

Festal Apologetics

Syriac Treatises on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Oriental Studies

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross offered an occasion to refute religious opposition to the cross and crucifixion in the diverse socio-political contexts encountered by Syriac Christians between the fourth and the ninth centuries. At its inception, the Feast of the Cross promoted the cult of the True Cross, Old Testament typology, and the expansion of the Christian faith, and these features were sufficiently malleable to meet new religious challenges and political contexts. John of Dara's ninth-century homily *On the Cross* is a lengthy exposition on the veneration of the cross, and it showcases how the feast could be used for apologetic ends. The first chapter focuses on the relic of the True Cross and the theologies of the cross of Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ephrem the Syrian, which shaped later festal celebrations. The second chapter traces the development of the legend of Helena's Invention of the Cross and introduces the most popular Syriac invention legends, the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos legends. The third chapter analyses themes in pre-Arab Conquest Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross by Narsai, David Eskolaya, Jacob of Serugh, Severus of Antioch, and Pseudo-Chrysostom. The fourth chapter provides an overview of the dramatic changes of the seventh century during the reign of Heraclius and following the Arab Conquest. Chapter five compares inter-religious debate concerning the cross and crucifixion between Christians and Jews and between Christians and Muslims between the seventh and ninth centuries. Chapter six introduces John of Dara's homily for the Feast of the Cross, which uses the traditional themes, together with apologetic topics, to defend the veneration of the cross. Chapter seven explores the influence of John of Dara's homily on later Syrian Orthodox writers, Moshe bar Kepha and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī.



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O Cross, which showed wondrous miracles to humanity,
allow me to tell your story in as much as I am able.
O Christ, who gives limpid light to unclean eyes,
illumine the eyes of my mind to see your glory.

Jacob of Serugh, *On Queen Helena and the Discovery of the Cross*

Introduction

As the Islamic State forces tightened their grip on the ancient city of Mosul in the summer of 2014, they removed the cross from the top of St Ephrem Cathedral, the seat of the Syrian Orthodox archdiocese in Mosul, and replaced it with the black IS flag. ‘They did not destroy the churches, but they killed us when they removed the cross, this is death to us,’ responded a local Christian who had fled Mosul for Al Qosh.¹ IS’s dire warnings to the ‘Nation of the Cross’ have only increased since then, as ancient churches and monasteries are vandalised, whole communities taken hostage, and mass beheadings staged on Libya’s beaches. Recent headlines are a new chapter in an old story, one whose roots lie in the distant past, long before the rise of Islam.

The sign of the cross, reverently traced upon foreheads and over the sacraments and imitated in prayerful postures, was an ancient feature of Christian devotion well before Constantine I’s climactic rise to power. Such devotion to the cross was ancient, but it was also malleable. St Paul had paradoxically declared the cross to be the instrument by which Christ had triumphed over the principalities and powers (Colossians 2.15). The innate paradox of a triumphant cross was soon neglected after Constantine rode to successive military victories bearing his *Chi-Rho labarum*, a standard that God had reportedly given him through an inspired vision. The victory of the cross became an easily recognised reality, eclipsing the counter-intuitive divine mystery it had once been. In his writings, Eusebius of Caesarea innovatively blended the image of the ubiquitous trophy (*tropaion/tropaeum*) – a public monument to victory achieved – with Constantine’s *labarum*, a military standard

¹ A.J. Rubin, ‘ISIS forces last Iraqi Christians to flee Mosul’, *The New York Times*, 18 July 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/world/middleeast/isis-forces-last-iraqi-christians-to-flee-mosul.html?_r=1 (accessed 21 July 2014).

carried into battles not yet won.² This blend of images communicated an expectation that when the emperor and his forces faithfully carried the cross into battle, victory would – or at least should – surely follow. It was a sign of God’s favour for the Christian empire.

The fourth century saw a rise in reported visions of the cross, often interpreted in terms of God’s continuing favour for Christian rulers. The same era saw the gradual spread of a rumour that the wood of the True Cross had been discovered at the site of Christ’s crucifixion and burial in Jerusalem. Just as the construction of a complex of buildings at the holy site was connected to the imperial family, in time the discovery of this most precious of relics was attributed to none other than the Empress Helena, Constantine’s pious mother. The annual celebration of the relic’s discovery coincided with the celebration of the dedication of the Constantinian buildings, and it became a fixed part of the liturgical year, filling a gap in the relatively uneventful season between Pentecost and Epiphany. The themes for these feast days, the Encaenia of the churches in the Holy Land and the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross (Feast of the Cross),³ initially overlapped. However, because the cross held such a significant place in Christian theology generally, the feast celebrating its discovery attracted a wider range of theological themes, making it remarkably adaptable to the needs of a particular context. By the sixth century, the Feast of the Cross frequently featured the retelling of the legends of the discovery of the cross, and it also allowed for the fresh articulation of the divine economy, centred on God’s saving action through the cross as anticipated in the types of the cross discernible in the Old Testament. God’s redemptive action continued into more recent history, as the conversion of Constantine and Helena’s alleged discovery of the cross clearly illustrated. From early on, such theological utterances were formulated over against the claims of competing religious communities, and,

² R.H. Storch, ‘The Trophy and the Cross: Pagan and Christian Symbolism in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries’, *Byzantion* 40 (1970) 105-18.

³ As discussed below, there were other feasts in the liturgical year celebrating the cross. If speaking of another of these feasts, I will clearly differentiate it from the Feast of the Cross.

correspondingly, the Feast of the Cross also provided an opportunity to put them to use against the main religious opponents of the day. The Feast of the Cross was an occasion that shaped the Christian community's vision of how God had intervened in history, and in turn it affected communal identity.

In the seventh century, dramatic changes in socio-political circumstances pushed this Christian imperial metanarrative nearly to its breaking point.⁴ Though short-lived, the Persian victories of the first quarter of the century were demoralizing, and the Persian capture of the relic of the True Cross from Jerusalem is a fit image for the degree of Byzantine humiliation. Not long after Heraclius had defeated the Persians and set his empire to rights, the first skirmishes with marauding Arab tribes occurred. These were not, however, isolated raids as in centuries past. By the 640s the Arab armies had seized control of Byzantium's eastern provinces and North Africa. Despite temporary gains in later centuries, the Byzantines would never manage to win them back. The metanarrative of divine favour, and even the entire concept of how the divine economy was working in human history, had to be drastically altered to address a new situation.

This change in the socio-political context inspired the central questions of this study. How did the perceived divine favour for a Christian empire fare after the rapid rise of Islam? How did these events affect inter-religious debate? When Christian kings marched under the banner of the cross, or cities paraded their relic of the True Cross on city walls and then fell to Arab armies all the same, how was the ordinary believer to make sense of this? How could the church equip them to maintain and defend their faith, shaken as their former confidence was? What effect did this have on the Feast of the Cross, laden with Christian imperial triumph, amongst Christians living in the Islamic caliphates?

⁴ For fuller discussion of these events, see chapter four.

This thesis will contend that the Feast of the Cross provided both a challenge and an opportunity to Christians under Islamic rule. The narrative of a divinely sanctioned Christian empire, particularly in the lands now outside of Byzantine rule, began to crumble and required the forging of a new vision of divine activity in history. An annual feast celebrating the association of the relic of the victorious cross with the imperial household was surely an intellectual and spiritual challenge in this context. At the same time, the feast had always reflected on the divine economy enacted through the crucifixion, and this timeless paradox of victory through the cross had traction whatever the political situation. John of Dara's ninth-century homily for the Feast of the Cross demonstrates how the traditional festal motifs could be turned to apologetic ends. The feast day provided him with an opportunity to equip his congregation with the means to defend their reverence for the cross against the questions of antagonists, and perhaps against their own doubts as well. Although John of Dara is a relatively unknown Syrian Orthodox bishop, his homily for the Feast of the Cross is one of the most comprehensive defences of the veneration of the cross from any era. It is an exceptional testament to the pressures Christian lay people and clergy alike felt to explain and defend their ancient practices.

Prior to tracing the fortunes of the Feast of the Cross before and after the Arab conquest, I must clarify a few points. First, I will briefly survey attitudes towards the cross prior to Constantine's conversion. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on events after the conversion of Constantine, but one can grasp neither the continuity nor change that occurred during this period without first considering the situation before his rise to power. Secondly, I will explain some of the potential confusions or questions that could arise from a study such as this. For example, I must explain why I choose to focus on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross rather than other annual feasts celebrating the cross. Furthermore, the primary sources uncritically blend a number of themes related to the cross in a way that the modern

reader may find muddled, and I will do my best to flag these potential confusions before they arise. Finally, I will give an overview of the chapters to come and how each of them contributes to the larger aim of this study.

1. The Cross before Constantine's Conversion

The New Testament writings offer the earliest witnesses to the emerging understanding of the cross during the apostolic period, and they provide the foundation for theological interpretations of the cross through the ages. From the very beginning, the crucifixion called for apologetic explanation, as Deuteronomy 21.23 explicitly named anyone who had been hung on a tree 'cursed'. In Galatians 3.6-14, Paul engages with this problematic passage, turning it to his advantage: he argues that everyone failed to keep the Law, and so all fell under the curse of the Law. They were freed from the curse by Christ 'becoming a curse for us'. In the Acts of the Apostles the fact that Christ was executed by 'hanging on a tree' is a central part of the apostolic message to both Jews and Gentiles (5.30; 10.39). For both Paul and the author of Acts, God vindicated Christ by raising him from the dead, abrogating the curse of the Law. It was not an easy message to get across. Paul begins 1 Corinthians with an extended reflection on the scandal of the message of the cross, observing that it is 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.'⁵ This moves towards the more radical and paradoxical statements about the cross in the New Testament. In John's gospel, the crucifixion is frequently portrayed as the exaltation and glorification of Christ, blending the crucifixion and resurrection into a single event (cf. 3.14;

⁵ 1 Cor 1.23-24. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

8.28; 12.23-4, 32). The deuterio-Pauline letter Colossians portrays Christ's crucifixion as an event with cosmic significance: the 'blood of [Christ's] cross' reconciles all things in heaven and on earth (1.20). The so-called 'Christ hymn' in Philippians 2.6-11 captures the whole range of New Testament perspectives of the cross well, from Christ's humility in the incarnation and crucifixion to Christ's resurrection and exaltation, which results in all creation worshipping at his feet. The multivalence of the cross and crucifixion of Christ in these foundational texts permitted later generations a wide scope of responses to their own social contexts.

Early on, Christians began to use the sign of the cross in worship and in day-to-day life as a sort of phylactery.⁶ By the third century, Christian writings begin to mention the sign of the cross. The brief *Ode of Solomon 27* is one such text: 'I extended (ܐܦܝܢܐ) my hands and hallowed my Lord | For the expansion (ܐܦܝܢܐ) of my hands is His sign (ܐܦܝܢܐ). | And my extension (ܐܦܝܢܐ) is the upright cross (ܐܦܝܢܐ ܘܢܝܘܢܐ).'⁷ In the *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle frequently makes the sign of the cross,⁸ and in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, making the sign of the cross protects Thecla from being burnt at the stake.⁹ At the beginning of the third century, Tertullian describes the ubiquity of the sign of the cross in Christian life: 'In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupieth us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross.'¹⁰ Tertullian also explained why Christians mark their foreheads with the cross by invoking Ezekiel 9.3-6, in

⁶ For a detailed overview of the cross in early Christianity, see J.-M. Prieur, *La croix chez les Pères (du II^e au début de IV^e siècle)* (Turnhout, 2006).

⁷ See also *Ode of Solomon* 42.1-2. The word used for 'cross' here could also be translated 'wood'.

⁸ The *Acts of Thomas* is generally dated to the early third century. The apostle makes the sign of the cross at notably liturgical moments, as when he is celebrating the Eucharist (chapter 50) and praying for one who has committed grievous sin (chapter 54); the cross is also mentioned with the seal of the holy oil (chapter 121).

⁹ *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 2.22.

¹⁰ *De corona* 3. Tertullian. *Volume 1, Apologetic and Practical Treatises*, tr. C. Dodgson (Oxford, 1842) 165.

which an angelic figure marks the heads of the faithful to protect a remnant from an imminent calamity.¹¹ Typological exegesis of the Old Testament provided the church fathers with a number of types of the cross, such as the bronze snake that Moses erected in the desert and Moses' arms outstretched at the battle against Amalek.¹² This small sample of pre-Constantinian texts indicates that early Christians adopted the sign of the cross as a religious gesture of blessing and protection.

Although early Christian writers eagerly looked for types of the cross in nature, its form rarely, if ever, appears in early Christian material culture.¹³ Crosses are an ancient and ubiquitous symbol in art worldwide prior to Christ,¹⁴ so the comparative lack of crosses in early Christian art is all the more peculiar.¹⁵ Doubtless, this reticence to use the figure of the cross directly had to do with the popular perception of the cross as an instrument of shame and execution. To the wider public, Christian claims about their crucified Lord were a source of derision – one of the earliest depictions of a cross is a graffito mocking the worship of a crucified God with the head of a donkey.¹⁶ Before Constantine, the cross of Christ was truly 'folly' and a 'stumbling block' to non-Christians. Tertullian, in a very rare reference to physical crosses prior to Constantine,¹⁷ defends the Christian use of crosses against pagan accusations that this is idolatry: 'He who calls us devotees of the cross shall be our fellow devotee. In its essence the cross is a wooden symbol. You also worship an

¹¹ *Against Marcion* 3.22.

¹² I discuss the Old Testament types at length elsewhere so I will only allude to them here.

¹³ G.F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*; rev. ed. (Macon, GA, 2003) 58-64. But see also R.M. Jensen's criticisms of Snyder's uncompromising position in *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London, 2000) 137-41. Jensen's arguments rely on the literary evidence for the cross as a part of the Christian imagination, and her argument has particular force for the sign of the ship, since it occurs in both material and literary sources. On the whole, however, Snyder's cautious approach to over-interpreting ambiguous cross-shaped signs is preferable.

¹⁴ J. Maringer, *Das Kreuz als Zeichen und Symbol in der vorchristlichen Welt* (St. Augustin bei Bonn, 1980).

¹⁵ There are abundant examples of simple cross shapes on ossuaries and the like from the period before Constantine, but it is impossible to prove that they symbolised the cross of Christ. Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60. The graffito cannot be precisely dated.

¹⁷ There are no extant material examples.

image of wood, but for you that wood represents the human form, while for us the wood speaks for itself.’¹⁸ A simple wooden cross such as Tertullian describes may not have survived the test of time, so perhaps there were greater numbers of artistically-crafted crosses produced for pre-Constantinian churches or for individuals than the current archaeological evidence suggests. Additionally, there are a few possible cases of the *Chi-Rho* symbol in Christian funerary inscriptions in Phrygia and at the Vatican in the late third/early fourth centuries,¹⁹ but otherwise the symbol only becomes popular after Constantine began to wield it in battle.

Many of the early church fathers enjoyed applying the paradoxical metaphor of the trophy (τροπαῖον/tropaeum) to the cross. The word *tropaion* was used generally for a monument erected to celebrate an enemy’s defeat. Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* is an early testimony to the paradoxical appropriation of this image. In chapter 55, Justin lists various types of the cross that occur in nature, and he observes that a ship cannot sail if it does not have ‘this trophy’, a cross-shaped mast, to support its sail. He goes further, saying that even his non-Christian opponents unwittingly witness to the sign of the cross by making their own trophies and governmental insignia in its shape. Hippolytus uses the same ship imagery, with a *tropaion* as the mast,²⁰ as does Minucius Felix.²¹ Whereas the image of the mast on a ship is peaceful, other church fathers used the imagery of the *tropaion* in a more combative sense. Tertullian’s sole use of the word *tropaeum* in *Against Marcion* 4.20 describes the cross as Christ’s trophy through which he fought and overcame death and demons. This

¹⁸ *Ad nationes* 1.12; tr. Q. Howe (2007), accessed 21 April 2015, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/howe_adnationes1.htm. Most of the time, the early Christians show a marked preference for naturally formed crosses, as in the human form with arms outstretched, the mast of a ship, etc., rather than for those which have been purposefully constructed.

