

Griechische Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei den Ostsyern

Transmissions



Studies on conditions, processes and dynamics
of textual transmission

Edited by
Rosa Maria Piccione

Volume 3

Griechische Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei den Ostsyrrern



Zum Gedenken an Mār Addai Scher (1867–1915)

Herausgegeben von
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DE GRUYTER

ISBN 978-3-11-065890-3
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-066829-2
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-066734-9
ISSN 2625-4018

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019947321

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

© 2020 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
Coverabbildung: Salone Sansovino © Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana
Satz: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Druck und Bindung: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyter.com

Mār Addai Scher (1867–1915)



Vorwort

Die hier gesammelten Beiträge wurden zum überwiegenden Teil auf dem Kolloquium „*Griechische Wissenschaft und Philosophie bei den Ostsyrern. Kolloquium aus Anlass des 100. Todestags von Mar Addai Scher*“ am 11. und 12. Juni 2015 an der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena gehalten, mit dem wir, auf die für einen Fachkollegen angemessene Weise, des Wirkens von Mär Addai Scher sowie seines grausamen Todes im Rahmen des armenisch-assyrischen Genozids exakt 100 Jahre zuvor gedacht haben. Hinzu gekommen sind neue Beiträge von Martin Heimgartner, Ute Possekkel und Alexander Schilling. Allen Beiträgerinnen und Beiträgern sei herzlich für ihr Engagement gedankt, das auch einen Beitrag zur weiteren Erinnerung an die ostsyrischen Menschen und Traditionen zu einer Zeit leistet, in der die Erforschung des Christlichen Orients im deutschsprachigen Raum um ihr Überleben zu kämpfen hat.

Die Herausgeber danken ferner der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena sowie der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft mit ihrem Projekt „Rezeption und Weiterführung von Philosophie in der Schule von Nisibis. Kommentierung und Analyse von Barhadbeschabbas *Ursache für die Einsetzung der Lehrperiode der Schulen* (um 600)“ für die Finanzierung und vielfältige Förderung von Kolloquium und Band. Zu danken haben wir auch Tim Haubenreißer, M.A., Samuel Klinge, Lisa-Maria Knothe und Annemarie Zöllner für vielfältige Hilfen während des Kolloquiums und bei der Drucklegung. Nicht zuletzt sei Rosa-Maria Piccione und den übrigen Herausgebern der Reihe „*Transmissions*“ für die Annahme des Manuskripts ebenso gedankt wie Serena Pirrotta und Marco Michele Acquafredda vom Verlag De Gruyter für die fachliche Betreuung sowie Anne Stroka für die Betreuung der Drucklegung des Manuskripts.

Jena, im Juli 2019

M. P. A. S.

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Emiliano Fiori

Dionysius the Areopagite and the East Syrian Mystics: The Phantom of a Greek Heritage

1 Introduction

One of the major features of East Syrian literature was the impressive blooming of a so-called ‘mystical’ (but we should more correctly say ‘ascetic-mystical’) literature in the East Syrian Church between the 6th and the 8th centuries. This particular current of literature, which flourished exclusively within monastic circles, reflected intensively on the phenomenology, the grounds, and the mystical aims of the ascetic effort. The sheer volume of writings would be enough witness to its relevance. But most of all, this literature represents a highly original moment of synthesis in the millennial and specifically Christian history of a peculiar way of thinking and writing: the monastic literature, which had ramifications all over the Mediterranean space and beyond, and which is still a vibrant practice in contemporary Orthodox Christianity. The originality and the autonomous force of the Syriac synthesis manifests, among other things, in the elaboration of a specific *forma mentis*, expressing itself through formulaic phrases and concepts that often recur from one author to the other,¹ in a remarkable conflation of scholastic and properly monastic components,² and in the tense relation some of these authors, or their writings, had with the hierarchy.³

The most important authors are well known to the specialized audience,⁴ and sometimes even to a wider public: Abraham of Natpar (6th century), Martyrios-Sahdōnā (7th century), Isaac of Nineveh (7th century), Dādīšō‘ Qaṭrāyā (7th century), John of Dalyātā (7th–8th centuries), Simon of Taybuteh (7th–8th centuries), Joseph Ḥazzāyā (8th century).

The texts of these writers have been widely studied, to such an extent that it is the only thematic sector of Syriac literature overall to have enjoyed an exhaustive bibliographical charting.⁵ There is no lack of good or excellent editions of the most

1 I shall show an example of this phenomenon in the present contribution.

2 Not sufficiently studied so far, but see for example Bettolo 2013, 35–46, and Bettolo 2011.

3 On this see in particular Berti 2011b.

4 For a list of less known authors see Chialà 2011, 65.

5 Kessel, Pinggéra 2011.

Note: The present article is a thoroughly revised and expanded version of Fiori 2014b.

important texts, with some relevant exceptions.⁶ Studies on the thought and spirituality of the authors are numerous.

Still, comprehensive and organic interpretations of this literature as a historical-cultural phenomenon are scant. In fact, only Beulay's famous book of 1987, "La lumière sans forme", can be considered to be such a study, although it is overwhelmingly, and not always convincingly, focused on the Greek and Syriac sources of the East Syrian mystical writers. Beulay's great erudition, deep knowledge of manuscript sources, and spiritual penetration, however, continue to make his monograph a valid reference book for any further exploration of the Syriac mystical territory. Other volumes devoted to a more or less comprehensive overview of the Syriac mystics are mostly fine collections of essays,⁷ but do not seek an overarching hermeneutical key. The only recent attempt was undertaken in 2010 by Sabino Chialà, who tried to understand whether the mystical season of the East Syrian Church can be interpreted as the expression of a school, or more simply as an 'epoch'. Chialà starts by rejecting a much earlier interpretation of the French scholar François Nau (1864–1931), who had grounded the mystical inclinations of the East Syrians in their Iranian origin, whereas the West Syrians, who were more purely "Semitic", would have kept to a more "realistic" worldview.⁸ Moreover, the West Syrians would rather have concentrated on the study of Greek philosophy and sciences, with which they had been in direct contact from their beginning.

Chialà, on the contrary, singles out three historical and cultural features that can better motivate the appearance of the East Syrian ascetic-mystical literature:

First, Abraham of Kaškar's (d. 586 or 588) reformation of East-Syrian coenobitic monasticism in the first half of the 6th century, which brought to the foundation of the Great Monastery on Mount Izlā and to the reorganization of previously existing monastic institutions.⁹ Most of the major protagonists of the East Syrian mystical season belonged to monasteries founded by Abraham or somehow affected by his reformation, and were often in contact with one another.

Second, a marked attention to Greek ascetic literature, that is to such authors as Evagrius, pseudo-Macarius, Mark the Monk or Isaiah of Scete and to a limited number of other authors, in particular Theodore of Mopsuestia, which were widely read, quoted, and – which is a peculiarity of East-Syrian ascetic literature – commented upon: The most famous cases are that of Babai the Great's commentary on Evagrius' *Chapters on Knowledge* and of Dāḏišō' Qaṭrāyā's commentary on Isaiah of Scete's *Asceticon*.

⁶ Critical editions of Isaac of Nineveh's *Chapters of Knowledge*, of Simon of Taibūteh's *Book of Grace*, and of much of Joseph Ḥazzāyā's work are still missing.

⁷ See the impressive and little-known volume (*Germanicum est, non legitur*) of Blum 2009, 3–477, which is more a gallery of portraits, and the important collective volume edited by Desreumaux 2011.

⁸ Chialà 2011, 66.

⁹ The reference work is Chialà 2005.

