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**Narsai's *Homily on Job*: A Digital Edition and Translation with Introduction**

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### **An Introduction to Narsai' *Homily on Job***

In the first major section of this introduction I offer a broad overview of Narsai's life and works; an introduction to the poetic genre in which this text was written, the *memra*, follows; and, finally, I offer the manuscript history of the *Homily on Job*. The latter half of the introduction presents a composite picture of Narsai's interpretation of the book of Job. Narsai depicts Job as an ascetic icon. That is, Job is an exemplary ascetic intended to aid and lead other ascetics in their pursuit of God. This depiction can be seen against both a wider Christian tradition of interpreting Job as a righteous example, and a contemporary ascetic movement in Mesopotamian Christianity. Narsai employs ascetic vocabulary to describe Job, and he crafts Job's narrative in such a way as to position him as a successful ascetic. Moreover, Narsai offers Job to his audience as an icon for ascetic practice. He describes Job with vivid visual metaphors and exhorts his audience to emulate Job's ascetic endurance. Narsai's call is thus to participate in ascetic practice and to use Job as an icon through which to pursue God.

### **An Introduction to Narsai's Life and Works**

#### **Narsai's Life**

Contemporary sources related to Narsai's life are few and laconic. We have a polemical letter by his opponent Shem'un of Beth Arsham describing the spread of the so-called 'Nestorian Heresy' in the Near East which cites Narsai and Barṣawma as primary culprits.<sup>1</sup> We also have canons from the School of Nisibis which bear Narsai's name.<sup>2</sup> Finally there are the potentially autobiographical references in Narsai's homilies. Frederick McLeod, for instance, sees Narsai's statement that "the

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<sup>1</sup> See Adam H Becker, *Sources for the History of the School of Nisibis* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008) for a discussion and translation of this text. See further Lucas Van Rompay, "Shem'un of Beth Arsham," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock et al., online ed. (Beth Mardutho, 2018), <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Shemun-of-Beth-Arsham>.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 12 (Stockholm: ETSE, 1961).

disease of their words has made rapid progress and has spread among the multitudes” as perhaps referring to the 449 Council of Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> One could also point to the references Narsai makes to his theological opponents, namely Cyril and Eutychus, but it should be noted that no such references occur in Narsai’s *Homily on Job*.<sup>4</sup>

The principal biographical sources we have for Narsai’s life come from almost 100 years after his death. Two sources give us a narrative overview of Narsai’s life: *The Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* and *The Ecclesiastical History*, both attributed to a Barḥadbshabba.<sup>5</sup> These two sources do not agree on every point and should be seen to a certain extent as providing a portrait of Narsai filtered through a later period’s lens. Nevertheless, to situate Narsai in his context, it is useful to summarize the broader contours of his life according to these sources.<sup>6</sup>

According to his *vitae*, Narsai’s life was fraught with difficulty. He lived at the Monastery of Kfar Mari with his uncle, the abbot there, because he became an orphan at sixteen. He enrolled at the famed School of Edessa as a student sometime after. There he eventually became an instructor and even the director. It was during his directorship, however, that the political and theological

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<sup>3</sup> Quote from Narsai, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension: Critical Edition of Syriac Text*, ed. F. Graffin, trans. Frederick McLeod, S.J., vol. 40.I, *Patrologia Orientalis* 182 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), 133. See his discussion of this passage in Narsai, 40.I:20; see also the broader project of dating the homilies based on internal evidence in Narsai, 40.I:19–22; Frederick G. McLeod, “The Soteriology of Narsai” (Ph.D. dissertation, Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1968), 5–30.

<sup>4</sup> Narsai, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:19–22 discusses several of these instances.

<sup>5</sup> There is some debate over the authorship of these two works. For a brief overview, see Adam H. Becker and Jeff W. Childers, “Barḥadbshabba ‘ Arbaya,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock et al., online ed. (Beth Mardutho, 2018), <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Barhadbshabba-Arbaya>. See also Becker, *Sources for the History of the School of Nisibis* for an ET of portions of both texts; Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 98–112, 126–54 on the Cause; Becker, 100–101 on the identity of Barḥadbshabba.

<sup>6</sup> See Lucas Van Rompay, “Narsai,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock et al., online ed. (Beth Mardutho, 2018), <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Narsai> for a brief biography which informed much of the below summary; See further Judith Frishman, “The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy an Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai” (Ph.D. dissertation, Leiden University, 1992), 1–5; McLeod, “The Soteriology of Narsai,” 5–30 for a more comprehensive discussion of Narsai’s life. On questions of historicity, see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*; Stephen Gero, *Barḥadbshabba of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* ; v. 426. Subsidia ; t. 63 (Louvain: Peeters, 1981); Arthur Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 266 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965).

winds changed. Narsai's dyophysite Christology<sup>7</sup> fell out of favor in the Roman Empire, and he was forced into exile. A few years later, the school itself closed for the same reason. Having fled across the border, Narsai eventually settled in Nisibis where the bishop Baršawma convinced him to reestablish the School of the Persians.<sup>8</sup> Narsai continued teaching and writing at Nisibis until at least 496 when we have the canons which bear his name.<sup>9</sup> He died shortly after, ca. 500.

Once again, these sources pose difficult historical problems. However, I wish to focus on three conclusions we can draw from the depiction of Narsai. First, we see that Narsai was no stranger to controversy. This is not a surprising observation considering the turbulent theological times in which he lived and into which he inserted himself. We find evidence of such controversy in his homilies where, at times, he directly names his Christological opponents: "Let there stand up Eutyches, that fraudulent laborer, with his disciples...Let there also come with him the Egyptian [a reference to Cyril of Alexandria], that deceitful apostle."<sup>10</sup> Although the *Homily on Job* offers no overt autobiographical details, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that Narsai found resonance between Job's experiences of suffering at the hands of "The Slanderer" and his own experiences of exile.

Second, we must note Narsai's place at the School of the Persians. It was at this school, no doubt, that Narsai was first exposed not only to the dyophysite Christology which he would help to introduce into the East Syrian tradition but also to the writings of earlier Syriac and Greek speaking

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<sup>7</sup> See Sebastian P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," in *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy*, Variorum Collected Studies Series 863 (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2006), 1–14 for the terminology surrounding the Church of the East.

<sup>8</sup> For this period in particular see Gero, *Baršawma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century*. More recently, see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 70–97. For the issues surrounding the nature of and designations for this (these) school(s), including a reappraisal of Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 23–97.

<sup>9</sup> For an edition with English translation of these texts, see Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, 73–89. See Vööbus, 21–24 for an overview of Narsai's life and relation to these canons.

<sup>10</sup> Lines 125 and 127 of the homily on Nativity, edited and translated in Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:44–45; see also the examples cited in Narsai, 40.I:19–22.

theologians, such as Ephrem and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Indeed, at this time the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Evagrius of Pontus, and others were being translated from Greek into Syriac.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated Theodore of Mopsuestia's imprint on Narsai.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Narsai's use of Greek loanwords exhibits the increasing influence of Hellenism. For instance, Job is an "athlete" (*atlēṭā*) engaging in a "wrestling match" (*āgōnā*),<sup>13</sup> taking place in a "stadium" (*estādīōn*).<sup>14</sup> Sebastian Brock has argued that scholars might use Narsai's oeuvre as a measure of the extent to which Hellenism penetrated Syriac culture over the course of the fifth century.<sup>15</sup> Particularly while in Edessa, the school culture was no doubt a hotbed of Hellenization.