¹⁹ Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 138. If there is any grain of truth to the legend’s report that Constantine sought out pagan and Christian priests to explain his vision, and that both groups reported that this was a sign of the Christians, then it makes sense that the *Chi-Rho* symbol was gaining ascendancy just before Constantine’s vision.

²⁰ *On Christ and the Antichrist* 59.

²¹ *Octavius* 29. Minucius Felix is responding to a charge that Christians worship the cross idolatrously.

vocabulary was ready and waiting when Eusebius wished to equate the *tropaion*, the emblem of victory, with the *labarum*, Constantine's new *Chi-Rho* battle standard.²² In the process, the symbolic trophy for the fight against spiritual forces has given way to a literal trophy for the fight against the empire's enemies of flesh and blood.

2. Points of Clarification

2.1. The Feasts of the Cross

The Syriac liturgical year contains several feasts that celebrate the crucifixion, visions of the cross, and the discovery of the cross. The most obvious is the most ancient: the Friday of Holy Week. Although by the 380s the Holy Friday service in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre included the exaltation and veneration of the relic of the True Cross, I chose not to focus on Holy Friday to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer number of primary sources. Most of the readings and homilies for Holy Friday are naturally focused on the event of the crucifixion, not the wood of the cross, so I assumed that looking for references to the discovery of the cross in these texts would be like seeking the proverbial needle in a haystack. According to François Nau, the ancient Syriac calendars had three different feasts for the cross: the discovery of the cross on 22 May (the same day as the commemoration of Constantine I), a 'dedication' or 'exaltation' of the cross on the 13/14 September,²³ and the commemoration of Cyril of Jerusalem's vision of the cross over

²² Storch, 'The Trophy and the Cross', 105-18.

²³ The Feast of the Cross is on the 13th in the East Syrian calendar whilst all other traditions celebrate it on the 14th. For a history of this feast in the West, see L. van Tongeren, *Exaltation of the Cross: Toward the Origins of the Feast of the Cross and the Meaning of the Cross in Early Medieval Liturgy* (Leuven, 2000).

Jerusalem on 3 May.²⁴ The September feast was variously called a Discovery (ܩܘܨܘܬܐ)²⁵ or a Dedication or Encaenia (ܩܘܨܘܬܐ or ܩܘܨܘܬܐ) of the cross.²⁶ Although the feast on 3 May appears in an early sixth-century lectionary, it dropped out of the Syriac festal year.²⁷ Whilst there is a Syriac translation of Cyril of Jerusalem's letter on his vision of the cross, there is little else to suggest that this festival was widespread.²⁸ Later a feast of the cross on 6 March celebrated Emperor Heraclius' restoration of the True Cross to Jerusalem in 629 after the Persians had taken it in 614.²⁹ By far the most popular of these feasts of the cross is the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross on the 13/14th of September, generating a sizable but manageable number of texts before and after the Arab conquest, most of which are not available in a modern edition or translation.³⁰ The Feast of the Cross on the 13/14th of September, as a significant feast in the church year, provides a suitable focus for a study of this length. Most importantly, the Feast of the Cross was a religious festival with imperial overtones, so it provides a unique window into how Christians adjusted their view of God's action in history during adverse circumstances. Scholars have left this promising angle for the study of the Feast of the Cross largely untapped, a gap that this thesis aims to fill.

²⁴ F. Nau, 'Sur la fête de la croix. Analyse d'une homélie de Moïse bar Céphā et du ms. grec 1586 de Paris', *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* II, 9 [19] (1914) 229. According to the Early Syriac Lectionary, the vision of Cyril occurred on the same day of the year that Constantine's vision had occurred (F.C. Burkitt, *The Early Syriac Lectionary System* (London, 1923) 13-4).

²⁵ Although secondary sources also call this feast the 'finding' or 'invention' of the cross, I prefer 'discovery'. It is a more natural English term than the awkward 'finding', which I rarely use. The term 'invention' I use occasionally, and it is helpful as a link to the increasing number of 'inventions' of holy relics in fourth-century.

²⁶ Sometimes it is also called an 'exaltation' of the cross. See *DACL*, s.v. 'Croix (invention et exaltation de la Vraie)'; ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq (Paris, 1924) 3.2:3138.

²⁷ Burkitt, *The Early Syriac Lectionary System*, 23. The Early Syriac Lectionary has certain features in common with local Jerusalem rites. Burkitt overestimated the influence of this particular lectionary in Syriac. See A. Baumstark, 'Neuerschlossene Urkunden altchristlicher Perikopenordnung des ostaramäischen Sprachgebietes', *OC* 3rd series, 1 (1926) 1-22; cf. K. Jenner, 'The Development of the Syriac Lectionary Systems: a discussion of the opinion of P. Kannookadan', *The Harp* 10 (1997) 9-24.

²⁸ J.F. Coakley, 'A Syriac Version of the Letter of Cyril of Jerusalem on the Vision of the Cross', *AnBoll* 102 (1984), 73-5.

²⁹ Nau mentions this feast, but he does not cite his source. I am not sure whether it was primarily a Melkite (or maybe Maronite?) festival or if it was celebrated by all the Syriac traditions.

³⁰ The two East Syrian homilies are available in modern editions, but there is no published English translation. I made my own editions and translations for the works by Jacob of Serugh, John of Dara, Moshe bar Kepha, and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī. The last three are in the accompanying dossier of texts and translations.

2.2. Blending of Themes in the Sources

Within the broad topic of the cross, there are several different themes that the primary sources blend together in a way that could feel confused to the modern reader. We naturally make distinctions between the relic of the cross, the vision of the cross, the sign of the cross, types of the cross, and crosses used in liturgy. In contrast to our tidy categories, the ancient Christian writers have a sacramental view of the world, and they assume that a sign or symbol participates in the reality for which it stands. This can seem muddled to the modern reader, but it is consistent with the worldview of the ancient author. For example, whilst Constantine's vision of a cross of light is clearly different from the wood of the cross discovered by Helena, Jacob of Serugh's homily for the Feast of the Cross purposefully refers to the vision *and* to the relic as 'the Cross of light'. For Jacob, Constantine's vision is as much about the discovery of the relic as it is the fashioning of the *Chi-Rho labarum*. Ephrem the Syrian found the cross typologically present in scripture and nature, and his theological heirs likewise constructed long lists of types of the cross. Solomon of Basra's thirteenth-century *Book of the Bee* connects the traditional Old Testament types of the cross to the literal wood of the cross. According to his account, Adam takes a limb of the Tree of Life for a staff when he leaves Eden, and it is passed down from generation to generation. Moses uses the same staff to work wonders during the exodus, and it is hidden until the birth of Christ, when the Lord reveals it to Joseph, who carries it into Egypt and later gives it to Jesus' brother James. Judas Iscariot steals the staff from James, and when the time of the crucifixion comes, he gives it to the Jews who use it as a cross-beam for the cross.³¹ Thus, in Solomon of Basra's account, the connection between the Tree of Life and the cross of Christ is not mere typology – it is direct and literal. The relic of the True Cross and the making of the sign of the cross are also intimately connected in the Christian Arabic

³¹ See especially the *Book of the Bee* 17, 30, and 44.

Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem (ca. 9th c.).³² When the monk claims that the relic of the cross can work wonders, his Muslim opponent responds that the Black Stone of Mecca can also perform miracles, but they would have to go there to see it. The monk declares that the relic of the cross is in Constantinople, but any Christian in any place can make the sign of the cross and expect God to hear them.³³ For the author of the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*, making the sign of the cross connects one to the power of the True Cross itself. The ninth-century works on the Feast of the Cross by John of Dara and Moshe bar Kepha assert that to worship the cross is to worship the one who was crucified on it.³⁴ They see liturgical crosses as sacramentally connected to Christ in a similar way to the elements of the Eucharist. To these writers the step between the symbolic and the literal is a smaller one than we might imagine. The homilies for the Feast of the Cross blend them all together, but it is not a muddle. It is more like the overture of a symphony, with distinct pieces worked harmoniously into a single arrangement.

3. The Shape of the Thesis

This thesis has two main parts of three chapters each, joined by a transition chapter. The first three chapters focus on the development and celebration of the Feast of the Cross from the fourth-century to the eve of the Arab conquest. This was, for later Christian authors, a golden age in which the ascendancy of the Christian faith was interconnected with the victory of the empire, as the emperor brandished the sign of the cross in the form of the *Chi-Rho labarum* in battle. The transitional chapter addresses the cataclysmic changes that

³² For more about this text, see chapter five.

³³ N.A. Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.): Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, PA, 1993) 333-40. See p. 169.

³⁴ This assertion is nothing new, of course.

occurred in the seventh century, from the Byzantine war with Persia to the Arab Conquest. The last three chapters discuss how the cross fared from the seventh century on, especially amongst Christians living under Muslim rule.

The Feast of the Cross began in fourth-century Jerusalem as a minor celebration embedded in the octave of the Dedication of the Churches (the Encaenia). Although there are no reports describing the celebration or stating when it became a feast in its own right, it is certain that these developments occurred in the fourth century, and the later celebrations of the feast were influenced by the theology of the cross that emerged in this period. The first chapter thus explores the theological environment in which the nascent Feast of the Cross developed by analysing the contributions of three fourth-century theologians: Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ephrem the Syrian.

The second chapter focuses on the Legend of the Discovery of the Cross by Queen Helena. The celebration of the discovery of the cross was already a part of the Encaenia before the Helena legend emerged, but the legend rapidly grew in popularity and naturally found its way into the festal materials for the Feast of the Cross. This chapter has two parts. The first section looks at the earliest witnesses to the Helena legend side-by-side and discusses how this legend may have emerged. The second section presents the two most popular legends about the discovery of the cross in Syriac: the legend of Protonike's first-century discovery of the cross and the Judah Kyriakos legend, in which a Jew named Judah assists Helena in finding the cross. This part of the chapter traces the way in which these legends were transmitted in the Syriac tradition and discusses the most prominent theories of how they arose.

The third chapter presents the extant Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross prior to the Arab conquest. The homilies of Severus of Antioch and Pseudo-Chrysostom had been translated into Syriac from Greek. The other three are native Syriac productions, all written

in verse. West Syrian Jacob of Serugh's homily narrates in verse Constantine's vision of a 'Cross of Light' and Helena's discovery of the relic with the help of Judah Kyriakos. East Syrians Narsai and David Eskolaya's homilies offer a more theological take on the feast day, replete as they are with biblical exegesis and polemical material. Despite the diversity of these five texts, prominent themes rise to the surface: the Constantine and Helena legends, polemical and apologetic argument, biblical exegesis, and the reversal of honour and shame. Narsai's homily is unique amongst the homilies from before the seventh century in that he defends the veneration of the cross against accusations of idolatry from outsiders.

The fourth chapter surveys the cataclysmic changes of the seventh-century. During the early years of the reign of Heraclius (r. 610-41 CE), the Persians swept through the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire, taking the prized relic of the True Cross from Jerusalem into 'captivity' in Persia. The Persians finally returned the True Cross to Heraclius, and he returned it to Jerusalem in 630, only to lose the Holy City to the Arabs several years later. By the end of the 630s, the Arabs had control of Persia and the eastern Byzantine provinces, the historic homeland of Syriac-speaking Christians. Islam presented a new religious challenge to traditional Christian beliefs about the crucifixion.

In the course of the tumultuous events of the seventh century, new inter-religious debate flowered, and the cross and the crucifixion received criticism from Jews and Muslims alike. Chapter five provides a broad survey of Christian apologetic arguments promoting and defending the crucifixion and the cross against outside criticism. This chapter aims to illustrate the main contours of the debate rather than provide a comprehensive assessment. The chapter shows the inter-relationship of and the distinctions between the Christians' response to Jews and their response to Muslims. After considering the extent of the Christian apologists' awareness of Muslim religious, the chapter examines their responses to challenges about the crucifixion, the veneration of the cross, and success in the present

world. Together with chapter four, this chapter puts the later homilies for the Feast of the Cross into context.

The sixth chapter introduces John of Dara's innovative, ninth-century *memra* *On the Discovery of the Cross*. The Syrian Orthodox metropolitan composed his festal homily with apologetic concerns in mind, and the first section of the chapter shows how he artfully deploys the traditional themes of the Feast of the Cross for the purpose of defending the veneration of the cross against religious opponents. Although his opponents go largely unnamed, comparison with the apologetic arguments surveyed in the previous chapter reveals that he had Jews and Muslims in mind. John of Dara lived in an age when many of his co-religionists were converting to Islam, and he uses the Feast of the Cross as an apologetic opportunity. Amongst other apologetic treatises from his age, John of Dara's homily stands out for its length and its exclusive devotion to the defence of the cross. As such, this festal homily is an important, and neglected, witness to the apologetic treatment of this topic in the early Abbasid period. John of Dara's efforts inspired later generations of Syrian Orthodox writers to take up the pen in defence of the cross as well.

The final chapter presents the treatises by Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903 CE) and Dionysius bar Šalībī (d. 1171 CE) for the occasion of the Feast of the Cross and in defence of the cross. Both authors import material from John of Dara's *memra*, enhancing it with other materials and updating it for their own concerns and contexts. These later works show the significance of John of Dara's treatise for later generations. They also reveal that the defence of the veneration of the cross continued to be a preoccupation of Syriac Christian writers for centuries to come.

Chapter 1: The Theological Backdrop to the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross

1. Introduction

This chapter will explore the historical and theological context in which the Feast of the Cross emerged in the fourth century, a formative period in the development of the liturgical year. The first part will trace the historical accounts that provide primary witnesses to the relic of the cross and the early celebrations surrounding it. In the absence of extant fourth-century liturgical or homiletical texts for the celebrations of the Feast of the Cross, this chapter investigates theologies of the cross from significant authors of the time who have left their mark on later celebrations of the day. The second part explores the theological contributions to the veneration and defence of the cross made by the fourth-century writers Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ephrem the Syrian. At the very least, these authors attest to the developing traditions that affected later celebrations. The chapter concludes by drawing together major features of these contributions as witnesses to the environment in which the Feast of the Cross was born.

2. Historical Witnesses to the Relic of the Cross

The Feast of the Cross has its shadowy origins in the fourth century.¹ According to the legend later associated with the feast,² inspired by a vision, Constantine I's saintly mother Helena went on pilgrimage to seek out the Holy Places, where she discovered the

¹ For a discussion of the legend and the early sources see *DACL*, s.v. 'Croix (invention et exaltation de la Vraie)'.
² The following summary is based on Rufinus of Aquileia's *Ecclesiastical History* 10.7-8. Rufinus' version is a fair representative of the account given by fifth-century historians, both Latin and Greek. For an English translation, see *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11*, trans. P. R. Amidon (New York, 1997) 16-18.

remains of the cross on which Jesus had been crucified. As the defiled soil of the temple of Venus was removed to prepare the ground for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, three wooden crosses were found amidst the rubble, along with the *titulus* of the True Cross, which had become detached. Since it was uncertain which cross was that of ‘the Lord’s glory’ and which were for the thieves’ punishment, the bishop Macarius suggested touching the crosses one by one to a dying noble woman, whom the True Cross would surely heal. Praying for God’s aid, Macarius touched each cross to the woman, and the third one miraculously cured her. Helena also recovered the nails of the cross, which she took to Constantine, who made a bridle and a helmet from them for battle. She left part of the wood encased in a silver reliquary in Jerusalem, and part of it she brought to her son.

So goes the legend. However, the historical emergence of the relic of the cross is rather more elusive than the later legend suggests. This section will trace the historical emergence of the relic, working backward from references to the discovery of the cross at the end of the fourth century to the alleged hints of the relic in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea.