Third, a peculiar way of approaching the Greek sources. The ascetic-mystical writers consciously tried to differentiate themselves from the scholastic approach with its focus on biblical exegesis that was so characteristic of the East Syrian Church, especially in the great school of Nisibis.¹⁰ Having attended a school was often considered a prerequisite to enter a monastery,¹¹ and education was evidently held in high esteem by monks. Here, as also in the West Syrian Church, where famous schools were established in monasteries such as Qennešrē, the monasteries themselves hosted schools with the notable exception of the Great Monastery on Mount Izlā, of Bet ‘Abē, and of Rabban-Šabur. Notwithstanding this, the monks accurately distinguished their scholastic culture from the monastic attitude to literacy. The latter was defined by Dāḏīšō‘ Qaṭrāyā as “spiritual interpretation” (*pūššāqā rūḥānāyā*).¹² It was this attitude, rather than the different object, that distinguished the monastic culture. This is most visible precisely in the choice of writing commentaries on the Greek spiritual Fathers, applying a typical scholastic literary practice and a typical genre, the commentary, to a different category of texts, but transposing it on a different level of thought and problems. Of course, these monks, as they had mostly attended schools outside the monasteries, brought their scholastic culture into their own writings.¹³ But the crucial point is that they were explicitly aware of representing another form of culture – not only with its own approach, but, correspondingly, with its own typical literary genres, especially, as we have seen, the patristic commentary and the collections of chapters on ascetic topics. In conclusion, Chialà maintains that the development of ascetic-mystical writing practices among East Syrian monks can be seen as a “school”, in the sense of a coherent line of thought shared by numerous authors often in contact with each other, although each one with his personal and important variants, and at the same time as an epoch, since this line characterizes a limited period of time in which the geographic and intellectual exchange between monastic personalities linked to Abraham’s reformation is particularly close.

Chialà’s is the most advanced interpretation of the phenomenon to date. It has a remarkable historiographical strength and can hardly be challenged, although further features may certainly be singled out. However, it is not my aim here to elaborate on it, and I limit myself to expounding its main lines as a general and ideal introduction to my following argument: Indeed, in what follows I am going to present a test case that has much to do with Chialà’s typology. It involves the East Syrian reading of a Greek author – Dionysius the Areopagite – in ascetic circles, and through the discovery of hitherto unnoticed textual connections between Isaac of Nineveh and Joseph

10 On this institution it is sufficient to mention the classic monographs Becker 2006b, Vööbus 1965a, and Macina 1982/83.

11 Chialà 2011, 72f., citing the Rules written by Abraham’s successor, Dāḏīšō‘ of Izlā (rule 7, Italian Translation in Chialà 2005, 172).

12 In the preface to his *Commentary on Isaiah* (ed. Draguet).

13 See for example most recently Bettiolo 2011.

Ḥazzāyā, it further strengthens the picture of the intensive sharing of a repertory of motifs – in a word, of a “school” – and it highlights the peculiar quality of the East Syrian ascetic approach to an important Greek source.

In the present contribution I shall tackle the question of the Dionysian influence on Isaac the Syrian and Joseph Ḥazzāyā in particular and, more briefly and tentatively, on the East Syrian mystics in general, reopening a field that has not been explored further since the pioneering studies of Robert Beulay in the Eighties. Beulay described the East Syrian attitude towards the Areopagite as follows: “One could say that Dionysius was considered a teacher to read and possibly to comment upon; they [the ascetic authors] only retained some primary or secondary elements from him, but without sticking to the properly doctrinal aspect of his teaching.”¹⁴ On Isaac in particular he stated: “His borrowings from Pseudo-Dionysius regard [in comparison with those borrowed from Evagrius or John the Solitary] less essential topics” and “if they are drawn from Dionysius, they do not seem to have been really assimilated.”¹⁵ Beulay did much to ground these statements on the doctrinal level. Furthermore, he correctly noticed that any influence of Dionysius is absent from the writings of such mystics as Martyrius-Sahdōnā, Dāḏišōʿ Qaṭrāyā, Šubḥalmāran and Nestorius of Nuḥadrā. A meaningful exception may be represented by John of Dalyātā, but I will deliberately exclude this author from the scope of my research, as his case is particularly complex and would require a separate investigation. Here I intend to build on Beulay’s correct intuition, and to find a reason for Dionysius’ marginality, in particular by pointing out the peculiar way his text was spread in the Syriac speaking world.

I will limit myself to the works of Isaac of Nineveh and Joseph Ḥazzāyā as they offer more material to the discussion than other ascetic-mystical writers do. Thus, an investigation of these two can be considered to be an exemplary case study for the greatest part of the literature they represent. Joseph Ḥazzāyā, whose work is in a certain sense the systematic summary of the previous ascetical literature of the East Syrian Church, is particularly significant in this regard. The exposition will be divided into four parts. In the first part, I will study the question from both a literary and a linguistic standpoint, taking into consideration the very few passages in the works of Isaac which explicitly quote or at least very likely point to Dionysius, and going into the detail of single phrases that Isaac shares with Dionysius. In the second part, taking another passage as occasion, I will shift to the level of the possible doctrinal influence of Dionysius on Isaac as far as the knowledge of God is concerned: What kind of motives may Isaac have inherited from Dionysius? In this regard particular attention will be paid to the interaction between Evagrius and Dionysian “mysticism”.

¹⁴ Beulay 1987, 161.

¹⁵ Beulay 1987, 208. More radically and even more appropriately Rucker 1936, 46: “Seine [scil. Dionysius’] Werke sind [...] merkwürdigerweise nur von den Monophysiten stärker benutzt worden; [among the Nestorians] wird sein Name nur selten genannt”.

In the third part, I shall try to highlight the presence of Dionysian motifs in Joseph Ḥazzāyā. In the conclusion, I will speak about the actual purport of the Areopagite in the construction of the East Syrian mystical and ascetical discourse.

2 Dionysius: An Important Authority for Isaac?

It is commonly assumed that Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁶ belongs to the authors Isaac had read and who had influenced his views on certain points of doctrine. Admittedly, Dionysius' importance for Isaac must not be overestimated:¹⁷ It is immediately evident that his main authorities are others. Yet it remains a commonplace that the Areopagite's works belong to those of which Isaac had a first-hand knowledge. I will try to demonstrate that Dionysius' presence in Isaac is even less important than one would normally expect.

The first striking feature as to Dionysius' presence in Isaac's writings is the extreme paucity of direct citations: in fact, only *one* citation is detectable in what remains to us of Isaac's work. Whereas other acknowledged authorities, for example Theodore of Mopsuestia and Evagrius of Pontus, not to mention the Desert Fathers, are quoted with relative frequency, only in one passage does Isaac introduce an explicit quotation from Dionysius the Areopagite:¹⁸ in Discourse 22 of the First Part.¹⁹ This Discourse deals with the progress of prayer, which is transformed into something else when it reaches the limits of nature, to such an extent that it is called "non-prayer" and "pure prayer". Using a terminology that is one of the most permanent legacies of the 5th century Syriac author John of Apamea, Isaac also calls this extreme step of the ascetic life "spirituality" (*rūḥānūtā*). At this stage, the holy men "dwell in stupor (*temhā*)" and enjoy a "simple knowledge", which is beyond any composition and any distinction, so that every sensible thing, like shapes, forms and color, and every name or sign is absent. In order to explain the limits of the power of our intellect, which enacts distinctions and definitions, Isaac relies on a quotation taken from Dionysius' treatise on the *Divine Names*, IV, 11, and introduced by the phrase "according to the word of the holy Dionysius".²⁰ Dionysius says that "we use signs, syllables, conventional names and words on behalf of the senses. But when by spiritual working our soul is moved unto divine things, then the senses and their workings are superfluous

¹⁶ Throughout the present contribution, Dionysius is quoted according to the critical edition of Suchla, Heil, and Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum I-II* (Works 1–2).

¹⁷ See for example Chialà 2002, 86.

¹⁸ On the possibility that Dionysius' Epistle 7 was known to Isaac, and that allusions to it are detectable in his work, see the Conclusions.

¹⁹ Isaac of Nineveh, *On religious perfection* (163–175 Bedjan); *Mystic Treatises* (111–118 Wensinck); *Ascetic Homilies* (204–213 Gallo, Bettiolo).