One further point about Narsai's being a part of the 'school tradition' should be made. It is likely that Narsai's teachings (and with it those of Theodore of Mopsuestia) were transmitted through the East Syrian school tradition. For instance, Jason Scully has documented how this happened for Isaac of Nineveh's reliance on Theodore in his account of "infantile Adam" and the

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<sup>11</sup> For Theodore, see Frederick McLeod, "Narsai's Dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia," *The Canadian Society for Syriac Studies Journal* 7 (2007): 19. For Evagrius, Columba Stewart, "Evagrius beyond Byzantium: The Latin and Syriac Receptions," in *Evagrius and His Legacy*, ed. Joel Kalvesmaki and Robin Darling Young (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 217 asserts a late-fifth or early-sixth century date of translation. For Greek to Syriac translation in general in this period see Sebastian P. Brock, "Towards a History of Syriac Translation Technique," in *III Symposium Syriacum 1980: Les Contacts Du Monde Syriaque Avec Les Autres Cultures*, ed. René Lavenant, S.J., *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 221 (Roma: Pont. Institutum studiorum orientalium, 1983), 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> McLeod, "Narsai's Dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia"; Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:22–29, esp. note 85 and p. 25–26; Judith Frishman, "Type and Reality in the Exegetical Homilies of Mar Narsai," in *Papers Presented to the Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1987*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, vol. 20, *Studia Patristica* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1989), 169–75; Frishman, "The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy an Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai," 34–36, 148–55, 180–83. Indeed, scholars at times often so overstate this influence as to risk obscuring Narsai's potential innovations. For example, McLeod structured the sections of his dissertation on Narsai's Soteriology around this principal: "We first review the essential aspects of Narsai's theory of redemption and then discuss the significance that this has for the understanding of Theodore and his doctrine," McLeod, "The Soteriology of Narsai," 309 (emphasis mine). Indeed, he closes his dissertation by expressing the hope that "the introduction of countless new texts from unedited and untranslated works of Narsai will promote a deeper understanding of Theodore..." McLeod, 339 (emphasis mine). While Theodore's influence on Narsai is clear, it is my hope that the publication of reliable editions and translations of Narsai's texts, including the one at hand, will promote among western scholars a deeper respect for and understanding of Narsai in his own right.

<sup>13</sup> For these two terms in Narsai and Ephrem see Sebastian Brock, "Greek Words in Ephrem and Narsai: A Comparative Sampling," *ARAM Periodical* 12 (2000 1999): 444–45, <https://doi.org/10.2143/ARAM.12.0.504480>.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, lines 243, 315, and 28, among others.

<sup>15</sup> Brock, "Greek Words in Ephrem and Narsai," 448–49.

need for asceticism as part of divine pedagogy.<sup>16</sup> No doubt Narsai enshrined this tradition in the School of Edessa/Nisibis, a tradition which the burgeoning monastic movement then transmitted to Isaac. There was perhaps an ascetic spirit in the School of the Persians whose resonances with Abraham of Kashkar's later monastic reform movement enabled the transmission of the scholastic ideas to the monastic practitioners.<sup>17</sup>

This potential ascetic climate leads us to the third conclusion we can draw from Narsai's biographies: not only was Narsai a teacher and exegete, he was also an ascetic practitioner.<sup>18</sup> Now, one must concede the possibility that the later, post-monastic reform sources gave Narsai's biography an ascetic tint for purely hagiographic reasons. At the same time, we should not be too quick to dismiss these accounts as solely monastic embellishment. Although asceticism in Narsai's writings remains understudied, they may prove to be a source for the presence of an ascetic spirit not only in the School, but also in Narsai himself.<sup>19</sup> Preliminary observations on the ascetic theme in Narsai's *Homily on Job* will be made shortly. For now, it is sufficient to remember that it was from this same scholastic milieu that Abraham of Kashkar, Narsai's successor as director of the School of Nisibis, embarked on his project of monastic reformation. We can conclude from this, at the very least, that there was the presence of an undercurrent of asceticism in the "school tradition". Thus, along with the turbulent times and the centrality of the School for Narsai's intellectual formation,

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<sup>16</sup> Jason Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 27–47, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780198803584.001.0001/oso-9780198803584>. For the idea of God as divine pedagogue found in the thought of Theodore and Narsai, and preserved in scholastic culture, see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 113–25. There are echoes of this theme in Narsai's homily on Job, e.g. lines 107–116.

<sup>17</sup> For the context of this possibility, see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 169–210.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the passage quoted and discussed in Becker, 205.

<sup>19</sup> See the preliminary comments made by McLeod, "The Soteriology of Narsai," 53. See also the recent paper given by Robert Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the Mēmre of Narsai" (Conference Presentation, June 22, 2017), particularly his point about this gap in scholarship on page 4. I am grateful to Dr. Kitchen for sharing an unpublished version of this paper with me.

and for the transmission of his teaching, the later biographies may offer a glimpse into the practical, embodied vision of this poet and preacher. It is to Narsai's poetic genre we now turn.

### The Memra as Poetic Genre

Narsai wrote his homilies in a verse form called the memra.<sup>20</sup> To a certain extent, Narsai and his contemporary Jacob of Sarugh—who was Narsai's poetic and theological rival, according to tradition—marked a stylistic break from previous Syriac poetic tradition when they adopted the memra form. Their predecessor Ephrem predominately wrote madrashe, a shorter hymn genre, although certain memre attributed to him appear to be genuine.<sup>21</sup> Syriac meter is based on syllable count, and madrashe tend to be stanzaic while memre are formed around distiches of either seven or twelve syllables. McLeod makes the case that Narsai began with the seven syllable meter, associated most closely with Ephrem, before settling into a twelve syllable meter, in which he wrote the majority of his homilies.<sup>22</sup> We should perhaps not draw too firm a line between early and late homilies based on Narsai's use of one or the other meter because we do not (and cannot) fully understand all that went into his decision to compose in a certain meter. What we can say with more certainty, however, is that Jacob and Narsai's innovation was not the use of the memra genre itself, but the use of rhetorical asides inserted into their memre.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For an overview of Syriac poetic genres see Sebastian P. Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, 2009 whose arguments I follow in the below discussion; See further Sidney H. Griffith, "The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac Memre at Work," in *Literature, Rhetoric, and Exegesis in Syriac Verse: Studia Patristica, Vol. LXXVIII. Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2015*, ed. Markus Vinzent, Jeffrey Wickes, and Kristian S. Heal, *Studia Patristica* 78 (Leuven Paris Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> See Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac" for a discussion of the authenticity of Ephrem's memre.

<sup>22</sup> McLeod, "The Soteriology of Narsai," 54–55.

<sup>23</sup> Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac." Examples of such asides are found in the homily on Job, e.g. lines 3, 106, 156, and 299. ; See further Philip Michael Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Sarugh*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 22–55 for an exploration of these texts' function in a homiletical context where the homilies are both given orally and written down to be circulated among the episcopal elite. While Forness's arguments, building on Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's theory, for both a "physical audience" and an "imagined audience" are particularly focused on Jacob of Sarugh, they apply equally well to Narsai. See particularly pp. 29-30 for Forness's discussion of this theory.

The memra is built around the distich, and this unit affords the poet the ability to develop wordplay and parallelism across the couplet. This parallelism can be conjunctive, disjunctive, or causal and resultant as needed. For instance, Narsai writes of the results of Job's showdown with Satan:

The embodied conquered the spiritual with the strong willpower,  
And the spiritual was defeated by the body in the weakness of soul.<sup>24</sup>

This couplet underscores the unexpected outcome of the battle between Job and Satan by reiterating in the second line what was asserted in the first. An example of the disjunctive couplet is lines 39-40.<sup>25</sup> Here Narsai emphasizes Job's devotion to God by first praising his children before reaffirming Job's zeal for God:

He showed the beautiful crowns, which are his children, ten in number.  
But his love for his children did not temper his affection for his Lord.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, we find example of the causal and resultant distich in lines 177-178. Satan, in the guise of a sympathetic party, offers Job an interpretation of the events of the first trial, the destruction of Job's possessions:

Your Lord repaid you (with) evil rewards in exchange for your righteousness  
Because he caused the fire to fall and consumed the flocks unmercifully.

The use of the relative particle in the second line links the two causally. It is *because* of how (according to Satan) God treated Job's possessions that one can draw the conclusion that God has repaid Job evil for good.

Narsai likewise employs wordplay across the distich, some examples of which we saw above. One further example should illustrate this point. In describing Job's pious response to the first test, Narsai writes:

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<sup>24</sup> Lines 313-314.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that since Syriac has one conjunction (the *wam*-conjunction) for both conjunctive and disjunctive clauses, the distinction between the two must be interpreted from context.

<sup>26</sup> Lines 39-40.



