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7-15-2014

## Observations on the Performative Force of the Qyama and the Ihidaye, and its Pertinancy Today

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### Recommended Citation

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE PERFORMATIVE FORCE OF THE *QYAMA*  
AND THE *IHIDAYE*, AND ITS PERTINENCY TODAY

by

C. A. Chase

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology·Seminary of  
Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Theology (Systematics).

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY·THEOLOGY  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

15 June 2014

This paper was written under the direction of

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Fr. Columba Stewart, O.S.B.

Director

OBSERVATIONS ON THE PERFORMATIVE FORCE OF THE *QYAMA*  
AND THE *IHIDAYE*, AND ITS PERTINENCY TODAY

Description:

Using contemporary social and art theory, with particular emphasis on the notion of *performative*, this paper examines the historical and theological context of a unique social and ecclesial phenomenon in 4<sup>th</sup> century Syria—the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant. By observing these committed laity as a ‘living performance,’ an exploration of the identity of the faithful, both severally and as a community, may be undertaken. This paper focuses on the relation of such a performative to notions of Christology and anthropology, with an eye towards today’s laity and their seeking for identity in a complex world of competing shifting allegiances and competing ideologies.

*This paper may be duplicated.*

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15 June 2014

During the formative period of the Syriac Church, across the outer reaches of Coele Syria and into Osrhoene and Persia, there appeared a unique subculture of consecrated laypersons, each of whom pursued an individualistic expression of piety, though in communion. They did not seek to live out beyond civilization, in desert wilderness or high up mountain slopes, but rather they resided in the midst of the hustle and bustle of urban life. They came into existence, they flourished, they became regulated and supervised, and then dissipated into new forms of community and identity, eventually being absorbed into alternative ecclesial institutions. These consecrated groups of persons were known as the *bnay qyama* (for males) and the *bnat qyama* (for females), or Sons and Daughters of the Covenant.

In a recent article, historian Columba Stewart, points to such subgroups and notes that “we lost the people and the places that didn’t fit” readily the norms of our Western monastic history.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to note that “we might need them now,” and points to how new “Sons and Daughters of the Covenant are appearing in cities and suburbs.” This need is the locus for what follows. It is complicated because little remains of these persons and the fullness of their collective expression of piety and holiness. The observations within this paper will move between primary sources, socio-historical data, learned assessments, and speculations predicated on contemporary art and gender theory, as well as modern dogmatic investigations. The objective is to find these people, and to place them, as best as possible, in the nexus of their time and place and self-communication, so as to enter into a colloquy with their progeny, while they struggle to find identity and meaning in the middle of metropolises and suburban sprawl.

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<sup>1</sup> Columba Stewart, O.S.B., “The Origins and Fate of Monasticism,” *Spiritus* 10, no. 2 (2010): 262.

“Real Christians—indeed the truest of all Christians—were those who were persecuted by the enemies of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Sizgorich, writing this, avers the claim the Western Church has long held up as normative: that Persecution/Martyrdom marks the highest justification of authenticity, for the Christian. However, Peter Brown and others point to an alternative justification through *living* out a life imitating Christ’s holy ministry, through consecrated purity, humility and service to God. Viewed as a performative, “outsiders could admire [this life] as a form of physical heroism equivalent to the observed capacity of Christians to face down the chill fear of death.”<sup>3</sup> Such was the purpose of the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant. They were not “wild vagrants” but exhibited, instead, a “tranquil way of life”<sup>4</sup>—thus honoring the sentiments of the legendary Saint Addai: “When you are silent, your modest and honourable appearance joins the battle for you with those who hate truth and love falsehood.”<sup>5</sup> Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler notes that though such a “body politic... [may] not speak at all—it still... [can] exercise a certain performative force in the public domain.”<sup>6</sup>

Who were these “serene, sweet-natured”<sup>7</sup> covenanters? According to the renowned scholar Sebastian Brock, there is little concrete information that can be said

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 60. Brown goes on to quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, *die föhliche Wissenschaft*, 358, to expand on the potency of such a display: “Celibacy already appealed to ‘the faith that a person who is an exception on this point will be an exception on all others as well.’”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

<sup>5</sup> *The Teaching of Addai*, ed. and trans. G. Howard (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1981), 85-87, quoted in Hans J. W. Drijvers, “Jews and Christians at Edessa,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985): 94.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 196.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 29, quoted in Brown, *The Body*, 204.

