

THE MEMRA OF PATRIARCH MAR ʾĪŠŌʾYAHB I OF ARZŌN (581-595): THE CAUSE OF THE 'HOLY GOD'

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ABSTRACT

In 1917, Guiseppe Furlani introduced the Syriac world to an otherwise unknown sixth century document composed by Mar ʾĪšŏʾyahb I the Arzŏnite, catholicos-patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East from 581 to 595. Furlani provided the Syriac text of the memrā of ʾĪšŏʾyahb I, which was an apology for the liturgical and theological use of the Trisagion by the Church of the East. It was accompanied by a study of the text and the sole manuscript which contains it. The importance of this document is manifold. First, it is not mentioned by Mar ʾAbdišŏʾ of Nisibis in his famous 'Catalogue', and therefore seems to be an anomaly. Second, this memrā gives us the terminus ante quem for the insertion of the Trisagion in the rite of the Church of the East in the greater framework of the development of this rite. Third, and of great import, the memrā provides a springboard for the author to express and defend the christological position of the School of Nisibis, his alma mater and the center of Church of the East orthodoxy in the mid-sixth century. The

English translation of this important memrā is offered here for the first time, along with a study of the historical and theological contexts of the tractate at the time of its composition sometime in the latter half of the sixth century.

INTRODUCTION

It was in his 1917 research article “Il Trattato di Yešō’yahb d’Ārzōn sul ΤΡΙΣΑΓΙΩΝ,” that the Semitic philologist and Assyriologist Giuseppe Furlani first introduced us to the text of this important memrā of Mar ’Īšō’yahb I (patriarch, 581-596).¹ The importance of Furlani’s article lay in the fact that he reproduced, for the very first time, the Syriac text of this memrā, or ‘tractate,’ as Furlani names it, of a patriarch whose other works (primarily canonical) are extant. The import lies in the fact that it is not mentioned by ‘Abdīšō’ of Nisibis in his *Catalogue of Syrian Authors*. Further, it is contained in only one known manuscript, which we shall survey further below.

’Īšō’yahb’s memrā is concerned with a hymn that had only been introduced into the liturgy of the Assyrian Church of the East during his own lifetime. I have previously discussed the hymn ‘Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on

¹ See G. Furlani, “Il Tratto di Yešō’yahb d’Ārzōn sul ΤΡΙΣΑΓΙΩΝ,” (*Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 7 [1917]), 687-715. For more concerning the biography and works of G. Furlani, see: R. Contini, “Furlani, Giuseppe,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, edited by Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz and Lucas Van Rompay (Gorgias Press, 2011; online ed. Beth Mardutho, 2018), <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Furlani-Giuseppe>; S. Furlani, “Bibliografia degli scritti di Giuseppe Furlani dal 1914 fino a tutto il 1956” (*Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 32 [1957]), xiii-xxxvii (with updating to 1962, in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 38 [1963], 70-71); P. Taviani, ‘Furlani, Giuseppe,’ in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 50, ed. Francesco I. Sforza (Gabbi, Italy: n.p. 1998), 776-779.

us'—more commonly known as the 'Trisagion', after its Greek appellation.² This hymn, often called the 'liturgical Sanctus' is inspired by the glorification of the seraphim in the Vision of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:3). However, 'Īšō'yahb's concern is not merely liturgical, but rather dogmatic—or more precise, christological.

THE AUTHOR

One of the main sources of the life and works of Mar 'Īšō'yahb is the anonymous *Chronicle of Seert*.³ We are told that 'Īšō'yahb hailed from the region of Mesopotamia known as Beth 'Arbāye.⁴ This area essentially constituted the hinterlands of Nisibis, comprising the land between Mosul, the Tigris and the Khabur Rivers, including the hill country to the northeast of Arzōn.⁵ This region, and basically all of the territory of Nisibis, was ceded by the Romans under Jovian to the Persians in 363. Thus, it came to be known as the 'Arzōn of the Persians' distinguishing it from 'Arzōn of the Greeks'—more widely known as the city of 'Erzerum.⁶ As such, Nisibis soon was

² See D. Royel, "East Meets East: Byzantine Liturgical Influences on the Rite of the Church of the East" (*Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 [2008]), 44-59, particularly 50ff.

³ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, Parts I-II. *Patrologia Orientalis* II:3 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908), 438-442.

⁴ A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Weber, 1922), 126. Cf. L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriaque orientale dans les Rapports diplomatiques entre la Perse et Byzance aux V^e-VII^e siècles* (Paris: n.p., 1986), 101.

⁵ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dioceses_of_the_Church_of_the_East_to_1318#Province_of_Beth_Garma%C3%AF, accessed on August 11, 2020.

⁶ For more on the topographical and ecclesiastical description of the region of Arzōn see: J.-M. Fiey, *Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus. Répertoire des Diocèses Syriaques Orientaux et Occidentaux*, *Beiruter Texte und Studien* 49, (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993) 53-54.

amalgamated not only into the Persian territory, but into the jurisdiction of the Church of the East. Already in the Synod of Catholicos Isaac (410), Nisibis became a major provincial (metropolitan) see, second only to Elam, and numbered among the five primatial provinces of the Church in Persia. We read in the *acta* of the synod of 410: “Immediately comes the see of Nisibis [after the see of Beth Lāpat, who is the metropolitan of Beth Hūzāye]: the bishop who occupies [this see] is the metropolitan of Arzōn, of Qardū, of Beth Zabdai, of Beth Rahīmai, of Beth Moksāye and the bishops who are found there...”⁷

According to the *Chronicle of Séert*, ʿĪšōʿyahb was a student at the famed School of Nisibis under Abraham the Interpreter d-Beth Rabban, the nephew of Mar Narsai (d. 503). Sometime between 569 and 571, he was a lecturer at the same school, actually succeeding Abraham as the director of the school. He was then made bishop of Arzōn in 579, during the reign of the Persian emperor Khusrōw I Ānūšīrāvān (r. 531-579).⁸ As noted above, Arzōn was a diocese suffragan to the metropolitan see of Nisibis, and was recognized as such already in the first recorded synod of the Assyrian Church of the East, held under Catholicos Isaac at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410.⁹

We have an important historical reference from the *Cause of the Founding of the Schools* (علل تأسيس المدارس), by Bar Hadbšabbā ʿArbāyā, the bishop of Halwan, regarding the scholastic tenure of ʿĪšōʿyahb at the school of Nisibis. Bar

⁷ J.-B. Chabot, ed. & French trans., *Synodicon orientale, ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 272. For the complete *acta* of the Synod of Isaac, see *Ibid.*, 17-36 [Syriac]/253-275 [French trans.].

⁸ Baumstark, *Geschichte*, 126; H. Gismondi, ed. & Latin trans., *Maris, Amri et Slibae: De Patriarchis Nestorianorum Commentaria. Pars Altera: Amri et Slibae Textus Arabicus* (Rome: F. De Luigi, 1896), 44; J.-M. Fiey, *Oriens Christianus*, 53.

⁹ J.-B. Chabot, *Synodicon*, 272-273.

Sulaimān's history of the Nestorian patriarchs, (اخبار فطاركة كرسى (المشرق), 'Īšō'yahb was consecrated at Al-Madā'in and invested with a violet-colored *bīrōnā*.¹⁴ The new catholicos' relationship with the Persian emperor would prove for a fruitful patriarchal administration and a period of quiet at the Romano-Persian border, especially as Hormizd himself is said to have married Maria, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Maurice (582-602).¹⁵

'Īšō'yahb's patriarchate was an active one, and two important events in the life of the Church of the East took place at that time. First, 'Īšō'yahb was sent by Hormizd IV at the head of an embassy to the Byzantine Empire, in order to meet with Emperor Maurice. The patriarch and the emperor met at Aleppo, where the gifts were received by Maurice with great rejoicing. The patriarchal chronicle of Mārī ibn Sulaimān records the fact that at Aleppo, the emperor was happy to meet with the patriarch of the Church of Persia, for contacts had been cut-off for a long period of time. As a consequence, the emperor asked 'Īšō'yahb to present his Church's creed in written form. It was penned in Greek first, then translated into Arabic and subsequently into Syriac—according to the chronicle.¹⁶ This credal statement of 'Īšō'yahb was received by Maurice, and sent by him to 'Cyriac the patriarch of Constantinople' and 'Gregory the patriarch of Antioch' for scrutiny as to its orthodoxy. According to the chronicle, Maurice declared after seeing the

¹⁴ H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 44. The *bīrōnā* is the main episcopal liturgical headdress of the Church of the East, which denotes the shepherd's hood.