He tore the cloak covering his body and cut his hair,  
 But he did not tear his heart through doubt concerning his Creator.<sup>27</sup>

The multivalence of the Syriac in the phrase “through doubt” is lost in translation. At issue in this couplet is Job’s unswerving devotion to God. In Syriac, this is communicated through the Syriac word *pālāgā* which can mean “doubt”, as it does here, but whose root carries the sense of “division”. Thus Job both “did not tear his heart through doubt” and “did not tear his heart through division.” Job was single-mindedly focused on God; his devotion was not torn.<sup>28</sup>

The rhetorical power of the memra genre, however, lies in the poet’s manipulation of the balance created by the distiches. Narsai’s encomium on the “righteous athlete” exhibits his deftness in this regard:

O athlete of righteousness who endured so much  
 And did not become weak through the stratagems of the Enemy!  
 O mortal, dressed in limbs, who conquered the passions,  
 O flesh that laid hold of the contest with the spiritual one!  
 O son of man, dust of the earth, whose nature is to go astray,  
 But the love for his children did not dull the love for his Lord!  
 O mind coupled with the passions of mortality,  
 Who was not weakened by the sufferings of his sons towards complaining!  
 O invincible one whom the Evil One worked against with harsh reports  
 But (who) did not soften when hearing the distressing things!  
 Mortality did not lead his nature astray in the sufferings that he bore:  
 But (it was) not as despising the love of his children—he was not complaining.  
 He was indeed suffering in the suffering of his children and possessions,  
 But he was being comforted in the mercy of his Lord and (therefore) was not weakening.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lines 261-262.

<sup>28</sup> For further examples of Narsai’s poetic ability, particularly his use of balance within and across distiches, see Narsai, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:29–30.

<sup>29</sup> Lines 243-256.

Here Narsai sets up a distich pattern of an attribute describing Job in the first line followed by an example of his overcoming the struggle in the second, e.g. “**O athlete of righteousness** who endured so much, **and did not become weak through the stratagems** of the Enemy!”<sup>30</sup> This pattern comes through all the more strongly in Syriac as the beginning of each line forms a phonetic pattern as well: “’ô...włô”. However, Narsai uses variations on this rhythm, such as in lines 246-247, for rhetorical effect. In this distich, Narsai collapses the pattern of attribute and feat into a single line. The result is a pulsing sort of rhythm that both intrigues the listener and compellingly communicates Job’s bizarre triumph.<sup>31</sup> At the end of the series, Narsai signals his transition to a new topic by gracefully exiting the established pattern. In lines 253-254 he shifts the phonetic pattern to “l’ô...włô,” anticipating the thematic shift from his encomium on Job’s righteousness to his explanation of how Job both remained fully devoted to God and fully experienced the emotional toll of his children’s deaths.

Narsai also uses such rhythmic patterns to shift his narrative focus. For example, in a similar vignette later in the poem, after reporting how Job was victorious even in the “contest of the body,”<sup>32</sup> Narsai praises Job once again as a heroic victor:

O Archer who shined out and was victorious in every contest  
 And an earthborn raised him while seated but being sent his munitions.  
 O mortal, contemptible nature whom demons tread out,  
 Who rose while falling, casting them beneath his feet.  
 O corporeal athlete whom the spirits gladdened  
 And the body, heavier than the light things, saved his soul  
 O sailor who journeys the sea in a strong tempest,  
 And the disturbance of the swells did not drown his faith!

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<sup>30</sup> Lines 243-244.

<sup>31</sup> See also lines 123-132 in the homily on the Nativity, discussed in McLeod, “Narsai’s Dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia,” 29, for a similar example of Narsai’s manipulation of balance and rhythm in a repetitive series.

<sup>32</sup> Line 300.

The Evil One disturbed him on the sea of his body (along) with his mind,  
 And he made the boat to stink in the perseverance of his soul, so that (his soul) would not  
 be drowned.

The reports blew at him like hurricanes but he did not weaken,  
 And the suffering over his children's death(s) battered him but he did not doubt.  
 The Evil One dashed against the ground of his body with a hail of pains,  
 But his mouth answered (with) a hymn of praise instead of blasphemy.  
 The Accuser took his possessions captive in order to take his heart captive,  
 But the wealth of the hiddenness of his soul sheltered inside truth.  
 Because he did not weaken with the destruction of his goods and the sufferings of his body,  
 His Lord braided for him a crown of victory in exchange for his afflictions.<sup>33</sup>

Here Narsai establishes a similar rhythmic pattern as the example above, rehearsing the metaphors of Job as a carnal athlete fighting with the spiritual. But then, within the same rhythm, he introduces a new metaphor: "O sailor".<sup>34</sup> At first blush he seems to take this metaphor on a tangent, but upon closer inspection we see that this transition is intentional. He uses the fresh, nautical imagery as a way to summarize the exegetical ground he had just covered in his homily: the various afflictions hurled at Job's body, family, and possessions,<sup>35</sup> but also the salutary effects of these afflictions.<sup>36</sup>

Turning to the large scale, systematic study of overarching stylistic devices, the 'macro-poetics' as it were, of the memra genre remains a desideratum. Sydney Griffith offers the possibility that research into ring structures might shed some light on the memra genre.<sup>37</sup> McLeod demonstrates how Narsai interweaves the retelling of a biblical narrative with exegetical and theological exposition in predictable patterns in his homilies on the ecclesiastical feast days.<sup>38</sup> Narsai's *Homily on Job* exhibits some parallelism between the introduction and conclusion. For

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<sup>33</sup> Lines 329-346.

<sup>34</sup> Line 335.

<sup>35</sup> Lines 337, 339-341.

<sup>36</sup> See particularly line 338 where in making Job's body stink actually ensured the salvation of his soul.

<sup>37</sup> Griffith, "The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Memre* at Work," 19-20, particularly note 41.

<sup>38</sup> Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:31-32.

instance both lines 16 and 352 relate that Job's narrative is intended to help a person "cleanse the foulness of their soul." In short, I would reiterate Griffith's observation that this is an area ripe for further investigation. It is hoped that the publication of more of Narsai's works will lead to greater interest in such an investigation not only of Narsai's memre, but of the macro-poetics of the memra genre in general.

### **Manuscript Evidence for the *Homily on Job***

Narsai's *Homily on Job* has a rich manuscript history, having been attested in at least ten copies of which nine are now extant. At least one manuscript family is evident, consisting of three of the ten manuscripts: Chaldean Church of St Joseph MS 5, British Museum Oriental MS 5463, and the now lost Urmiah College 34. British Museum Oriental MS 9367 contains the same contents as this manuscript family, but in a slightly different order. The extant copies range from 1893 to 1902<sup>39</sup> and are all, as one might expect, East Syrian in origin. Geographically and ecclesiastically their provenance ranges from Mosul, Urmia, and Alqoš; and from the Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholic church. The following description of the manuscripts is in two parts. The first describes those witnesses used in the eclectic edition; the second describes additional manuscript witnesses which were not used in the edition. As almost all of these sources have been described at length by Macomber,<sup>40</sup> the descriptions, particularly in the second part, are brief.

#### *Manuscripts Used in the Edition*

**Mingana's *editio princeps*** (A): Alphonse Mingana first published a two-volume edition of 47 of Narsai's memre in 1905. Unfortunately, although he cites three manuscript sources, from Urmia, Mosul, and Alqoš, he does not provide enough information regarding these manuscripts to

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<sup>39</sup> This range refers to the extant manuscripts. Mingana's *editio princeps* was published in 1905, for instance. Although the Patriarchal Press edition was published in 1970, the manuscript of which it purports to be a facsimile was copied in 1901 and therefore fits within the given range.

<sup>40</sup> William F. Macomber, SJ, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homiles of Narsai," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 34, no. 2 (1973): 275–306.

compare them with Macomber's list; nor does Mingana provide variant readings, although in a few places he offers emendations.<sup>41</sup> The text is printed in a vocalized East Syrian script with distiches delineated by the symbols : and ❖ for the first and second line, respectively. This text was selected as the base text in part due to its status as the *editio princeps* and in part due the availability of a TEI-XML transcription of Mingana's text on the Syriac Digital Corpus.<sup>42</sup>

**Patriarchal Press Edition (B):** This text, published in 1970 in two volumes, is a facsimile of a manuscript copied in 1901 in Mosul by Patros ben Yosip from Telkepe, Iran. It would appear that this manuscript is no longer extant; based on the ordering of the memre, it is not directly related to any of the manuscripts in Macomber's list and thus represents an important witness to Narsai's text.