²⁰ Transl. Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises* (114 Wensinck).

to us.” This doctrine is quite traditional.²¹ Isaac supports his argument with another quotation, from Paul’s *Second letter to the Corinthians* 12, 2: “Whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows”, where the apostle makes reference to the “man in Christ” who was “caught up to the third heaven”. The quotation helps Isaac to focus his statement that the mind does not even know its own condition when it has reached the stage of non-prayer. As to the Dionysian quotation, not only is it the only literal quotation from the Areopagite, it is also the only case in which Isaac mentions the name of Dionysius. This quotation is particularly interesting here, not so much for its content as for the fact that the same passage is also used by Joseph Ḥazzāyā in the fifth Mēmṛā of his *Book of Questions and Answers*, and in the extant works by Joseph too, as we shall see, this is the only textual quotation from the writings of Dionysius. As I will show later by commenting Joseph’s quotation, the context of the Dionysian citation in the two authors is very similar. Even more interestingly, this quotation is found, not as a citation but as a de-contextualized excerpt, in a florilegium of Dionysian citations in the manuscript *Sinai St. Catherine* Syr. 24.²² Now, it is noteworthy that this manuscript also contains the First Part of Isaac of Nineveh; moreover, it contains a letter to a monk by a certain “Simon” which is actually an abridged version of Philoxenos of Mabbug’s *Letter to Patrikios*, the Dionysian florilegium, an anthology of passages from Athanasius’ works and some homilies by John of Dalyatha, whose name nevertheless is not mentioned. The Dionysian anthology is then part, here, of a collection of writings which are quite clearly intended for a monastic readership, and it cannot be overlooked that in this manuscript the passage from *Divine Names* IV, 11 occurs both as a quotation in Isaac and as an independent excerpt in the florilegium. In summary: Firstly, this passage is the only Dionysian one to be literally quoted by Isaac and Joseph Ḥazzāyā. Secondly, it is found in a monastic Dionysian “repertoire”, as a discrete unity. Thirdly, this repertoire in its turn is found in a monastic manuscript containing Isaac’s Discourse where the Dionysian passage is quoted. All this evidence raises the suspicion, although of course is not enough to confirm, that this passage was not read by Isaac nor by Joseph in the works of Dionysius, but in a florilegium similar to, if not coincident with, the one found in the manuscript *Sinai St. Catherine* Syr. 24. It could even be that Joseph was influenced by Isaac when quoting it, rather than having read it in an anthology.

²¹ See for example Evagrius Ponticus, *Gnosticus* 27 (132–133 Guillaumont): “Do not ever define the divine. Definitions are proper to begotten and compound beings”.

²² Short descriptions in Lewis 1894, 41; Clark 1952, 15; Kamil 1970, 153. See now Kessel 2010 for a thorough discussion of the manuscript. Let us remark here incidentally that the quotation is also found in Babai the Great’s *Commentary on Evagrius Ponticus’ “Kephalaia Gnostica”*. For this see 142 Frankenberg, corresponding to Vat. Syr. 178, 66v. The quotation from *Divine Names* IV, 11 appears then to be a recurrent topos of East Syrian mystic literature, independently of any first-hand knowledge of Dionysius. In Babai’s case, however, this is not the only literal quotation from Dionysius, since he also quotes *Mystical Theology* I, 3-II (see here below, n. 61 and Fiori 2014a [CSCO Syr. 252], XXII).

Another passage where Dionysius' doctrines would seem to be detectable in Isaac is Discourse 25 of the First Part,²³ an interesting piece of writing describing the hierarchical distinctions between the spiritual beings, which are not spatial but depend on the deepness of their penetration into the primal light. Here Isaac speaks at some length of the angels, but the only evoked authority is that of Diodore of Tarsus:²⁴ This cannot be but meaningful. Whenever Isaac discusses the problem of the hierarchical order of beings and especially of the vertical transmission of knowledge, which is passed on by the higher angels to the lower ones and by the latter to humans, Dionysius is never mentioned, the authorities being different: Diodore in this case, Evagrius in the very important passage of Isaac's *Chapters on Knowledge*²⁵, III, 57, which is the centre of a group of chapters on revelations: III, 55–60.²⁶ Furthermore, as recently pointed out by Bettio²⁷, Isaac's doctrine on the transmission of revelations as formulated in Discourse 19 of the First Part²⁸ widely and explicitly draws upon Theodore of Mopsuestia, rather than on other authors. Thus, Patrik Hagman is undoubtedly correct in remarking that Isaac is not so much Dionysian in this regard, and to support this statement he refers precisely to Discourse 19 and *Chapters of Knowledge* III, 57: "While Dionysios the Areopagite maintains that all revelation comes from the mediation of heavenly beings", Hagman writes, "Isaac claims that only a certain, lesser kind of revelation comes to humans this way. The two different kinds of revelations are distinct in both content and value. Through the mediation of angels come revelations about the [...] life in this world [...] the revelations that come from the Holy Spirit, however, are revelations regarding the divine Nature." Related to this would be another important difference: Whereas for Dionysius hierarchy will not be transcended in the *eschaton*, for Isaac it is just a temporary, educational device, and at the end of time everyone will receive all knowledge directly from the Spirit.²⁹ But Hagman views Isaac's doctrine as a "reworking" and correction of a Dionysian influence. I think on the contrary that the Areopagite is simply out of question here: Despite the common subject, that is the angels and the transmission of knowledge, Isaac's ideas about it seem to draw on different authorities: Diodore, Theodore and, regarding the differences stressed by Hagman, Evagrius in particular. At the end of *Chapters* III, 57 Isaac explicitly quotes Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika* IV, 51 and V, 63:

23 Isaac of Nineveh, *On religious perfection* (182–188 Bedjan); *Mystic Treatises* (124–128 Wensinck); *Ascetic Discourses*, 222–227 (Gallo, Bettio).

24 Wensinck 1923, 126: "Perhaps those which are entrusted with magistracy and authority are smaller in number than those which are compelled to obey their commandment, says the master of teachers Diodorus Rhetor."

25 See Isaac of Nineveh, *Spiritual Homilies* (133–136 Bettio).

26 For the Evagrian citations, see below.

27 Bettio 2011, 102–110.

28 Isaac of Nineveh, *On religious perfection* (154–61 Bedjan); *Mystic Treatises* (103–109 Wensinck); *Ascetic Discourses* (194–200 Gallo, Bettio).

29 Hagman 2010, 183–184.

[...] in the second natural contemplation some are powerful and other subject to powers; in the Monad, on the contrary, there are no powerful ones nor subject ones, but all will be gods [IV, 51]; in the contemplation of beings there are ascent and descent [...] but it is not so in the contemplation of the holy Trinity [...] in which there are no ascent nor descent [V, 63].³⁰

In the last part of our Discourse 25, however, a mention is made of the division of the angels into three orders, each comprising three ranks, which is very similar to Dionysius' *Heavenly Hierarchy* (6th and 7th chapters):

All heavenly beings are named by the divine instruction with nine designations: it divides these three classes each into three subdivisions. The first comprises thrones exalted, high and holy; and Cherubs with many eyes; and Seraphs with many wings. The [second] tripartite class [comprises] Lords and Powers and Magistrates. The third: Princes and Archangels and Angels. According to the meaning of the Hebrew, these terms are to be interpreted thus: Seraph means those who cause heat and fire. Cherubs means magnitude of knowledge and effusion of wisdom.³¹

These lines are indeed a slightly reworded translation of the above-mentioned Dionysian passages.³² In this regard, two remarks must be made: Firstly, the content of these passages, that is the division of the angels into nine ranks and an explanation of their names, does indeed draw on Dionysius. However, it was highly schematized, simplified, and traditional in the Church of the East, and was generally transmitted in various but similar forms as standard exegetical material of scholastic origin to comment upon such passages as Eph. 1, 21 (“far above all rule and authority and power and dominion”) or Col. 1, 16 (“for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities”). Normally, the explanations for the name of the ranks in this traditional material differ considerably from those found in Dionysius; to our knowledge, only in the present passage from Isaac's Discourse 25 is the explanation of the names of Seraphs and Cherubs so close to Dionysius'. One century after Isaac, we find this scholastic angelology, for example, in the *Scholia* of Theodore bar Kōnī³³ and later on in the exegetical works of Īšō' dāq̄ of Merw³⁴ or in the anonymous exegetical compilation on

³⁰ Evagrius Ponticus, Kephalaia Gnostika (158–159 and 204–205 Guillaumont, respectively).