about the *qyama*. The term: (1) is “sometimes understood as a vow,” (2) is “some form of consecrated life,” (3) “formed the core of the local church community” and (4) refers to those as such who also “lived in small associations” that may have resembled “informal religious communes.”<sup>8</sup> Historian Naomi Koltun-Fromm notes that “these early celibates were not monastic. They continued to live and function within their communities.”<sup>9</sup> Syriac linguist Joseph Amar considers the *bnay qyama* and *bnat qyama* to refer to “home-based, urban Christians who consecrated themselves to a chaste life at baptism which in the Syriac church was conferred only in adulthood.” He goes on to challenge any claim that these persons constitute a “‘pre-’ or ‘proto-monastic’ movement within Syriac Christianity,” noting that “[f]rom its inception, monasticism was characterized by a dualism that denigrated the flesh and enjoined ‘flight from the world’ (*fuga mundi*) as the prerequisite to bringing the body into submission to the mind and spirit.” For Amar, the chastity of the *qyama* “was not informed by a dualism that condemned the flesh as intrinsically evil.”<sup>10</sup> While Amar goes on to claim that the *qyama* did not “disparage marriage and family life,” Koltun-Fromm, like most scholars, ties the term *ihidaya* (‘single-one’) to *qyama*, noting that the “primary meaning” of *qyama* is “covenant (virginity),”<sup>11</sup> and *ihidaya* signifies: (1) “singlehood,” (2) “singleness of mind or purpose” and (3) a “special relationship of emulation and representation of the *Ihidaya*,

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<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Revised ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Yokes of the Holy-Ones: The Embodiment of a Christian Vocation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (2001): 205fn1.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph P. Amar, “Christianity at the Crossroads: The Legacy of Ephrem the Syrian,” *Religion & Literature* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 6.

<sup>11</sup> Koltun-Fromm, “Yokes,” 216.

God's only-begotten-one, Jesus."<sup>12</sup> Koltun-Fromm points to complexity within the notion of *ihidaya*, when she emphasizes that membership to this 'elect' was never limited to *btule* (virgins), but also included *quaddishe*, persons who had married, had consummated their marriages with children, but who, at a point in their married lives, elected to ascend to a state of celibacy, less it seems out of a loathing of sex or flesh, and more as a means of better following Christ.<sup>13</sup> Sidney Griffith underscores this Christological grounding of *ihidaya* as the "primary" sense, for "the term is not simply a designation of a Christian ascetic ... but it is first of all a title of Christ with biblical authority."<sup>14</sup> Koltun-Fromm points to Aphrahat, the fourth-century "Persian Sage,"<sup>15</sup> and "leading" member of a *bnay qyama* in his local church.<sup>16</sup> For Aphrahat, all of these terms are seemingly interchangeable.<sup>17</sup> Aphrahat's treatise, known as Demonstration Six (topic: *qyama*) focuses, in sections 9-10, "on Jesus' perfected humanity—particularly his humility—which all *ihidaye* should imitate."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the *ihidaye*, much like Christ, are "'in society' but not 'of society.'" This binding between *Ihidaya* (Christ) and each *ihidaya* is made explicit in the ritual of baptism. Griffith notes: "when the divine

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<sup>12</sup> Koltun-Fromm, "Yokes," 205.

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 132-33.

<sup>14</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 224; see also 225.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat: Some Observations," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 187fn1. "The name 'Aphrahat, which almost certainly means 'wise man' in Persian, appears only in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the more cumbersome title 'Persian Sage' is quite early, showing up in all the earliest manuscripts (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries)."

<sup>16</sup> Murray, *Symbols*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.