**Chaldean Church of St Joseph MS 5 (C):** This manuscript, listed as Neesan 1 by Macomber, was copied in 1896 at Urmia and now resides in the Church of St Joseph in Tehran, Iran. It is a copy of British Museum Oriental 5463 (copied in 1893), itself a copy of an earlier, now lost manuscript, Urmiah 34 (copied in 1715), making it part of the oldest known chain of transmission of Narsai's homilies.<sup>43</sup> This manuscript is paginated with each page containing two columns of text; rubrics are given in red ink. I was able to consult this manuscript through the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library's virtual reading room.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Additional Manuscripts*

The following list consists of those manuscript sources which contain this memra but which I was unable to consult.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lines 163, 208, and 332 in the homily on Job, for example. Alphonse Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Fraternity of Preachers, 1905), vol. 2:259, 260, and 263 respectively.

<sup>42</sup> Narsai, "On Job - ܟܘܠ ܟܘܠ ܕܝܢܝܩܠܐ," based upon Alphonse Mingana ed., *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina* (Mausilii: Typis Fratrum Prædicatorum, 1905), Digital Syriac Corpus, last modified July 5, 2017, <https://syriacorporus.org/96>.

<sup>43</sup> Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 288.

<sup>44</sup> Images available at <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/501331>.

<sup>45</sup> I urge that, where possible, these sources be photographed so that they might be made available to scholars across the globe. For uniformity of reference I use Macomber's designation for these manuscripts; Macomber, SJ, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai."

- **Dietrich MS 5:** Copied in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries in an undetermined location. This manuscript, which contains thirty-five of Narsai's memre, currently resides in the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The *Homily on Job* appears on folios 74a-77a.<sup>46</sup>
- **British Museum Oriental MS 5463:** This is the first dated manuscript, copied in 1893 at Urmia. The manuscript, which contains seventy-one memre, has its putative source in Urmiah College MS 34, no longer extant but finished in 1715. As noted above, this manuscript is likely the source for Chaldean Church of St. Joseph MS 5, making the latter a child of what is potentially the earliest extant witness to Narsai's work. The *Homily on Job* appears on folios 262a-266a.<sup>47</sup>
- **Chaldean Patriarchate MS 70:** This manuscript exists in four distinct parts, with the *Homily on Job* appearing on folios 74b-81b of the second part. The first two parts of this manuscript were copied in 1895 in Alqoṣ for the Chaldean patriarch 'Abdišo' Ḥayyaṭ. Macomber proposes that this manuscript serves as a supplement to Chaldean Patriarchate MS 69, the pair representing the entirety of the church's collection of Narsai's works.<sup>48</sup>
- **British Museum Oriental MS 9367:** Copied in 1896 at Alqoṣ and now residing in the British Library, this manuscript contains the same contents as British Museum Or 5463, Chaldean Patriarchate MS 70, and Chaldean Church of St Joseph MS 5, albeit in a different order. The *Homily on Job* appears on folios 72a-78b.<sup>49</sup>
- **Notre-Dame des Semences MS 161:** Copied in Alqoṣ in 1898, this manuscript this manuscript exists in three parts and seems to derive from Chaldean Patriarchate MSS 69 and

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<sup>46</sup> Macomber, 283.

<sup>47</sup> Macomber, 286.

<sup>48</sup> Macomber, 288–89.

<sup>49</sup> Macomber, 289.

70. The first of the three parts mirrors the second part of Chaldean Patriarchate MS 70 in contents, order, and numbering. The *Homily on Job* appears on folios 74b-81b.<sup>50</sup>

- **Mingana Syriac MS 55:** This manuscript was copied in 1902 at Alqoš and now resides in the Mingana collection of the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham, formerly the Selly Oaks Colleges Library, in Birmingham, England.<sup>51</sup> The *Homily on Job* appears on folios 82a-88b.<sup>52</sup>

### Narsai's Interpretation of Job

#### Job in the Context of Narsai's Theology

While there are several themes at play in this memra—such as the hiddenness of God<sup>53</sup>—in this introduction I will focus on Narsai's understanding and use of the character and narrative of Job. Narsai holds Job out to his audience as a model of Christian ascetic virtue without connecting him typologically to Christ. Narsai marshals biblical narratives as guides for the lives of Christians, and the *Homily on Job* functions in a similar way. Job is an example of proper Christian conduct. For Narsai, as we will see, Job is not merely a general example of Christian virtue but a particular ascetic exemplar. Through this homily, Narsai teaches his audience to emulate this paragon of ascetic virtue through their reading and remembering Job's story.

#### *Job's Relationship to Christ*

We have already seen above that Theodore of Mopsuestia exerted the most direct and lasting influence on Narsai's theology. Unfortunately, it seems no commentary on Job from Theodore has

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<sup>50</sup> Macomber, 290.

<sup>51</sup> The catalogue for the Mingana collection may be found here, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/birmingham-quran-mingana-collection/index.aspx>.

<sup>52</sup> Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 291.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, lines 51-58. God's hiddenness is a synonym for God's utter transcendence, a central claim in Narsai's Christology, on which see Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:22–29.

survived. This lacuna is no doubt due to the condemnation his views received at the Second Council at Constantinople (553).<sup>54</sup> In spite of this lack, the manner in which Theodore, and by extension Narsai, approached the Old Testament may still prove instructive.<sup>55</sup>

Narsai adheres to Theodore's strict definition of typology.<sup>56</sup> For an Old Testament narrative to be a type of Christ, it had to be related in some tangible way to the events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. In other words, Narsai, like Theodore, emphasizes the literal rather than the allegorical sense of scripture as the locus of typology: it is in the text as written—not in some allegorical interpretation of the text—where one finds the type.<sup>57</sup> This limiting of typology may be seen as part of the Antiochene reaction to Alexandrine theology.<sup>58</sup> The prophet Jonah, for example, is a type of Christ because his narrative, particularly the three days in the fish (without air), maps directly onto Christ's three days in the tomb (without air).<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, certain narratives

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<sup>54</sup> Dimitri Z. Zaharopoulos, *Theodore Mopsuestia on the Bible: A Study of His Old Testament Exegesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 32–33 offers a concise summary of quotations concerning Theodore's putative commentary on Job. ; See further Zaharopoulos, 45–48 for a discussion of the extent of our knowledge of Theodore's views on Job based on quotations and summaries in other sources.

<sup>55</sup> An extensive study of this is made in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore Mopsuestia on the Bible* particularly chapters 3, "Theodore's View of the Old Testament Canon and Text" (pp. 44-77) and 6, "Old Testament Messianic Expectations as Interpreted by Theodore of Mopsuestia" (pp. 142-175). Cf. the literature cited below.

<sup>56</sup> A concise overview of Narsai's understanding of typology can be found in Frishman, "Type and Reality in the Exegetical Homilies of Mar Narsai". Cf. the fuller discussion in Frishman, "The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy an Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai," 128–79.

<sup>57</sup> See Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 2009), 19–21. The emphasis on "literal" rather than "allegorical" has often been a way of differentiating Antiochene exegesis (represented by Theodore) from Alexandrian (Origen, Cyril, etc.). However, the emphasis on the literal, what "actually happened" would mean, for Theodore, "happened" according to the narrative of the biblical text rather than, necessarily, "an event that has been established by the critical historical method." (McLeod, 19). ; See further, Richard J. Perhai, *Antiochene Theoria in the Writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 208–12.

<sup>58</sup> Although, as Frances Young has shown, these dichotomies of the two schools are less useful than they once were. See Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://www.netLibrary.com/urlapi.asp?action=summary&v=1&bookid=54590>; Frances Young, "The Rhetorical Schools and Their Influence on Patristic Exegesis," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 182–99; Frances M. Young, "Traditions of Exegesis," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 1: From the Beginnings to 600*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Joachim Schaper, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 734–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139033671.039>.

<sup>59</sup> See lines 213-232 of this homily, translated and discussed in Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the Mēmrē of Narsai". See further, Robert Kitchen, "Winking at Jonah Narsai's Interpretation of Jonah for the Church of the East," in *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East*, ed. Vahan Hovhannessian, Bible in the Christian Orthodox Tradition 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 54, who cites lines 283-284 as linking Jonah and Christ typologically using the technical term discussed below.



that Narsai's contemporaries, such as Jacob of Serugh, considered types of Christ—if they were not outright rejected as such by Narsai—were handled by him with somewhat more anxiety. An illustrative example of this is the binding of Isaac. While Narsai connects Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac to Christ's death and resurrection, as Griffith notes, "Narsai was obviously nervous about the typology...he went on for another 50-some lines explaining himself."<sup>60</sup>

Narsai's view of a given text as typologically connected to Christ may be surmised through his use of the technical term *raza*. For Narsai, this term denotes a type, which points to the "truth" (*šrānā*) that is Christ.<sup>61</sup> For example, speaking of his baptism to John the Baptist in the *Homily on Epiphany*, Narsai puts the following words in Christ's mouth:

I am from the (same) lineage that death has swallowed and defrauded of its life.