³¹ Transl. in Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises* (126 Wensinck).

³² For a comparison, see Wensinck 1923, LIII.

³³ Theodore bar Kōnī, *Scholium* (Recension from Seert) (71–72 Hespel, Draguet), gives the following reconstruction: “Le bienheureux Paul, en fait, les divise en neuf catégories : les *trônes*, qui sont les honorés ; les *seigneuries*, qui sont ceux qui dominent les royaumes ; les *principautés*, qui sont les dirigeants de l'air ; les *dominations*, qui dominent les peuples et chacun des hommes ; les *puissances*, dont la vue est terrible, c'est-à-dire qu'ils *peuvent par la puissance* ; les *séraphins*, qui proclament saint ; les *chérubins* qui sont interprétés les porteurs ; les *vigilants* qui sont les gardiens ; et les *anges* qui sont les messagers [...] Denys les divise en trois *ousiai*, et il divise chacune d'elles en trois ordres”. See also *ibidem* 261.

³⁴ See Gibson, *Commentaries* vol. 5, ܘܫܘܢܘܬܐ (text), 65–66 (version).

the New Testament of the manuscript (*olim*) *Diyarbakır Chaldean Archbishopric 22*.³⁵ Even in the 13th century, the same standard material is still used by Solomon of Basra in his *Book of the Bee*, chapter 5 (6) on angels.³⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that this scholastic material, which was constantly reshaped, could be more or less similar to Dionysius' *Heavenly Hierarchy*. In Isaac's Discourse 25, it is closer to it than in other sources available to us. In this sense, Isaac's knowledge of these angelic doctrines may be purely scholastic and not at all derive from a direct reading of Dionysius' angelological treatise: And we do know that Isaac must have had a general notion of the classification of angels into nine ranks, because he names it *en passant* in the Third Part (VII, 16).³⁷

Secondly, however, I would even tend to exclude that the part of the Discourse to which these passages belong can really be attributed to Isaac, because from this point on the structure of the Discourse resembles more a collection of glosses than an organic piece of writing.³⁸ First of all, and this seems to me an important argument, it is not usual for Isaac to avoid mentioning by name the author of a literal quotation. Moreover, within the actual body of the Discourse Isaac does not seem to be interested in an orderly classification of angels. Finally, given the traditional nature of these doctrines, it is quite likely that some reader or learned copyist would have easily added some marginalia to Isaac's text, in order to bring it into line with the scholastic teachings on angelology.

Remarking the absence of an extensive reference to Dionysius and of any significant influence of his doctrine in the treatment of the angels is of course an argument *e silentio*, but quite a strong one if we consider that an assiduous reader of the *corpus dionysiacum* would hardly have overlooked Dionysius's teaching on this point: At least he would have relied more heavily on it.

³⁵ At page 945 of this manuscript we read the following commentary on Eph. 1, 21 which is actually an abridged version of the same commentary found in ʿĪšō' dāq̄ (see previous note): "He says *who is above all the principalities, the authorities etc* about all the spiritual natures, those of which Dionysius speaks, and which he divides into three *ousiai*, and into nine ranks: each one is threefold; and one is superior to the other. The principalities are governors of the air: 'principalities' (*archas*) [means], in Syriac, 'heads'. The authorities because they have authority over nations and over each one of the human beings. The angels are messengers. The [name] 'Cherubs' is interpreted as 'bearers'. The Seraphs [are so called] because they are sanctifiers. The watchers because they are guardians. The thrones because they are (honoured); the lordships because they rule over kingdoms". The text is still unpublished. For a general description of the manuscript with further bibliographical information, see [Anonymus], *Commentary on Genesis and Exodus*. A critical edition with English translation of the commentaries on *Galatians* to *Colossians* is being prepared by Emiliano Fiori and Maya Goldberg.

³⁶ Solomon of Basra, *The Book of the Bee* (9 Budge).

³⁷ Isaac of Nineveh, *Third Part of the Homilies* (48 [text]/73 [version] Chialà): "Le nove schiere delle coorti degli esseri spirituali".

³⁸ See Gallo, Bettolo, in: Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetic Homilies*, 226, note 3.

3 Linguistic Parallels?

Isaac shares some phrases with the Syriac version of Dionysius made in the early 6th century by the chief physician of Rēš'aynā, Sergius, and preserved in a unique copy in the manuscript *Sinai St. Catherine* Syr. 52.³⁹ Many of these phrases were singled out by Sebastian Brock, and I found some more when preparing the critical edition of Sergius' version. In itself, this could be a relevant hint at Isaac's use of Dionysius, and even at Isaac's deep meditation of the Dionysian text, which could have led him to assimilate Dionysius' language to a microscopic degree. But here, too, a problem arises, because of the simple remark that Isaac shares this language not only with the Areopagite but, most of all, with the Syriac versions of Evagrius. There is almost no phrase which Isaac and Dionysius have in common, that does not have at least one parallel in the Syriac versions of Evagrius' writings. Some examples:

- the phrase “holy light” (*nūhrā qaddišā*), found in Dionysius (*Bibliothèque Nationale de France* Syr. 378,⁴⁰ f. 54v) and Isaac, Second Part 9, 7,⁴¹ is also in the Syriac translation of Evagrius' epistles;⁴²
- the “natural movements” (*zaw'ē kyānāyē*), in Dionysius BNF Syr. 378, f. 42r and Sin. Syr. 52,⁴³ f. 75r, and in Isaac, Second Part 20, 2,⁴⁴ is present in Evagrius (ms. *British Library* Add. 14578, f. 92v, *On the distinctions of thoughts*);
- “true knowledge” (*īda'tā šarrirtā*): Dionysius ff. 14r, 108v, and 112r (from now on, Dionysius is always cited after the ms. Sin. Syr. 52); in Isaac, Second Part 36, 2⁴⁵ and Third Part 11, 32,⁴⁶ it is found as the “knowledge of truth” (*īda'tā da-šrārā*), a very frequent phrase in Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika* version S₁, I, 14. 52. 89 and *passim*;⁴⁷
- for the phrase “movements of the intellects” (*zaw'ē q-hawnē*), which is found in Dionysius, f. 15r and Isaac, Second Part 36, 2,⁴⁸ Brock refers to Evagrius, *Gnosticus* 120 (syriac version);⁴⁹

³⁹ A critical edition of the first part of Sergius' translation is available in Dionysius Areopagita, Works, ed. Fiori.

⁴⁰ This manuscript, containing a quire of the Sinai Syr. 52 (see below), is described in Briquel-Chatonnet 1997, 69–77.

⁴¹ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (28 [text]/35 [version] Brock).

⁴² Confer Evagrius Ponticus, Works (568 and 608 Frankenberg).

⁴³ This precious manuscript, the only witness to Sergius of Reš'aynā's translation of the Dionysian Corpus, is described in Lewis 1894, 51; Clark 1952, 18; Kamil 1970, 153.

⁴⁴ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (95 [text]/106 [version] Brock).

⁴⁵ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies 145 [text]/157 [version] Brock).

⁴⁶ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies 92 [text]/128–129, n. 68 [version] Brock).

⁴⁷ Evagrius Ponticus, Gnostic Chapters, 22, 42, 58, and *passim* (Guillaumont).