Ihidaya was put on at baptism, the ascetic was ... putting on divinity, in the name of the many in Christ the Ihidaya, just as the ‘Word’ of God had put on humanity at the Incarnation.”<sup>19</sup> Such was the understanding of Ephrem, the poet-theologian, contemporary of Aphrahat, “who was personally dedicated to the lifestyle of the Covenant.”<sup>20</sup>

Dmitrij Bumazhnov of Tübingen, notes that *qyama* is cognate with “the root *qam*, ‘to rise, stand.’”<sup>21</sup> ‘Stand’/‘single’ become key markers for Bumazhnov, as they can be traced back into earlier non-canonical texts, highlighting possible starting points for the development of this unique emulation/representation. Going back to the second century *Gospel of Thomas*, saying 23, “Jesus said, ‘I shall choose you, one out of a thousand, and two out of ten thousand, and they shall *stand* as a single one.”<sup>22</sup> Bumazhnov goes on to quote from the Syriac Apology of Pseudo-Meliton (early third century AD). In chapter 6, the author writes: “you also, putting off what is visible and perishable, shall *stand* living and knowing forever before Him.”<sup>23</sup> In chapter 12, sections 4 and 5, the anonymous author reveals the first recorded use of *qyama* in such a context: “4. For it is impossible for all changeable <beings> to see Him who is unchangeable. 5.

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<sup>19</sup> Griffith, “Asceticism,” 227.

<sup>20</sup> Amar, “Christianity at the Crossroads,” 6.

<sup>21</sup> Dmitrij Bumazhnov, “Qyama before Aphrahat: The Development of the Idea of Covenant in Some Early Syriac Documents,” in *Syrien im 1.—7. Jahrhundert nach Christus*, ed. Dmitrij Bumazhnov and Hans Reinhard Seeliger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 65.

<sup>22</sup> B. Layton, trans., *The Gospel according to Thomas, in: Nag Hammadi Codex II.2-7 together with XIII.2\**, *Brit. Lib. Or.4926(1), and P.Oxy 1, 654, 655*, ed. B. Layton, Vol. 1, NHS 20, Leiden et al. 1989, 65, quoted in Bumazhnov, “Qyama before Aphrahat,” 68.

<sup>23</sup> Ps.-Mel., apol. 6 (CorpAp 9, 506,1-9 Ot.), quoted in Bumazhnov, “Qyama before,” 70, translated by Bumazhnov.

But those who are mindful <of Him> *and are in the unchangeable qyama* do see God as far as they are able to see Him.”<sup>24</sup>

The *qyama*, thus, serves as a *transformative* performative. The purpose of the *ihidaye*, according to Griffith, “was to imitate Christ—and to do so publicly.”<sup>25</sup> “Holiness,” according to Koltun-Fromm, “is a manifestation of power.”<sup>26</sup> She goes on to label the members of the *qyama* as “the spiritual elite.”<sup>27</sup> Griffith, citing Nedungatt, sees the *qyama*, “in the language of everyday life,” as representing “an inner circle of elite Christians.”<sup>28</sup> Such declarations seem to run against the grain of the theology at work in such a performative existence, i.e. the kenotic aspect of their life. This radical *imitatio* causes “the *bnay qyama* and *ihidaye* [to] stand before God in perpetual service.” This unending giving/sacrifice causes the whole community to experience a “continual communion with God.”<sup>29</sup> This radical *imitatio* mirrors Christ’s existential, whose “mother’s womb,” according to Ephrem. “reversed the roles:”

the Establisher of all entered in His richness,  
but came forth poor;  
.... naked and stripped  
there came forth from her He who clothes all.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ps.-Mel., apol. 12 (CorpAp 9, 510,20-511,4 Ot.), quoted in Bumazhnov, “Qyama before,” 71, translated by Bumazhnov.

<sup>25</sup> Griffith, “Asceticism,” 228.

<sup>26</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>28</sup> George Nedungatt, “The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973), 203, quoted in Griffith, “Asceticism,” 230.

<sup>29</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 132.

<sup>30</sup> Ephrem, poem *Nativity* 11:6-8, quoted in Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 25, translated by Brock.

In such wondrous symbolic living, the focus of the church can be on the *galyata*, “revealed things,” where the attention of “intellectual enquiry” should be, as opposed to attempting the folly of philosophers, the crossing of “the ontological ‘chasm.’”<sup>31</sup> In this way, Ephrem claims the Incarnation, in its concreteness, as the anchor to his symbolic theology. His allegiance to the *galyata*, was a wager on the divine: if God crossed over what only God can cross over, what would be the point for humans to try to do the same, with their philosophies, like some tower in Babel? Instead, focus should be spent on the reading of the ‘revealed,’ and the making of the ‘revealed’ into *living* witness through the power of interpretation.