Let it be so! I am descending in *mystery* into the water and raising it up.

I am a member of the race that is captive to the evil one on its own accord.

I will go forth (to) bring back our captive race from the rebel.

A bond of death my (fore)fathers wrote out and succumbed to sin;

And I have made an agreement that I will pay for it in *mystery* first of all.<sup>62</sup>

The highlighted term, "mystery" is *raza*. The point, for Narsai, is that Christ's baptism serves as a typological indicator of the events and effects of his death and resurrection—descent into the water (which symbolizes the grave), the freeing of "our captive race," and the payment of our bond. It should be noted that earlier Syriac writers such as Ephrem also used the term *raza* to mean type in

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<sup>60</sup> Griffith, "The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Memre* at Work," n. 37. See pp. 17-18 for the citation of this homily.

<sup>61</sup> See Frishman, "The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy an Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai," 128 for a translation of this latter term as "solid reality", a term that more accurately captures Narsai's sense.

<sup>62</sup> Lines 251-256 Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:86-87.

contrast with the truth.<sup>63</sup> However, Narsai employs these terms in this much narrower, typological sense.

This discussion of Narsai's technical usage of *raza* emphasizes the point that Job, for Narsai, was not a type of Christ. The only use of the term in Narsai's memra on Job is in line 79, "He [Satan] bound the mystery on his own and fashioned the pact." The context is not typology. Rather, Satan is here discussing how he will (attempt to) keep hidden his aim of causing Job to blaspheme when he goes to accuse him before God. Narsai never connects Job's actions in a typological fashion with Christ. This is not to say that Narsai's Job does not exhibit certain Christ-like tendencies, rather, the lack of *raza* emphasizes the fact that Job's actions do not foreshadow Christ's in the same manner that, say, Jonah's do. Indeed, Narsai seems to exhibit some anxiety about identifying Job too strongly with Christ. At points Narsai's exegesis of the book of Job parallels the language of his homily on the temptation: "The contestants went down to the contest (*'agôna*), | | the Athlete of righteousness and the head of the Air, the envious one."<sup>64</sup> In line 24 of the *Homily on Job* he says that "with the Prince of the Air [righteous exemplars] descended to the contest (*'agôna*)."<sup>65</sup> The trials Job faced are likewise described as contests to which he and Satan "descended".<sup>65</sup> Job, like Christ, is an athlete of righteousness<sup>66</sup> battling the envious one. However, whereas Christ won the decisive victory, "In Job's sufferings the athletic competition commenced, and flesh began to seize the struggle with spirits."<sup>67</sup>

### *Job as Righteous Exemplar*

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<sup>63</sup> As Sebastian P. Brock, ed., *Treasure-House of Mysteries: Explorations of the Sacred Text through Poetry in the Syriac Tradition*, Popular Patristics Series, no. 45 (Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 18 notes for Ephrem, "a single verse may contain many different *râzê*, but they are all pointers to the same *šrara*, 'truth,' that is divine reality."

<sup>64</sup> English translation taken from Brock, "Greek Words in Ephrem and Narsai," 445.

<sup>65</sup> See lines 158, 199, and 311.

<sup>66</sup> Line 243.

<sup>67</sup> Lines 358-359.

If not a type of Christ, how does Narsai conceive of Job? In another homily entitled *On the Perfection of the Ways*,<sup>68</sup> Narsai invokes Job in a list of exemplary Old Testament figures, the emulation of whom serves Christian moral formation. Such a list is a common device in Syriac authors, undoubtedly drawn from the models found in the Bible.<sup>69</sup> The figures on Narsai's list all "overcame their own passibility while in passible nature, despised thoughts pertaining to the body and occupied themselves with spiritual thoughts."<sup>70</sup> This dynamic is at work in Narsai's *Homily on Job* as well. Job is a "mirror for our own weakness, because while he was embodied, in the sufferings of the body, he conquered the spiritual."<sup>71</sup> We can therefore understand Narsai, in his *Homily on Job*, to be explaining what specifically makes Job worthy of inclusion on a list of righteous exemplars and the specific ways Job's narrative might prove effective for Christian formation.

It is worth mentioning that Narsai's interpretation of Job as an example of righteous conduct is by no means innovative. From the beginning Christian interpretive tradition has lauded Job as an exemplary sufferer. The reason for this development is twofold. First, the majority of earliest Christian interpreters worked from the Old Greek version of the book of Job, which scholars have noted exhibits theological editing.<sup>72</sup> Job appears in this version less vitriolic, for instance. Exegetes also read the Old Greek version through the lens of the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Job*, popular in Christian circles. Syriac interpreters of Job, despite having the Syriac Peshitta (a closer rendering of

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<sup>68</sup> See the discussion of this text in Frishman, "The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy an Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai," 24–26.

<sup>69</sup> On this structure see Robert Murray, S.J., "Some Rhetorical Patterns in Early Syriac Literature," in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East*, ed. Arthur Vööbus and Robert H. Fischer (Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1977), 109–32. Biblical examples include Hebrews 11:1-40; Ezekiel 14:14, citing Job along with Daniel and Noah; and perhaps even the patriarchal formula "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" invoked inter alia in Exodus 6:3; 32:13. .

<sup>70</sup> Frishman, "The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy an Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai," 24. For the ascetic character of this list, see the discussion of asceticism in Narsai below.

<sup>71</sup> Lines 365-366.

<sup>72</sup> See CL Seow, *Job: Interpretation and Commentary (1-21)*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 6–10.

the Hebrew than the Old Greek) by the third century, tended to follow this Greek-influenced righteous Job tradition.

Narsai offers one final piece of evidence for how he conceives of the divine purpose for Job's narrative. Towards the end of his homily, Narsai tells his audience that Job's "triumphs were like preachers in everyone's ears, so that they strengthen a person, so they do not weaken in the sufferings of the body."<sup>73</sup> Job's narrative is thus a sermon, placed by God in the Old Testament.

### **Job as Ascetic Icon**

What is Job's sermon, his kerygma? To answer this question, we must refine our description of how Narsai understands Job. For Narsai, Job is not merely an example of generally righteous conduct; instead, Job is an ascetic icon. Both of these terms require further comment. This section deals with the former: how does Narsai connect Job with asceticism? The following section takes up the question of how Narsai depicts Job as an icon.

Narsai's interpretation of Job fits both the wider Mesopotamian Christian ascetic tradition, and Narsai's own ascetic vision. Asceticism in the *Homily on Job* exhibits clear resonances with the Mesopotamian Christian ascetic tradition represented by the anonymous *Book of Steps* and by such figures as Aphrahat (d. 364), Ephrem, and, in particular, John the Solitary (early 5<sup>th</sup> C). Moreover, Narsai's own understanding of asceticism guides both the terms Narsai employs to praise Job as righteous and the manner in which he tells Job's narrative.

#### *Early Syriac Asceticism*

Narsai seems to position Job as an ascetic par excellence in similar terms as those of John the Solitary. Mary Hansbury has pointed out John's reliance on the broader theological framework of Theodore of Mopsuestia.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps, then, we see in Narsai and John resonances from a shared

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<sup>73</sup> Lines 359-360.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Hansbury, trans., *John the Solitary on the Soul*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 32 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), xviii-xx.

source encountered in the school context. In the *Dialogues on the Soul*, John divides the ascetic program into bodily, psychic, and pneumatic.<sup>75</sup> The movement is towards *šapyūt napšā*, “luminosity of soul,” a term which Narsai frequently employs to describe Job’s state of being.<sup>76</sup> John also describes these divisions not as a linear ascent but as different modes of being, that is, “way of life at the level of the body; way of life at the level of the soul; way of life at the level of the spirit.”<sup>77</sup> Narsai perhaps exhibits a similar understanding in his introduction of Job:

The Creator wrote their victory and placed it in the archive  
So that everyone might learn about the combat of flesh and soul.  
In this contest, which is with spirits, Job was also victorious.<sup>78</sup>

Narsai can be read as assuming that there are multiple modes of ascetic combat, and that Job excelled in more than one of these modes.