2.1. Before the Helena Legend

The first written account that directly connects Helena with the discovery of the cross is Ambrose of Milan’s *Funeral Oration* for Theodosius I, delivered in 395 CE. Since the legend first appears over a decade after the first record of a festal celebration of the relic, it is best treated separately to avoid the temptation of reading it into earlier texts. Thus the legend of Helena’s discovery of the cross and its gradual embellishment in the fifth century will wait for the next chapter. Before Ambrose of Milan’s oration, only John Chrysostom’s 85th homily on the gospel of John betrays any awareness of how the relic of the cross had

been discovered, and it does not mention Helena.³ Chrysostom reports that, although the first generation of Christians were too preoccupied with other matters to concern themselves with preserving the cross, later generations would search for it. Chrysostom says that it is likely that three crosses would be found together, and that the cross of Christ would be the middle of the three and recognizable by its *titulus*.⁴ The main outlines of Chrysostom's account are shared by later historians, who report that three crosses were found together with the *titulus*. However, these writers relate that the *titulus* had become detached prior to reclamation efforts, necessitating other means of identifying the True Cross. Chrysostom may have known some version of a discovery story, but Helena seems not to have played a role in it. In any case, the discovery of the relic is not a central part of Chrysostom's theology of the cross.⁵

The earliest reference to the celebration of the relic of the cross during the Encaenia is Egeria's *Itinerary*, from approximately sixteen years before Chrysostom's allusion to the discovery, and it is also an important source for the veneration of the relic of the cross in Jerusalem at the end of the fourth century. The pilgrim Egeria offers a detailed account of her journeys in the Holy Places between 381-384 CE.⁶ Keen to share with her community at home details of the holy sites and the Christian rituals that took place there, Egeria's account is a rich source for studies of fourth-century pilgrimage and liturgical practices.⁷

³ Chrysostom preached his homilies on John in Antioch ca. 389-391 CE. S. Heid, 'Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende', *AnBoll* 109 (1991) 103.

⁴ *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople: On the Gospel of John*; trans. G.T. Stupart (Oxford, 1848) 2:757.

⁵ P. Stockmeier, *Theologie und Kult des Kreuzes bei Johannes Chrysostomus: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Kreuzes im 4. Jahrhundert* (Trier, 1966) esp. 194-202.

⁶ For more on her pilgrimage and a translation, see J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 3rd ed (Warminster, 2006). The Latin edition is *Itineraria et alia geographica I*, ed. and tr. A. Franceschini and R. Weber; CCSL 175 (Turnhout, 1965) 27-103.

⁷ For standard studies on pilgrimage, see E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460* (Oxford, 1982); P. Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient: histoire et géographie des origines à la conquête arabe* (Paris, 1985). For translations of other early texts on Jerusalem pilgrimage, see J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, 2002). See also F. Cardman, 'Jerusalem and the Sanctification of Place: Christian Holy Places in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries', in *Schools of Thought in the Christian Tradition*, ed. P. Henry (Philadelphia, 1984) 49-63; R.L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven, 1992) 101-25.

She describes the veneration of the wood of the cross on the Friday of Holy Week, when the cross was taken out of its silver reliquary to be touched and kissed by the laity. Due to an enterprising worshipper's attempt to bite off a piece of the cross, the bishop, holding the wood of the cross, was flanked by deacons whose job it was to prevent theft of bits (or indeed bites) of the relic.⁸ At the end of her description of the liturgical year in Jerusalem, Egeria also mentions the Feast of the Dedication (Encaenia) of the Church, celebrating the consecration of the churches at the Holy Places in Jerusalem.⁹ Egeria attributes the high honour with which the Feast of the Encaenia was celebrated to the fact that it coincides with the day when the cross was found.¹⁰ She compares the occasion to Solomon's dedication of the temple in 1 Chronicles.¹¹ By her time, crowds of laypeople, monastics, and clergy from as far away as Mesopotamia and Egypt piously flocked to the Holy City for the octave of the Feast of the Encaenia, during which the churches of Jerusalem were as lavishly decorated as at Epiphany and Easter. The celebrations included services that rotated between the churches in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, Egeria's account breaks off here, but her explanation provides the earliest reference to a special celebration of the discovery of the cross. The Old Armenian Lectionary,¹² which also witnesses to the early Jerusalem practices,¹³ specifies that on the 'second day' of the Encaenia the relic of the cross was shown to the assembly in the Martyrium.¹⁴ Although it gives a separate rubric for the readings for the display of the

⁸ *It. Eg.* 37.2.

⁹ *It. Eg.*, 48-9.

¹⁰ Egeria never attributes the discovery of the cross to Helena, although she does report that Helena had supervised the building of the Martyrium. *It. Eg.* 25.9.

¹¹ *It. Eg.* 48.2.

¹² Athanase Renoux, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, 2 vols.; PO 35-36 (Turnhout, 1969). For the Feasts of the Dedication and of the Cross, see 1:222-225.

¹³ The two primary Armenian MSS, Jerusalem 121 and Paris 44 are from 1192 CE and the 9th or 10th centuries respectively. The scholarly consensus is that these are translations of much older Greek manuscripts, estimated by Renoux to date to between 417-439 CE. The Armenian Lectionary is therefore often compared to Egeria's description of Jerusalem's liturgy and festivals. For a discussion of the dating of the Old Armenian Lectionary MSS and the original texts which lie behind them, see Renoux, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, 2:29, 169-81.

¹⁴ The Encaenia began on the 13th of September, so the display of the cross was on the 14th.

cross on the second day, the readings are nonetheless identical to those prescribed for the first day of the Encaenia. Early on then, the Feast of the Encaenia and the celebration of the discovery of the relic of the cross were inseparable. The reports of the relic, however, are older than the reports of its celebration during the octave of the Encaenia.

2.2. The Mid-Fourth Century: Cyril of Jerusalem and the Relics of the Cross

Cyril of Jerusalem made the first indisputable mention of the discovery of the cross in the middle of the fourth century, thirty years before Egeria described the veneration of the relic and the Feast of the Cross. Cyril rose to the see of Jerusalem around 350 CE, or just before.¹⁵ Cyril first mentions relics of the cross in his *Catechetical Lectures*, delivered sometime between 348-350 CE in the evocative environs of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.¹⁶ The relics of the cross must have been in circulation for a while before Cyril produced his lectures, for at this time Cyril could appeal to worldwide distribution of pieces of the True Cross to corroborate his teaching that Jesus is the Son of God: ‘The holy wood of the cross, visible amongst us until this day, testifies [to this], and [it testifies] through the ones who take away pieces of it in faith, thence filling more or less the whole world.’¹⁷ Similar references to the proliferation of pieces of the wood of the cross throughout the

¹⁵ Cyril’s accession to the see of Jerusalem is variously dated to between 348-351 CE. As the exact date is not of direct relevance here, I will not rehearse the different arguments. It seems likely to have been closer to 350 CE, since Cyril calls his letter to Constantius in May of 351 CE a ‘firstfruits’ of communication, implying that the newly made bishop is introducing himself. J.W. Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem: Bishop and City* (Leiden, 2004) 34.

¹⁶ For a recent discussion of the date of the *Catechetical Lectures*, see J.W. Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 56-8. Most people date them between 347-350 CE. The standard Greek edition is still *S. Patris nostri Cyrilli Hierosolymorum Archiepiscopi Opera quæ supersunt Omnia*, ed. W.H. Reischl and J. Rupp, 2 vols. (Munich, 1848-60). For English translation, see *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, tr. L.P. McCauley and A.A. Stephenson; 2 vols (Washington, 1970). The *Procatechesis* and the *Catechetical Lectures* on the Jerusalem creed were delivered during Lent before the catechumens were baptised at Easter. The *Mystagogical Lectures* were delivered after baptism to explain the deeper significance of the sacraments. It is doubtful that Cyril is solely responsible for the *Mystagogical Catecheses*. For John II of Jerusalem as the author, see W.J. Swaans, ‘À propos des “catéchèses mystagogiques” attribuée à S. Cyrille de Jérusalem’, *LM* 42 (1942) 10-42; and for a middling position, see P.E. Piédagnel (ed.), *Catéchèses mystagogiques* (Paris, 1966) 18-40; see also the summary by McCauley and Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, 2:143-9.

¹⁷ *Cat.* 10.19, my translation.

world occur in *Catechetical Lectures* 4.10 and 13.4. Should one suspect Cyril of exaggeration here, there is some corroborating evidence that the popularity of the relic of the cross was on the rise. Two inscriptions from North Africa, one of which dates to 359 CE, report the reception of relics of the cross.¹⁸ In 363 CE, the emperor Julian rebuked Christians for venerating the wood of the cross, tracing it on their foreheads, and engraving it on the front of their houses.¹⁹ In 379 CE, Macrina the Younger was known to possess a piece of the True Cross and to use it in her personal devotions.²⁰ The cult was clearly gaining ascendancy in the last half of the fourth century, and Cyril was the first to turn its growing popularity to apologetic ends.²¹

In May of 351 CE, Cyril wrote a letter to the emperor Constantius allegedly to report to the emperor the apparition of a cross of light over the city of Jerusalem.²² The occasion allowed Cyril an excuse to contact the emperor, creating an opportunity to bid for imperial favour and to promote the status of the see of Jerusalem. In his letter, Cyril reminds Constantius of an event that took place in Jerusalem during his father Constantine's reign: 'In the time of your blessed father Constantine... the saving wood of the cross (τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ σταυροῦ ξύλον) was found in Jerusalem when God's grace rewarded the piety of his noble search with the discovery of the hidden holy places.'²³ Cyril moves beyond the relics of the cross to alluding to its discovery. For him, the discovery took place during

¹⁸ *DACL*, s.v. 'Croix (invention et exaltation de la Vraie)', 3.2:3135.

¹⁹ According to Cyril of Alexandria's *Contra Julianum* (PG 76, col. 796-7).

²⁰ *DACL*, s.v. 'Croix (invention et exaltation de la Vraie)', 3.2:3135.

²¹ Two of his references occur in passages where he invokes the relics of the cross as evidence for the reality of the crucifixion, presumably against docetic views (*Cat.* 4.10, 13.4). The other includes the relic of the cross in a long list of witnesses to the truth of the gospel more generally (*Cat.* 10.19).

²² The authenticity of the letter is undisputed, and references to it appear in an impressive array of early documents. See E. Bihain, 'Épître de Cyrille de Jérusalem à Constance sur la vision de la Croix (BHG 413)', *Byzantion* 43 (1973) 266-7. The letter exists in Greek, and was also translated into Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian. The standard Greek edition is E. Bihain, 'Épître de Cyrille de Jérusalem à Constance', 264-96. For the Syriac, see J. F. Coakley, 'A Syriac Version of the Letter of Cyril of Jerusalem on the Vision of the Cross', 71-84. For a recent English translation of the Greek, see E. Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem* (London, 2000) 68-70.

²³ *Letter to Constantius* 3; Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 69.

Constantine's reign, by God's grace, and at the same time as the discovery of the holy places. The casual and confident manner in which Cyril refers to the event suggests that he can take Constantius' familiarity with the discovery of the relic for granted. Cyril's brief allusion agrees with the information in Egeria's account: there is a close relationship between the discovery of the relic of the cross and the discovery of the location of Christ's passion and resurrection. Between the beginning of Cyril's episcopacy in Jerusalem and Egeria's pilgrimage, it seems that the account of the discovery of the relic had changed very little. Neither would have had a reason to omit the Helena legend if they knew it, and Cyril in particular would have wanted to remind Constantius how his pious grandmother had uncovered the relic in Jerusalem. Instead, Cyril emphasises Constantine's initiative in building the Martyrium. From his *Catechetical Lectures* and *Letter to Constantius*, it is clear that by Cyril's time the fame of the relic was widespread, a ready witness to the growing religious and political influence of Jerusalem in the fourth century.²⁴

2.3. The Silence of Eusebius

Perhaps the most tantalising issue in the early history of the relic of the cross is the silence of Eusebius of Caesarea, the famous theologian and church historian, who was the metropolitan bishop of Palestine until his death in 339 CE. Only about a decade separates Eusebius' death and Cyril's bold claims about the distribution of pieces of the relic. Despite the fact that Eusebius meticulously describes the newly built Church of the Holy Sepulchre and even had the privilege of delivering the address at its dedication in 335 CE, not once does Eusebius make an indisputable reference to the relic of the cross, much less to its

²⁴ For discussion on rise of see of Jerusalem and its conflict with Caesarea, see Z. Rubin, 'The Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Conflict between the Sees of Caesarea and Jerusalem', *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, ed. L.L. Levine, vol 2 (Detroit, 1982) 79-105; and *idem*, 'The See of Caesarea in Conflict with Jerusalem from Nicaea (325) to Chalcedon (451)', in *Caesarea Maritima. A Retrospective after Two Millennia*, ed. K.G. Holum and A. Raban (Leiden, 1996) 559-74.

discovery. Eusebius is not alone in his silence. In 333 CE, the Bordeaux pilgrim described the hill of Golgotha, the tomb, and the basilica built by the command of Emperor Constantine, but never mentions the relic of the cross.²⁵ For his part, Eusebius relishes telling the story of Constantine's vision of the cross of light, the ornate fashioning of the *labarum*, and the way Constantine vanquished every foe whilst brandishing this sign. He also celebrates Constantine's building projects in the Holy Land, and he rejoices at the discovery of the 'cave of the tomb' when Constantine demolished the temple of Venus to begin construction on the Martyrium. The disparity between Eusebius' silence and Cyril's emphasis on the relic of the cross not long afterward has puzzled modern scholars, who have hunted for explanations of this disparity.

Curiously, many who have addressed the topic take as a starting assumption that the relic of the cross had been discovered at the time of the excavations and that Eusebius had reason to bury reports of the relic's discovery. Consequently, they search Eusebius' works for inadvertent testimony to the existence of the relic. In *Life of Constantine* (VC) 3.25-57,²⁶ Eusebius recounts Constantine's church building programmes at length alongside the emperor's orders for the destruction of pagan temples. After the Bar Kokhba revolt of 135 CE, the emperor Hadrian had transformed the Jewish city of Jerusalem into a pagan Roman city, Aelia Capitolina. According to Eusebius, in the process, the tomb of Christ had been buried under a large quantity of soil, paved over with stones, and then a temple to Venus was erected on top. After his conversion, Constantine ordered that the temple be demolished

²⁵ See the translation of the Bordeaux pilgrim's itinerary in *The Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society*, tr. A.D. White (London, 1885) 24-5. The Latin edition is the first text in *Itineraria et alia geographica I*, ed. and tr. P. Geyer and O. Kuntz; CCLS 175, 1-26. The Bordeaux pilgrim's descriptions are generally spare but become more expansive when discussing Jerusalem.

²⁶ For the Greek text: *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, ed. F. Winkelmann; 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1991). For an English translation with excellent commentary: *Life of Constantine*, ed. A. Cameron and S.G. Hall (Oxford, 1999).

and rubbish removed from the site, at which point the tomb of Christ was discovered.

Eusebius lauds the discovery of the tomb as evidence for Christ's resurrection:

As stage by stage the underground site was exposed, at last against all expectation the revered and all-hallowed Testimony (*martyrion*) of the Savior's resurrection was itself revealed, and the cave, the holy of holies [τό τε ἅγιον τῶν ἁγίων ἄντρον] took on the appearance of a representation of the Saviour's return to life. Thus after its descent into darkness it came forth again to the light, and it enabled those who came as visitors to see plainly the story of the wonders wrought there, testifying by facts louder than any voice to the resurrection of the Saviour.²⁷

Eusebius thus celebrates the discovery of the tomb, but makes no reference whatsoever to the relic of the cross.

Determined to find what Eusebius has 'omitted', scholars have looked to Constantine's letter to bishop Macarius excerpted in full two chapters later, which orders the construction of a church on the site of the tomb. Allegedly, a contrast in the emperor's interests and those of Eusebius arises.²⁸ Constantine refers to 'the evidence of [Christ's] most sacred passion (τὸ γνῶρισμα τοῦ ἁγιατάτου ἐκείνου πάθους)²⁹ which had been buried and uncovered. He calls the location a 'sacred place... hallowed from the start by God's judgment, but now proved yet holier since it brought to light the pledge (πίστιν) of the Saviour's passion....'³⁰ Many have emphasised that Constantine's interest is in 'the passion' in contrast to Eusebius' interest in the tomb and resurrection. They argue that the terms used by the emperor, 'the pledge of the Saviour's passion,' suggest that Constantine has the wood of the cross and not the tomb in mind.³¹ They point out that, later in the same book, Eusebius

²⁷ VC 3.28. Unless otherwise noted, translations of VC are from *Life of Constantine*, ed. A. Cameron and S.G. Hall.