⁴⁸ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (145 [text]/157 [version] Brock).

⁴⁹ Confer Evagrius Ponticus, Works (548 Frankenberg).

- In Dionysius, ff. 15v, 82v, and 111v, we find “holy notions” (*yad’ātā qaddiṣātā*): it is also found in Isaac, Second Part 17, 11,⁵⁰ and once again it is already an Evagrius phrase (at least once in the Syriac version of the Epistles⁵¹ and repeatedly in *Kephalaia Gnostika*, II, 34 (sing., both versions), III, 72 (sing., S₁ only), VI, 27 (sing., S₁ only).⁵²
- In Dionysius, f. 16v, we read “spiritual contemplation” (*te’awryā d-rūḥ*), to translate *noēsis*: Brock has noticed that the phrase recurs elsewhere in Sergius’ Dionysian translation at f. 98v, and that it has relevant parallels in Evagrius’ *Kephalaia Gnostika*, often only in the expurgated version: II, 13.61; III, 24; IV, 47 (also in S₂); V, 16.74; VI, 63.65.⁵³ Brock also points out its presence in Isaac (Second Part, 7, 1⁵⁴).
- In Dionysius, f. 77r, we read the phrase “with your persistent meditation” (*b-hergāk tkībā*): this is also found in the Syriac version of Evagrius’ *Gnostikos*, 147 (Greek 45)⁵⁵ and in Isaac, Second Part 22, 6.⁵⁶

Furthermore, in his introduction to the Second Part Sebastian Brock singled out a very small number of exceptions to this general rule, showing that five or six (one is found in the title of a Discourse) phrases are not found in the Syriac translations of Evagrius (*rāzā d-pulḥānā*; *zaw’ā rūḥānā*; *zaw’ā d-ḥirūtā*; *sūkkālā ḥattītā*; *te’awryā alāḥāytā*; *te’awryā gnīztā*).⁵⁷ But here we are left with a difficult question regarding their actual Dionysian provenance. These phrases are indeed so limited in number that it may be asked: why should Isaac assimilate some isolated phrases from a work of which he seems to ignore, or to overlook, the overall doctrine and contents? This question is all the more urgent if we consider that some of the latter six phrases occur, if not in Evagrius, in other authors as well, as Brock has pointed out in his annotation to the Second Part.

4 “Ignorance” according to Dionysius and Isaac

Thus if we rely on a literary and linguistic analysis, we should conclude that there is little influence of Dionysius on Isaac. What we have seen so far, however, admittedly kept us at the margins of Isaac’s doctrine, although his angelology has already been

⁵⁰ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (83 [text]/94 [version] Brock).

⁵¹ Confer Evagrius Ponticus, Works (572 Frankenberg).

⁵² Respectively Evagrius Ponticus, Gnostic Chapters, 74–75; 126; 228 (Guillaumont).

⁵³ Evagrius Ponticus, Gnostic Chapters, 66 and 84 (II, 13.61); 106–7 (III, 24); 157 (IV, 47); 182–183 and 208–209 (V, 16.74); 244–245 (VI, 63.65) (Guillaumont).

⁵⁴ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (19 [text]/23 [version] Brock).

⁵⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, Works (552 Frankenberg).

⁵⁶ Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (107 [text]/119 [version] Brock).

⁵⁷ Brock, in: Isaac of Nineveh, Second Part of the Homilies (version), XXXIX.

touched upon: We have to go into Isaac's thought to really see whether Dionysius, even if not on the level of explicit quotations and mentions, left any trace on his theological and spiritual sensibility. For the sake of a first sounding, we will concentrate on a test case raising a central issue that was repeatedly tackled by scholars and can be seen as representative for a better understanding of the relation between Dionysius and Isaac. As was already noted by Paolo Bettiolo in commenting upon one of the *Chapters on Knowledge* (IV, 48) of the Second Part,⁵⁸ Isaac seems to be making reference to a Dionysian doctrine when he writes:

What comes immediately from contemplations or other revelations is not the complete cessation of thinking and the migration of nature from knowledge to non-knowledge which is superior to knowledge, as the Fathers say, but peace and joy accompany the rapture and fervor of the heart.

Here Isaac is hinting at his view on the degrees of knowledge. According to him (First Part 52,⁵⁹ Third Part 13⁶⁰) there are three places of knowledge: within nature, outside nature, above nature. The first two forms of knowledge correspond to both forms of natural knowledge in Evagrius: the knowledge of things and of their inner reasons. These two forms depend on human action, whereas the third is God's gift. Now the phrase "non-knowledge which is superior to knowledge", does sound Dionysian: it is no literal quotation, but it is very close to what we read at the end of the first chapter of the *Mystical Theology* (I, 3, 144, 14): "the non-operation (of knowledge), which is better than operation". Moreover, the terminology (non-knowledge, *lā īda' tā*) is definitely reminiscent of many Dionysian passages in Sergius of Rēš'aynā's version, and is found in the immediate vicinity of the same passage. Once again, this passage is present in the florilegium of the manuscript *Sinai St. Catherine* Syr. 24, and it is also found in Babai's introduction to Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika*:⁶¹ Therefore, if Isaac actually relies on it, we would have another case of a Dionysian passage quoted by two East Syrian authors and, at the same time, present in the same monastic anthology so that, once again, it would seem very likely that Isaac is just assimilating an isolated "element", as Beulay put it, of Dionysius' doctrine because he finds it in an isolated fragment of his writings. But the fact that this element enters Isaac's works as an isolated chunk, without presupposing an organic reading, meditation and, as it were, digestion of the Dionysian doctrine of mystical knowledge as a whole, is further and more relevantly confirmed by the fact that "non-knowledge" is here explicitly rejected by Isaac. Dionysius' doctrine of ignorance as superior to knowledge was very likely conceived as a correction to Evagrius' doctrine, which lies behind the other degrees in the progress of knowledge according to Isaac, and according to

⁵⁸ Bettiolo, in: Isaac of Nineveh, *Spiritual Homilies*, 168–169.

⁵⁹ Isaac of Nineveh, *On religious perfection* (377–379 Bedjan); *Mystic Treatises* (253–261 Wensinck).

⁶⁰ Isaac of Nineveh, *Third Part of the Homilies* (105–111 [text]/145–153 [version] Chialà).

⁶¹ Babai the Great, *Commentary on Evagrius Ponticus' Kephalaia Gnostika* (40 Frankenberg). The work is preserved in ms. *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* Syr. 178, the passage is found at f. 18rab.

which the intellect, at the highest level, *does know* God in a positive sense – because God is himself knowledge –, although this knowledge is infinitely inadequate to God and in a sense can be called ignorance (*Practicus* 87).⁶² Admittedly, the motif of non-knowledge is present elsewhere in Isaac (First Part Discourse 52, Third Part Discourse 13, as I said, but also in *Chapters on knowledge* III, 85⁶³), but firstly it is not really pervasive: one may easily suppose that Isaac occasionally accepted the term “non-knowledge” into his own vocabulary because of the parallel it offered to his characteristic terminology of “non-prayer”,⁶⁴ with the same function of stressing the human limits; secondly, Chialà rightly remarks that, if this actually had something to do with the apophatic doctrine of Dionysius, the latter nevertheless implies an ecstatic move of the mind which both Evagrius and Isaac do not contemplate in their doctrines of knowledge.⁶⁵ In Isaac in particular, non-knowledge is above nature and this might be seen as Dionysian as well, since in Sergius’ translation the typical Dionysian adjective *hyperousios*, referring to the transcendent aspect of God, is rendered as “above nature”, *l’el men kyānā*⁶⁶, but still it is God’s gift which operates within man’s nature. Moreover, the characteristic sign of non-knowledge in Isaac is not ecstasy but wonder, *temhā*, and this is not at all a Dionysian motif. Drawing upon Chialà, I would tend to assume that Isaac does have something in common with Dionysius’ doctrine on this point, but what they share is just the vocabulary. We should not think that a distinctively Dionysian doctrine made its way into Isaac’s thought, which would establish a “tension” with the Evagrian background, as Bettiole styled it.⁶⁷ To conclude, whether or not the philological level is involved in this case, that is the hypothesis that Isaac was using an anthological excerpt on “non-knowledge”, and did not read the whole of Dionysius’ works, the doctrinal level here is more decisive. Isaac could well have elaborated the phrase “non-knowledge which is superior to knowledge” on the basis of an anthological fragment from the *Mystical Theology*, but, whether he read this Dionysian passage or not, he appropriated this concept for purposes that are at any rate remarkably at odds with the meaning of Dionysius’ doctrine of knowledge.

