hermits who live in solitude and watch their thoughts the crown of glory along with the martyrs.<sup>660</sup> And to complete the perspective on the reality common to both ways of martyrdom, Isaac also considers martyrs as having participated in the ecstatic experience by being ‘inebriated’ (*rāwēn*) with love for their ‘Beloved’ (or Friend, *rāḥmā*).<sup>661</sup>

#### 2.5.5.4. Humility

We may conclude this section by paying attention to the factor that is basic to Syrian, and all Eastern Christian, spirituality: that of humility (*makkūkūtā*). One might even argue that the understanding of the concept of ‘spirituality’ in the Eastern Christian tradition comes very close to that of humility. Real spiritual growth is not measured in the quantity of visions nor in the quality of spiritual comprehension but in one’s conception of oneself and in one’s attitude towards others. After all, extraordinary experiences as such are not regarded as aims or methods but rather as a kind of “sight” along the road that one is expected to travel. Isaac of Nineveh considers constancy to be better than ‘trance’ (*šunnāyā*), but when transformations of the state of being must take place, he continues, they should be for the better.<sup>662</sup>

For this reason the position of all the mystical phenomena described above in a sense belongs on the margins of the structure of metatheological discourse. Yet for the same reason, humility can be seen as the background from which the experiences arise, as Simeon the Graceful relates in the following:

The following is the sign that a monk is progressing in the Lord: his heart is contrite in asceticism and humble in grief over small sins previously committed. Respect and modesty even with regard to the lowly and the weak reign over him; his heart is artless and simple, even when bearing the fruits of the Spirit. His face is illuminated and joyful in his love towards all, and he communes with everybody as if everybody were good.

<sup>659</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 242; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 163.

<sup>660</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 46 (34\*).

<sup>661</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219–220; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148–149.

<sup>662</sup> ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 208; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 140. The context refers to angels and their immaterial motion towards the Good, but the same position also applies to men, for whom the change in question may be painful, because of the weakness of the flesh.



Do not, however, rely on your righteousness, although the grace has come upon you (Simeon the Graceful).<sup>663</sup>

This order of precedence is further clarified by the fact that a visionary experience of angelic beings is considered demonic if it emanates from vainglory and pride.<sup>664</sup>

In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* the motion of humility working in the soul is the first sign whereby one can distinguish true experience from the demonic. As long as the motion of humility is preserved in the soul, “it burns like a flame of fire in the heart of man”.<sup>665</sup>

The final chapter of Isaac of Nineveh’s discourses forms a subtle tribute to humility, which seems to be the way to actualise the mystic’s unification with God. “And (the humble one) is reckoned by everyone as a God, though he is simple in his words and of mean respect.”<sup>666</sup> Moreover, in humility lies the hidden power of God.

Humility is a mysterious power (*ḥaylā rāzānāyā*), which the perfect saints receive when they have reached accomplishment of behaviour. And this power is not granted except to those who, by the power of Grace (*ḥayl ṭaybūtā*), have personally accomplished the whole of excellence, in so far as nature in its domain is able to do this. For humility is all-comprehending excellence.<sup>667</sup>

Accordingly, humility is for Barhebraeus one of the three main causes of weeping, the other two being the power of pleasure (*hannī’ūtā*) present in the mystical intuitions and the ardent love of God. Humility itself is caused by two factors: knowledge of one’s own sinfulness, and the remembrance of God’s greatness.<sup>668</sup>

The charismatic character of humility is confirmed by Isaac when he makes a clear distinction between man’s natural humble characteristics and the mystical degree of humility granted as a gift. “Not every one who in his nature is peaceful or quiet or discrete or without blame, has reached the rank of humility (*dargā demakkikūtā*).”<sup>669</sup> Real humility is a permanent state of mind, independent of any causes or circumstances.

Humility is also the reason behind the projective telling-technique of Syriac metatheologians. Experiences are described in the third person singular yet the subject is left unmentioned, which may leave the modern reader with an insecure

<sup>663</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 199a, p. 318 (tr. 66–67).

<sup>664</sup> Mingana 1934/’Abdišo’, 158a, p. 276 (tr. 168).

<sup>665</sup> Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40–41 (30\*).

<sup>666</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 577; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 386.

<sup>667</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 578; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 387.

<sup>668</sup> Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 58 (tr. 49–50).

<sup>669</sup> Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 578; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 387.

feeling: whom is the author writing about? This way of telling, however, is not unique or even infrequent in the Semitic languages, but in the discourse of mystical experiences it serves the author to minimise his own role and to project his own experiences onto an ideal self (and then perhaps to project the experiences of the ideal subject back into his own mental reality).

Isaac goes on to present permanent humility as a state necessary for reception of revelations of divine mysteries that in turn deliver spiritual knowledge. So we are back where we started in chapter 2.1. – presenting a constant state as an enabling condition of a particular (peak) condition, i.e. mystical experience.

In the end, almost all of the metatheological discussion can be seen to take place in some kind of relation to mystical experience. The symbols open various possibilities for homiletic discoursing on all aspects of spiritual life. For example, the symbol of fire is utilised by John of Dalyatha to fulfil the exhortative function of the discourse by urging his readers to “give material to the fire of Jesus” so that its purity might catch the soul “if it is not overcome by alien waters”.<sup>670</sup> This may serve as an example of how the mystical experience penetrates the whole religious discourse.

The components of the metatheological discourse that we have roughly differentiated according to their logical functions, are ultimately combined and mingled in the metatheological discourse, where vision, for instance, may be presented as beauty and likened to food, and the revelation identified with drink. “My Lord, give me the beauty of your vision to nourishment, and the revelation of the secrets hidden into the bosom of your Essence to drink.”<sup>671</sup> In the mental reality the various phenomena constitute a single whole, and accordingly, in Syriac metatheology everything leads to everything, and the decisive category is that of totality.

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<sup>670</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 15:8 (pp. 350–351).

<sup>671</sup> Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318–319).