²⁸ For example, see H.A. Drake, 'Eusebius on the True Cross', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985) 8-9.

²⁹ VC 3.30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Several studies assert that Constantine refers to the wood of the cross: H. A. Drake, 'Eusebius on the True Cross', 1-22; Z. Rubin, 'The Church of the Holy Sepulchre', 82-5; P.W.L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1990) 244-5; J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden, 1992) 83-8. Drijvers has since changed his mind ('Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Myth: Some New Reflections', *Millenium* 8 (2011) 148).

himself calls a painted image of the cross ‘the emblem (σύμβολον) of the saving Passion.’³² Still, there is nothing in the context of Constantine’s letter to suggest that his ‘the pledge of the Saviour’s passion’ must necessarily be the cross and not the tomb.³³ It makes the most sense in the wider context of Eusebius’ description of the building project for Constantine’s letter to refer to the tomb. In his speech *In Praise of Constantine*, delivered before the emperor himself in 336 CE, Eusebius states plainly that the emperor had built the Martyrium in Jerusalem because of the discovery of the tomb.³⁴ Surely if the distinction between Constantine’s purpose and Eusebius’ emphases is so great, Eusebius would have been more circumspect when speaking in the emperor’s presence.

These efforts to find veiled references to the relic of the cross fail to convince. What motives might Eusebius have had to omit the discovery of the cross if he knew of it? Some have suggested that Eusebius was a careful historian, who perhaps omitted the story about the relic because he doubted its veracity.³⁵ Scholars frequently cite political competition between the sees of Caesarea and Jerusalem as a reason for Eusebius to ignore the relic,³⁶ but surely he would have downplayed the discovery of the tomb, too, if that were the case.³⁷ Scholars have also proposed theological motivations, such as Eusebius’ dislike for religious images³⁸ or his more spiritual/allegorical approach to scripture and his emphasis on the resurrection.³⁹ The only reason, however, that one need posit these motivations is if one has already judged Eusebius as duplicitous regarding the relic of the cross. It is much simpler to

³² VC 3.49. However, when talking about the cross as a military standard, Eusebius does not usually use the term σύμβολον, but more often uses σημεῖον or τρόπαιον.

³³ See the comments of A. Cameron and S.G. Hall in *Life of Constantine*, 282-3.

³⁴ LC 11.2.

³⁵ H.T.F. Duckworth, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre* (London, 1922) 87.

³⁶ For a focus on political motivations, see Rubin, ‘The Church of the Holy Sepulchre’, 79-105. Drake suggests that Eusebius wished to reserve the cross as a sign of imperial victory, safeguarding the site of the resurrection so it would be less vulnerable to compromise with worldly powers (‘Eusebius on the True Cross’, 17-20), but his argument does not move beyond conjecture.

³⁷ See comments of A. Cameron and S.G. Hall on *Life of Constantine*, 282-3.

³⁸ L. de Combes, *The Finding of the Cross*, tr. L. Cappadelta (New York, 1907) 240-1.

³⁹ For an extensive comparison of the theological approaches of Eusebius and Cyril to Golgotha and the cross, see Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?*, esp. 252-60.

conclude that the relic did not yet exist during the lifetimes of Eusebius and the Bordeaux pilgrim, and that, in the years between Eusebius' death and Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*, the purported relic had surfaced and its popularity had spread. A decade or more is ample time for such a change to occur, particularly in a region with a high traffic of pilgrims, soldiers, and trade.

2.4. Concluding Remarks

Eusebius of Caesarea gave an oration on the occasion of the Dedication of the Holy Sepulchre, an event that entered the church calendar as an annual feast. His writings give no indication of the existence of the relic of the cross prior to his death in 339 CE. By 350 CE, the existence of the relic was well-known and pieces of it were widespread. Cyril of Jerusalem can confidently remind Constantius that this relic was found when his father sought the holy sites in Jerusalem. The relic and a simple explanation of its discovery must have emerged in the 340s. By Egeria's time, the Feast of the Dedication had developed into an octave, and the discovery of the True Cross was celebrated at the same time, since the cross was reportedly discovered when the basilica was built. In essentials, her account is no different from Cyril's account thirty years earlier, except that the occasion is now a part of the liturgical year. It is difficult to date precisely the initial celebration of the Feast of the Cross, but by Egeria's time the relic was celebrated during Encaenia festivities that were as lavish as those at Easter or Epiphany, so it must have been a part of the Jerusalem calendar for some time. According to the Old Armenian Lectionary, the True Cross was displayed on the 14th of September, the second day of the octave and had a rubric identical to that of the Feast of the Dedication. Egeria's omission of the Helena legend and the fact that the earliest written account of the legend dates only from 395 CE indicates that the Helena legend was not an original feature of the feast day. At the same time, it is impossible to determine what

the original features of the feast actually were. However, the fourth-century theological context from which it emerged resonates strongly with later celebrations. The next section will investigate the theologies of the cross that seem to have shaped the Feast of the Cross in its original context and in its later reception.

3. Interpreting the Cross: Theological Contributions of Fourth-Century Writers

Although Eusebius of Caesarea and Cyril of Jerusalem do not mention the Feast of the Cross, these two influential theologians of Palestine left a theological impression on the later celebrations of the feast. Eusebius and Cyril had contrasting theological approaches,⁴⁰ but their emphases prove to be complimentary features of later traditions celebrating the discovery of the cross. This section will first discuss Eusebius' theological-historical concern for the cross as a symbol of victory, best signified by Constantine's vision of the cross of light and his subsequent military exploits accomplished under the *labarum*. The second part of this section will explore Cyril's theology of the cross as he develops it in his Lenten *Catechetical Lectures*, particularly the thirteenth lecture. Cyril's primary focus is on the Old Testament predictions of the cross and equipping new Christians with a firm foundation for their faith so that they can defend it against religious rivals. Finally, this section will discuss Ephrem the Syrian's more nuanced view of the military might of the *labarum* and his symbolic theology of the cross.

3.1. Eusebius and the Victorious Cross

Eusebius' works left a lasting mark on later liturgical celebrations of the discovery of the cross. The clearest influence is Eusebius' emphasis on Constantine's vision of the

⁴⁰ See *passim* Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?*

cross of light and the military successes associated with the *labarum*. Later celebrations of the feast day recounted the vision of the cross of light side-by-side with the discovery of the relic of the True Cross.⁴¹ The vivid contrast between these juxtaposed stories – the luminous cross appearing in the heavens and the wooden relic emerging from the depths of the earth – proved irresistible. For his part, Eusebius enthusiastically emphasised the cross as an emblem of victory. Whilst he tells of Constantine’s famous victory over Maxentius outside of Rome in several of his writings, nowhere else is he as enlivened by the story of the sign of the cross as in *VC*.⁴² In *VC*, from Constantine’s triumph over Maxentius to his victory over Licinius, Eusebius attributes every victory to God’s power as manifested in the sign of the cross. In another work, the *Theophany*, when Eusebius mentions the cross, he calls it the ‘the sign of the victory of the cross (ܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܐ)’,⁴³ and thus, even when speaking directly of Christ’s death, he constantly calls to mind that it was the means of victory over death. Eusebius has very little interest in the cross as a symbol of the passion. Although later

⁴¹ There has been some discussion about whether the legend was told during church services on the feast day. At one time, J.W. Drijvers argued that the legend was not told on the feast day (*The Finding of the True Cross. The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers (Louvain, 1997) 18), but he has since reversed his judgement (‘Helena Augusta, the Cross, and the Myth’, 159-67). There are sermons for the feast that include it: Jacob of Serugh’s entire homily on the Discovery of the Cross recounts the legend, and Narsai mentions it in his festal homily. It also appears in liturgical hymns (S.P. Brock, ‘Two Syriac Poems on the Invention of the Cross’, in *Lebendige Überlieferung: Prozesse der Annäherung und Auslegung. Festschrift für Hermann-Josef Vogt zum 60. Geburtstag*; ed. N. el Khoury, H. Crouzel, and R. Reinhardt (Beirut, 1992) 55-82). It seems that it probably did play a role in celebrations of the feast day at least by the end of the fifth century in the Syriac tradition. However, that is not to assume that a homily for the feast day had to include the tale, as is evident from the numerous homilies that make no mention of Helena and her discovery, eg., Severus of Antioch, Cathedral Homily 31 in *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d’Antioche*; ed. and tr. M. Brière and F. Graffin; PO 36 (Paris, 1974) 640-65. S. Borgehammar also offers an appendix of Greek homilies, some of which tell the story of the invention: *How the Holy Cross was Found: from Event to Medieval Legend* (Stockholm, 1991) 185-7.

⁴² For studies on Eusebius’ treatment of Constantine: A. Cameron, ‘Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine’, in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, ed. M.J. Edwards and S. Swain (Oxford, 1997) 145-74; T.D. Barnes, ‘Panegyric, History, and Hagiography in Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*’, in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams (Cambridge, 1989) 94-123. For early Christian biography in general, see M.S. Williams, *Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between Eusebius and Augustine* (Cambridge, 2008).

⁴³ *Theoph.* 3.20, 57-58, 60-62, 68, 74; 5.42. Only fragments of the original Greek survive, the whole being preserved in Syriac translation. See the edition by S. Lee, *Eusebius Bishop of Caesarea on the Theophania, or the Divine Manifestation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, a Syriac Version* (London, 1842). It was probably written in the 320s or early 330s (A.P. Johnson, *Eusebius* (London, 2013) 10).

celebrations of the Feast of the Cross were more attentive to the innate paradoxes of the victory of the cross than Eusebius was, they also preserve his emphasis on the cross as a sign of victory and glory, frequently alluding to Constantine's vision.

Eusebius' emphases also correlate with later celebrations of the discovery of the cross in the way that he proclaims the triumph of the truth of Christianity over pagan temples and sorcery. For Eusebius, not only does Constantine conquer physical foes under the sign of the cross, but, because of God's power, his victories have cosmic significance. In *VC*, Constantine is depicted as a pensive, pious man who entreats God before entering battle,⁴⁴ in contrast to his enemies, Maxentius and Licinius, who both make recourse to sorcery and idolatrous sacrifices.⁴⁵ Before the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Eusebius describes Constantine's deliberation regarding which god to trust, and his conscious choice to follow 'his father's God'.⁴⁶ Subsequently, the trophy of the cross (σταυροῦ τρόπαιον) of light appears in the sky, with the words, 'Conquer by this (ἐν τούτῳ νικά)', and Constantine wisely seeks out appropriate counsel to understand what this means.⁴⁷ The contrast between Constantine's piety and Maxentius' idolatrous, cruel, and hedonistic actions in Rome could not be stronger. Whereas Constantine's trust in the Christian God leads him to advance courageously under his new banner, Maxentius places his trust in sorcery and fears to leave the city.⁴⁸ When God finally draws Maxentius from behind Rome's walls, the 'tyrant' and his army sink into the Tiber with little effort required on the part of Constantine and his troops, just as Pharaoh and his armies were swept away by the Red Sea.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *VC* 1.27-28; 2.4, 12-14.

⁴⁵ *VC* 1.33-36; 2.4, 11, 15.

⁴⁶ *VC* 1.27. Constantine's father was not a Christian, so this is a curious statement.

⁴⁷ *VC* 1.28, 32. Eusebius uses the words σημεῖον and τρόπαιον for the sign of the cross in this section. Compare the account in Lactantius, *On the Death of the Persecutors* 44.

⁴⁸ *VC* 1.37.

⁴⁹ *VC* 1.38. The comparison of Constantine to Moses has drawn special attention: F. Damgaard, 'Propaganda against Propaganda: Revisiting Eusebius' Use of the Figure of Moses in the *Life of Constantine*', in *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations*, ed. A. Johnson and J.M. Schott (Washington, DC, 2013) 115-23; M.J. Hollerich, 'The Comparison of Moses and Constantine in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of*

The pattern recurs when Licinius, one-time friend and co-emperor of Constantine, allows his treachery to come to light. Constantine prays piously in a ‘tabernacle’ of the cross that travels with his army,⁵⁰ whereas Licinius makes sacrifices to the gods and resorts to divination.⁵¹ Licinius’ speech before the battle makes it a contest between their ancestral gods and the Christian God, and he urges his troops to adhere to whichever side prevails, confidently assuming that it will be their own.⁵² Although Eusebius claims that he draws on an eyewitness account for the speech, the dramatic irony also plays well to his larger purposes of promoting Christianity and dissuading would-be followers of polytheism. When Constantine and his army win the victory, marching under the *labarum* of the cross, Eusebius leaves the reader in no doubt about the spiritual impact of this outcome: ‘Those who so recently had been buoyed up by hope from diviners found themselves in fact accepting the God of Constantine as he truly was, and confessing that they acknowledged him the true and only God.’⁵³ For Eusebius, Constantine’s victory under the sign of the cross is in fact a victory of the Christian faith over polytheism.

The same concern to proclaim Christian victory over polytheism through the cross appears in chapters 11-18 of the *Tricennial Oration*, more commonly known as *In Praise of Constantine (LC)*.⁵⁴ Eusebius delivered this oration before Constantine himself in 336 CE. Written before *VC*, the final chapters of *LC* were originally a separate work.⁵⁵ Whilst Eusebius still addresses the emperor directly in chapter eleven, the tone and subject matter

Constantine’, in *In Dominico Eloquentio = In Lordly Eloquence: Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken*, ed. P. Blowers (Grand Rapids, MI, 2002) 172-84.

⁵⁰ *VC* 2.12-14.

⁵¹ *VC* 2.4, 11, 15.

⁵² *VC* 2.5.

⁵³ *VC* 2.18.

⁵⁴ Greek edition: *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 1, *Über das Leben Constantins, Constantins Rede an die heilige Versammlung, Tricennatsrede an Constantin*; ed. I. Heikel (Leipzig, 1902-26) 195-223. For an English translation and commentary: H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius’ Tricennial Orations* (Berkeley, 1976).

⁵⁵ Heikel first argued that these chapters contained the *Oration on Christ’s Sepulchre* (*Eusebius Werke*, 1:civ-vi, 223). Drake further explored and strengthened Heikel’s argument (*In Praise of Constantine*, 30-45).

shifts dramatically. In 335 CE, Eusebius had had the privilege of delivering the address for the Dedication of the Church of the Anastasis in Jerusalem. Given the subject matter of the second half of *LC*, it is likely that Eusebius edited his *Oration on Christ's Sepulchre* and appended it to *LC*. Chapters eleven and eighteen of *LC* point most suggestively to the original *mise-en-scène* of the second half of the oration. Near the beginning of chapter eleven, Eusebius praises the emperor's building of grand basilicas in Palestine and elsewhere. At the end of the oration, as Eusebius summarises the motives he has outlined for Constantine's pious activities, he addresses the emperor directly:

For all these reasons, then, it is reasonable that you have heeded these manifest proofs of the Savior's power and have displayed to all men, believers and non-believers alike, a house of prayer as a trophy of his victory over death, a holy temple of a holy God, and splendid and great offerings to the immortal life and the divine kingdom – memorials of the All-Ruling Savior entirely fitting and suitable for a victorious sovereign.⁵⁶

Eusebius' reference to the construction of a 'house of prayer' as 'a trophy of [Christ's] victory over death' and to its consecration makes the most sense if it refers to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Since the Encaenia soon became an annual eight-day festival of the Christian year, and the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross was later celebrated on the second day of the octave, it is worth exploring what resonances this inaugural oration may have with the celebrations of the Feast of the Cross in subsequent years.

The 'bookends' of the section, chapters eleven and eighteen, with their direct references to the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, might lead one to expect this entire section of the oration to focus on the Jerusalem complex. However, Eusebius used the occasion to give a poignant, if short, summary of God's providential activity in history.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *LC* 18.3. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 127. Unless otherwise noted, English quotations are from Drake's translation.

⁵⁷ The same broad themes are more fully developed in Eusebius' earlier works, the *Preparation of the Gospel*, the *Proof of the Gospel* and the *Theophany*. See Johnson, *Eusebius*, 154.