¹⁵ G.D. Malech, *History of the Syrian Nation and the Old Evangelical-Apostolic Church of the East, From Remote Antiquity to the Present Time* (Minneapolis: n.p., 1910), 196-197. However, Maria's name does not appear in the list of names of the Byzantine emperor's issue in any of the Greek chroniclers.

¹⁶ H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 45.

credal statement of 'Īšō'yahb that it was entirely orthodox, and as a result, they celebrated the Eucharist together. The chronicle notes that both Maurice the emperor and Cyriac the patriarch of Constantinople communed from the hands of 'Īšō'yahb, and on the last day of the embassy, 'Īšō'yahb communed from Cyriac who had celebrated the liturgy in Aleppo.¹⁷ Furthermore, the emperor had reportedly declared that if this was what Nestorius had in fact confessed, then he too must have been orthodox! These two hierarchs mentioned in the chronicle must be Cyriac II, who reigned as patriarch of Constantinople from 595-606, and Gregory I, who ruled as patriarch of Antioch from 571-593/94. It is said that this embassy took place sometime in the winter of 586-587.

The second important event during the patriarch of 'Īšō'yahb was his synod, held at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 585—just four years after acceding to the patriarchal throne and two years before the famous delegation to Aleppo. The preamble of this synod's *acta* indicate the amicable relationship enjoyed between the Persian shah Hormizd and the Christian community in Persia:

It was pleasing to him [God] in his lovingkindness, then, to turn toward us in his mercifulness, in that he provided for the land in our days, in a failing time, for he raised up from a renowned family of the glorious kingdom a good, mighty, victorious, and peace-loving lord, the philanthropic lord forever, Hormizd, the King of Kings, as it were for the tranquility of the entire habitable world and for the happiness of the inhabitants of the earth. By his hands, and by his authoritative, good, and wise commands, he revealed the riches of his immense compassion...Even more, he revealed the abundance of his mercifulness and the

¹⁷ H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 47.

multitude of his love toward our Christian people, the servants and subjects of his lordship, who, all of us, with a steadfast mind which has no guile or spot in it, and as venerators and debtors of his lordship, intercede for his lordship by night and day, that he might hold his dominion forever, and that the Inhabitant of Heaven, the Lord of Kings, might be with him in everything forever, and the inhabitants of the earth and dwellers in the world might be subject to his lordship forever, according to the will of the Lord.¹⁸

This synodal statement should not be taken at face value, but rather as a fine example of the typical flowery oriental style of flattery—particularly to a monarch. Rather, it is actually representative of a shift that has taken place after the cessation of the persecutions of the Christians in the Persian Empire, and a continuation of the policy of toleration and the freedom of cult which was accorded the Christian population in Persia since the reign of Yazdgerd I in 420.¹⁹ This *Pax Persiana* ushered in a period of growth for the Church, although there were sporadic periods of harsh treatment of the Christians under the Persians.

In 589, Hormizd was succeeded by his son Khosrōw II Parvīz (591-628), in a coup which was supported by Hormizd's disgraced general Bahram. In 590, Hormizd accepted defeat, and was succeeded by his son Khosrōw, who was suspected of

¹⁸ Quoted from the English translation of the *Synodicon Orientale*. See M.J. Birnie, trans., *The Eastern Synods (Synodicon Orientale)*, (Seattle: n.p., 1999), 88.

¹⁹ In many Syriac historiographical works, Yazdgerd was seen as a 'second Constantine,' as it was during his reign that the Great Persecution of the east (339-379) ended, and he allowed the bishops of the Assyrian Church of the East to summon the first synod under the catholicos in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. For more on this, see: S. McDonough, "A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgerd in Christian History and Historiography," (*Journal of Late Antiquity* 11 [2008]), 127-141.

putting his father to death. 'Īšō'yahb was on very good terms with Khusrōw, and the Persian shah was very favorable towards the Christians throughout his 18-year reign. 'Īšō'yahb I had served as patriarch for a period of 15 years, according to Bar Hebraeus, and died during the reign of Khosrōw in 907 *Anno Graecorum*, or 596 AD.²⁰ He was interred at the monastery which was founded by Hind, the daughter of Nū'mān the Christian king of Al-Hīrā, or Hīrtā (ܢܘܡܢܐ) according to the Syriac appellation.²¹ His tomb was placed in the bema, in the middle of the nave.²² After his death, 'Īšō'yahb was succeeded on the patriarchal throne by Mar Sabrišō' I (596-604) of the village of Pīrōzābād.

KNOWN WORKS OF 'ĪŠŌ'YAHB I

The author of this *memrā* is a patriarch of the Church of the East who lived during a period of intense theological exchange, which came about as a direct result of the christological controversies of the fifth century.²³ Consequently, much material was produced by the scholars of the School of Nisibis, with which 'Īšō'yahb was tightly associated, in the form of treatises and in the canonical literature of the Church of the East, as well. What's more it was time when the Zoroastrian

²⁰ H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 49.

²¹ See the Syriac text in: J.-B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy, eds., *Gregorii Barhebraei, Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*. Vol. 3 (Paris-Louvain: Maisonneuve-Peters, 1877), 105/107. For the English translation see: D. Wilmshurst, *Bar Hebraeus, The Ecclesiastical Chronicle: An English Translation*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 40 (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2016), 340/341. H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 49.

²² A. Scher, *Chronique de Séert*, II.2, 442.

²³ For more on the role of 'Īšō'yahb during this period, especially as enshrined in the Church of the East historiographies, see: P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 128-131.

Persians were friendly to the Christians, particularly the two shahs during whose reign 'Īšō'yahb ruled as patriarch.

In his *Catalogue*, 'Abdīšō' bar Brikhā of Nisibis, the metropolitan of Nisibis and Armenia (d. 1318), states the following regarding our author: "He composed against Eunomius, and against a certain heretical bishop he made a disputation; and twenty-two questions on the mysteries (ܐܘܨܬܐܝܢܐ) of the Church, and an apology and epistles, and synodical canons.²⁴ 'Īšō'yahb's tractate against 'a certain heretical bishop' is not extant, nor is it known to which bishop he was reacting. However, there is an extended commentary on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed at the beginning of the *acta* of 'Īšō'yahb's synod which addressed the heresies of the Arminians, Eunomians (also called 'Anomoeans') and the semi-Arian Macedonians.²⁵ His twenty-two questions on the mysteries have been included in the *Synodicon Orientale* (or, the collection of eastern synods) in the form of a synodical letter addressed to Mar Jacob, the bishop of Darai.²⁶ However, there are only twenty questions which are contained in the letter, and not all are of a liturgical nature. We must assume, therefore, that of the original twenty-two mentioned by 'Abdīšō', only a few actually remain. As far as the 'apology' (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܨܐ) is concerned, Assemani had conjectured that it could have been the *professio fidei* of 'Īšō'yahb presented to the Roman Emperor Maurice. However, however its precise identification is uncertain. Could it, in fact, be the present tractate under study, as it most certainly is an apology for the use of the Trisagion in the rite of the Church of the East.

²⁴ See J.S. Assemani, ed. & Latin trans., *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, Vol. III/Part 1 (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregatione de Propaganda Fide, 1728), 108-111.

²⁵ Cf. M.J. Birnie, *Eastern Synods*, 90-93.

²⁶ For the Syriac see: J.-B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 165-192; for the English see: M.J. Birnie, *Eastern Synods*, 115-135.