Additionally, for John, the aim of asceticism is “stillness” (*šelyā*) resulting in “silence” (*msarrqūta*). While neither of these terms appears in Narsai’s descriptions of Job, part of Satan’s goal with the afflictions was to “shake the athlete into complaining.”<sup>79</sup> In some sense this language implies the desire to “shake Job’s faith”. However, at stake here is perhaps also the disruption of Job’s single-minded focus on God. Of course, Satan is unable to accomplish his ends. Indeed, Job’s afflictions ironically prove salutary. Narsai’s description of this ironic outcome evinces this ideal of ascetic stillness: “The Rebellious one pulled down the edifice of his body but built his soul, he unbound his limbs but he bound together his stirrings through perseverance.”<sup>80</sup> The unbinding of Job’s limbs refers to the bodily afflictions of boils (Job 2:7). Notably, Narsai parallels this description with an obscure statement about “binding together his stirrings through perseverance.” Job was able

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<sup>75</sup> Hansbury, *John the Solitary on the Soul*.

<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, lines 152 and 192.

<sup>77</sup> Hansbury, *John the Solitary on the Soul*, xi.

<sup>78</sup> Lines 25-27.

<sup>79</sup> Lines 206; a similar sentiment is found in line 136. Cf. line 149, “the Audacious One hoped to cause him to tremble”; line 152, “he was not troubling the luminosity of his soul.”

<sup>80</sup> Lines 323-324.

to subdue his stirring, i.e. his movements, thereby preserving his stillness. Again, Narsai never directly invokes John the Solitary's ascetic scheme of stillness and silence, but Job's ability to remain unshaken from his state of luminosity seems to be at stake in his contest with Satan.

*Asceticism in Narsai's Works*

Despite the previously mentioned resonances with the wider ascetic context of early Syriac Christianity, asceticism in Narsai's work remains largely understudied. Robert Kitchen's recent paper provides some preliminary observations.<sup>81</sup> Kitchen draws together insights from four of Narsai's homilies that speak to ascetic themes. For our purposes here, I will summarize his arguments based on Narsai's *On the Perfection of the Ways* and *On Prayer and Fasting*.<sup>82</sup> Kitchen views *On the Perfection of the Ways* as a call to ascetic practice.<sup>83</sup> In this homily, "the Biblical narratives and characters referred to are models and illustrations of asceticism, not the focus of exegesis and interpretation of their Biblical context."<sup>84</sup> Narsai, as we noted above, employs Job within this list of "illustrations of asceticism." Thus again Narsai see Job as an ascetic icon and the *Homily on Job* as an explanation of the particulars of Job's ascetic virtue. We might note, for example, that in the *Homily on Job*, Narsai lauds Job's *dûbāre*, his "way of life." This same term appears in the title of the homily which Kitchen studies: *On the Perfection of the dûbāre*. In Syriac usage, this term takes on the technical sense of "the ascetic way of life." As we will see below, Narsai employs several other key ascetic terms in his depiction of Job.

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<sup>81</sup> Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the Mēm̄rē of Narsai."

<sup>82</sup> The other two homilies, "On Jonah" and "On the Fiery Furnace," are both immensely important for understanding Narsai's ascetic vision as a whole. However, neither are as directly relevant to the ascetic program laid out in the homily on Job. For these homilies see also, Kitchen, "Winking at Jonah Narsai's Interpretation of Jonah for the Church of the East"; and Robert Kitchen, "Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Sarug and Narsai," in *Literature, Rhetoric, and Exegesis in Syriac Verse: Studia Patristica, Vol. LXXVIII. Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2015*, ed. Markus Vinzent, Jeffrey Wickes, and Kristian S. Heal, Studia Patristica 78 (Leuven Paris Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017), 73–84.

<sup>83</sup> Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the Mēm̄rē of Narsai," 5.

<sup>84</sup> Kitchen, 5.

Whereas Narsai's homily *On the Perfection of the Ways* is a call to asceticism, his *On Prayer and Fasting* explores the natural inclination towards evil at work in human nature. God does not intend to change this natural inclination. In light of this fact, therefore, Narsai urges both asceticism but also supplication of God's mercy.<sup>85</sup> Kitchen summarizes Narsai's ascetic theory as follows, "the control and management of our *yaṣrā bīṣā* by both human beings through the example of Christ, and by God through grace and mercy, is the basic principle underlying Narsai's ascetical strategy."<sup>86</sup> In the *Homily on Job*, Narsai lauds Job as one who, though a "son of man, dust of the earth, whose nature is to go astray,"<sup>87</sup> nevertheless was not led astray by that mortality.<sup>88</sup> The sentiment is similar to Genesis 6:5, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually."<sup>89</sup> Again, just as Narsai holds asceticism as a method of overcoming our evil inclination—by God's mercy and aid of course—so Job is an example of one who was successful at just such an endeavor. Narsai took part in the wider Mesopotamian Christian ascetic movement, and he consequently identified Job as a successful ascetic.

#### *Narsai's Ascetic Job*

Narsai depicts Job as an ascetic in two ways. First, he employs a surfeit of ascetic vocabulary to laud Job as righteous. That is, for Narsai, Job is a particular, ascetic kind of righteous person. An example of Narsai's technical ascetic vocabulary is 'amle, "labors".<sup>90</sup> The term can mean 'labor' in general, but it often refers specifically to ascetic practices.<sup>91</sup> Narsai describes Job's *dūbbāre*, his "way of

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<sup>85</sup> Kitchen, 18–19.

<sup>86</sup> Kitchen, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Line 247.

<sup>88</sup> See line 253.

<sup>89</sup> Kitchen invokes this same passage, Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the Mēmre of Narsai," 19.

<sup>90</sup> The term appears in this sense in lines 4, 9, 10, 11, 16, 70, 73, 80, 348, 354, and 367.

<sup>91</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, "Lexeme: *ܐܡܠܐ*," Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/2351>.

life,” as righteous, as we saw above.<sup>92</sup> This multivalent term can refer specifically to an ascetic’s way of life.<sup>93</sup> As noted above, Narsai uses this term in his homily *On the Perfection of the Ways* [dûbāre], where he includes Job in a list of Old Testament examples of successful ascetic practitioners. Narsai employs two other terms which carry ascetic overtones. For example, Narsai emphasizes Job’s “endurance” (*hûmsānā*)<sup>94</sup> and “desire” (*ṣebyānā*)<sup>95</sup> for God. We are to emulate both of these traits.<sup>96</sup> The former can mean either “endurance” or “perseverance,” and seems for Narsai to mean a kind of ascetic endurance. The latter refers to “desire” but also to “will,” specifically “freewill,” as well as to “delight.” At times Narsai seems to use this term to refer to an ascetic desire for God.<sup>97</sup>

Three further ascetic comments found in this homily merit consideration. The first is Narsai’s metaphor for the three reports of lost property. These Narsai describes as “darts,” (*gere*).<sup>98</sup> But these reports did not faze Job:

The Rebellious One hurled three darts with the three reports,  
But not one tip pierced Job through his armor.<sup>99</sup>

This is ascetic language, recalling Ephesians 6:11-18. In particular, 6:16 exhorts, “With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” The Syriac term for arrows here is the same, *gere*. Second, Narsai employs the phrase “movements of the soul” (*ṣāway napsā*) to describe Satan’s activity. This is an Evagrian term used to describe

<sup>92</sup> See lines 10, 15, 18, 69, and 76.

<sup>93</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܩܘܒܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/648>.

<sup>94</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܩܘܒܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/8733>.

<sup>95</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܩܘܒܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/2654>.

<sup>96</sup> For “endurance,” see lines 367-8. For “desire,” see for example line 50.

<sup>97</sup> See, for instance, line 3, “the desire of the just ones.” Cf. line 50 where the “desire of the just ones” is contrasted with “the lust of the Evil One which is against the just ones.”

<sup>98</sup> This term can mean either “dart” or “arrow.” George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܩܘܒܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/495>. See lines 160 and 238, in addition to 189 which is discussed in more detail here.