His oration is constructed as a response to a proponent of paganism,⁵⁸ whom Eusebius imagines pompously issuing his challenge with contracted brow:

Would it not be better... to preserve the ancestral rites and to propitiate the heroes and gods that are worshipped among each several race, and not to spit on them and desert them on account of some misfortune or other? Either deify those as well just like this one [Christ] for the similarity of their suffering, or, if these must be discarded for being too human, it is only fair to assign the same judgment to this one [Christ].⁵⁹

Eusebius' answer unfolds in the rest of the oration as he argues that the Divine Logos, the agent of all creation who sustains its life and guides its course throughout history, became incarnate in a human being in order to invite all people to draw near to the one true God. For Eusebius, the very purpose of the Incarnation was compassionate response to the ignorance of idolatry,⁶⁰ and he argues that it is the spread of the gospel worldwide, rather than the worship of various gods by different people groups, that has brought peace and prosperity to the world in recent times.⁶¹ Chapter fifteen responds to the criticism of worshipping one who suffered and died, arguing that such a death was necessary to prove definitively Christ's power over death, to convince his disciples to trust his promise of eternal life whilst fearlessly proclaiming the gospel in the face of certain death, and for Christ to be a ransom for the sins of all nations, bringing all sacrifices to an end.⁶²

Chapters sixteen and seventeen are especially interesting. They argue succinctly that the appearance of the gospel at the very time of the emergence of the Roman Empire was no coincidence. Eusebius makes this point most clearly in 16.6:

For while the power of Our Savior destroyed the polyarchy and polytheism of the demons and heralded the one kingdom of God to Greeks and barbarians and all men to the farthest extent of the earth, the Roman Empire, now that the causes of the manifold governments had been abolished, subdued the visible governments, in order to merge the entire race into one unity and

⁵⁸ For Eusebius versus polytheism, see A. Kofsky, *Eusebius of Caesarea against Paganism*; repr. (Boston, 2002).

⁵⁹ *LC* 11.4. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 103.

⁶⁰ *LC* 13.1.

⁶¹ *LC* 16.1-3.

⁶² *LC* 15.3-5.

concord. Already it has united most of the various peoples, and it is further destined to obtain all those not yet united, right up to the very limits of the inhabited world. For with divine power the salutary instruction prepares the way for it and causes everything to be smooth.⁶³

For Eusebius' purposes, the united empire was a divinely-orchestrated vehicle for the rapid spread of the gospel to the very ends of the habitable world. He seems to suggest that this will coincide with the expansion of the Roman Empire, but it is likely that his main concern is the evangelical rather than the imperial conquest of the world. As Eusebius wraps up his argument in chapter seventeen, he challenges his previously quoted contender to give an example of any other being who has accomplished such things as those performed by the Incarnate Word.⁶⁴ Eusebius piles on the accomplishments of the Divine Word, thus demanding that his interlocutor concede that there is no other being who is like the Son of God. He repeats his conviction that the mutual harmony of all nations shall follow the spread of the gospel to all nations.⁶⁵

Although later the Feast of the Cross was not connected to the Feast of the Encaenia,⁶⁶ the two festivals shared a common origin, and Eusebius' oration contains several related themes. In particular, the presence of a supposed opponent, whose pernicious assertions must be answered definitively, was a frequent feature of celebrations of the feast day. Although Eusebius aims his response at a pagan rival, with only brief mention of the Jews, later preachers engage reactions to Christian beliefs and practices by various religious opponents, whether pagan, Jewish, or Muslim. The composition of the audience and the prominent issues of the day determined which adversary the orator targeted. Also significant is Eusebius' contention that the divine economy has been leading up to the spread of the gospel to all nations, and that the unity of the Roman Empire was an important vehicle for

⁶³ Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 120.

⁶⁴ *LC* 17.5-14.

⁶⁵ *LC* 17.12.

⁶⁶ That is, when it was celebrated outside of Jerusalem.

that expansion. Eusebius' ideas about divine governance of the direction of history made an indelible impression on the beliefs and expectations of later Christians.

3.2. Cyril of Jerusalem's Theology of the Cross

In his exhaustive survey of the history of Christian liturgy, Gregory Dix claimed a central role in the development of the Christian year for the fourth-century church in Jerusalem.⁶⁷ Dix overstated the case for one-way influence: pilgrims brought traditions from outside Jerusalem that were integrated into the Jerusalem liturgy,⁶⁸ and the process of taking over liturgical traditions from elsewhere was gradual and selective.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, even if Jerusalem was not the only player in liturgical developments of the fourth century, the Holy City was still undeniably instrumental in the development of the liturgical year. The later widespread celebration of the Feast of the Cross is a prime example of how Jerusalem's local liturgical traditions affected practices further afield. Cyril of Jerusalem was the bishop during much of this time of innovation, and Egeria visited just before the end of his long episcopacy. In Egeria's *Itinerary*, the bishop plays a primary role by leading the congregation to various sites in and around Jerusalem that were deemed suitable for a given feast day. Despite the fact that Cyril left behind no festal homilies at all, his Lenten *Catechetical Lectures* and other writings do contain significant glimpses of Cyril's theology of the cross, much of which was traditional by his time. Many of the same themes occur in later festal homilies for the Feast of the Cross, so Cyril's writings offer a glimpse of the traditions around the cross which were prominent in Jerusalem when the Feast of the Cross began, before it spread to various churches across the Eastern Empire and beyond.

⁶⁷ G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster, 1945), esp. 348-60.

⁶⁸ T.J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*; 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN, 1991) 176-89, 203-14.

⁶⁹ J.W. Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 72-3.

Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures*, in addition to using the relic of the cross and the presence of the rock of Golgotha as corroborating evidence for the Christian story, also teach about the sign of the cross in a way that resonates with the later teachings that occur in festal homilies for the Feast of the Cross. Although Cyril's comments were not made with that feast day in mind – he was explaining the contents of the creed to catechumens – his thirteenth lecture is a repository for traditional beliefs about the significance of the cross, and so it is no surprise that the later sermons for the Feast of the Cross borrow from the same cache of traditional imagery, biblical texts, and topics. Cyril's prominent position in Jerusalem, a melting pot of liturgical innovation in the fourth century, where sermons and services were performed in Greek but simultaneously translated into Syriac and Latin,⁷⁰ makes it plausible that his influence spread readily, even just by word of mouth.

In his thirteenth lecture, Cyril instructs the catechumens on the creedal phrase 'who was crucified and buried', repeating the orthodox traditions of the cross current at the time.⁷¹ The lecture contains more than it is possible to discuss here, so I will select the most relevant material under the following topics: New Testament teaching on the cross, Old Testament prophecies for the cross, the refutation of opponents, and the importance of the cross for the life of the believer. Each of the *Catechetical Lectures* began with the phrase of the creed being expounded and a relevant passage from Scripture. This section, on the suffering and death of Christ, begins appropriately with a reading of the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 53. Then Cyril begins his lecture in earnest.

Cyril's understanding of the cross is shaped by the letters of Paul and the gospels. He begins the lecture by exhorting his listeners that the cross is the 'boast of all boasts', referring to Paul's vow never to boast in anything except the cross.⁷² Cyril calls the cross

⁷⁰ *It. Eg.* 47.3-5.

⁷¹ For a recent English translation of *Lecture 13*, used for quotations here, see Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 149-63.

⁷² Cf. Gal 6.14; *Cat.* 13.1.

‘the boast of all boasts’ because, unlike Christ’s other earthly miracles, which were limited in scope, the cross has redeemed the whole human race because the one who was crucified on it was no ordinary man. However, Cyril is aware that the cross may be a dubious sign of boasting to those outside the faith, and he paraphrases another Pauline passage, 1 Corinthians 1.18-24: ‘For the word of the cross, whilst it is a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, to us it is salvation.’⁷³ By citing these two Pauline passages at the beginning of his lecture, Cyril emphasises that the cross is to Christ’s glory and that Christians should not be ashamed of it. Objections from outside the Christian camp were as much a part of the pluralistic context of fourth-century Jerusalem as they had been in the first century.⁷⁴ His main concern throughout is to explain that the cross is not shameful and that it was a part of God’s divine plan. The gospels provide evidence for Jesus’ innocence, showing that he died for sins he did not share⁷⁵ and that Jesus willingly went to his death after predicting that he would be arrested and killed.⁷⁶ Whilst Cyril does not say so directly, implicitly he guards against any suggestion that Christ was not in control and so cannot be divine. Finally, the gospels provide evidence that the cross was, contrary to all appearances, truly Christ’s glory, implying that it ought to be the glory of Christians, too.⁷⁷ Towards the end of the lecture, the importance of New Testament texts that mention the cross reappears. Cyril reminds his audience that the blood Jesus shed on the cross made peace between things in heaven and on earth, an allusion to Colossians 1.20. Like the homilies written for the Feast of the Cross in later years, Cyril attends to Pauline passages that directly mention the cross, and the three

⁷³ *Cat.* 13.3.

⁷⁴ For the religious diversity of Jerusalem in the fourth-century as reflected in Cyril’s writings, see J.W. Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 97-125.

⁷⁵ *Cat.* 13.5. Cyril quotes Mt 5.18 and Mt 16.22-3 along with 1 Pet 2.22-3 (where the author is paraphrasing Is 53.9).

⁷⁶ *Cat.* 13.6. Cyril refers to Mt 26.2, Mt 20.18-9, and Lk 9.51.

⁷⁷ *Cat.* 13.6. He quotes from Jn 12.23, 13.31, 17.5, and 10.18.

he cites here become some of the most commonly used Pauline passages in the sermons for the feast day.

Whilst Cyril alludes to and cites the New Testament frequently, much of the lecture is dedicated to demonstrating that Christ's suffering and death were predicted in the Old Testament.⁷⁸ At the heart of his exposition, the Jews object, 'Does the Lord suffer? Were human hands stronger than his lordship?'⁷⁹ Cyril rebukes them for their resistance to believe the very scriptures that they have studied.⁸⁰ He recalls Jeremiah's Lamentations, stating that the prophet wept for the Jerusalem of old because its citizens would crucify Christ. In contrast, there will be no lamenting for the present Jerusalem because its people now worship Christ. The following ten paragraphs present Old Testament proofs for the various events of Jesus' final days, including the thirty pieces of silver, the potter's field, his trials, the mockery he endured, and his crown of thorns.⁸¹ Next Cyril's adversary requests proof for Old Testament predictions about the wood of the cross.⁸² The growing cult of the relic of the cross would likely have inspired such questions about the wood of the cross. After providing some evidence from the prophets, Cyril answers this challenge with traditional typology for the cross. He reminds the audience of the passage read at the beginning of his lecture: Isaiah 53, which describes the servant of God as a 'lamb led to the slaughter', just as the evangelist John called Jesus 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'.⁸³ He recalls two passages used in Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Judaism since the time of Justin Martyr. Jeremiah 11.19 provides the words of those plotting against him: 'Let us put

⁷⁸ For Cyril's use of Old Testament types of the cross compared with other church fathers, see G.T. Armstrong, 'The Cross of the Old Testament according to Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and the Cappadocian Fathers', in *Theologia Crucis – Signum Crucis: Festschrift für Erich Dinkler zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. C. Andresen, E. Dinkler, and G. Klein (Tübingen, 1979) 17-38.

⁷⁹ *Cat.* 13.7.

⁸⁰ In the Judah Kyriakos version of the Helena legend (discussed in the next chapter), Helen rebukes the Jews of Jerusalem for their inability to understand what the scriptures taught. See *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers, 40-1 (text); 58-9 (translation).

⁸¹ *Cat.* 13.9-18.

⁸² *Cat.* 13.19.

⁸³ Jn 1.29.

wood into his bread, and wipe him off from the land of the living.’⁸⁴ Cyril also quotes Deuteronomy 28.66, with its reference to the people seeing ‘their life hang before their eyes’. He follows these traditional citations with commonly adduced types of the cross, most of which concern a piece of wood or something made of wood.⁸⁵ He first produces the type of the bronze serpent that Moses erected in the desert, a type in use since the composition of the fourth gospel.⁸⁶ The wood of Noah’s ark is a type of the wood of the cross.⁸⁷ Moses’ staff, which parted the Red Sea, and the wood that sweetened bitter waters also provide ready types for the cross.⁸⁸ As we shall see, these types, and a host of similar ones, are catalogued in later sermons for the Feast of the Cross. Cyril also invokes the symmetry of recapitulation: just as one tree resulted in humankind’s expulsion from Paradise, now believers can enter Paradise through the tree of Jesus.⁸⁹

As we have seen, Cyril shows himself to be aware of the challenges that he and his community face. Elsewhere in his *Catechetical Lectures*, Cyril mentions other opponents of the Christian community, likely a real presence in the vicinity of Jerusalem during his lifetime: pagans, Jews, heretics (eg., Marcionites and various gnostic sects), and Manicheans.⁹⁰ Cyril’s first reference to an opponent is spiritual: he urges his auditors, if

⁸⁴ Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 72.

⁸⁵ *Cat.* 13.20.

⁸⁶ Jn 3.14.

⁸⁷ Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 138.

⁸⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 86.

⁸⁹ *Cat.* 13.2. Cyril alludes to Rom 5.17-18 here, arguing that if death came to rule through one man’s sin, how much more will life come to rule through the righteousness of one man. He extends the logic to the tree in Paradise and ‘Jesus’ tree’ – the cross.

⁹⁰ For an overview of the distribution of religious groups in Palestine between 135-324 CE, see J.E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford, 1993) 48-85. For the pagan presence in Jerusalem in the 2nd-4th centuries, see N. Belayche, *Iudaea-Palaestina: The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century)* (Tübingen, 2001) 108-70.

After the Bar Kokhba revolt, Hadrian banned Jews from Jerusalem, and Constantine reaffirmed this law. It seems that by Constantine’s time, the ban only applied to the city itself, since Jerome reports having contact with Jews in nearby Bethlehem. Jews were allowed into the city to mourn at the Western Wall once a year, on the 9th of Ab. There are also rabbinic reports of Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the 4th and 5th centuries, so it is uncertain how strictly or evenly the ban was enforced. For more discussion see M. Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Oxford, 1976) 163-4; G. Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century*, tr. R. Tuschling (Edinburgh, 2000) 40-3.

uncertain of the cross's power, to ask the demons, who cower before it.⁹¹ Although his paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 1.18-24 may lead one to expect that, along with the Jews, the polytheistic Hellenists would be targets of his arguments, he mentions them only briefly at the end, instructing his listeners to respond to the arguments of the Greeks from their own mythology.⁹² He follows this up with a stern warning to keep away from heretics who consider the death of Christ to be illusory. Cyril mentions the docetic view near the beginning⁹³ and again at the end of the lecture, indicating his particular concern with this theological threat. His repeated emphasis on boasting in the cross rather than being ashamed of it also seems to fit with his defence of orthodoxy against the docetic position. In response to the docetic view, Cyril invokes the rock of Golgotha and the wood of the True Cross as tangible witnesses to the reality of Jesus' death. However, it is the challenge of Jewish objections to the crucifixion of the Lord and a demand to be convinced from Old Testament prophecies that preoccupies Cyril throughout most of the lecture. As described above, he lists prophecies and types at length, so that the heart of the lecture provides the listener with abundant arguments to buttress Christian claims against religious rivals. Cyril also seems to anticipate concern about the sort of death Jesus died, and he reiterates that Christ was innocent, crucified for sins he did not share. He emphasises that Christ willingly went to his death. This reflects an objection that Cyril is anticipating, which later becomes a major feature of Jewish-Christian and Muslim-Christian debate about the cross.

One of Cyril's objectives throughout the lecture is to show new Christians the benefits of the cross, whether for the defence of the faith against challengers or for securing Christian confidence. As seen above, equipping new Christians for the defence of the faith is a preoccupation throughout, and, gesturing to the Golgotha that his audience can see and

⁹¹ *Cat.* 13.3.

⁹² *Cat.* 13.37.