The second statement of faith by the patriarch is to be found at the end of the *acta* of 'Īšō'yahb's synod, referred to as the "...creed composed by Mar 'Īšō'yahb'." This consists of credal statements concerning the divine *qnōme* of the Father and the Son—addressing the heresies attacking each—but nothing is said concerning the Holy Spirit.²⁷ Ž. Paša has concluded that the Syriac recension of the credal statement found in the *Synodicon Orientale* (at the end of the *acta* of 'Īšō'yahb's synod) is in actuality the Syriac version of the original Arabic, which is found in the *Asfār al-Asrār* of Salība ibn Yūhannā al-Mawsilī.²⁸ The Arabic text, shorter than the *confessio fidei* found in the Syriac recension, seems to resemble the Creed of the Synod of Bishops of 612.²⁹

The book *Kitāb al-Mağdal* of Mārī ibn Sulaymān recounts the embassy of the Persian shah Hormizd, headed by Patriarch 'Īšō'yahb' I, to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, which met in Aleppo in 586, discussed earlier. During this encounter, the patriarch gave the emperor—at the latter's request—a confession of faith of the Church of the East, which the emperor found to be entirely orthodox. Nonetheless, it is not altogether clear whether the Syriac credal statement found in the *acta* of 'Īšō'yahb's synod of 585, or the Arabic text found in the *Asfār al-Asrār*, is in fact the confession of faith submitted by 'Īšō'yahb' to Maurice in 586.³⁰ In any case, scholars note that this second credal statement of 'Īšō'yahb is more 'Chalcedonian' in its language than Theodorian, and it speaks about the Godhead

²⁷ See M.J. Birnie, *Eastern Synods*, 136-138.

²⁸ Ž. Paša, "Īšū'yāb Al-Arzunī and Confession of the Faith: Critical Edition and Translation" (*Parole de l'Orient* 44 [2018]), 361. See the Arabic text in: H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 44-47 [Arabic]; 26-28 [Latin].

²⁹ See Paša, "Īšū'yāb Al-Arzunī," 361. For the Syriac text of the credal statement of 612 see: J.-B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 564-567.

³⁰ See Paša, "Īšū'yāb Al-Arzunī," 362.

being confessed to exist in three particular *qnōme*, but in one nature.³¹ The statement speaks concerning the incarnation of the Word of God in terms of ‘becoming’ man by ‘assuming’ our humanity while “...remaining without change or addition” as to the essence of the Word’s divinity.³² The standard formula for the union of the two natures as being a ‘*parsopic*’ union is also emphatically confirmed in this credal statement.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE TREATISE

In addition to its theological significance, the tractate of ʾĪšōʾyahb also bears considerable historical importance in regards to the ongoing christological controversies in the east and their aftermath. In this regard, we know that ʾĪšōʾyahb was part of another important embassy to the Byzantine Empire. This embassy had been previously dated by scholars to many years before the Second Council of Constantinople, or around 533.³³ However, L. Sako has argued that it took place sometime in 546-547,³⁴ when Mar ʾĪšōʾyahb joined Paul the metropolitan of Nisibis on an embassy to the Roman emperor Justinian. The bishop of Arzōn was sent by the Persian shah Khosrōw Ānūšīrāvān to the Roman territory. This embassy had an important dialogue with Justinian and the major proponents of

³¹ Metselaar-Jongens, Marijke. *Defining Christ. The Church of the East and Nascent Islam*, Ph.D. dissertation, (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2016), 93.

³² Metselaar-Jongens, *Defining Christ*, 92.

³³ A. Guillaumont, “Justinien et l’Église Perse” (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23-24 [1969-1970]), 51. See also: A. Scher, *Chronique de Séert*, 187; A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, CSCO 266, Subs. 26 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965), 153.

³⁴ Though others have disputed this dating and suggested alternatives. See, for example A. Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Tradition II.2: The Church of Constantinople in the Sixth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 466.

Chalcedonian orthodox christology at the time.³⁵ A dialogue in prose form is attributed to Paul of Nisibis, titled *Argument Against Caesar* (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܝܣܪܐ ܕܩܝܣܪܐ), which contains almost a verbatim transcript of the theological discussion between Paul and Justinian.³⁶ Notwithstanding the intense debate, Paul of Nisibis and his delegation defended the christological position of the Church of the East, stating: "Christ has two kyānē and two qnōmē; this is the doctrine of my fathers, my predecessors and my guides, the 318."³⁷

Paul was accompanied by three of his suffragan bishops: Marī of Balad, Barsawmā of Qardū and Babai of Šīgār. In addition, two doctors of the major schools of the Church of the East also took part in the delegation: ʾĪšai the Interpreter at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and ʾĪšōʿyahb I.³⁸ Although ʾĪšōʿyahb is referred to by the author of the *Chronicle of Séert* as the "...bishop of Arzōn, who later became the Catholicos of the East", nonetheless the embassy took place before he became the bishop of this diocese, most likely while he was still a lecturer at the School of Nisibis. The embassy was highly honored by Justinian, and the theological discussions are said to have lasted for three days.

The delegation is supposed to have visited with Justinian and discussed the matter of the Three Chapters, who were later condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. At

³⁵ C. Ş. Popa, "East Syriac Theological Instruction and Anti-Chalcedonian Identity in Nisibis in Late Antiquity" (*Review of Ecumenical Studies* 11:3 [2019]), 435.

³⁶ Popa, "East Syriac Theological Instruction," 435. For fragments of this text in French translation, see: A. Guillaumont, "Justinien et L'église de Perse," 62-66.

³⁷ A. Scher, *Chronique de Séert*, 568 [248]; quoted in Popa, "East Syrian Theological Instruction," 435.

³⁸ See A. Scher, *Chronique de Séert*, 187; cf. A. Guillaumont, "Justinien et l'Église de Perse," 50; L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriaque*, 108.

the outset, the emperor seemed favorable to the christological position of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus; Ibas of Edessa is not mentioned in this narrative. However, his position changed shortly thereafter, and by the time of the council of 553, the ‘neo-Chalcedonian’ position was already championed by Justinian as a compromise position. In appearing before the Byzantine emperor, the embassy itself aimed at justifying the christological position of the Church of the East, that is, the teaching of the doctors of the School of Nisibis. For his part, Justinian had desired to reconcile the Christians in the Persian Empire, thereby unifying all of the Christians of the East under his patronage and protection—to be further served by a theological agreement and reconciliation—and thus serve the interests of the Byzantine Empire.³⁹ However, the condemnation of the Three Chapters, strongly venerated by the Christians of the Persian Empire, remained a stumbling block for this desired ecclesiastical reconciliation, and the embassy ultimately proved fruitless.

Later, ʾĪšōʾyahb would ‘canonize’ the christological teaching of the doctors of Nisibis, and especially the place of Theodore, in his synod held in 585 discussed above. Notably, it was the first time since the synod of ʾĀqāq of 486 that *parsōpā* was used in the christological discussion in order to explain the union of the Godhead and the humanity of Christ.⁴⁰ ʾĪšōʾyahb further describes the union of the two natures *economically* (ܡܝܚܘܒܐ) as opposed to *naturally*—possibly being the first official statement of the Church of the East against the christological teaching of Constantinople II (553).⁴¹ ʾĪšōʾyahb’s synod also canonized the theological authority and person of Theodore of Mopsuestia, and condemned those who in turn condemned

³⁹ Cf. L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriaque*, 95.

⁴⁰ Metselaar-Jongens, *Defining Christ*, 89.

⁴¹ Metselaar-Jongens, *Defining Christ*, 89. Cf. A. Guillaumont, “Justinien et l’Église de Perse,” 55.

him, which we know took place at Constantinople II.⁴² Thus, one could conclude that at the time of this synod, and under 'Īšō'yahb's direct influence, the Church of the East became decisively and formally 'Theodorian' in her christology, as evidenced further by this synod's stance against the miaphysite position, and also that of Hnānā of Adiabene (albeit indirectly)—formerly a doctor at the School of Nisibis and considered the greatest traitor of the school's christological position.

The next embassy that 'Īšō'yahb took part in was to the court of the Byzantine emperor Maurice, sometime in 587, when 'Īšō'yahb was sent by the Persian Shah Hormizd to broker a peace treaty with the Byzantines. The patriarch and the emperor met in the city of Aleppo, according to the *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum* of 'Amr bin Mattai, and 'Īšō'yahb presented Maurice with a number of precious gifts from the Persian shah as a token of good will. The emperor is reported to have remarked to the patriarch: "Since the Council of Chalcedon, we have not received any letters from you, as it once was the custom. Now, I would love to know the truth of your faith and the symbol [creed] which you recite. Write it down so that I may examine it."⁴³

An account of the same event is also found in Mārī ibn Sulaymān's *Kitāb al-Mağdal*, who narrates:

The king of the Persians sent 'Īšō'yahb to Maurice the Byzantine emperor, with presents, letters and votives. The presents were agreeable and the emperor greatly honored 'Īšō'yahb, saying to him: 'Since the council which took place at Chalcedon, there has not been between you and us any correspondence. We do not

⁴² A. Guillaumont, "Justinien et l'Église de Perse," 55.