A clue to the power of the collective within the *qyama* might be gleaned from a nuancing of Ephrem’s appreciation of the plurality of interpretation. Writes Brock: “no single individual is capable of taking in everything. There are thus infinite ‘interpretations,’”<sup>32</sup> for what the human eye can come to see as possible. Ephrem, in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, uses this notion to justify the necessity for a dynamic hermeneutics:

If there only exists a single sense for the words of Scripture,  
then the first commentator who came along would discover it,  
and other hearers would experience neither the labour of searching,  
nor the joy of finding...<sup>33</sup>

No single *ihidaya* can wholly reflect God or imitate Christ, and thus, “[e]rror enters in when one person claims that his [or her] spiritual interpretation is the only one

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<sup>31</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7:22, quoted in Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 46, translated by Brock.

possible.”<sup>34</sup> It is only in the polyvalence expressed in the *qyama* that authentic interpretation begins to be a possibility. Writes Ephrem:

Single is Your nature, but many are the ways of interpreting it.<sup>35</sup>

Brock’s sense of the performative (with respect to interpretation) seems to infer a sense of authentic relationship between the *ihidaya*, the *Ihidaya*, and the *qyama*. He writes:

First we have the movement from the One to the many: so infinite is the single nature of God that it can be described in infinitely different ways, can be represented by infinitely different symbols. And then we have the movement back from each of the many symbols to the One. And here too each individual symbol is itself capable of whole wealth of different meanings, in that that particular aspect of the divine reality to which it points is infinitely rich itself.<sup>36</sup>

Peg and Myles Brand, writing on Arthur Danto’s philosophy of aesthetics, note: “Interpretations are *transformative*, they are ‘functions which transform material objects into works of art’... There is no work of art without an interpretation.”<sup>37</sup> The *ihidaya* in communion serve as a performative interpretation of the *Ihidaya*—their living in “perpetual service” is transformative, not only for each individual consecrated believer, but also for the community, and, it could be argued, for the larger urban culture.

For Brock, *ihidaya* defies singularity in its *single*-ness. It means: “single;” “individual;” “unique;” “single-minded, not divided in heart;” and “single in the sense of unmarried, celibate.”<sup>38</sup> *Ihidaya* is, thus, a symbol with many meanings that can exist

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<sup>34</sup> Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7:22, quoted in Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 46, translated by Brock.

<sup>35</sup> Ephrem, poem *Faith* 10:3, quoted in Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 57, translated by Brock.

<sup>36</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Peg Brand and Myles Brand, “Surface and Deep Interpretation,” in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. by Mark Rollins (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 55.

<sup>38</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 136.

independent or concurrent. *Ihidaya* in its paradox, simple and complex, becomes a mediator and commentator on Scripture, and on life. The placement of the *qyama* becomes a *locus theologicus/locus anthropologicus*, in the middle of the church community, in the middle of the city, “in which a good deal of life was lived in public, and privacy was an almost unknown concept.”<sup>39</sup>

In the Palestinian Targum at Genesis 3:22, one discovers the Scriptural crux of this socio-existential construct: “Behold the first Adam whom I created is single (*ihiday*) in the world, just as I am single (*Ihiday*) in the heights of heaven.”<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the prelapsarian state of Adam, as being of ‘single’/undivided, is again realized, in the consecrated commitment of the celibate *ihidaya*. In this sense, members of the *bnay qyama* and of the *bnat qyama* have erased the divisions of gendered, divisive sexuality. All are now potentially ‘brides of Christ.’<sup>41</sup> Each, male or female, is “single as Adam was single when he was created.”<sup>42</sup> Living consecrated, singularly committed, embodied interpretively communally—the *ihidaye* have become living art forms. Each is a polished metal mirror that Ephrem highly valued as an exemplary symbol. Each life interprets Christ. Each life comments on Genesis 3:22. In such a sense, the *ihidaye* and the *qyama* have become living midrash, constantly informing, constantly being informed.

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<sup>39</sup> Drijvers, “Jews and Christians,” 89.