⁹³ *Cat.* 13.4.

touch, Cyril tells them to set up their faith in the cross as a standard (τρόπαιον) against opponents.⁹⁴ One can hardly help but recall Constantine's *labarum* in this context. According to Cyril, the ordinary Christian need only cross herself before discussing the cross with unbelievers and their objections will be silenced.⁹⁵ The cross provides support and meaning for the whole of Christian life, whether giving courage and even joy to the believer facing persecution, being the universal sign made over all the church's sacraments, or invoking blessings over daily routines.⁹⁶ The passage has so many resonances with the later feast days that it is worth quoting: 'We should boldly trace the cross with our fingers as a seal on our forehead and over everything: over the bread we eat, the cups we drink, when we come in and when we go out, before we go to sleep, when we go to bed and when we get up, on journeys and at rest.'⁹⁷ By stretching his arms out on the cross, Cyril says, Christ's embrace encompasses the whole world;⁹⁸ he reminds the audience that the cross brought them, and even the barbarous nations, to the knowledge of God.⁹⁹

Cyril finishes his exposition of the phrase 'who was crucified and buried' with a further claim about the significance of the cross: that it is destined to come again with Jesus from heaven. Cyril is repeating an ancient Christian tradition that expected the cross to precede Christ upon his return, based on Jesus' apocalyptic speech in Matthew 24.30 where he tells his disciples that the 'sign (τὸ σημεῖον) of the Son of Man' will appear in the heavens. According to the gospel, this event will occur just before the final judgement. Here Cyril emphasises that the appearance of the cross will lead the Jews to lament and repent when they recognise the cross of the one they dishonoured, but the time for repentance will be

⁹⁴ *Cat.* 13.22.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Cat.* 13.36.

⁹⁷ *Cat.* 13.36. One also notices similarity to Tertullian's statement in *De corona* 3.

⁹⁸ *Cat.* 13.28.

⁹⁹ *Cat.* 13.41.

past.¹⁰⁰ As for Christians, Cyril concludes, returning to his opening theme, they should ‘boast of the cross and take pride in it,’ thereby adoring the Lord who was crucified for them. In the course of this long lecture, Cyril provides a sweeping view of salvation history seen through the lens of the cross. Even as the cross was prefigured in the garden at the beginning of the world and announced in advance through the prophets, so it will precede Christ when he returns in his glory. Cyril repeats this idea in his letter to Constantius, where he predicts that a cross of light will appear in the sky again at Christ’s second coming.

3.3. The Cross in Syriac: Ephrem the Syrian

As the focus of this study is on the reception of the Feast of the Cross amongst Syriac-speaking communities, the symbolic theology of Ephrem the Syrian, which influenced Syriac Christians across denominational divides, must be included. Ephrem was a contemporary of Cyril of Jerusalem, but his writings do not mention the discovery of relic of the cross. Likewise, although he left behind hymns and sermons for the major festivals of the Christian year, he shows no knowledge of the Feast of the Cross. Perhaps this event, which began as a local Jerusalem feast, was not yet celebrated in the borderlands of Nisibis and Edessa. On the other hand, if local Christians were beginning to adopt the Feast of the Cross by this time, it may not have been a significant enough occasion to inspire a cycle of homilies or hymns. However, that does not mean that Ephrem’s theology of the cross did not influence the later Syriac homilies or hymns for the Feast of the Cross. With a view to subjects of importance in later homilies for the feast day, this section will discuss Ephrem’s account of the cross as a military symbol and the types of the cross that Ephrem found abounding in nature and scripture.

¹⁰⁰ In his fifteenth lecture, in a similar passage, when he anticipates the Jews’ mourning and repenting at the sight of the sign of the Cross in the sky, Cyril invents a short speech for their confession. See *Cat.* 15.22.

Like Eusebius, Ephrem considers the military *labarum* of the cross a symbol of victory and divine favour. His third hymn *Against Julian* gives prime examples of Ephrem's understanding of the cross's military power.¹⁰¹ Ephrem's cycle of four hymns celebrate the demise of the pagan emperor Julian, who died fighting the Persians, and lament the consequent ceding of his hometown of Nisibis to Persian rule. The third hymn describes how Julian's body was paraded past the walls of Nisibis as the Persians raised their banner over its tower (v. 1). Ephrem contrasts the outcome of Julian's war with the previous thirty years of war against the Persians during which the city of Nisibis successfully protected itself against attack, attributing its enduring safety to the cross, which 'came down and saved [the city]', even when the walls had been breached.¹⁰² Ephrem rejoices at the downfall of Julian, but in equal measure, he finds it necessary to explain why the cross had not been completely successful during the previous three decades of warfare between the Romans and the Persians.

Whilst he shares Eusebius' perspective that the cross is victorious, Ephrem has lived on the edge of the frontier and seen firsthand the complexities of war in more uncertain times. Ephrem must admit that the cross did not conquer everything when it set out (v. 7). He wrestles with the defeats that Constantius' army endured from the Persians, even though the Romans carried the cross aloft before them into battle. In Ephrem's view, the difficulties faced by Constantius' army and the ultimate demise of Julian have the same root cause: persistent idolatry. Hindsight allows Ephrem to discern and disclose the purposes of 'the One who knows all' (v. 10). Although he could not foresee the downfall of Julian before it

¹⁰¹ The Syriac critical edition is in *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de paradiso und contra Julianum*, ed. E. Beck; CSCO 174 (Louvain, 1957). For an English translation with notes, see *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, tr. By K. McVey; Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 1989) 221-57. All English translations cited here are McVey's. For Ephrem's poems alongside other contemporary works about Julian see *The Emperor Julian: Panegyric and Polemic*, ed. S.N.C. Lieu; 2nd ed. (Liverpool, 1989). For the theological impact of *HcJul* on the Syriac tradition, see S.H. Griffith, 'Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns "Against Julian": Meditations on History and Imperial Power', *VC* 41 (1987) 238-66.

¹⁰² In 350 CE the Persians managed to breach the walls of Nisibis, but failed to take the city. See Lieu, (ed.), *The Emperor Julian*, 118 n. 60.

took place (v. 5), retrospectively he understands that God allowed these wars to continue so that Julian's death would be maximally humiliating, revealing the folly of relying on divination and many gods (vv. 7-9). Ephrem compares and contrasts Julian's utter defeat with the difficulties that Constantius' army faced against the Persians. Whereas he depicts Constantius as a believing king who trusted in the cross, Ephrem states that his soldiers still held to pagan idolatry, and as a result, when they went into battle, [the cross] 'kept the king in safety, it gave the army to destruction' (v. 10). In this battle, Ephrem reports that the cross endured the mocking reproach, 'It cannot not save them!' However, Ephrem blames Constantius' defeats entirely on the polytheism of his troops, and he urges believers to praise the cross: 'Let the cross of Him Who searches all, therefore, be praised – / [the cross] that fools without discernment reviled at that time.'¹⁰³ He compares Constantius' failed campaigns to the Israelites' defeat at Ai. The Israelites took the Ark of the Covenant into battle and their leader Joshua was righteous, but they were still routed because of a curse amongst the people. Likewise, the Roman army entered the battle under the banner of the victorious cross, but the idolatry of the troops resulted in their defeat. Ephrem's discussion of the *labarum* in this hymn reveals how widespread was the conviction that the cross should provide divine protection for those who trusted in it, and his efforts to explain why some cross-bearing armies were routed provide a testimony to how unsettling military defeat could be to those who sought to understand God's divine intervention in human affairs.

Ephrem's major contribution to later Syriac theology of the cross was his genius for playfully discovering types of the cross in scripture and nature.¹⁰⁴ His works anticipate most of the types of the cross invoked by later Syriac authors in their homilies for the Feast of the

¹⁰³ *HcJul* 3.10.

¹⁰⁴ For a broader study on early Syriac types of the cross, see Mor Cyril Aphrem Karim, *Symbols of the Cross in the Writings of the Early Syriac Fathers* (Piscataway, NJ, 2004). This is a reprint of Karim's Doctor of Divinity dissertation. However, I cite the pages numbers from Karim's original dissertation: 'Symbols of the Cross in the Writings of the Early Syriac Fathers' (D.D. diss., St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland, 1994).

Cross. Just as Cyril of Jerusalem does, Ephrem contrasts the tree in Eden that led to death with the cross which gives life.¹⁰⁵ When Abraham walks the length and breadth of the Promised Land, Ephrem detects a paradox. Through the sign of the cross made by Abraham's walking to and fro, the People inherited the Promised Land, but because of the actual cross, of which Abraham's walking was a mere type, the People later lost it.¹⁰⁶ At the binding of Isaac, the wood the boy carries is a type of the cross carried by Christ.¹⁰⁷ Jacob's life contains several types of the cross: 'The righteous Jacob depicted the cross by the ladder he saw in the night whilst he was sleeping. And he made the cross known by the crossing of his arms and by the rods he put in the water. And the faithful Church worships the cross of the Son by whom she was saved.'¹⁰⁸ Moses also provides Ephrem with several types of the cross. In his commentary on Exodus, Ephrem sees types of the cross in Moses' staff dividing the sea¹⁰⁹ and in the wood that sweetened bitter waters at Marah.¹¹⁰ He also shares two of the oldest known types of the cross: the bronze snake that Moses set up in the desert¹¹¹ and Moses' extended hands at the battle of Amalek.¹¹² Notably, Ephrem reports that, like the snake in the desert, the cross is an object 'full of curses, and the fount of blessings' and so it became 'a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.'¹¹³ The wood that Elijah threw into the water and, when it sank, an axe head floated to the surface also provides Ephrem with a type of the cross.¹¹⁴ Just as scripture abounds in types of the cross for Ephrem,

¹⁰⁵ *CNis* 14.8.

¹⁰⁶ *CommGen* 10.2.

¹⁰⁷ *HVir* 8.16.

¹⁰⁸ *HDis* 21.16. My translation.

¹⁰⁹ *CommEx* 14.3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.1.

¹¹¹ For early Christian use of this type, see *Barn.* 12.5-7; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 94.3 and 131.4; and Tertullian, *AdvMarc* 3.18.

¹¹² See *Barn.* 12.2; Irenaeus, *Dem* 46; Tertullian, *AdvMarc* 3.18; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 90.5 and 91.1.

¹¹³ *HDis* 21.6. My translation.

¹¹⁴ *HVir* 8.7.

so does the natural world.¹¹⁵ A bird's wings, outstretched in flight, is a symbol of the cross, as are objects made by human beings, such as the masts of ships and ploughs. Even when one puts on a garment, one stretches the arms out in the shape of the cross.¹¹⁶

4. Conclusion: The Cross in the Fourth Century

The fourth century saw dramatic changes in the social status of the church, and these changes also affected the public perception of the cross. This chapter has traced the dramatic change in fortunes for the symbol of the cross during the fourth century. Following Constantine's vision, the public recognition of the sign increased, and by sometime in the 340s a supposed relic of the True Cross had emerged. As its importance grew steadily throughout the fourth century, the relic earned its own celebration in the church calendar, and, by the end of the century, the earlier, simpler story of its discovery during Constantine's building projects had developed into the Helena legend.

Even though the fourth-century witnesses discussed in this chapter did not leave behind any direct written evidence for the Feast of the Cross, each made significant contributions to the theology of the cross that appears in later texts. Eusebius of Caesarea's enthusiastic endorsement of Constantine's vision of a cross of light witnesses to a watershed moment in the public perception of the cross. The image of a Christian emperor conquering under the *labarum* was seared on the collective memory in a way that would be hard to erase, even when the reality was defeat rather than victory. Cyril of Jerusalem's *Letter to Constantius* shows how this symbol became infused with meaning for God's support for the empire, and ancient ideas about the return of the cross heralding Christ's second coming

¹¹⁵ For Ephrem's natural types of the cross, see P. Yousif, 'St Ephrem on the Symbols in Nature: Faith, the Trinity, and the Cross (Hymns on Faith, No. 18)', *ECR* 10 (1978) 52-60. Cf. Karim, *Symbols of the Cross*, 126-36. The types of the cross in nature given here are all from *HFid* 18.

¹¹⁶ Arms outstretched in prayer are also a sign of the cross in *Odes of Solomon* 27.

were remade in the image of Constantine's vision. Ephrem, living on the fringes of the empire, also shared the expectation that the *labarum* was a sign that should give its bearer victory, and he struggled to explain what was afoot when this expectation was frustrated. His efforts to explain why God would allow an army fighting under the cross to be beaten show just how deeply the message of the victorious cross had penetrated his assumptions. The story of Constantine's vision of the cross of light and the repeated references to the glory and victory found in the cross left a permanent mark on the Christian imagination, and it is no surprise to hear these sentiments repeated on the feast day celebrating the discovery of the relic.

All three of the authors discussed above find that the cross and crucifixion occasion polemical discourse with other religions. One suspects that, even in its nascent form, the Feast of the Cross always contained a current of polemic against other groups. Although the identity of the adversary shifted with the changes of the times, later festal sermons almost always target a perceived opponent. For Eusebius, the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is an embodiment of the theological refutation of pagan cults. Whilst his words for the Encaenia do not mention the cross or its discovery, the interpretation he provides for the significance of the triumph of Christianity over paganism has echoes in later literature. Ephrem's third *Hymn Against Julian* also assumes that the cross is victorious – in particular over pagan adversaries, whether ordinary soldiers or powerful emperors. In his thirteenth Lenten lecture, Cyril responds to multiple opponents – polytheists ('Hellenists'), docetic heretics, and Jews. For both Cyril and Ephrem, whose writings about the cross adopt and creatively develop traditional theologies and types of the cross, Jewish critiques pose an especially difficult challenge. The prophecies and types of the Old Testament were key weapons in their arsenal to refute the accusation that the cross is 'folly'.

Such was the theological and political atmosphere in which the Feast of the Cross began. Whilst these prominent writers did not speak directly on the feast, their writings do reflect the time in which this festival gained popularity. Each tailored traditional theology about the cross to respond to a new situation, just as later generations would take up the themes discussed here, and develop them in new directions as the political and theological winds shifted. The next chapter will discuss another important contextual backdrop to the Feast of the Cross: the elaborations of the Helena Legend during the fifth century and its reception in Syriac.

Chapter 2: The Helena Legends and Their Reception in Syriac

1. Introduction

As the fourth century drew to a close, a new story arose from the environs of Jerusalem to explain more precisely how the holy cross had been discovered. Word spread that Queen Helena, the mother of Constantine, had uncovered the relic herself, and its discovery was accompanied by a miraculous sign to verify the True Cross. Although not an original feature of the celebration of the discovery of the cross during the Encaenia, the Helena legend would gradually become an important part of the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross.

This chapter has two sections. In the first part of the first section, I will examine the three earliest accounts of Helena's discovery side-by-side in search of shared original features of the Helena legend. The second part of the first section presents and critiques different theories of the legend's origin. The legend emerged in the context of Encaenia celebrations, so a brief discussion follows about that festival's theological features and how they may have influenced the themes found in variations of the legend. The second section of the chapter addresses how the story of the discovery of the cross was received and circulated in Syriac-speaking communities. The Syriac tradition knew two invention legends: the account of Protonike, the fictional first-century wife of Claudius Caesar, and the Judah Kyriakos variation of the Helena legend. After introducing the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos versions, I will discuss the intertwined transmission of these legends in the manuscript tradition. Finally, I survey the main theories for the origins of these two legends. The conclusion of the chapter summarises the influence of the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos legends in Syriac.

2. The Helena Legend in its Earliest Guise

Siren-like, the elusive origins of the Helena legend call to the researcher from this way and that and can dash the unwary onto the rocky beaches of confusion. Many have attempted to trace the historical ‘growth’ of the tale,¹ and with some success, particularly when comparing accounts found in the ecclesiastical histories of the fifth century. But widening the net to gather up other written reports, such as Ambrose of Milan’s *De Obitu Theodosii* or Paulinus of Nola’s *Letter 31* to Sulpicius Severus, makes for a more complicated picture. Not only are the latter two texts amongst the earliest written accounts, they do not neatly align with the version preferred by the church historians. Although many questions must remain unresolved here, this section will attempt to find a safe harbour whilst addressing these two questions: (1) What were the features of the earliest Helena legends? (2) How and why did the Helena legend emerge when it did? Finally, I will discuss how the theology of the Encaenia celebrations influenced variations of the Helena legend.