⁴³ H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 45-57/26-27; L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriaque*, 105.

know if your profession of faith has remained the same, or if you have changed it. I would love for you to write it down, so that I may read it and meditate upon it.⁴⁴

The same event is also recorded by the West Syrian chronicler Michael the Great, in his *Chronicle*.⁴⁵ Then, the catholicos celebrated the Eucharistic liturgy according to the rite of the Church of the East, and communed Maurice, the patriarch of Constantinople and the patricians of the Byzantine empire. After that, ʾĪšōʿyahb himself partook of the Eucharist celebrated by Cyriac the patriarch of Antioch, in the presence of the emperor.⁴⁶

Needless to say, although both these embassies in which ʾĪšōʿyahb was involved were *prima facie* political embassies on behalf of the Persian shah, nevertheless they proved to be important opportunities for ecumenical contact and theological discussion between hierarchs of the Church of the East and those of the Byzantine Empire. Because ʾĪšōʿyahb was both a student and doctor of the School of Nisibis, it was the christological teaching of this school which the patriarch sought to defend and propose in his discussions abroad. He was both faithful to the teachings of this school and the masters who preceded him there. In this regard, the theological legacy of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai was indispensable for both ʾĪšōʿyahb and the School of Nisibis as a whole, as was the christological position of his predecessor in the see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, namely Mar Ābā the Great. Thus, ʾĪšōʿyahb did not

⁴⁴ H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 56/49-50. Cf. L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriacque*, 105, footnote 62.

⁴⁵ J.-B. Chabot, ed. & French trans., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche, 1166-1199*. Volumes 3 & 4 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1905, 1963), [III] 521; [IV] 776. Cf. L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriacque*, 105, footnote 62.

⁴⁶ L. Sako, *Le Rôle de la Hiérarchie Syriacque*, 106. Cf. H. Gismondi, *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum*, 47/27.

capitulate to the Chalcedonian orthodoxy of his day in either of his embassies, but proved a bastion of what one might call 'Nisibene orthodoxy',⁴⁷ demonstrating his unwavering fidelity to the anti-Chalcedonian dogmatic position of the School of Nisibis and its most famous doctors.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The memrā of Mar 'Išō'yahb—which Furlani published the Syriac text in Sertō script—is found in the manuscript India Office Syriac 9, housed in London, and is contained in folios 426v to 432v.⁴⁸ The manuscript is written in Nestorian (i.e. eastern Syriac characters), and was written by two different hands. As the colophon is lacking, the manuscript has not been dated by Furlani. The codex is bound in leather and is in octavo, with 444 numbered pages, with some lacunae after f. 40v.

The codex seems to be an anthology of mostly Church of the East writers, with about 84 different contents. Some of the well-noted theologians of the Church of the East whose partial works are contained in this anthology include: Elia bar Šīnāye, Gabriel called 'Qamsā' metropolitan of Mosul, Yāhannan bar Zō'bī, St. Ephrem, Theodore bar Kōnī, 'Išō'bōkht of Rewardāšīr, Michael Bādōqā (the 'Interpreter'), 'Abdišō' of Gazartā, Hūnain, 'Enānīšō', Dawīd bar Paolōs, Šem'ōn of Šanqalābād, 'Išō' bar Nūn the Catholicos and 'Abdišō' of Nisibis. In addition, Bar Hebraeus and Epiphanius of Cyprus are also quoted in a few brief selections.

⁴⁷ Cf. Popa, "East Syriac Theological Instruction," 437.

⁴⁸ The India Office of London possesses only one Syriac manuscript, number 9, catalogued in: G. Furlani, "Il manoscritto siriano 9 dell'India Office (*Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 10 [1924]), 315. The collection is now housed in the British Library at London. At the time that G. Furlani catalogued this manuscript in 1915, it was still housed at the British Museum, as were all of the other Syriac manuscript collections.

Our *memrā* is numbered as the 78th item in the collection, and it follows the ‘Discourse of Michael the Interpreter ‘On Man as Microcosm’ (ff. 421r-426r), and precedes a brief discourse titled ‘Commentary on the Creed which the Fathers of Nicea Posited’ (ff. 432v-440r).⁴⁹ The latter is believed to be authored by Mar ‘Išō‘yahb I, and is found in the *Synodicon* of the Church of the East. The fact that the last portion of the codex, in which our *memrā* is found, contains works by the fathers of the Nisibene school and other dogmatic Church of the East materials—such as explanations of the fashion of the Union—seem to indicate a common source for this material, possibly taken from a *florilegium* of broader ‘Nestorian’ christological materials. However, it is worth noting that Furlani is the only scholar to have discovered and produced the Syriac text of ‘Išō‘yahb’s *memrā*, though he only briefly summarized the contents. Thus, it is translated into English for the first time in this present article.

THE TRACTATE ‘THE CAUSE OF THE *HOLY GOD*’

The tractate, or *memrā*, of ‘Išō‘yahb is formally titled as the ‘*elthā* (ܐܠܬܗܐ) of the Trisagion. This type of literature is particular to the doctors of the School of Nisibis, who produced a number of theological treatises in this format, most especially between 500 and 700 AD. An ‘*elthā* composition entails the giving of both an historical *and* theological explanation for a certain doctrine, as observed in a liturgical celebration or feast.⁵⁰ One might think of them as the ‘lecture notes’ of the professors of the school, which were delivered orally by the doctors of Nisibis, being copied down by the students and often times committed

⁴⁹ See G. Furlani, “Il manoscritto siriano,” 320.

⁵⁰ P. Bettolo, “Syriac Literature,” in *Patrology. The Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon (451) to John of Damascus (751)*, ed. A. Di Bernardino and A. Walford (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. [2006]), 469-470.

to memory.⁵¹ They are closely associated with the feasts and commemorations of the liturgical year, essentially giving a basis for the mystery that is celebrated on these liturgical days. As such, these 'causes' were collected over time into one volume and named the *Causes of the Feasts of the Economy* (ܩܘܣܘܣܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ).⁵² At the end of the composition, each 'cause' would contain a conclusion that was an exhortation to moral living and virtuous conduct, which basically called the reader (the student at the school?) to live out the meaning of the feast under discussion as a moral imperative.

Mar Narsai of Nisibis (399-503), the great doctor of that school, would be the first of Nisibis' teachers to have written prose compositions following this genre of the 'Cause' literature, however, none are attributed to him by 'Abdīšō' in his *Catalogue*. This type of literature was first published and made known to the western world with the publication of the Syriac text and Latin translation of Thomas of Edessa's *Cause of the Nativity of our Lord*, published by Simon Joseph Carr in 1898.⁵³ Shortly thereafter, three other 'causes' of two well-known doctors of Nisibis were published: the *Cause of the Martyrs* by 'Īšai the Presbyter and Interpreter, and Hnānā of Adiabene's *Cause of the Friday of Gold* and the *Cause of the Rogation*; these

⁵¹ W. Macomber, *Six Explanations of the Liturgical Feasts by Cyrus of Edessa, An East Syrian Theologian of the Mid-Sixth Century*, CSCO 356, Syr. 156 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1974), vi.

⁵² There are 13 tractates which are collected together in this volume. The oldest known manuscript was that of Siirt 82 (belonging to the library of the Chaldean Archbishop of Siirt, Mar Addai Scher), and was written sometime in the 16th century; cf. W. Macomber, *Liturgical Feasts*, v.