62 Evagrius Ponticus, *Practicus* (678–679 Guillaumont); On Self-Cognition (237–239 Bettiole): “Of the passions there will one day be complete destruction, but in the case of ignorance they say one form will have an end, the other will not.” Translation from Evagrius of Pontus, *Ascetic Works* (111 Sinke-wicz).

63 Isaac of Nineveh, *Spiritual Homilies* (146 Bettiole): “[prayer is] spiritually accomplished when it is absorbed by non-knowledge.”

64 Chialà 2002, 140.

65 Chialà 2002, 140–141.

66 Fiori 2011b, 190–192.

67 Bettiole ²1990, 196 note 6.

5 Remarks on Joseph Ḥazzāyā

The case of Joseph Ḥazzāyā (8th century) is peculiar. As a matter of fact, any influence of Dionysius is hardly detectable throughout Joseph's works. His *Book of Questions and Answers*⁶⁸ is particularly interesting for us since its fifth *Mēmra* contains Joseph's only quotation from the Areopagite, which is the one from *Divine Names* IV, 11 that we already found in Isaac, in a florilegium, and in Babai the Great. Significantly enough, Joseph introduces his quotation from Dionysius within the same argumentative context as Isaac does. The argument of the solitary is prompted by the following question of the disciple: "If the mind is lifted to the place of the intelligible concepts [...] does it [still] need sensible concepts?"⁶⁹ The solitary replies that

because, as well as when one is a child, his food is of a certain type, his speech is also of a certain kind and of a certain type are the thoughts that come to his mind; and when he reaches the youth, the thoughts that move in him are of another type; and when he arrives at the acme of the age, his thoughts undergo another change; thus also the labor of the mind consists in three orders: one is its labor in the order of the corporeity, another one is its labor in the order of psychicity, and a further one is its labor in the order of spirituality. So also the divine Paul, when he exhorts the Corinthians, says: 'when I was a child I spoke as a child and I ate as a child and I thought as a child; but when I became a man I gave up the things of the youth' [1 Cor 13,11]. And as well as when one arrives at the acme of the old age he does not need the food that he ate in the order of childhood [...], thus also the soul, as long as it stays in the order of corporeity and psychicity, needs the sensible labor, because without it, it cannot grow up of a spiritual growth and ascend to the order of spirituality, as well as a child, too, does not grow and come to the order of manhood, according to the argument we previously made. [...] But when the sight of the mind is simplified [remember the concept of "simple knowledge" in Isaac], with the rays of the source of life that are manifested on it, all the labor becomes spiritual. And there is no need of things sensible by the intermediation of which it gets close to God.⁷⁰

A few lines later, Joseph goes on to quote Dionysius: "[The mind] does no longer need sensible resources in order to learn the truth of intelligible actions by means of written signs, insofar as it becomes sight of the truth in its very substance, as the holy

68 The *Book* is preserved integrally only in ms. (*olim*) Diyarbakır Chaldean Archbishopric 100, then Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131; despite the events in Iraq during the last decade, the manuscript is among the surviving ones and has been digitized by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. The treatise was also partially preserved in the manuscript Mosul, Chaldean Patriarchate 103. For this see Scher 1907a, 254. Mingana published excerpts in [Auctores Varii], *Collection of Texts on Mysticism* (156a–158a [text], 165–168 [translation]). According to Scher, *Notice sur les manuscrits* (Diarbékir), 409, one further excerpt on Elijah and Enoch was also found in the manuscript (*olim*) Diyarbakır Chaldean Archbishopric 112, whose whereabouts are unknown. In the meantime, G. Kessel informed me that he has found new excerpts scattered in monastic florilegia and in indirect tradition.

69 Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 221r.

70 Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 220v–221v.

Dionysius said, too, etc”.⁷¹ Thus both Isaac and Joseph are treating, though each in his peculiar language, the question of the condition of the mind when it has reached what they call spirituality/*rūḥānūtā*, i.e. the peak of the mind’s progress toward God. As we saw, Isaac also applies to it his famous terminology of “non-prayer”. Both see this stage as the last of those three steps in the ascetic progression that they call corporeity (*paḡrānūtā*), psychicity (*napšānūtā*) and spirituality (*rūḥānūtā*). Moreover, both associate it with a state of “astonishment”, *temhā/tehrā*. Indeed, in Joseph’s *Book of Questions and Answers*, the solitary adds that sometimes the mind at the stage of spirituality “does not even know” its own state, “because of the stupor that fell upon it and of astonishment. The blessed apostle Paul is a witness to this in his ascent to the third heaven, ‘whether in the body or not in the body I do not know; God knows [it]’. Indeed, continues the solitary, the apostle’s mind had been lifted among the unutterable goods, so that also the corporeal sensation might be left aside by him completely”.⁷² Although the mutual literary relations between the East Syrian mystics are still a relatively unexplored field, and although it is hardly possible to detect any literal correspondence between the two writings, it can be argued with a certain confidence that Joseph is absorbing Isaac’s concepts into his own stream of thought. This assumption is supported by the fact that Joseph certainly had first-hand knowledge of Isaac, since he quotes him by name in at least one of his writings,⁷³ and is also evidenced by his reworking and recasting Isaac’s references into a new mold: the quotation from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians 12, 2, in particular, is common to Isaac and Joseph, suggesting that the stage of spirituality, laying beyond body and soul, cannot be defined within the limits of what belongs to them, and the mind itself lacks any reference to understand what it is experiencing. Isaac’s closeness to Joseph’s argument is even more evident in a passage from Isaac’s Discourse 4 of the First Part, where 2 Cor 12, 2 is explicitly related to the absence of corporeal sensations at the stage of spirituality,⁷⁴ whereas Discourse 22 refers to the lack of will in the mind which has reached the level of non-prayer. Another occurrence of 2 Cor 12 in Isaac with the same meaning as in Discourse 4 of the First Part is found in Isaac’s *Chapters on Knowledge* II, 59, where the verse is once again quoted to evoke the utter superiority of the supreme “order of revelation”, which “was subtler and higher in its movements than the appearances of the memory of visible things”.⁷⁵ Joseph’s second Pauline reference, 1 Cor 13, 11, is not present in Isaac’s Discourse 22 nor in any of his

⁷¹ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 222r.

⁷² Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 219v–220r.

⁷³ See Joseph’s treatise on *The Prayer Which Comes to the Mind in the Place of Purity*, in: [Auctores Varii], *Collection of Texts on Mysticism* (150a [text]/157 [translation] Mingana).

⁷⁴ Isaac of Nineveh, *On religious perfection* (49–50 Bedjan); *Mystical Treatises* (35 Wensinck); *Ascetic Homilies* (91 Gallo/Bettio).

⁷⁵ Isaac of Nineveh, *Spiritual Homilies* (100 Bettio).

published works, and at first sight would seem to be Joseph's personal elaboration. Nevertheless, the comparison of a child with the soul of a novice, and of the spiritual growth with the progressive assumption of solid food, is certainly not new to ascetical literature; not by chance do we find an elaboration of this theme at the beginning of Isaac's Discourse 4. The reference to Dionysius, then, is part of a shared argumentative context, which may even lead us to suspect, as I said above, that Joseph's quotation does not derive from an independent reading of a Dionysian florilegium, but from Isaac himself. Joseph certainly shared with other East Syrian authors the veneration for Dionysius, which was less linked to a direct reading of his entire works than to the fact that he was supposed to be Paul's direct disciple. Since one of Isaac's homilies on the absence of corporeal and discursive signs at the spiritual stage made reference not only to Paul, but also to Dionysius, it is not daring to suppose that Joseph, when treating the same subject, found it suitable to repeat the quotation.