<sup>40</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 136.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Vööbus, “The Institution of the *Benai Qeiam* and *Benat Qeiam* in the Ancient Syrian Church.” *Church History* 30, no. 1 (March 1961), 21. “The *benai qeiam* and *benat qeiam* took the vow of virginity and became the ‘brides of Christ.’” It should be noted that Vööbus’ article, though important in its day, relied excessively on the rules and the Life of Rabbula as a normative framework for the *qyama*. These sources are important, but feature the final development of the covenants: marking an era of submission to “the surveillance of the clergy” (23), and significant segregation of the sexes and restrictions of mobility. Griffith notes a loosening of the term “virginity,” in his article, “Asceticism,” 223: “[T]he term *ihidaye* came to include both male and female virgins, as well as persons who may once have been married, but who subsequently consecrated themselves in a special way and who then lived as consecrated celibates in the Christian community under the name *qaddise* (saints or holy ones).”

<sup>42</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 139.

Herein exists Butler's "performative force in the public domain," a force, that as it performs severally, in consensus, "avow[s] the unperformable."<sup>43</sup>

The start point for the *ihidaya* is the public consecration of celibacy, concurrent with baptism: "a religious vocation of sexual continence embodied in the name they bear, 'single ones.'"<sup>44</sup> With "no possession, no family, no home," these covenanters—as "a bride, separated out from all other women and reserved for her one specific man"—"are separated out for their spiritual Bridegroom, Jesus."<sup>45</sup> This symbol is featured prominently at the beginning of Aphrahat's Demonstration Six: "Let us keep the appointed time of the glorious Bridegroom, so that we many enter with him into his bridal chamber."<sup>46</sup> Implicit, in the watch for the bridegroom, is "a dynamic pattern of movement from the collective in sacred primordial time to the individual in historical time, and then back to the collective in sacred eschatological time, where the potential implied in primordial time is actually fulfilled."<sup>47</sup> For Ephrem, such "dynamic fluidity" is found within the very term for 'bridal chamber' *gnona*. The symbol may signify "the Kingdom in its eschatological dimensions"—or—"the Kingdom as realized, or as realizable, here on earth by individuals."<sup>48</sup> Such tension frees the individual so that he or she "can merge into the collective, and the collective into the individual."<sup>49</sup> Thus one

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Butler, *Dispossession*, 194.

<sup>44</sup> Koltun-Fromm, "Yokes," 205.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>46</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* 6.1 (referencing Mt 25:10), in *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage*, trans. and ed. Adam Lehto (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 170.

<sup>47</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 126.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

meaning, or another, one dimension, or another, can be referred to by a word like *gnona*—or, in fact, both may be implied simultaneously. In this way, Ephrem can draw out, in concert, the contexts of *ihidaya*, *qyama*, and the universal church:

The soul is your bride, and the body is your wedding chamber.  
Your guests are our thoughts joined to the senses.  
If a single body can be a wedding celebration for you, (Lord),  
How great will the banquet be for the entire church?<sup>50</sup>

Joseph Amar underscores Ephrem's "positive attitudes toward the physical body," including thoughts and passions, rather than the Pauline normative to "avoid *porneia*."<sup>51</sup> Thus Daniel Boyarin can claim: "The erotic life of Christians is ideally devoted entirely to the new bridegroom, Christ."<sup>52</sup> However, Murray counsels caution in keeping at bay "our own presuppositions" as we move to interpret these symbol-driven theologians. "Interpreters of the early Syriac Fathers... must 'listen to them' to discover their theological idioms."<sup>53</sup> Thus, Koltun-Fromm notes: "The irony of male virgins imitating female brides betrothing the male God is inconsequential to Aphrahat. Spiritual marriage replaces earthly marriage for these men and this metaphor becomes gender free."<sup>54</sup> Though, Virginia Burrus is correct in noting that "the trend toward asceticism" is

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<sup>50</sup> Ephrem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen de Fide*, vol. 152; 62, Hymn XIV, translation by J.P. Amar, in Amar, "Christianity at the Crossroads," 6.

<sup>51</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 156.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "Brides of Christ: Jewishness and the Pauline Origins of Christian Sexual Renunciation," in *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), 176.