⁵³ See S. Carr, Latin trans., *Thomae Edesseni Tractatus de nativitate Domini Nostri Christi: textum syriacum edidit, notis illustravit Latine reddidit*, Rome: Typis R. Academiae Lynceorum, 1898; reprinted as: *Thomas of Edessa on the Nativity of the Lord*. Syriac Studies Library 79. Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2012.

were published by the famous martyr-bishop Mar Addai Scher in 1911.⁵⁴ The most well-known of the ‘Cause’ compositions are those which were introduced and made available for the first time in English translation by William Macomber. The collection of six ‘causes’ or liturgical explanations were published by Macomber in 1974, and they consisted of the extant works of one of the most famous of the doctors of Nisibis, Cyrus of Edessa.⁵⁵ The six feasts explained by Cyrus, and published by Macomber in translation, were: The Explanation of the Fast, of the Pasch, of the Passion, of the Resurrection, of the Ascension, and of Pentecost Sunday.⁵⁶

Thus, the memrā of Mar ʾĪšōʾyahb under study seems to fall under this type of theological literature produced by the professors, or doctors, of the famed School of Nisibis. Albeit, it is not the ‘cause’ of a liturgical feast but of a liturgical hymn of great importance. Taking into consideration the fact that ʾĪšōʾyahb’s tenure as an ‘interpreter’ at the School of Nisibis lasted roughly from 569 to 571, it was mostly likely during this period that he authored the ‘Cause of the *Holy God*,’ almost certainly before he became bishop of Arzōn after 571. However, the unresolved question as of yet is why his tractate did not

⁵⁴ A. Scher, French trans., “Traité d’Isaï le Docteur et de Hnana d’Adiabène sur les Martyrs, le Vendredi d’Or et les Rogations, et Confession de Foi à Réciter par les évêques nestoriens avant l’Ordination,” *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. 7, ed. R. Graffin and F. Nau, (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1911), 3-87.

⁵⁵ See W. Macomber, *Liturgical Feasts*. Cyrus of Edessa, or Qiyōre, studied at Nisibis under Mar Ābā the Great sometime in 533 to 538. For more on his biography see: S.P. Brock, “Qiyore of Edessa,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, S.P. Brock, et. al., eds. Beth Mardutho, print Gorgias Press. Retrieved 20 August 2020; Ute Possekel, “Cyrus of Edessa,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*. Vol. 1, ed. O. Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 447.

⁵⁶ For more on the life and works of these afore-mentioned doctors of the Nisibene school, see: P. Bettolo, “Syriac Literature,” 469-472.

make it into the collection of the *Causes of the Feasts*,⁵⁷ a large portion of which were later published as noted above. One would expect the tractate of 'Īšō'yahb to have been preserved, somehow, especially since it would have been part of the curriculum of the school. However, the fact that this work is also not mentioned in 'Abd'īšō' of Nisibis' *Catalogue* is noteworthy, and seems to indicate that for very many centuries this work of 'Īšō'yahb was practically unknown in the Church. Thus, the existence of this tractate of 'Īšō'yahb in the unique India Office Syriac 9 manuscript is a precious work, which providentially managed to survive the vicissitudes of theological history down through the centuries in this singular manuscript.

'Īšō'yahb addresses his text to a certain 'Mar Abraham of Deir Gāzartā', who solicited the patriarch's explanation of the Trisagion. Reference is made to the doctors or *malpāne* in the introduction of the tractate, which seems to indicate that it was intended to be read by those in scholastic circles, quite possibly by the students of the School of Nisibis, or that of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Be that as it may, the recipient of our author's tractate, Mar Abraham, was most likely the head of the ecclesiastical community at *Deir Gāzartā*, an otherwise practically unknown locality.⁵⁸

The relevance of 'Īšō'yahb's *memrā* on the cause of the Trisagion is to be seen not with regard to its liturgical aspect, but rather with regard to its theological import. In essence, it is none other—in Furlani's estimation—than a 'definition' of God

⁵⁷ For more on this literature, see the seminal study on this collection of the explanation of the feasts of the Church of the East in: A. Baumstark, "Die nestorianischen Schriften 'de causis festorum,'" (*Oriens Christianus* 1 [1901]), 320-342.

⁵⁸ Sadly, the present writer has been unsuccessful in identifying the locale of Deir Gāzartā.

restricted to brief words.⁵⁹ Essentially, the tractate aims at expressing: 1) the nature (ܡܚܘܒܐ) of God; 2) the natural or essential qualities of God (ܡܘܠܘܕܐ ܕܡܚܘܒܐ); and 3) the qualities which God does not possess (ܡܘܠܘܕܐ ܕܠܐ ܡܚܘܒܐ)—what we would call ‘apophatic’ theology nowadays. The uniqueness of such an interpretation of the Trisagion, by a doctor of the Church of the East, is unparalleled and not found in the other eastern Christian traditions. It stems from the philosophical foundation of the School of Nisibis in making faithful use of Aristotelian logic when dealing with theological matters and discussions. This unique methodology based on Aristotelian philosophy is especially seen in the interpretation of the union of the two natures, and the polemical discussions on christology in general; this is the hallmark and genius of the Nisibene school and its doctors, as well as its alumni. Finally, the latter part of ʾĪšōʾyahb’s memrā which deals with the addition to the Trisagion (‘Who was crucified for us’), is a rebuttal to the ‘theopaschite’ stance in the christological controversies. Again, he vehemently does not allow for this insertion because it is seen by ʾĪšōʾyahb as a contradiction of terms, and negates the very essence of the theological declaration on the nature of God made in the Trisagion.⁶⁰ This tractate serves, therefore, as a formal rebuttal to the theological and christological position of the Miaphysites at the time, based on the unique philosophical basis of the ‘Nestorian’ doctors and expounders of the School of Nisibis.

⁵⁹ G. Furlani, “Il trattato di Yešōʾyahb,” 712.

⁶⁰ G. Furlani, “Il trattato di Yešōʾyahb,” 712-713.

During the reign of the Byzantine emperor Anastasius I (491-518), the addition to the Trisagion was introduced into the Constantinopolitan liturgy, however, not without great opposition. In fact, in 512 a great riot broke out in the capital city of Constantinople against the Emperor Anastasius on account of his forced insertion into the Trisagion the words 'Who was crucified for us.'⁶⁵ In his tractate, 'Īšō'yahb very explicitly refers to the forced attempts of Anastasius at inserting the clause 'Who was crucified for us' (sections 13-16), referring specifically to the 'edicts' by the emperor to this effect (section 14). Such an imperial edict on the part of Anastasius is recorded by Evagrius Scholasticus, who mentions in his *Ecclesiastical History* 3 the following note: "...at Byzantium, when the emperor wished to make an addition to the Trisagion of the phrase, 'Who was crucified for us', a very great disturbance occurred on the grounds that the Christian worship was being utterly nullified."⁶⁶ Further riots and discord erupted in the empire's capital due to the addition inserted into the Trisagion 'of Proclus,' to the extent that Anastasius almost lost his crown at the behest of the frenzied rioters. It wasn't only until the death of Anastasius in 518 that the conflict was quelled, especially as he was succeeded by the pro-Chalcedonian emperor Justin I. With his succession as Byzantine emperor in 518, the Trisagion according to the usage of Patriarch Proclus was fully restored. Severus the patriarch of Antioch was deposed from his see, and a feast was established

⁶⁵ W. Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre (Known Also as the Chronicle of Zuqnin): Chronicle, Part III* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 7ff. Cf. A. Karim, "The Meaning of the Trisagion in East and West," 28. For an account of this riot, see: M. Whitby, trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 195-196.

⁶⁶ Quoted from: M. Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, 195. Cf. K. Ginter, "The Trisagion Riots," 52ff.

commemorating the Council of Chalcedon on July 16th. It was at this time that the Trisagion was formally inserted into the Byzantine liturgy, functioning as the ancient hymn of entry.⁶⁷

In the liturgy of the Church of the East, the eucharistic celebration begins with the ancient hymn *Lākhū Mārā*, which according to tradition goes back to the patriarch-martyr Mar Šem'ōn bar Sabbā'e (d. ca. 344).⁶⁸ It functioned as the hymn indicating the opening of the public service of the liturgy. Later, the Trisagion was added, sometime between the patriarchates of Mar Ābā I (540-552) and Mar 'Īšō'yahb I—thus sometime between 540 and 596. The first formal tractate on this hymn, no doubt, is that of 'Īšō'yahb who is explaining a tradition that had already existed in the Church for at least a generation. All evidence points to Mar Ābā I as the one who imported the Trisagion from Constantinople into the liturgy of the Church of the East. We know that Mar Ābā sojourned in Byzantine capital, along with Mar Thomas of Edessa, between 525 and 533.⁶⁹ It is almost certain that it was during his stay in Constantinople during these years that he picked up the Trisagion, and also imported the two anaphorae which he named in honor of Theodore and Nestorius.