One may legitimately ask, then, how a famous passage from Joseph's *Book of Questions and Answers* must be judged. As is well known from Guillaumont's monograph on Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika*, in the second Mēmra of his *Book of Questions and Answers* Joseph, although he does not mention him by name and although it is not even clear whether he knew him or not, accuses the translator of the Dionysian corpus, Sergius of Rēš'aynā, of having complicated Dionysius' style: Insofar as the Areopagite is the disciple of the Apostle, his style cannot be but simple; furthermore, the translator would have reversed the order of priority between the Cherubs and the Seraphs, putting the latter above the former – although of course this is already so in the Greek original.⁷⁶ Moving from these premises, Joseph declares that, had he time to do it, he would comment upon (rather than “translate”) the book of Dionysius, in order to reject the translator's intrusions. Much later, 'Aḥdīšō' bar Briḳā (13th–14th centuries) actually mentions a commentary (or much less likely “translation”, *pūššāqā*) on Dionysius among Joseph's works.⁷⁷ Without further evidence, it is impossible to decide whether this commentary was actually written or whether 'Aḥdīšō' relied upon Joseph's intentions. If Joseph did write the commentary, he really must have had access to the Dionysian corpus at some point in time. If he did not, it remains to be understood how he had gained his knowledge of Dionysius' style at the moment of writing the quoted passage. It is very likely indeed that he formed

76 Guillaumont 1962, 216; ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 218; Beulay 1987, 161–162. Joseph's passage is on f. 75r–v of the manuscript: “The writer who translated Mar Dionysius corrupted the books he translated, because he was a corrupted man; and because of the sharpness of his intelligence, he changed the expressions of the divine books according to his own opinion. [...] If there was time to explain that book, I would reject and expel from it every appearance; since he was the one who introduced the complicatedness in the style of this book: the blessed Dionysius, being the disciple of the blessed Apostle, wrote in a plain style [...] not as this corrupted writer did, who on account of his rhetoric complicated the style of the saint.”

77 'Aḥdīšō' bar Briḳā, Catalogue (III, 103 Assemani).

his opinion on the ground of anthological fragments, such as we read them in the florilegia that came down to us. They are often long enough to judge of their stylistic quality, but he could even have formed it on the ground of hearsay: He does not make a mystery, for example, that the abbot Narsai of the monastery of Mount Izlā was at the origin of a mouth-to-mouth tradition according to which Kumī had altered the text of Theodore of Mopsuestia's *On the Incarnation*, which is also untrue.⁷⁸ And in fact, his information does not appear to be very reliable: I think that he had no clue who the translator of the Dionysian corpus was, first of all because of the very fact that he does not name him. When he wants to discredit Kumī, on the contrary, he does not hesitate to call the latter by name. Secondly, his chronological notions are imprecise: He correctly puts Dionysius' translator under Justinian, but at the same time he makes him a "companion" of Kumī,⁷⁹ who was active in the first half of the fifth century. Thus, as far as we can judge, it is at least conceivable that Joseph, despite his claims to a good knowledge of Dionysius, had not read anything more than a bunch of anthological passages when he wrote his *Book of Questions and Answers*.

But before drawing a conclusion, let us move to a last point. As well as in Isaac's case, angelology is another revealing topic insofar as the relation with Dionysius is concerned. If we turn to a long systematic passage on angelology that immediately follows the excursus on the unfaithful translators in the second Mēmrā of the *Book of Questions and Answers*, we can observe that, despite his claim that he could have translated Dionysius better than Sergius of Rēš'aynā, Joseph shows a remarkable ignorance of or at least a total lack of interest in Dionysius' doctrine on angels. What he expounds in a lengthy answer of the solitary can be partially viewed as an expanded and commented version of the traditional scholastic system of angels that, as we saw,⁸⁰ had already been used by Isaac and is mainly attested in Theodore bar Kōnī, Īšō'dāḡ of Merw, and the Anonymous Commentary preserved in the manuscript (*olim*) *Diyarbakar Chaldean Archbishopric* 22. This system is constantly attributed to Dionysius in all these works as well as in Joseph, but the explanation of the functions of the single angelic ranks has nothing to do with the Dionysian hierarchy. As to the interpretations in Joseph's work that overlap with the traditional exegetical material, let us compare some chunks of Joseph's treatise with Theodore bar Kōnī's angelology, which is particularly close to it.

Theodore: "the lordships, who are those who rule over kingdoms";⁸¹ Joseph: "The sixth rank is that of the Lordships. This is their service: to have authority over kingdoms".⁸²

⁷⁸ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 76v–77r.

⁷⁹ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 76v.

⁸⁰ See paragraph 1 above.

⁸¹ Theodore bar Kōnī, *Scholium (Recension from Seert)* (71–72 Hespel, Draguet).

⁸² Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 80r.

Theodore: “the principalities, who are the governors of the air”;⁸³ Joseph: “The third rank is that of the principalities. This is its service: it moves the air and raises the clouds [...] And it determines all the changes of the air”.⁸⁴

Theodore: “the cherubs, who are interpreted as ‘the carriers’”;⁸⁵ Joseph: “the Cherubs carry His (God’s) seat”.⁸⁶

In other cases, Joseph apparently diverges from the interpretation witnessed by these writings, but also in these cases he does not show any direct Dionysian influence: for instance he states that “the Thrones guard the doors of the heavenly Holy of Holies”,⁸⁷ that the virtues have the function of “preventing the demons from wasting God’s creatures because of their envy towards men”,⁸⁸ or that the main function of the plain angels is that of guardian angels, so that they are not reduced to their etymological meaning of “messengers” as is the case in the traditional Syriac exegesis – and in Dionysius as well.⁸⁹ Even when the scholastic exegesis is close to Dionysius, then, Joseph diverges from it, showing thereby – at the very least – that he is not interested in making any use of the Dionysian angelology on which he claims to know the truth distorted by the Syriac translator; or, which is more likely, that he ignores it. All the clues I gathered here, it is true, are no conclusive evidence to prove that Joseph never read Dionysius’ writings. Still, they are a set of concrete facts which support the assumption that, at the moment of writing the *Book of Questions and Answers*, Joseph did not have first-hand knowledge of the Dionysian writings *as a whole*. The concrete fact, as I said, is that he is not influenced at all by Dionysius, even on those points where he claims to know Dionysius’ true thought; this can only mean one of two things: either that he had not read him at all, or more likely than that, that if he had read him, he had not assimilated him, as Beulay remarked. In the second case, the attested existence of florilegia gives a key to understanding why it was not possible for the ascetic reader to get an in-depth knowledge of Dionysius and to assimilate his thought. Of course, the Dionysian corpus as a whole did have a circulation, although probably a limited one, so that it was not utterly impossible to read it in its entirety. But this hypothesis, because of the lack of positive evidence, remains more speculative than postulating that the East Syrian ascetics, and Joseph Ḥazzāyā in particular, read Dionysius in anthologies, which in contrast are materially attested.⁹⁰ As in Isaac’s case, then, the hypothesis of the anthological reading as source of the scarce assimilation

⁸³ Theodore bar Kōnī, Scholium (Recension from Seert) (71–72 Hespel, Draguet).

⁸⁴ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 79v–80r.

⁸⁵ Theodore bar Kōnī, Scholium (Recension from Seert) (71–72 Hespel, Draguet).

⁸⁶ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 81r.

⁸⁷ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 81r.

⁸⁸ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, *Book of Questions and Answers*: ms. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarchate 131, f. 80r.