<sup>53</sup> Murray, *Symbols*, 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Koltun-Fromm, "Yokes," 208.

a stridently reoriented desire toward the divine,” her fixation on *eros* being “bent or queered” may betray the aforementioned concern of Murray.<sup>55</sup>

Adam Lehto points out: “The fact that ‘guarding the pledge in purity’ can mean more than fidelity to a vow of sexual renunciation is significant. For Aphrahat, the ideal of purity is all-encompassing, and is related to obedience to the law, not in its ritual aspects, but at its deeper level, that of loving God and neighbor.”<sup>56</sup> Thus virginity/abstinence is not an end point for the *ihidaya* or *qyama*, but, rather, a point of departure. In exploring the pledge, Lehto does not limit his reading of Aphrahat to Demonstration Six, but rather reads across the whole collection. Therefore, he shifts the moral to the character of the individual *ihidaya*, emulating the *Ihidaya*, and away from the Law: “the righteous have no need of a written law: they observe the ‘law of righteousness’ that is inscribed in their hearts.”<sup>57</sup> This righteousness is bound to the double law of love: “[A]fter a person loves the Lord his God, he should also love his neighbor as himself.”<sup>58</sup> Thus the “furnishing for the house of faith” in Aphrahat’s very first demonstration has to do with a “purity of heart, which includes a commitment to moral action [that] transcends mere ascetic praxis.” Aphrahat’s “inclusion of love, almsgiving, and hospitality... makes

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<sup>55</sup> Virginia Burrus, “Mapping as Metamorphosis: Initial Reflections on Gender and Ancient Religious Discourses,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> Adam Lehto, “Moral, Ascetic, and Ritual Dimensions to Law-Observance in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 175.

<sup>57</sup> Cf., Aphrahat, *Dem.* 2.2,7; 13.8; referenced in Lehto, “Moral, Ascetic,” 163.

<sup>58</sup> Cf., Aphrahat, *Dem.* 2.11; quoted in Lehto, “Moral, Ascetic,” 163fn24.



a clear connection between faith and good works.”<sup>59</sup> Thus Aphrahat, in Demonstration Six, exhorts the covenanters: “Read and learn, and be zealous to read and to act.”<sup>60</sup>

To read and to act: for whom? For whom has the *qyama* been called into existence? The performative force is to engage what audience? For the purposes of this query, it is necessary to focus on a particular city, Edessa, noting Hans Drijver’s insistence that the “cultural pattern of Edessa had much in common with other cities in or near the Syrian-Mesopotamian desert.”<sup>61</sup> The query will frame the *qyama* against two competing horizons: (1) the dominant pagan culture; and (2) the competing Abrahamic religion, rabbinic Judaism.

At the time of Ephrem’s arrival in Edessa, circa 364 AD, “the bulk of the Edessene population was pagan.”<sup>62</sup> The city was founded by Seleucos I Nicator some six hundred years earlier, and was named after the Macedonian capital, on account of its abundance of fresh water like its namesake. Soon after founding Edessa, the diadochos transformed the city into a Greek polis.<sup>63</sup> The Seleucids grafted “Hellenistic traditions of religion, administration and learning” on to an “autochthonous” bedrock.<sup>64</sup> Thus the pagan pantheon at Edessa was composed of “various deities of a different cultural origin.”<sup>65</sup> From Babylon was the god Bel, the kosmokrator: “creator of order out of

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<sup>59</sup> Cf., Aphrahat, *Dem.* 1.4; 3.8; 4.14-15; referenced in Lehto, “Moral, Ascetic,” 164.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., Aphrahat, *Dem.* 6.20; quoted in Lehto, “Moral, Ascetic,” 162.

<sup>61</sup> H.W.J. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs in Edessa* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), 3.

<sup>62</sup> Drijvers, “Jews and Christians,” 89.

<sup>63</sup> Drijvers, *Cults*, 9-10.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

chaos” and “warrant of the well-organized kosmos in which human life had its own place.” His son was Nebo, a god of wisdom and “initiator of human culture, messenger of divine wisdom and holder of human fate.” He functioned as a “divine guide.” The feminine was represented in the Syrian goddess Atargatis, “life-giving and fertilizing, warrant of the city’s prosperity.” Her cult carried with it the custom of castration and orgiastic rites.<sup>66</sup> Drijvers points out that the local paganism was tolerant, “by its own character,” negotiating “all the various aspects of human nature and culture” without any need to resolve existing contradictions.<sup>67</sup>

Edessa was “a true academic center—called the Athens of the East—in which Greek philosophy was widely known and taught.” Drijvers is quick to stress that any “language frontier” between Syriac-speaking Northern Mesopotamia and Coele Syria with its preference for Greek “did not imply a cultural barrier between a hellenistic Syrian Western region and Osrhoene with its supposedly Semitic culture.”<sup>68</sup> Porphyry’s *Philosophy from Oracles* provided both “a sympathetic account and defense of the traditional religions of the Greco-Roman world,” whilst, at the same time, fashioning a niche “within this scheme for the new religion founded by Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>69</sup> For Porphyry and his contemporaries, the charge against the Christians was the promulgation of an “unreasoning faith”<sup>70</sup>—“illegitimate” in its imposition of “the way of one people,”

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<sup>66</sup> Drijvers, *Cults*, 179-180.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>68</sup> Hans Drijvers, “The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Syria,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Matthews, and Robert W. Thomson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1982), 37.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians As the Romans Saw Them*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 148.