⁶⁷ K. Ginter, "The Trisagion Riots," 53. Cf. S. Janeras, "Le Trisagion: un formule brève en liturgie comparée," in R. F. Taft & Gabriella Winkler (eds.), *Acts of International Congress: Comparative Liturgy Fifty Years After Anton Baumstark (1872-1948) Rome, 25-29 Sept. 1998*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 265, ed. R.F. Taft and G. Winkler (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2001), 496-498.

⁶⁸ For more on the life and martyrdom of this patriarch, see: R. Kosiński, "The Date of the Martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba'e and the Persecution of Christians in Persia under Shapur II" (*Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 21:3 [2017]), 496-519.

⁶⁹ D. Wilmschurst, *The Martyred Church: A History of the Church of the East* (London: East and West Publishing, 2011), 56-57.

Another important clue as to the use of the Trisagion in the liturgy of the Church of the East is that 'Īšō'yahb refers to it as a *qānōnā* (ܩܢܘܢܐ), particularly in sections 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 13, 15, 16. The *qānōnā* is a very technical term that refers to a liturgical piece with an intercalated refrain, and generally ending in a *Gloria Patri* and an *A saeculo* doxology. We know that the liturgical psalter was redacted by Mar Ābā I, who not only made the final revision of the Peshiṭtā text of the Psalms, but also fixed them for antiphonal recitation in the divine office.⁷⁰ In the liturgical psalter of the Assyrian Church of the East, each psalm is given a refrain, which is sung after the first two verses of the psalm. Historically, in the recitation of the psalter these refrains or *qānōne* were used commonly, whereas nowadays they are relegated only to major feasts of our Lord and commemorations of the saints. Mar Ābā himself is the author of these refrains of the psalms, and it is he who divided the psalter into *maremyāthā* (a grouping of three psalms) and *hūlāle* (a grouping of three *maremyāthā*). Since the Trisagion is always recited in the various offices and liturgy of the Church of the East with the intercalated doxologies between the three repeated verses, it follows the same liturgical system invented by Mar Ābā for the liturgical psalter. Hence, Mar 'Īšō'yahb's reference to this hymn as a *qānōnā* most likely points to its being structured liturgically as such by none other than Mar Ābā himself.

⁷⁰ See A. Baumstark, *Geschichte*, 120; J. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Vol. III/Part 1, 76; P. Yousif, *Appunti sulla preghiera liturgica del rito caldeo (commune)*, unpublished manuscript (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1982-1983), 5. The English translation of the Psalm refrains composed by Mar Ābā can be found in: A.J. Maclean, *East Syrian Daily Offices. Translated from the Syriac with Introduction, Notes and Indices and an Appendix Containing the Lectionary and Glossary* (London: Rivington Percival & Co., 1894), 236-248.

In the Church of the East, the Trisagion is one of the most important (and ancient) liturgical hymns after the *Lākhū Mārā* (ܠܚܘܡܐ ܡܪܐ) — which entered the rite of the Church of the East most likely during the patriarchate of Mar Šem‘ōn bar Sabā‘e.⁷¹ In his tractate, ʾIšō‘yahb informs us that the whole Church worldwide recites the Trisagion both in the morning/matins (ܡܝܢ ܩܘܢܝܢ) and in the evening/vespers (ܡܝܢ ܩܘܢܝܢ ܥܝܪܝܢ), at the end of the divine office (sections 1, 17).⁷² It is considered an essential and indispensable part of the ‘sealing’ (ܡܫܚܘܬܐ) of the divine office.⁷³ Another source that corroborates the witness of ʾIšō‘yahb is Dādīšō‘ Qatrāyā (ca. late 7th century). In his *Commentary on the Asceticon of Abba Isaiah*, Dādīšō‘ mentions the liturgical usage of the novice monks under the training of Mar Bābai the Great (ca. 551-628). Dādīšō‘ points out the fact that Bābai had instructed in the volume he composed for the formation of novices, that in the office of complines they were to “...recite ten *maremyāthā* or more, and one hymn (*teshbōhtā*) and the Trisagion; at nocturns (*lelyā*) they recite ten *maremyāthā* or more, and one hymn (*teshbōhtā*) and the Trisagion...”⁷⁴

⁷¹ For more on this ancient *introit* hymn of the Church of the East see: Joseph Alencherry, *The Rite of Lakhumara According to the Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar (VII Century)*, Academia, August 20, 2020. https://www.academia.edu/31403003/The_Rite_of_Lakhumara_according_to_the_Commentary_of_Gabriel_of_Qatar_VII_Century_in_Christian_Orient. Cf. S. Janeras, “Le Trisagion,” 498.

⁷² Cf. S. Janeras, “Le Trisagion,” 503.

⁷³ According to Pseudo-George of Arbel; see R. H. Connolly, ed. & Latin trans., *Anonymi Auctoris. Expositio Officiorum Ecclesiae, Georgio Arbelensi Vulgo Adscripta*. Vol. 1., CSCO 64, Syri. 25, (Louvain: Peeters, 1961), 217: ܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܡܝܢ ܩܘܢܝܢ ܥܝܪܝܢ. Cf. Janeras, “Le Trisagion,” 503.

⁷⁴ Quoted in the fragmentary 13th *memrā* of this work, found in the ms. Vatican Syriac 496, ff. 154v-157v; see J. Mateos, *Lelya-Šapra. Les offices chaldéens de la nuit et du matin*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 156 (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1972), 473. This lost work of Bābai was

By the beginning of the seventh century, we know that already the Trisagion ended both the offices of vespers and matins. Gabriel of Qatar (who flourished ca 615)⁷⁵ mentions this fact very clearly in his *Interpretatio Officiorum*:

For, the service of vespers is completed with the *qānōnā* of 'Holy.' However, we add an antiphon and a section from the (Letter Psalms). We are obliged, therefore, to demonstrate the cause for this addition. That the service of vespers as well as matins ends with the *qānōnā* of 'Holy'—this is clear, not merely because of the fact that that the priest recites the [prayer of] imposition of hands and blesses the people, but also from the [fact] that we draw closed the veil in the face of the people once the service has reached its conclusion.⁷⁶

The liturgical explanation of Gabriel corroborates the statement of ʾĪṣōʾyahb that the two major offices end officially with the Trisagion.

A senior contemporary of Gabriel is Mar Bābai the Great (ca. 550-628). In his famous *Book of Union*, he mentions the Trisagion during a lengthy discussion on the nature of God, at the outset of his work. He states concerning the hymn in Memrā I, Chapter V: "In like manner the Church also sanctifies: 'One holy Father, one holy Son, one Holy Spirit,' with one hymn of

composed after the death of Mar Abraham the Great, of Kaškar in 588. Bābai succeeded Abraham as abbot of the monastery of Mt. Izla in Nisibis, until his death in 628.

⁷⁵ For more on the life and works of Gabriel of Qatar see: S. P. Brock, "Gabriel of Beth Qatraye as a Witness to Syriac Intellectual Life c. 600 CE," in *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38, ed. M. Kozah, et. al. (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2014), 155-167; see also S. P. Brock. "The origins of the qanona 'Holy God,...' according to Gabriel of Qatar," *The Harp* 21 (2006) 173-185

⁷⁶ See ms. British Museum Oriental 3336, ff. 26v-27r. The English translation of this section is that of the present writer.

usages without change and innovation.⁷⁹ Thus, we can conclude that the Trisagion was inserted into the eucharistic liturgy of the Church of the East after the patriarchate of ʾĪšōʾyahb I, or 596, but before the time of the writing of Gabriel's commentary, ca. 615.⁸⁰ Possible authorities for the insertion of the Trisagion in the eucharist could be either Patriarch Sabrīšōʾ I, who succeeded ʾĪšōʾyahb I in 596, or Mar Bābai the Great who ruled the Great Monastery of Izla (588 to 628), and who also administered the vacant patriarchal see during the interregnum of 607/8-628.

The Trisagion is generally recited antiphonally, between the two choirs, and there is an invitatorial exclamation on the part of the deacon initiating its recitation: 'Lift up your voice, all ye people, and glorify ye the living God.' The three strophes of the Trisagion are intercalated with the *Gloria Patri* and the *A saeculo*, respectively.⁸¹ The reason for the deacon's invitation to recite the Trisagion might come from the fact that it was an angel, according to ʾĪšōʾyahb, who taught the hymn to one of the holy presbyters of Constantinople. The reason for the invitatorial exclamation is because the deacon fulfills the type and role of the angels in the liturgy. According to Pseudo-George: "And that the deacon commands, 'Lift up your voice and glorify ye, all the people...' is because this very *qānōnā* itself was heard from the angels, and in the same manner this fleshly

⁷⁹ R. H. Connolly, *Expositio Officiorum Ecclesiae*, 158.