⁸⁹ See Dionysius Areopagites, *Heavenly Hierarchy IX*, 2 (Works 2, 199–201 Heil, Ritter).

⁹⁰ Like the one in ms. Sinai Syr. 24 and others on which see the conclusions here below.

of Dionysius is a reasonable one, because it has the advantage of relying on some concrete evidence. In the same direction, the case studies of Isaac and Joseph allow for a series of concluding remarks of a more general character.

6 Conclusions

Reassessing the passages where a Dionysian influence was deemed to be possible, on Isaac as well as on Joseph Ḥazzāyā, we have consistently realized that the imprint of the Areopagite is certainly not “technical”, as Beulay had already pointed out, nor organic to Isaac’s and Joseph’s doctrine, and even where they touch themes that have something in common with those of Dionysius, as for example angels or superior ignorance, they never appear to be “Dionysian” on these points. In order to explain this situation, I have put forward the hypothesis that Isaac and Joseph *did not* read Dionysius except in small fragments in florilegia, for if they did read Dionysius extensively, they did not assimilate his thought. Be this as it may, Isaac and Joseph proved to be the ideal authors to introduce the problem of the low degree of assimilation of Dionysius in the East Syrian world overall, and of an anthological approach to the Areopagite as a possible explanation of this limited assimilation. This seems indeed to have been a common attitude toward Dionysius among Syriac-speaking readers in the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries. As a matter of fact, Sergius’ Dionysian version miraculously survives only in the manuscript *Sinai St. Catherine* Syr. 52 the confessional origin of which we ignore. This, of course, does not mean in itself that his translation had had little diffusion, but what we have today of Sergius’ version apart from the manuscript *Sinai St. Catherine* Syr. 52 is just a bunch of quotations in florilegia. Thus Sergius’ version seems primarily to have been transmitted in monastic or dogmatic anthologies, and two facts are significant in this regard: Firstly, in these anthologies, we mostly find the same recurring sets of passages. Typical cases are those of a short florilegium from Dionysius’ Epistle 9, to be read in two different manuscripts in exactly the same form,⁹¹ or of *Divine Names* II, 9, a Christological passage that is quoted in many Miaphysite dogmatic anthologies.⁹² Secondly, as we have already seen for *Divine Names* IV, 11 and *Mystical Theology* I, writers like Babai the Great, Isaac, and

⁹¹ Manuscripts: British Library Add. 17191, f. 2r (9th–10th century) described in Wright 1871, 1008–1015, where excerpts of the ninth *Epistle* are found (ep. 9, 3–6 passim); in British Library Add. 14538 (ca. 10th century; Miaphysite anthology) described in Wright 1871, 989–1002, f. 27v contains the same texts from ep. 9.

⁹² Manuscripts: British Library Add. 12155 (8th century; Miaphysite anthology) described in Wright 1871, 921–955. F. 87ra–vb presents a group of citations from *Divine Names* I and II, among which is also II, 9, 133, 5–11. British Library Add. 14532 (8th century; Miaphysite anthology) described in Wright 1871, 955–967, contains *Divine Names* II, 9, 133, 7–12 at f. 50v. British Library Add. 14535 (9th century; Miaphysite anthology) described in Wright 1871, 796–799, has *Divine Names* II, 9, 133, 5–12 at f. 12v. In

Joseph Ḥazzāyā exclusively quote passages that are also present in attested florilegia. Moreover, they are the only writers to have quoted Dionysius and each of them did it only once. Therefore, Sergius' version must have been excerpted early, a repertoire of quotations must have crystallized very early, and these fossilized florilegia might have been the only form in which at least some East Syrian ascetics and theologians read Dionysius in the 7th–8th centuries.⁹³ Thus if Beulay is certainly correct in stating that these authors only used “elements” of Dionysius' doctrine, we are convinced that they did not usually consider him “a teacher to read”, but rather an authority to quote occasionally: his was, of course, known to be an important voice, insofar as it came from a disciple of the Apostle, and therefore worth some mentions, but a need to study his whole work was not so urgently felt. Unlike among West Syrians, to whom Dionysius himself probably belonged,⁹⁴ the Areopagitic doctrine with its concentration on liturgical and hierarchical problems and philosophical speculation was far removed from the main interests of the cultivated East Syrian solitaries, so that Dionysius' work *as a whole* must never have become part of a common reading repertoire. Every individual author had his own approach, of course, and some of them *may* have read Dionysius in somewhat greater depth, especially Simon of Taibuteh at the end of the 7th century⁹⁵ and John of Dalyātā in the 8th century,⁹⁶ so that we can suppose that some copies of the whole Dionysian corpus were available; however, at the end of the 8th or at the beginning of the 9th century the East Syrian patriarch Timothy I is at a loss to find a copy of Dionysius' work, and sends to look for it in the West Syrian monastery of Mar Mattai.⁹⁷ And as I said above, it was already clear to Beulay that many ascetical authors did not even take Dionysius into consideration. It is mainly in this sense that I mean the phrase in my subtitle, “the phantom of a Greek heritage”: Dionysius' appearances in the East Syrian ascetic literature are phantasmatic, insofar as he is mentioned and quotations from his writings do emerge here and there, but the substance of his teaching, his “doctrinal flesh” is not present, since whenever he is quoted, his traces get immediately lost and the context of the quotation remains

the ms. Mingana syr. 69 (middle of the 7th century; Miaphysite anthology) described in Mingana 1933, 173–178, f. 30v contains *Divine Names* II, 9, 133, 7–12.

93 In a recent article, Bumazhnov 2016b has convincingly pointed out a further parallel between Isaac's *Chapters on Knowledge* IV, 77 and Dionysius' *Epistle* 7, 1. Now, no excerpt of *Epistle* 7, except for a single sentence, is preserved in florilegia known to us. But given the highly limited overall presence of Dionysius' thought in Isaac, and since many of Dionysius' epistles, or parts of them, are transmitted singularly in Syriac florilegia (Epistle 1, 4, 8, 9, and 10 are attested), I would tend to speculate that also of Epistle 7, or of its incipit, Isaac may easily have had an anthological knowledge.

94 Fiori 2011a, 38–42.

95 See his “notes” on Dionysius in: [Auctores Varii], *Collection of Texts on Mysticism*, 282–287; Simon of Taybutēh, *Book of Grace* (22–33, Bettiolo).

96 See Beulay 1987, 168–169, 178–180, and Beulay 1990, where a quick look at the index (p. 522) already gives a clue of the importance of a Dionysian background in John of Dalyātā.

97 Detailed information and discussion of the sources in Brock 1999b, and Berti 2009, 342–345.

foreign to him (Joseph Ḥazzāyā's angelology is particularly significant in this regard). Like a phantom, Dionysius comes into view for a moment and disappears. Only later did Syriac writers begin to show more systematic interest in Dionysius, but this significantly happened among the West Syrians, with a second translation made at Qenneshe at the end of the 7th century and the compilations of passages from the Dionysian *Hierarchies*⁹⁸ attributed to John of Dārā in the 9th, whereas the East Syrians continued to ignore Dionysius' teaching for a long time, the case of the catholicos Timothy being particularly telling. Only few traditional notions transmitted via a scholastic elaboration survived, as in the case of Dionysian angelology. The reason for a so much deeper engagement on the West Syrian side probably lies in the fact that Dionysius himself may be considered a West Syrian author writing in Greek; in this sense, he would have remained the "other" way of Syriac mysticism: the way of a stronger liturgical stress that was much more cultivated on the Miaphysite side and did not find an equivalent in the East Syrian culture.⁹⁹ But this is another story.

⁹⁸ These unpublished compilations excerpted passages from the second Syriac translation of the *Corpus areopagiticum* which was made by Phokas of Edessa at the end of the 7th century, and of the scholia that accompanied it. See Breydy 1964; Breydy 1978; more recently, Becker 2006a, and Herman 2009.

⁹⁹ See Fiori 2011a.