2.1. What Were the Features of the Earliest Helena Legends?

Ultimately, there were two rival legends of how Helena discovered the cross,² which are designated in the scholarly literature by the name of their respective protagonists: the Helena version and the Judah Kyriakos version.³ In the Helena version, Helena discovers three crosses and Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, helps her identify the True Cross by means of a miraculous healing. The Helena legend is at core earlier than the Judah Kyriakos version, although certain features of the latter were heralded in the earliest variations of the

¹ S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*, 7-81; J.W. Drijvers. *Helena Augusta*, 95-117.

² In Syriac and Armenian there was also the Protonike legend, but it reports a ‘first’ discovery of the cross in the days of Emperor Claudius, and it was modelled after the Helena version. See pages 68-77.

³ J. Straubinger first suggested that these legends be designated by their protagonists, Protonike, Helena, and Judah Kyriakos respectively. J. Straubinger, *Die Kreuzauffindungslegende. Untersuchungen über ihre altchristlichen Fassungen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der syrischen Texte* (Paderborn, 1912) v.

legend, as shall be discussed below. The Judah Kyriakos legend achieved widespread popularity in Latin, Greek, and Syriac hagiography (and indeed in many other languages),⁴ whereas the Helena legend was favoured by the fifth-century church historians Rufinus of Aquileia, Sozomen, Socrates, and Theodoret.

I focus here on the earliest iterations of the Helena legend rather than attempting to show the development of the legend over time, as other scholars have already painstakingly done.⁵ I will compare the three earliest extant accounts of Helena's discovery of the cross side-by-side, and then I will make broad observations about the common questions that these accounts attempt to address. I will not discuss the diachronic development of the legend because it can muddy the waters by allowing the version with the most enduring afterlife to become the *de facto* measure of the 'accuracy' of other versions. I also do not assume that the early reports of the legend have a literary relationship to one another. By placing these stories side-by-side, I hope to avoid the pitfalls of assuming the existence of an 'authoritative' narrative at the time of the earliest accounts of the story.⁶ The Helena legend in its earliest guise was fluid, and the manner of its telling depended on the purposes of the narrator. I hope to preserve these differences. The first three extant witness to the Helena legend were written within eight years of each other: Ambrose of Milan's 395 CE funeral

⁴ See S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*, 194 n. 33.

⁵ S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found* and J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*.

⁶ S. Heid has suggested that the legend as found in the ecclesiastical histories was used in written form during the Encaenia celebrations and thus enjoyed an authoritative status. Heid is trying to explain why Rufinus (or his source) would choose the version that he does over other variations of the story which he must surely have known, but this seems an unlikely solution. S. Heid, 'Der Ursprung der Helenalegende im Pilgerbetrieb Jerusalems', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 32 (1989) 62-63.

oration for Emperor Theodosius (*De obitu*),⁷ Rufinus of Aquileia's *Church History* (ca. 402 CE),⁸ and Paulinus of Nola's *Letter 31* to Sulpicius Severus (ca. 403 CE).⁹

These three texts differ greatly from one another in genre and purpose. The earliest written account is Ambrose of Milan's *De obitu*, a eulogy given on the occasion of Theodosius I's funeral in 395 CE. The source of Ambrose's narrative is unclear, and his account of the discovery is carefully tailored to fit his broader eulogistic aims: to persuade the sons of Theodosius to follow in the footsteps of their orthodox Christian predecessors.¹⁰ Rufinus's account is similar to the accounts of the Greek historians Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret, who all wrote in the 440s.¹¹ Scholars have suggested that the church histories of Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret are all directly dependent on the lost *Church History* of Gelasius of Caesarea,¹² written sometime between the death of Cyril of Jerusalem in 386 and Gelasius' own death in 395 CE.¹³ Whilst this theory has much to recommend it, it can lead to overconfidence,¹⁴ and one should surely heed Thelamon's warning against the

⁷ For an English translation of the Latin eulogy: *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches*, trans. J.H.V.G. Liebeschuetz, (Liverpool, 2005) 174-203. For a Latin edition, see *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, pars 7, ed. O. Faller; CSEL 73 (Vienna, 1955) 369-401.

⁸ See page 18 n. 2.

⁹ Latin edition (with German translation): Paulinus of Nola, *Epistolae = Briefe*, ed. and tr. M. Skeb (Freiburg, 1998). English translation used here: *Letters of St Paulinus of Nola: Letters 23-51*, tr. P. G. Walsh (London, 1967).

¹⁰ There has been much scholarly debate over whether the Helena legend of *De obitu* is original to the oration, or if Ambrose added it later when he included *De obitu* in an edited collection of letters. The arguments for and against its original inclusion in the eulogy are all literary: on the one hand, the whole section could be removed without adverse effect on the whole, but on the other, the legend has been very deftly interwoven with the main themes of the rest of the eulogy. J.H.V.G. Liebeschuetz gives a summary of the argument for the Helena legend as an addition in *Ambrose of Milan*, 176-7. For the argument for the Helena legend as an original feature, see W. Steidle, 'Die Leichenrede des Ambrosius für Kaiser Theodosius und die Helenallegende', *VC* 32 (1978) 94-112. See also the discussion in J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 109-10. Since Ambrose was a well-connected man and he wrote his eulogy at just the time that the Helena legend was emerging from Jerusalem, it is hardly surprising or anachronistic for him to have incorporated it into this work. Even if it is a later addition, it is an early witness to the Helena legend, and it deserves attention here.

¹¹ For a detailed comparison of the contents of each historian's account: J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 95-108, and Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*, 7-30.

¹² For an overview of the scholarly debate over Gelasius, see Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia*, xiii-xvii.

¹³ According to a later tradition, Cyril of Jerusalem asked his nephew to write a church history. See F. Winkelmann, *Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia*; *Sitzungsberichte der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Klasse für Sprachen, Literatur und Kunst* Nr. 3 (Berlin, 1966) 10-1.

¹⁴ S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*, goes so far as to attempt to establish the historicity of the Helena account based on its presumed origin in Gelasius' *Church History*. Based on the

danger of trying to compare an extant work with one that is now lost.¹⁵ Given that one cannot know anything for certain about Gelasius' account, I think it is best to treat Rufinus' *Church History* in its own right. Paulinus of Nola's letter to Sulpicius Severus accompanied a fragment of the cross in response to Severus' request for a relic of a saint to put in the altar of his basilica. Melania the Elder had given Paulinus the piece of the cross and told him how Helena discovered it. Paulinus assures his friend of the value of the relic of the cross. In turn, Paulinus's letter influenced the account in Sulpicius Severus' *Church History*.¹⁶ All three of these accounts were originally written in Latin, but there is no longer any doubt that the Helena legend had its origin in Jerusalem.¹⁷ I compare the main features of the accounts given by these three early testimonies in the following table.¹⁸

Ambrose of Milan, <i>De obitu</i> 40-51 (395 CE)	Rufinus of Aquileia, <i>Church History</i> 10.7-8 (ca. 402 CE)	Paulinus of Nola, <i>Letter 31</i> , 3-6 (ca. 403 CE)
Ambrose alludes to the nails of the crucifixion found by Helena, made into a bridle in fulfillment of the prophecy in Zech. 14.20.		
		Paulinus discusses why the cross had been lost: the Jews would have destroyed it if they had the chance or it would have been destroyed during the persecution. Hadrian had also built a pagan temple to hide the place.
Inspired by her piety, Helena goes to Jerusalem to see the site of the Lord's passion.	Divine visions lead Helena to go to Jerusalem.	Inspired by God, Helena goes to the Holy Land to cleanse their locations of idolatry.
The Holy Spirit inspires Helena to search for the cross.		Helena visits many holy places in Jerusalem and finally

assumption that the Helena legend was first written by Gelasius of Caesarea, J.W. Drijvers credits Gelasius' uncle, Cyril of Jerusalem, with the attribution of the discovery to Helena (*Helena Augusta*, 141). Whilst it is tempting to credit the full development of the legend to a well-known and comparatively well-documented figure, there is no historical basis for this suggestion.

¹⁵ F. Thelamon, *Paiens et chrétiens au IV siècle: l'apport de l'"Histoire ecclésiastique" de Rufin de Aquilée* (Paris, 1981) 20. Cf. Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia*, xvi-ii.

¹⁶ Sulpicius Severus' report does have some notable differences. See J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 116-7.

¹⁷ Although it was once commonly asserted that the legends are Western because of their language of origin, it is now broadly agreed that they originated in Jerusalem. *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers, 13.

¹⁸ J.W. Drijvers' methodical study of these narratives was helpful in compiling this chart; *Helena Augusta*, 101-2, 108-116.

		expresses a desire to see the cross, which has been lost.
	She asks the city's inhabitants where Christ had been crucified.	Helena assembles local Jews and Christians to ask after the location of the crucifixion. They give unanimous witness about the place.
Helena goes to Golgotha but cannot find the 'banner of salvation'. She accuses Satan of hiding it; she compares herself to Mary.	The place was covered by a temple of Venus and almost forgotten.	[A statue to Jupiter was placed on the site of the Passion.] ¹⁹
She clears the ground and finds three crosses, which 'the Enemy' (Satan) had hidden.	Led by a vision to the place, Helena removes the rubble and finds three crosses jumbled together	With local information and divine guidance, Helena has soldiers and civilians excavate the place, and three crosses are found.
Unsure at first which cross is the Lord's, she consults the Gospel where Pilate writes the <i>titulus</i> , and she finds the <i>titulus</i> on the True Cross, confirming its identity.	The crosses are indistinguishable; the <i>titulus</i> is found but it has become detached.	It is uncertain which of the three is the Lord's cross.
	Bishop Macarius asks Helena to bring the crosses near to a dying woman.	God inspires Helena to order that a newly dead man be brought in, and it is done.
	Macarius prays and touches the crosses one by one to the dying woman.	The crosses are touched one by one to the dead man.
[<i>Titulus</i> confirms the identity of the True Cross]	At the touch of the third cross, the woman is miraculously healed and runs about the house rejoicing.	At the touch of the third cross, the man is restored to life – a resurrection miracle is fitting for the identification of the cross.
		Paulinus revisits the question of why the cross was lost for so long.
	Helena builds a church on the site where the cross was found.	
Helena searches for the nails of the crucifixion, and finding them, incorporates them into a bridle and diadem for Constantine. The nails should inspire piety in emperors, ensuring their successful reign.	She brought the nails of the crucifixion to her son and they are made into a bridle and a helmet for battle.	
	She sends part of the True Cross to her son and puts the rest in a silver reliquary to be kept in Jerusalem.	The cross is kept in the basilica at the site of the Passion where pilgrims seek to see and to venerate it, especially on Good Friday.

¹⁹ Paulinus mentions this earlier in the letter, where he discusses the animosity of pagans to the Christian faith.

	Helena serves the local virgins a meal in person.	
The Jews are ashamed and lament their rejection at length. Ambrose also decries the errors of the Photinians and Arians.		
Helena is held up as a model of imperial piety.		

Comparison of these three versions of the Helena legend makes clear that in the earliest stages of the legend's emergence, a great deal of variation existed simultaneously. The three authors select material and emphases to suit their purposes. For example, in his eulogy, Ambrose begins and ends his narrative of the discovery of the cross with the nails of the crucifixion.²⁰ He finds the nails, incorporated into the bridle and diadem of the emperor, a useful rhetorical tool to goad Theodosius' sons towards piety and orthodoxy. His grand theme of *hereditas fidei* inspires his emphases. Paulinus, too, selects material due to his immediate concerns. When read with the rest of Paulinus' letter, one can clearly see that he is anxious for his friend to understand the value of the fragment of the cross that he is sending. Paulinus is not giving his friend what he asked for: Sulpicius Severus had requested relics of the saints for the altar in his basilica. Paulinus expresses his concern that Severus will be underwhelmed by the small sliver of wood, so he takes pains to reassure him that this is truly a fine and appropriate gift.²¹ Paulinus also anticipates questions about the relic itself: why was it lost in the first place, and how can one really be certain that the wood discovered is the cross of Christ? Paulinus argues that the disappearance of the cross was divine intervention to save the wood from destruction at the hands of persecutors, whether Jews or pagans.²² All three narratives give reassurance that the True Cross could be

²⁰ *De obitu* 40 and 50-51.

²¹ *Letter 31* 1-2.

²² *Ibid*, 3.

identified with confidence, but Paulinus' evidence of the resurrection of a dead man²³ is certainly more dramatic than the others.

Despite the fact that researchers have often considered Rufinus and the other church historians more restrained, and thus supposedly closer to the 'original', many distinctive elements of Rufinus' version can also be explained by his authorial purpose. Features of Rufinus' narrative have important agreements with Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*,²⁴ which is no surprise since Rufinus was translating and continuing Eusebius' work. This part of book ten is near the beginning of Rufinus' continuation of Eusebius, and he may be making special efforts to smooth the transition. Whilst Eusebius attributes the building of the Holy Sepulchre to Constantine alone, he does report Helena's trip to the Holy Land to worship at the places where Christ's feet have stood.²⁵ There she also built churches (in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives) and was a model pilgrim, offering lavish gifts to churches and serving the virgins in the city.²⁶ This happened during the episcopacy of Macarius.²⁷ Eusebius' description of Helena's journey provides the scaffolding on which Rufinus hangs his narrative of the discovery of the cross. As in Eusebius' account, the location she seeks is covered by a temple to Venus.²⁸ The same Macarius to whom Constantine writes his letter about the construction of the Holy Sepulchre is instrumental in the identification of the True Cross.²⁹ Finally, the pious woman waits at table on the dedicated virgins of Jerusalem, as in Eusebius' account.³⁰ His desire to continue Eusebius' work in a seamless way has certainly guided Rufinus' editorial choices here.

²³ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁴ I leave aside the question of Rufinus' incorporation of Gelasius' lost *Church History* for the moment. Gelasius' work is thought to have continued Eusebius' history, too. For the relationship of the ecclesiastical histories with the *Life of Constantine*, see the discussion in J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 125-9.

²⁵ VC 3.42.

²⁶ For the construction of the churches in Jerusalem, see VC 3.25-44.

²⁷ VC 3.29-30.

²⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 10.7.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 10.7-8.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 10.8.

Despite their many differences, these three narratives have important similarities. The most important one is at the core of the narrative: Helena is inspired by God to look for the cross, she finds the right place, and she digs up three crosses. Each version reassures the reader that the cross was successfully identified as Christ's. Whether this identification came through the testimony of the *titulus*,³¹ miraculous healing, or a resurrection is secondary to the reassurance that it is the True Cross of Christ. Significantly, all three reports mention the presence of religious opponents. Ambrose takes the opportunity to decry the teachings of the Photinians and Arians.³² Echoing Eusebius, Rufinus reports that a temple of Venus was set up on Golgotha, obscuring the place of the crucifixion. Paulinus laments at length how pagan temples had been built over important holy sites in an effort to destroy the root and foundation of the Church.³³ Both Ambrose and Paulinus lay the blame for why the cross had been hidden for so long at the feet of opponents. For Ambrose, the struggle is cosmic in scope, and the culprit is Satan himself.³⁴ Paulinus asserts that if the cross had fallen into the hands of the Jews, they would have cut it up and burned it. Likewise, the guards of the tomb and, later, the persecutors would have sought its destruction.³⁵ For Paulinus, the long absence of the cross and especially its recent discovery were all the product of divine providence:

[S]ince the Lord's cross had lain hidden for so many generations, concealed from the Jews at the time of the Passion and screened from the sight of the Gentiles who undoubtedly dug up the ground when building a shrine there, it must have lain unnoticed through the agency of God so that it could now be found by a devoted search.³⁶

³¹ John Chrysostom also reports this method of identification, *Homily 85 on John*. See the discussion in chapter 1, pp. 19-20.

³² *De obitu* 49.

³³ *Letter 31* 3.

³⁴ *De obitu* 44.

³⁵ *Letter 31* 3.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 6. *Letters of St Paulinus of Nola*, tr. P.G. Walsh, 132.