<sup>70</sup> Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* 1.3.1, quoted in Wilken, *The Christians*, 161.

its believers, “upon all other peoples.”<sup>71</sup> Aphrahat exhorts the covenanters not even to engage, but “to be like their Lord,” to emulate, and in emulating to cultivate, a righteousness that pushes past argument and rhetoric. “He should not respond to an evil man, nor to his enemy. Let him fight in such a way as to have no enemies at all.”<sup>72</sup> To emulate Christ does not require reason; it does require faith.<sup>73</sup> Ephrem, in his *Letter to Publius*, underscores the performative force permeating even the type of non-response stated above. He writes: “Though dumb, the mirror speaks: in its silence, in cries out; although you might think it was a dead object, it makes its proclamation.”<sup>74</sup> In this way, Ephrem can avoid the “boundaries (Latin *fines*),” e.g., “definitions,” that he, according to Brock, “abhors,” and can proceed, instead, theologically “by way of paradox and symbol,”<sup>75</sup>—the greatest of these being the *ihidaya*, as solitary, and in solidarity as *qyama*.

Drijvers writes of the pagan tombs, which still surround the modern city of Şanlıurfa. These resting places had nothing to do with any bodily resurrection. Instead they signify the space “where the living ones meet the dead,” giving a profession of “solidarity” among all of the family, whether dead or alive. The value of such a space can be inferred from the curses that were inscribed as threats to any who thought of harming these shrines to a household (*oikos*): “Whoever breaks these bonds by removing the dead will himself be removed from the society of the living and the dead, because no

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<sup>71</sup> Wilken, *The Christians*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* 6.8, in Lehto, *The Demonstrations*, 185.

<sup>73</sup> Cf., Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 29, for a discussion on the primacy of faith for Ephrem.

<sup>74</sup> Ephrem, *Letter to Publius*, 1-2, quoted in Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 75, translation by S. Brock.

<sup>75</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 14.

son will throw dust on his eyes after his death.”<sup>76</sup> Against the conventions of *oikos* and *paterfamilias* was the “deviant behavior”<sup>77</sup> of the Christian single-one, emulating his Lord, “to the exclusion of all else—especially family and social and economic commitments.” To the cursing pagan, the one who has renounced family stands in radical opposition to “accepted social behavior.”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, it was only the elite “who could afford a wealthy burial-place.”<sup>79</sup> For the Christian, “[s]exual renunciation was a *carrière ouverte aux talents*.” Thus, even “women and the uneducated could achieve reputations for sexual abstinence as stunning as those achieved by any cultivated male.”<sup>80</sup>

Such a committed vocation defied the Rabbinic understanding of the first of God’s commandments as set forth in Genesis 1:28. “He who does not engage in procreation of the race is as though he sheds human blood.”<sup>81</sup> Koltun-Fromm notes that Aphrahat, residing in Mahoza/Ctesiphon, at the heart of Persia, “is more readily comparable to the Babylonian rabbinic content. Though Holiness was considered to be “the most valued attribute” of God, for both the late-ancient Jew and the late-ancient Christian, “[h]oliness loomed as a fulcrum of difference” between the two, particularly evident in their disputes. “The community that could prove its exclusive claim to holiness prevailed.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, the rabbis would promote procreation but within a carefully negotiated ethnic endogamy; and Aphrahat would choose, instead, celibacy as his ladder

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<sup>76</sup> Drijvers, *Cults*, 189.

<sup>77</sup> Drijvers, “Jews and Christians,” 89.

<sup>78</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 162.

<sup>79</sup> Drijvers, “Jews and Christians,” 90.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, *The Body*, 61.

<sup>81</sup> *Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth* 63b, quoted in Brown, *The Body*, 63.