<sup>99</sup> Lines 189-190..



temptation. Third and finally, Narsai stresses that since Job is a mortal human being, he is prone to suffering (*ḥašē*).<sup>100</sup> This term can mean both “sufferings” and “passions.” Indeed, the concept became a locus of contention in the Christological debates of the fifth century.<sup>101</sup> John the Solitary also conceives of ascetic practice as a method by which one struggles against the passions.<sup>102</sup> According to Narsai, Job’s ability to overcome these sufferings/passions is testament to his ascetic prowess.<sup>103</sup>

Beyond the technical ascetic vocabulary which he employs, Narsai treats the biblical narrative in a way that portrays Job as a successful ascetic. In the prose prologue of the book of Job (chapters 1-2), God allows Satan to afflict first Job’s property and then his health. The end of the prose portion leaves Job on the dunghill, not (yet) having “sinned with his lips” (Job 2:10). In the poetic portion that follows, the patient, righteous Job gives way to vitriolic railing in the dialogue between Job and his friends. Finally, after the divine speeches, Job’s wealth is restored (double) and he lives a long and full life (chapter 42). Narsai is much narrower in his focus: he only treats the prologue. He describes Job’s righteousness—in the ascetic terminology reviewed above—and the two trials, which occupy the vast majority of the 368-line homily. One might also note that Job’s wife plays no part in Narsai’s recounting. Moreover, despite the fact that, “a man’s love for his children holds him prisoner,”<sup>104</sup> as Narsai has Satan assert, Job’s “love for his children did not dull his affection for his Lord.”<sup>105</sup> Narsai thereby downplays the stumbling block that, from an ascetic point of view, Job’s family would have posed. But perhaps most shocking, Narsai leaves Job on the

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<sup>100</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: *ḥašē*,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1168> See lines 19, 94, 133, 154, 245, 249, 250, 253, 255, 260, 308, 340, 345, 357, 360, 362, 363, 364, 366.

<sup>101</sup> See John J. O’ Keefe, “Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology,” *Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (1997): 39–60; and, more recently, Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*, 56–88.

<sup>102</sup> Hansbury, *John the Solitary on the Soul*, xiv–xvi.

<sup>103</sup> See in particular lines 365-366.

<sup>104</sup> Line 236.

<sup>105</sup> Lines 40, 248.

dunghill. There is no cursing of the day he was born (cf. Job 3:1) but neither is there a restoration. Job is right where Narsai, with his ascetic program, wants him: stripped of worldly weights, silently and patiently contemplating God.

### **Job as Icon for Ascetics**

Having established that Narsai treats Job as a successful ascetic, we must return to the question of how Narsai deploys Job as an ascetic *icon*. This is perhaps an anachronistic term to use for Narsai, as the iconographic movement flourished later and in Constantinople. However, despite the dubiousness, historically, of using the term in connection with Narsai, the term itself is a useful one. The homily is replete with imagistic metaphors for Job. Moreover, Narsai exhibits conceptual blending between these visual metaphors and textual ones.<sup>106</sup> Finally, the term ‘icon’ is useful because it conveys Narsai’s hope that Job’s narrative will serve ascetics in their contemplation.

#### *Narsai’s Lexicon of Iconography*

There is no less a surfeit of visual metaphors than that of the ascetic vocabulary considered above. In the first lines of his homily, Narsai develops a conceit of Job as a commemorative monument. The first couplet sets the tone:

For the benefit of a person, the Creator inscribed a memorial for a person,  
So that through a monument to the just ones who triumphed a person might become wise.<sup>107</sup>

The two terms here, *dūkerānā* “memorial” and *‘ādbānā*, “monument” convey the sense of memory but in slightly different ways. The former has the sense of a “token” or “keepsake.” It often refers to the Eucharistic celebration or to a commemorative prayer.<sup>108</sup> In this homily, the term refers

<sup>106</sup> Becker, *Sources for the History of the School of Nisibis*, 48, note 7 points out that such conceptual blending of ‘painting with words’ was common both in classical rhetoric and in Syriac literature.

<sup>107</sup> Lines 1-2.

<sup>108</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: *ܕܘܟܪܐܢܐ*,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/704>. Its use for the Eucharist derives from the Peshitta version of Luke 22:19, where Jesus tells his disciples to “do this for my memorial.”

throughout to Job and other righteous persons.<sup>109</sup> The latter term appears in this text only here. Its primary meanings are “remembrance,” “record,” commemoration.”<sup>110</sup> In this case it seems to mean a commemorative monument.<sup>111</sup>

The verb used in the above line is *ṣām*, “inscribed.” This term allows Narsai to bridge visual and textual metaphors. The term conveys a sense of “engraving” but also of “drawing, tracing.”<sup>112</sup> It thus carries more of a sense of epigraphy than other writing terms, such as *ḵtab* and its associated images of “the book of His words.”<sup>113</sup> The term *ṣām* takes on a metaphoric meaning of “ordaining, decreeing, marking,” which also fits this homily: God in God’s providence ordained that Job become an example of righteous suffering. It may be, too, that Narsai uses this term to convey the physicality of Job’s becoming a memorial through the affliction of boils on his skin. Job was truly an engraved monument.

Not only is Job a commemorative monument, he is also a *damūt ṭab‘ā*, which God placed in Scripture.<sup>114</sup> Literally this phrase means an “image of a seal,” but *damūt* is likely adjectival here, thus Job is “like a seal.” The term *ṭab‘ā* can mean variously “seal, signet, stamp,” or even “character.”<sup>115</sup> God in this passage, “fixed,” or perhaps, “affixed,” Job as a seal to the Scripture.<sup>116</sup> God does not merely give Job the stamp of approval (cf. Job 1:8), Job is the stamp itself. Moreover, at the end of

<sup>109</sup> Lines 1, 5, 31, 350, and 351.

<sup>110</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܣܳܡܳܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/2258>.

<sup>111</sup> The combination of the two is striking in light of their subsequent use in the Eucharistic liturgy of the Church of the East. On this see, Pauly Maniyattu, “Unhdana and Dukhrana in Eucharistic Celebration.Doc,” *Bolletino Della Badia Greca Di Grottaferrata, Terza Serie* 5 (2008): 23–238. Narsai does not appear to be thinking of the terms along the same lines, however. Though perhaps, as Maniyattu notes (page 1) concerning their semantic field, *dûkrānā* refers to the memorial of the person of Job while *‘ûdhānā* refers to the events recorded in the book of Job. .

<sup>112</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܟܳܬܳܒܳܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/3079>.

<sup>113</sup> See lines 5, 9, and 31.

<sup>114</sup> Line 7.

<sup>115</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܬܳܒܳܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1206>.

<sup>116</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܕܳܡܳܘܳܬܳܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/2732>.

the homily, God “fixes” (*qba*<sup>117</sup>) the “goal” (*nšā*) in the narrative of Job’s triumph over Satan. The *nšā*, a semantically rich term,<sup>117</sup> appears to be the destination of the ascetic path.<sup>118</sup> Job, as ascetic icon, is “affixed” to the Scripture for the purpose of pointing to that ascetic goal.

Finally, Narsai employs two lexical items laden with traditional associations: *šapyūtā* and *mahṣūtā*. The former can mean “sincerity,” but more often refers to “luminosity.”<sup>119</sup> The latter is a term for a mirror.<sup>120</sup> Both these terms have technical usage derived from Ephrem: “The inner eye of the mind, or of the soul, functions by means of faith, in much the same way that the exterior, physical, eyes functions by means of light. The presence of sin darkens this inner eye by keeping out the light of faith, and so, in order that this inner eye may see properly, it needs to be kept lucid and clear.”<sup>121</sup> Thus spiritual formation is, for Ephrem, a movement towards luminosity of the inner eye. John the Solitary employs the term to describe the goal of ascetic life: “luminosity of soul” (*šapyūt naphšā*). It is in this sense that Narsai seems to use the term.<sup>122</sup> Thus, those who are “luminous of soul” are successful ascetics. Moreover, for Ephrem, Scripture is a “luminous mirror.”<sup>123</sup> The use of the term “mirror” goes back to 1 Corinthians 13:12, where the Christian’s condition in this present world is described as seeing “through a glass darkly.” As part of Ephrem’s theology of moral formation, one must become more and more luminous.<sup>124</sup> Consequently, Narsai uses these terms to round out his iconic portraiture of Job. Job’s luminous example reveals our own foulness.<sup>125</sup> In other

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<sup>117</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܩܒܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1962>.

<sup>118</sup> See lines 18, 325, 327, 328, 349, 368. This term is further discussed below.

<sup>119</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܫܦܘܬܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/9010>.