⁸⁰ With respect to the meaning of the Trisagion in the eucharistic celebration, Gabriel comments: "The *qanona* 'Holy...' is a symbol of the sanctification (of Christ) by the angels who accompanied him during his entire dispensation, just as the blessed Matthew said, 'The angels approached and were ministering to him' (Matt. 4:11)." See S.P. Brock, "The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the Liturgy" (*Hugoye* 6:2 [2003]), 12; online version: <https://hugoye.bethmardutho.org/article/hv6n2brock>, accessed 3 September 2020.

⁸¹ See J. Mateos, *Lelya-Šapra*, 78.

angel [i.e. deacon] at every season awakens and commands the people (concerning) everything that is done."⁸² Subsequently, the Trisagion was included in all of the liturgies and offices of the Assyrian Church of the East, after it had been inserted first in the matutinal and vespertine offices, then in the eucharistic liturgy.

THE SYRIAC TEXT OF THE CAUSE OF THE 'HOLY GOD'

Sadly, I have not been able to consult the actual manuscript in which this tractate is found. Therefore, I rely on and reproduce here the Syriac text as published by Furlani, but making use of the eastern Syriac script as opposed to the Serto used in the published text. Very limited vocalization and spirantization has been added to the present Syriac text, simply for further clarification, along with diacritical marks to distinguish between homographs. I have divided the tractate into 17 sections in order to facilitate the reading of the Syriac text, although there is no formal, internal division in the original text itself.

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⁸² R. H. Connolly, *Expositio Officiorum Ecclesiae*, 188.

for my memorial, and if possible, for the benefit of others as well. To the company of God which has now reached the house of God, it befits them to hear diligently the life-giving doctrines of the Holy Spirit from the Sacred Scriptures and from the doctors of the Church. We feeble ones also—the disciples of the apostles, doctors and servants of Christ, the Lord of all—have risen up today, with hope and in the strength of the power of Christ, to speak with the flock of our Savior the history of the canon the 'Holy God', which the Church of God recites at vespers and at matins in every region under the heavens. So that, with a sober and diligent mind you may hear the cause and the history, together with its interpretation, so that you too might be diligent to glorify the Holy Trinity by it every day, at vespers and at matins so that it might be the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in every generation and in every nation. In his goodness, God extended to the race of men that in such a manner by this profitable opportunity, the benefit of men might be obvious and revealed, and also so that his mercies might be further made known, and his care proclaimed to all men, as well as from his living word which is spoken by the holy ones and those who have put on the Spirit.

[2] One of the life-giving doctrines of the Holy Spirit is also the canon of the 'Holy God.' This exclamation is the glorification of that blessed and divine nature whose essence is incomprehensible, and who exists as it exists, and its *qnōme* are inscrutable, and are hidden (just as) they are hidden. For, according to their custom, the spiritual angels and holy men of the Old [Covenant] and the New [Covenant], without condemnation and without eschewal, willfully, ascribe and confess songs of the spirit to God who is over all, while singing and praising on behalf of their selves and on behalf of the fashioning of the world and the beauty of His creations. Thus, even though the inhabitants of the earth sinned and provoked to anger, the companies of angels grieved. And as they smote

the inhabitants [of the earth] with judgement, they willfully suffered with them. And when the sentences were dissolved, and they became tranquil, [the angels] rejoiced, and on behalf of them both they ascribed a befitting praise to God who is over all, while justifying and extoling the justice which disciplines rightly and beneficially, and the grace which shows compassion abundantly and pleasantly.

[3] For, at that time when the way of life of the Old [Covenant] held sway, and the law of the house of Moses was dominant, they [i.e. angels] were seen on many occasions in divers manners—at times with zeal, for the sake of benefit, while striking and disciplining; and at other times by taking pity, removing away chastisement and bringing healing. And even in the days of Isaiah [the prophet], they praised God in that divine revelation which was seen in the temple [Isaiah 6:iff]: ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord of hosts, for the heavens and the earth are filled with His praises.’ [Behold] the word which bears the symbol of the Trinity; the unique and united word. The one ‘Lord’ [indicates] the oneness of the nature pertaining to the oneness of the essence. The three times which they said ‘holy’, they demonstrate the unity of the *qnōme* in all things, save for their attributes. For, this also is the custom of the holy angels that in all seasons they symbolize ahead of time according to the divine command concerning things to come about, just as also in the New Covenant they diligently run to fulfill the command of our Savior. In like manner, even here in the invention this canon of the ‘Holy God’ which is recited at vespers and matins in the entire Church of God, those holy angels become mediators and ministers—a word which is [both] spoken and confirmed.

[4] But when the sins and iniquities of various kinds were committed by the inhabitants of the great city of Constantinople, the center of the western realm, while they yet tarried in their sins they were not humbled to hearken the

exhortation of the Holy Scriptures and take refuge in repentance. God who is over all, the lover of mankind, who is the governor of our good things and the caretaker of our souls, because they disturbed the excellent virtues by their offences, He stirred up the ground from under them in justice. Since they blasphemously shook the statues on the earth of the Inhabitant of heaven, He [too] justly caused the metropolis to shake, and for forty days, day and night, they were tortured by this fearful and severe punishment, to the point that they abandoned their city and they dwelt in tents outside near the wilderness.

[5] And while they were thus tormented and wasted away in regards to their dwellings and possessions, their perdition and corruption were present at every hour, evening and morning and at the rising of the sun and its setting, they were not hopeful of living. Then, God who is abundant in mercy and who rules over all and is upright in all things, in His goodness He shone upon them and extended to them the hand of mercy. For, one of the holy angels was revealed in a dream to one of the presbyters of the Great Church,⁸³ a man exceedingly proven in justice, and he said to him: 'Get up quickly and enter the Great Church. There, praise God who is over all by a resounding voice just as this: *Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Have mercy on us*, and straightway the quaking shall cease, and with a great calm shall be to the whole community.'

[6] And when the presbyter rose up and recounted these things to people, the dream was regarded as false, and they did not believe him. In the same way he saw [the dream] the following night, and he spoke these same things to him. And while they could not enter the third night, on account of the fear of the shaking which roared throughout the markets of the city, he appeared to him [again] and said: 'O man, believe me, for I am one of those who stand before the Lord, the Lord of all, and

⁸³ Referring most likely to the cathedral of Hagia Sophia.

I have been sent to proclaim their deliverance. Therefore, do not be afraid to enter the city, for the Lord is near, present and will grant you grace. For, when you enter the church, you will find me before you, [and] as you hear me saying, you say also.'

[7] Then, that blessed presbyter was strengthened and a few entered the city with him. He found the angel standing before the altar and praising God with a loud voice, while saying: 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Have mercy on us.' Then, they began to recite [it]. And when they had recited this canon for the third time, a great calm occurred, and the quaking ceased completely, and the sentence (judgement) which had threatened to destroy and topple the city had quieted. And they found that this canon and this hymn was for them the cause of deliverance and the grantor of their lives. Up to now, we have stated concerning the word of strength of grace and the composition of the spiritual angels, the history of its composition and its glorification.

[8] Therefore, from henceforth let us state the power and interpretation of the 'Holy God.' For, it is also fitting that its intention is made known to those who think upon it. Hearken, therefore, the interpretation of the 'Holy God.'

[9] The name, therefore, of 'holiness', most assuredly, belongs only to God. As it is said in the prophet: 'The Lord, the Lord of lords, has sworn by His holiness' [Amos 4:2], that is, He swore by the immutability of His nature. And the blessed apostle teaches this very thing, saying: '...for our help, that we might participate in His holiness' [Hebrews 12:10]. That is, He brings about all things in mercy, in order to make us worthy of the gift of the immutability which is from Him. And that which the Holy Spirit spoke to the Blessed Mary the Virgin also resembles this, as He announced to her concerning the majesty of our Savior, saying: 'He who is born from you is holy, and shall be called the Son of the Most High' [Luke 1:32]. In that He is 'holy,' it demonstrates concerning His immutability, and that

[He is] 'the Son of the Most High' symbolizes His immortality. In a greatly fitting manner he made use of both, for it befits the Holy One and the Son of God to be above death and change. For this reason, the spiritual ones said 'Holy God,' that is, it is meet to sanctify God at every hour, and the praise of holiness befits Him, for all those things that pertain to Him are without change.