<sup>82</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 6-7.

to holiness. In Demonstration Eighteen, Aphrahat notes, “a Jewish man who reproached one of [his] brothers,” saying: “You are unclean because you do not take wives, but we are holy and excellent because we father [children] and multiply our seed upon the earth.”<sup>83</sup> Naomi Koltun-Fromm points out that “Aphrahat cannot counter that argument. What he does instead is show that God actually gave another ‘commandment’ at Sinai—one that says, ‘be celibate,’ which bears greater weight.” Such abstinence/purification is required for Moses and the others to ascend to approach God on the holy mountain. Therefore Aphrahat “argues for a better obedience,” one that involves a “positive command”—“derived from Exodus 19:15.”<sup>84</sup>

One other significant conflict between the devoted Jew and the devoted *ihidaya* concerns *orthopraxis*. For Aphrahat, the disciple commits to fully striving to emulate Christ. This exemplary path of virtue towards righteousness stands in contrast with the prescription in the Mishnah: “He who accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, the yoke of government and the yoke of labor, are removed from him; and he who throws off the yoke of Torah, upon him is placed the yoke of government and the yoke of labor.”<sup>85</sup> “Holiness,” for Aphrahat, “comes not through procreation, Sabbath observance, or dietary laws but by following the simple example of Moses’ celibacy.”<sup>86</sup>

As mentioned earlier, righteousness pushes past the written law. In his final demonstration, Aphrahat writes: “The righteous are the pilots of this world, just as a ship is guided by the skill of its sailors...the skillful pilots stand on watch and bring the ship to

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<sup>83</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* 18.12, in Lehto, *The Demonstrations*, 405.

<sup>84</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 156.

<sup>85</sup> *Mish.Abod* 3.5, quoted in Koltun-Fromm, “Yokes,” 213-214.

<sup>86</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics*, 158.

the place of rest. If a ship lacks skillful pilots, it cannot reach harbour.”<sup>87</sup> For Ephrem, the relation between the mariner and his exemplar is stressed:

O Master Mariner, who hast conquered the raging sea,  
thy glorious wood is a sign [or, ‘has come’];  
it has become the oar of salvation.

...  
Blessed is he who has become the mariner of his own soul.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike Porphyry’s rationality or the study of Torah, involving “only a one-way movement, from the mind to the object of enquiry,” Ephrem approaches the theological as “engagement, an engagement above all of love and wonder... a two-way affair, involving continual interaction.”<sup>89</sup> In a similar spirit, Karl Rahner writes of how to approach a formula like “the Chalcedonian formulation of the mystery of Jesus.” He states “we have not only the right but the duty to look at it as end *and* as beginning. We shall never stop trying to release ourselves from it, not so as to abandon it but to understand it, understand it with mind and heart, so that through it we might draw near to the ineffable, unapproachable, nameless God, whose will was that we should find him in Jesus Christ and through Christ seek him.”<sup>90</sup> It is necessary “to depart from the Chalcedonian formula in order to find the way back to it in truth.”<sup>91</sup> For Rahner, at the heart of this affair is an ever-present “incompleteness which the formula does not resolve but in fact preserves.”<sup>92</sup> Rahner is approaching the conciliar pillars with the same *type* of

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<sup>87</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* 23, 28.21-29.6, quoted in Murray, *Symbols*, 251.

<sup>88</sup> Ephrem, *HVirg.* 31,15, quoted in Murray, *Symbols*, 251.

<sup>89</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., “Current Problems in Christology,” in *Theological Investigations I*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, O.P. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 150.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>92</sup> Rahner, “Current Problems,” 151.

wonder that Ephrem sought back in the fourth century. He is wrapping dogmatic theology in paradox and mystery, and doing so, not as Ephrem-Aphrahat-manqué, but in a fashion that truly responds to the context and markers of his day. Rahner shows the translation from the insights of a Doctor of the Church to today, in such a way as to find current value. He goes on boldly to state: “we see that Christology is at once beginning and end of anthropology.”<sup>93</sup> For the Syriac Church in the fourth century, the *Ihidaya* was at once beginning and end of the *ihidaye*. By bracketing *inidaye* within the *Ihidaya*, by surrounding anthropology with Christology, Christ is freed to become the limitless horizon of hope, toward which the neo-covenanters may turn, and return, as they confront all their world presents.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 185.

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