<sup>120</sup> George A. Kiraz and James Bennett, “Lexeme: ܡܗܫܘܬܐ,” Syriac Electronic Data Research Archive (SEDRA), accessed April 22, 2019, <http://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1002>.

<sup>121</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, Rev. ed, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 71.

<sup>122</sup> See lines 36, 46, 57, 62, and 351.

<sup>123</sup> See, for instance, Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 76–77.

<sup>124</sup> Brock, 71–79.

<sup>125</sup> Line 352.

words, the luminosity of Job enables later ascetics to see their own impurities. This idea derives also from Ephrem, as Brock notes, “the ‘polished mirror of the holy Gospel of your Lord’ reflects the truth about divine reality, [and] it also reflects the truth about the beholder, showing up whatever moral ugliness may be there...”<sup>126</sup> Moreover, Job’s luminous state should become the goal towards which ascetics should work. A similar dynamic is at work in the metaphor of Job both as the trailblazer and the path upon which people should walk. Job represents both the goal and the journey. Indeed, the metaphors of Job as mirror and Job as path interweave at this point:

Because he tread a path towards justice by the discernment of his soul,  
 He made him a path so that they might journey [upon] a man in the example of his labors.  
 Because he received the goal of the victory of truth against the Evil One,  
 [God] inscribed his memorial like a portrait inside His Scriptures;  
 [God] wrote his memorial as a mirror for the luminous of soul,  
 That everyone would scour the foulness of their soul with the beauty of Job.<sup>127</sup>

Emulation of Job is thus both the destination and the journey; the ideal and the spotlight on the impurities keeping one from that ideal.

*Reading the Icon: Narsai’s Exhortation to Asceticism*

Narsai uses this iconic imagery to teach his audience how they are to use Job’s narrative in their own ascetic practice. Narsai’s Job is a paragon of ascetic virtue. Job is, further, an iconic example of ascetic practice. To conclude, then, let us consider the following question: what does Narsai’s *Homily on Job* expect from its audience? To put it another way, *how* does Narsai intend for his hearers to use Job as an ascetic icon?

A preliminary answer lies in Narsai’s concluding exhortation. Many of Narsai’s memre end with some type of exhortation, a direct address of his audience where he commands them to respond in some way. Often times this response seems to be a repetition of a statement of faith,

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<sup>126</sup> Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 76.

<sup>127</sup> Lines 347-352.

usually built around a quotation of a biblical text.<sup>128</sup> This is symptomatic of Narsai's larger project of developing what Kristian Heal calls, "scriptural self".<sup>129</sup> In the conclusion to his *Homily on Job*, Narsai also quotes a relevant text, Roman 8:18.

Because he did not weaken with the destruction of his goods and the sufferings of his body,  
 His Lord braided for him a crown of victory in exchange for his afflictions.  
 Because he tread a path towards justice by the discernment of his soul,  
 He made him a path so that they might journey [upon] a man in the example of his labors.  
 Because he received the sign which is the victory of truth against the Evil One,  
 He (God) engraved his (Job's) memorial like a portrait inside His Scripture;  
 He wrote his memorial as a mirror for the luminous of soul,  
 That everyone would scour the ugliness of his (their) soul with the beauty of Job.  
 In agreement with this he praised the just exceedingly,  
 So that they might be an example through their labors for the hiddenness of truth.  
 He did not braid earthly praises for his athletes;  
 He cast zeal on earth for humankind (to go) toward justice.  
 In Job's sufferings the athletic competition commenced,  
 And flesh began to seize the struggle with spirits.  
 His triumphs were like preachers in everyone's ears  
 So that they strengthen a person, so they do not weaken in the sufferings of the body.  
 Like a trumpet everyone cries out over his victory,  
 "A little while, and a few sufferings, but a great recompense!"  
 He converses with all and in everything through the sufferings which he bore:  
 "The sufferings of now are not equal to the glory that will come" (Rom 8:18).  
 Let Job be like a mirror for our own weakness,  
 Because while he was embodied, (and) in the sufferings of the body, he conquered the  
 spiritual.

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<sup>128</sup> See for instance the homilies edited and translated in Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*.

<sup>129</sup> See on this idea Kristian Heal, "Tradition and Transformation: Genesis 37 and 39 in Early Syriac Sources" (PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2008), 126–39. See further Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/vanderbilt/Doc?id=10927999>.

In the path of his labors let us always journey so that (there may be) no complaint.  
 And in his endurance let us erect the sign for our faith.<sup>130</sup>

Several aspects of this exhortation require further comment.

The language that Narsai uses in this conclusion most closely parallels his *Homily on the Epiphany*, wherein Narsai exhorts his audience to follow Christ's example by being baptized, thereby participating typologically in the death and resurrection:

He gave his word and promised renewal of the body and redemption of the soul,  
 And he wrote these out on the two tablets of water and the Spirit  
 The goal of life he set in baptism for his forces,  
 So that they might aim at the fashioning of the Kingdom on high.  
 In water he fixed the new goal of spiritual birth,  
 Because everyone who willingly does likewise receives freedom.  
 Behold the promise of the King on high which (can)not be broken!  
 Come! Let us strive to receive gratis the wealth of the Spirit!  
 Behold! The goal is fixed before (his) disciples so that they might imitate him.  
 Let the heart believe and the mouth confess and the faculties take aim (at the goal)  
 This (is) the road (that) the King has traversed for us in his own person.  
 Come! Let us travel on it to the end as long as there is light.  
 Behold! There is opened the womb which begets men spiritually.  
 Bury mortality in baptism and acquire life!  
 Let everyone hear that declaration (of the Father): "This is my beloved";  
 And let us acquire love for that one who holds men in his love.  
 With John, let us cry out in one voice the confession:  
 "This is the Lamb of the God of the universe who purifies the stains (of sin)"!<sup>131</sup>

Just as the "goal of life" was set by Christ in Christian baptism, so too Job's combat with Satan

"embedded the sign within the struggle."<sup>132</sup> Moreover, in both homilies, Narsai calls his audience to

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<sup>130</sup> Lines 345-368.

<sup>131</sup> Lines 529-546, edition and translation in Narsai, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 40.I:102-5.

<sup>132</sup> Line 325.

follow a path forged by his narrative subject. In Job's case, the path was one of forbearance in suffering; in Christ's, the path was baptism. In both cases, the call is to emulation. In the homily on Epiphany, Narsai calls his audience not only to repeat a statement of faith but also to a specific liturgical action: baptism, construed as typological participation in Christ's redemptive work. So too, in his *Homily on Job* Narsai calls us to action (albeit, not typological action): to journey "in the path of his labors" to avoid "complaint".<sup>133</sup> What does it mean to journey in the path of Job's labors?

On the surface Narsai's call is to ascetic endurance: "in his endurance let us erect a sign for our faith."<sup>134</sup> However, the method of endurance seems to be through actively remembering, i.e. retelling, Job's story. It is for this reason that Narsai employs the iconic imagery. Job's memorial is "engraved" in scripture; this memorial, is moreover, "a mirror for the luminous of soul."<sup>135</sup> What is this mirror for? It is a "preacher."<sup>136</sup> The way to give voice to the "preacher" that is Job's narrative, the way to activate the mirror, is to read the narrative of Job. Narsai's exhortation is to read. But it is not just any reading: the inspired narrative of scripture is meant to "strengthen a person, so that they do not weaken in the sufferings of the body."<sup>137</sup> Narsai calls his audience to use the reading—we might say *his* reading—of the book of Job in their own ascetic practice, as a guard against laxity or spiritual defeat. Indeed, it is through the active remembering of Job, a luminous mirror, that we see our flaws, scrub them off, and thereby assimilate ourselves to the exemplary life written "in the book of His words". Reading is the locus of forming the "scriptural self".<sup>138</sup> Job, a luminous one, is both the path and the goal;<sup>139</sup> reading his narrative is a way "to erect the banner of our faith" in a sure foundation: one that endures.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Line 367.

<sup>134</sup> Line 368. It should be kept in mind that the term "labors", *pālḥānā*, can refer to ascetic practices.

<sup>135</sup> Lines 350-351.

<sup>136</sup> See line 359.

<sup>137</sup> Line 360.

<sup>138</sup> See again Heal, "Tradition and Transformation," 126–39.

<sup>139</sup> See lines 347-348, 351-352.

<sup>140</sup> Line 368.



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