[10] In the same way, the name 'God' is an indicator of the nature. According to the usage of the Hebrews, the name 'God' is interpreted as 'Judge,' others say [it means] 'Creator,' and according to the meaning of the Greeks, it is interpreted as 'the Cause of all things,' and most assuredly, the name 'God' befits the eternal nature. For, the holy angel made use of the name of the nature which befits the essence, while by attaching the [word] 'holy' he desired to sanctify and glorify those [things] which pertain naturally to the nature, even as he had sanctified the glorious nature of the godhead. And by one [attribute] from among all of them he shows concerning all of them. For, he was constrained to say this [as] one from many, for he greatly abbreviated his statement, by adding 'Holy Mighty.' And as he could have in an abbreviated manner stated many thing concerning the nature and also concerning those [attributes] which pertain to the nature, rather by brief statements he (fittingly) stated this one concerning the nature, such as: the living Essence, the Spiritual One, the Hidden One, the Uncircumspect One, and other [terms] such as these. However, he includes all of these by that [statement] 'Holy God.' Concerning the [attributes] of the nature, he could have stated: wise, good, foreknowing, and [all] those which resemble these. But even all of these are included in that which he stated, 'Holy Mighty,' and all of the glorious [attributes] are posited in the name of 'Mighty.'

[11] But after thus speaking briefly, he wisely spoke concerning the nature and concerning those things which pertain to the nature. He added another [term] which does not

indicate what or how the nature is, and neither those natural [attributes], but rather makes known those things which do not exist in God. For this reason he added to the sanctification of his statement: 'Holy Immortal.' And by this he made use of great brevity, and from [among] many [attributes] he posited (only) one. For he could have said 'incorruptible,' 'immutable,' 'immovable,' 'unswerving,' and others like unto these. But, that by immortality he included all of them, and demonstrated not that which God *is*, even by those [terms] which are before it, (but rather) what God *is not*. Rather, instead of saying that there is no mortality to God, i.e. that He is living and without beginning and without end, and death does not cut off the life of His essence, and neither does change draw near. Just as saying that 'God is good and is not evil,' for by saying that He is good, one says that which God is, and by saying He is not evil [one states] that which He is not—it is the very same statement (but) in two variations. For when you posit 'good,' you have shown that which He possesses, and it points to that which He does not possess. In like manner, so the statement 'immortal' which the spiritual one posited [is] instead of saying 'the Living One, whose life does not possess a time when it does not exist.' And to all of these [foregoing statements], he added very fittingly 'Have mercy on us.'

[12] For that nature is the cause of all things, while itself not having a cause, and it is omnipotent and almighty, and from everlasting was not overcome and is not overcome, and He naturally possesses essential life which are above amount and measure, and also fear. He is himself also the Merciful One, who desires our good—from Him let us request that He might turn towards us in mercy. And as by brevity (of speech) here this: 'Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal, have mercy on us.' That is: All holy, Cause of all, Omnipotent, who is unhindered by anything, turn towards us in Your mercy and have pity on our febleness, and support by Your compassion our guiltiness.

That he [i.e. the angel] tripled his word and did not quadruple it, he is demonstrating to them concerning the Trinity. He does not ascribe the *qnōme* to the one Godhead, to the one Mightiness, and to the one Immortality by dividing them. Rather, so that by a three-fold [recitation] his hymn might awake and encourage them to glorify without ceasing the divine Nature—the Almighty and the Immortal—the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

[13] The weak-minded man Caesar Anastasius desired to disturb this canon concerned with the immutability of God the Lord of all, which the angel had recited, for he set up with contention against the truth. For, he had said in his confusion and instability that all those who are in his realm should say in this manner: 'Holy Immortal who was crucified for us, have mercy on us.' Observe the confusion of the statement which disputes itself, and itself throws down those whom it convinces, and by its paradox demonstrates its falsehood, just as 'yes' and 'no.' For, it is not possible that 'yes' and 'no' exist in a single matter in the same statement. And it easy to establish this by the word of Christ our Savior: 'Let your word be yes and no' [Matthew 5:37], 'yes' and 'no' cannot exist in the very same word. Even as the apostle, the doctor of the Church, said: 'God is true, that our word to you was not yes and no, but it was yes in Christ' [2 Corinthians 1:18, 19]. For, the 'yes' obscures the 'no', and the 'no' obscures the 'yes.' Therefore, if you say 'Immortal', be cautious of that [statement] 'Who was crucified for us.' But if you make use of [the statement] 'Who was crucified' (then) delete that of 'Immortal.'

[14] But that rebellious and heretical caesar did not consider the contradiction and stupidity of the statement neither did he honor or submit to the beloved composition of the spiritual one, nor did he fear the ready and reserved judgment of God. Rather, while having trampled upon and destroyed everything, he ordered that they should 'Holy Immortal, who was crucified

for us,' and he encouraged the establishment of this heresy by decrees, warnings and promises.

[15] And while a great many by way of flattery towards him assented to allow [it], and others because the sickness of heresy were born in their soul, and still others because of the hope in vain promises and husks, thus they gave way to and obeyed his word—unto the punishment and perdition of their *qnōmā*. But that city in which the tradition of this canon took place by the Holy Spirit were not persuaded to allow (it), for two reasons: for the its inhabitants say 'We, that is our forefathers, were the recipients of this angelic canon, for it is exceedingly foolish and even iniquitous that while our forefathers received this good tradition from heaven and by it were delivered from the powerful scourge which wipes out from life we should turn back and change the heavenly tradition by the [mere] word of an earthy man, and even the foolishness of the statement and its contradiction does not allow the discerning ones to submit to it. And since we are the royal city, and we reside in the mother of cities [i.e. metropolis] and our city is the head of the whole West, it is not fitting that we should shrink from and fear the word of a king who exists today and does not exist tomorrow. Behold, up to this very day the very city of Constantinople holds to this canon, and sanctifies and praises God by it, even as she received it from the spiritual one. In the same way, neither has the holy city of Jerusalem assented to change anything in it.'

[16] But thus spoke the inhabitants of her [Jerusalem] in opposition to the tyranny of Anastasius the rebel, saying 'We are the city of God and here (it was) that the dispensation of Old Covenant was completed, and also that of the New Covenant was perfected here. With us and among us is the cave of the holy tomb of our Lord, the Golgotha of the crucifixion, the dominical Wood of our salvation, the place of His ascension to heaven, the wonderful Upper Room in which took place the handing-over of the life-giving Mysteries (and) the descent of the Spirit upon

the holy and blessed apostles. We do not fear tyrannical threats, and we are not enticed by vain promises, for we shall accept every torment of yours, but we shall not assent (to change) anything to the heavenly tradition which we received by succession from our forefathers, for we know that its truth is obvious and trustworthy. And regarding 'Holy Immortal, Who was crucified for us,' it is utterly foolishness and iniquity. And behold, even the very city of Jerusalem with all of its authority sanctifies and praises God in this manner, by this canon (just as) the holy angel who was sent by the commandment of the merciful God in order to give aid and save the afflicted from their afflictions had delivered it. And even the western lands beyond Constantinople, those which surround the great city of Rome which is under the authority of the catholicos-patriarch. Even the great city of Rome itself ascribes praise with this canon in this manner, (just as) we say it, that is, as the spiritual one delivered it.

[17] Let us, therefore, be wakeful my beloved, and praise God with the heavenly hosts at [the times of] matins and vespers, and at every hour. Let every one of us at vespers praise and sanctify God by this canon, and then (go to) rest. And at matins let us get up and glorify by it, and then go out to work. That by doing this, joyful seasons may come to us, which bring benefits of the spirit and body, from the gift of the Lord, and quiet and restful nights and the times of day which are full of tranquility and profit. And let us all equally, in overflowing and firm love, and with one undivided and unshakable accord let us say with the ranks and choirs of the spiritual ones: 'Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal, have mercy on us'—to whom be the praise, and to unto me absolution, and His mercy upon His Church unto the ages of ages, amen.

The Cause of the 'Holy God' is ended, and unto God be the praise; amen.

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