Both Paulinus and Ambrose evince antipathy towards Jews, whereas the sole antagonist for Rufinus is Hellenistic religion. Whereas one already finds religious antagonism against idolatry in Eusebius' description of the building of the Jerusalem complex, the antagonism against the Jews in the discovery accounts may be a more recent addition, stoked into flame by Emperor Julian's favour for the Jewish community and his efforts to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.³⁷ In all three cases, Helena's discovery of the cross is a pivotal event in the vindication of the Christian faith on the world stage.

2.2. How and Why Did the Helena Legends Emerge?

There have been numerous attempts to answer this question, all of them speculative to some degree, but some more compelling than others. Perhaps due to the historical nature of the question, many scholars have preferred to start with the somewhat tidier accounts of the church historians. Stephan Borgehammar's *How the Holy Cross was Found* thus attempts to reconstruct the original historical account of Gelasius of Caesarea through the latter's inheritors and continuators, seeking to reconcile along the way the differences between these historians and other independent reports. Borgehammar's aim is to establish the *historicity* of Helena's discovery of the cross by reconstituting the earliest possible written source (Gelasius), which he hopes to show is reliant on eyewitness reports. Even if Borgehammar's reconstruction really is similar to Gelasius' account, Gelasius only began to write his history after 386 CE, when his dying uncle Cyril of Jerusalem supposedly requested it. This is still half a century after Helena's death, so little ground has really been gained. Studies have also raised warning flags against attempting to reconstruct Gelasius'

³⁷ This attempt drew the ire of many church fathers. It seems that genuine difficulties accompanied the attempts to rebuild the temple, as Ammianus Marcellinus, a non-Christian chronicler, reports that fire broke out at the foundations of the building works at the site of the temple (*Roman Antiquities* 23.1.3). Others, such as Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oration* 5.3-4), report that visions of crosses and other divine interventions prevented Julian's plan from succeeding. See the discussion in S. Heid, 'Der Ursprung der Helenallegende', 67-9, and especially J.W. Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 127-52.

history on the basis of Rufinus' account; although the latter probably consulted Gelasius, he did not slavishly copy all that he found.³⁸ Finally, Borgehammar does not explain why so many people, such as Cyril of Jerusalem and Egeria (who ought to have known the story if it were current), do not refer to it, even when they discuss the discovery of the cross.

Jan Willem Drijvers also emphasises the importance of tracing the narrative back to Gelasius, but his conclusions are more restrained. Like Borgehammar, Drijvers carefully compares the accounts, grouping them broadly into categories as either 'church historians' or 'others', remarking on the correspondences and distinctive features of each along the way. Drijvers does not attempt to argue for a historical event, an approach that he emphatically eschews. Instead, the key for Drijvers is the connection of the legend to Gelasius of Caesarea's influential uncle, Cyril of Jerusalem. Drijvers suggests that Cyril himself was responsible for attributing the discovery of the cross to Helena (albeit later in life)³⁹ and that his motivation was to garner imperial favour for the see of Jerusalem.⁴⁰ Reflecting on Gelasius' report that Cyril of Jerusalem asked him to write a church history, Drijvers asks, 'Could it have been pure coincidence that it was the same Gelasius who... wrote his Church History and included the narrative about Helena's discovery of the Cross, a narrative in which Jerusalem and its bishop play such prominent roles?'⁴¹ However, Drijvers' provocative rhetorical question fails to convince that it could not be a coincidence. In a later study, Drijvers argued that the legend must have been developed between 351 (the date of Cyril's letter to Constantius) and 390 (the date proposed for Gelasius' *Church History*), most of which falls within Cyril's episcopacy.⁴² However, Drijvers does not take into account that

³⁸ Consult Jacques Schamp, 'Gélase ou Rufin: un fait nouveau', *Byzantion* 57 (1987) 360-90; *idem*, 'The Lost Ecclesiastical History of Gelasius of Caesarea', *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6 (1987) 146-52.

³⁹ T.D. Barnes also suggested that Cyril or Gelasius invented the story (*Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA, 1981) 382 n. 130).

⁴⁰ Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 141-2. He expands on his theory in *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 172-5.

⁴¹ Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 142.

⁴² *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 172.

Egeria's much later reference (ca. 384 CE) to the discovery of the cross does not mention Helena. For this reason, I think it best to place the *terminus post quem* at 384 CE, when Egeria left Jerusalem. In turn, because the history of Gelasius is no longer extant, a safer *terminus ante quem* is 395 CE, when Ambrose gave the funeral oration for Theodosius. Cyril died in 386 CE. The legend could have developed in Jerusalem during the final two years of Cyril's episcopacy, but the proposition that Cyril masterminded the invention of the legend himself seems rather unlikely. Cyril was not the only active and influential devotee of the True Cross in Jerusalem at that time, and many of the others would have been keen to enhance the city's status. A compelling case might also be made for Cyril's successor, John II, during whose episcopacy the first written accounts came into existence, especially since two of the three earliest extant accounts originate with Rufinus and Melania the Elder, who had close ties to John.⁴³ In any case, one need not be the bishop of an important see to popularise an invention legend when there was already so much appetite for hagiographical tales amongst thronging pilgrims.

Whereas Drijvers makes a top-down argument for Cyril's invention of the legend based on his assumptions about Cyril's political motivations, Stefan Heid argues from the bottom-up for the Helena legend developing in response to the curiosity of pilgrims.⁴⁴ The Holy Sepulchre housed the relic of the cross from at least the middle of the fourth century,⁴⁵ and the date of the Encaenia, as Egeria tells us, coincided with that of the discovery of the cross so that the two were celebrated together. At the same time, in Eusebius' account Helena plays a central role in the construction of the Jerusalem basilicas, and Eusebius portrays her

⁴³ Thus M. van Esbroeck has argued for John II's role in the development of a trilogy on the discovery of the cross, referring to the legends of Protonike, Judah Kyriakos, and the martyrdom of Judah Kyriakos. I will discuss van Esbroeck's thesis below. For relevant studies, see van Esbroeck, 'Jean II de Jérusalem et les cultes de S. Étienne, de la Sainte-Sion et de la Croix', *AnBoll* 102 (1984) 99-134, and *idem*, 'L'opuscule *Sur la Croix* d'Alexandre de Chypre et sa version Géorgienne', *Bedi Kartlisa* 37 (1979) 102-32.

⁴⁴ 'Der Ursprung des Helenalegende', esp. 47-62.

⁴⁵ The mid-fourth century date is based on Cyril of Jerusalem's testimony of the discovery and widespread distribution of fragments from Jerusalem in his *Catechetical Lectures* (written c. 348-50 CE) and his letter to Constantius (c. 351 CE). See the previous chapter for more detail.

as a model pilgrim.⁴⁶ Heid intuitively feels that the visiting pilgrims would naturally ask questions about how and by whom the cross was found. It was a small step to connect the discovery of the cross with the excavation of the building and its discoverer with the model pilgrim, Helena.⁴⁷ Drijvers' argument focuses mainly on the accounts of the historians, and his explanation for other variations of the legend is less developed.⁴⁸ Heid focuses on the orality of the earliest accounts,⁴⁹ particularly the way in which certain features would have answered the questions that pilgrims would surely have had. The question of how the cross was lost initially gave rise to accounts of its burial (and identifying the culprits), and in turn these explanations put the cross in the right place to be discovered during the building excavations. If one asked how the cross of Christ was authenticated, there were various ways to give reassurance to the pious. Whilst Heid's arguments are speculative, his intuitions often ring true, offering plausible explanations for how different features of the legend arose. His use of historical documents along with his psychological insight into early Jerusalem pilgrims and their local hosts is more textured than the one-dimensional political machinations Drijvers suggests.

⁴⁶ However, her journey may have been more of an *iter principis* than a pilgrimage. See K. G. Holum 'Hadrian and St Helena: Imperial Travel and the Origins of Christian Holy Land Pilgrimage', in ed. R. Ousterhout, *The Blessings of Pilgrimage* (Urbana, IL, 1990) 66-81.

⁴⁷ Heid, 'Der Ursprung des Helenalegende', esp. 50.

⁴⁸ J.W. Drijvers does, however, give fuller treatment of the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos versions. See *Helena Augusta*, 147-63 and 165-80 respectively.

⁴⁹ However, Heid does suggest that the version later adopted by Rufinus and the fifth-century Greek historians was actually written down and read as a part of the Jerusalem liturgy during the Encaenia, and this is why it had such 'authority' for Rufinus ('Der Ursprung des Helenalegende', 62-3). That is to say, Rufinus found the liturgical account recorded in Gelasius' history, and, although there were other oral sources he could have employed, Rufinus chose to adopt Gelasius' account as is because it had official church sanction. Nevertheless, Heid argues, the legend was only read once a year, allowing other oral versions to develop alongside it. Heid thus tries to have his cake and eat it, too: the historians' version is authoritative, but not *too* much. Whilst one does find later writers arguing in favour of the Helena legend as found in the church histories, they only argue for it on the basis of its historical reliability, never some purported canonical status. (For Severus of Antioch's virulent rejection of the legend, see p. 79.) Meanwhile, liturgical material from the same era shows no awareness or endorsement of an official liturgical version. Heid's arguments in this article are grounded as much as possible on the sources, with plausible psychological intuitions to explain the gaps, and Heid does this well. His argument here for the liturgical version is less persuasive.

Summarily, the legend of Helena's discovery of the cross apparently had not taken shape by 384 CE, when Egeria left Jerusalem, but just over a decade later, her discovery was taken as an established, and politically useful, fact by Ambrose of Milan. It seems that the legend of Helena's discovery of the cross arose naturally out of the context of the feast of the Encaenia, where the discovery of the cross was associated with the building of the Jerusalem basilicas. As pilgrims asked questions, explanations arose for how the cross had been lost, how Helena found it, and how the True Cross was distinguished from the others. One might even call these explanations 'educated guesses', as they connected the historical reports of Helena's pilgrimage and her building activities with the tradition that the wood of the cross had been found on the day chosen for the Encaenia celebrations. If the Encaenia provided the liturgical context for the emergence of the legend and also for the nascent Feast of the Cross, it is worth examining more closely.

2.3. The Theological Contribution of the Encaenia Celebrations

Writing in 384 CE, Egeria provides the earliest testimony about the festivities of the Encaenia, and this is worth excerpting at length:

Those are called the days of dedication when the holy church which is in Golgotha, and which they call the Martyrium, was consecrated to God; the holy church also which is at the Anastasis, that is, in the place where the Lord rose after His Passion, was consecrated to God on that day. The dedication of these holy churches is therefore celebrated with the highest honour, because the Cross of the Lord was found on this same day. And it was so ordained that, when the holy churches above mentioned were first consecrated, that should be the day when the Cross of the Lord had been found, in order that the whole celebration should be made together, with all rejoicing, on the self-same day. Moreover, it appears from the Holy Scriptures that this is also the day of dedication, when holy Solomon, having finished the House of God which he had built, stood before the altar of God and prayed, as it is written in the books of the Chronicles.

So when these days of dedication are come, they are kept for eight days. And people begin to assemble from all parts many days before; not only monks and *apotactitae* from various provinces, from Mesopotamia and Syria, from Egypt and the Thebaid (where there are very many monks), and from every different place and province... but lay people too in like manner, both

men and women, with faithful minds, gather together in Jerusalem from every province on those days, for the sake of the holy day. ... But why should I say more? For he who on these days has not been present at so solemn a feast thinks that he has committed a very great sin, unless some necessity, which keeps a man back from carrying out a good resolution, has hindered him. Now on these days of the dedication the adornment of all the churches is the same as at Easter and at Epiphany, also on each day the procession is made to the several holy places, as at Easter and at Epiphany.⁵⁰

The second half of Egeria's description emphasises how significant the octave of the Encaenia was amongst the other major festivals in Jerusalem. Its pomp and solemnity was rivalled only by the ancient dominical feasts of Easter and Epiphany, and great throngs of pilgrims flooded the city to partake in the festivities.⁵¹ Egeria's most enlightening comments about the cross occur in the first paragraph. She attributes the special honour shown to the first day of the Encaenia to the reported discovery of the cross on that same day.⁵² Egeria reports that the day of the consecration of the churches was specially chosen to coincide with the day on which the cross was purportedly found. This fits well with her frequent comments about how carefully planned the festivities in Jerusalem are:

But what is above all things very pleasant and admirable here, is that the hymns, the antiphons, and the lessons, as well as the prayers which the bishop says, always have suitable and fitting references, both to the day that is being celebrated and also to the place where the celebration is taking place.⁵³

⁵⁰ *It. Eg.* 48.1-49.3. This translation is from *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, ed. and tr. by M.L. McClure and C.L. Feltoe (London, 1919) 95-96. Wilkinson's more recent translation is more dynamic and thus more readable, but the translation by McClure and Feltoe is truer to the Latin syntax.

⁵¹ Eusebius reported crowds of bishops and other church officials from every province coming to the inaugural dedication of the church in 335 CE (*VC* 4.43.4). Perhaps one should take his comments with a pinch of salt, since he had delivered the oration at the dedication of the Holy Sepulchre himself and has an interest in the occasion appearing to be a great success. Still, even if Eusebius overstates the case, one can fairly assume that the Encaenia festivities had grown alongside the well-attested increasing popularity of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The crowds of Egeria's day still included many bishops, monks, and other clerics, and large numbers of lay people as well.

⁵² Heid is right to warn that it is anachronistic to speak of a 'Feast of the Discovery of the Cross' at Egeria's time ('Der Ursprung des Helenalegende', 59). It was simply a celebration of the discovery of the cross within the octave of the Encaenia, and according to her testimony, the 14th of September was not yet reserved for the celebration of the discovery.

⁵³ *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, 94. She observes the appropriateness of prayers, readings, psalms and sermons regularly in her description of the Jerusalem liturgy.

The same careful forethought even gives the Encaenia its name, since, as Egeria says, the day of the consecration of the temple of Solomon in the book of Chronicles⁵⁴ was called by the same name.

The old Armenian lectionary has long been considered the earliest witness to the liturgy in Jerusalem, going back to the early fifth century,⁵⁵ and consequently it has often been compared to the festal year as Egeria portrays it in her *Itinerary*.⁵⁶ Egeria's account gives an impression of the grandeur of the octave, whereas the Armenian lectionary gives, at least in part, a glimpse of the theological emphases of the feast. By the time the lectionary had been formed, the discovery of the cross had secured its own slot on the second day of the festival, the 14th of September. However, the rubric for the celebration of the cross instructs that the same canons should be read for the feast as were read the previous day for the beginning of the Encaenia.⁵⁷ The lack of distinctive readings for the Feast of the Cross suggests that holding it on a separate day was a relatively recent innovation. Another difference from Egeria's description is that, according to the Armenian lectionary, the relic of the cross was now shown to the gathered worshippers on the second day of the Encaenia. In her description, Egeria does talk about a veneration of the relic, in which the wood was brought forth and worshippers were allowed to approach and kiss it, but this only happened on Holy Friday,⁵⁸ not during the Encaenia. In any case, the celebration of the cross' discovery had acquired a distinct day by the time of the lectionary, but its theological content was still decided by its place in the larger context of the Encaenia.

⁵⁴ A reference to Solomon's prayer of dedication in 2 Chr 6.12ff.

⁵⁵ Renoux argues that it was based on a Greek lectionary of the early fifth century (*Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*). See p. 21 n. 13.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, esp. 175-94.

⁵⁷ The readings for the Encaenia and display of the cross on the second day: Ps 65.2; 1 Tim 3.14-16; Ps 147 (especially v. 12); Jn 10.22-42. Renoux, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, 360-3.

⁵⁸ See pp. 20-1.

Egeria's connection between the Encaenia of the Jerusalem basilicas and the dedication of the temple of Solomon has resonances with other fourth- and early fifth-century sources. Already in 314 or 316 CE, Eusebius had given a dedication speech at the basilica of Tyre, describing its builder, the bishop Paulinus, as a new 'Solomon, a king of a new and much better Jerusalem'.⁵⁹ As there were no standard models for a panegyric on the occasion of the dedication of a church, Eusebius had to be innovative in his speech,⁶⁰ and this link with Old Testament dedications would have echoes in unexpected places through the centuries.⁶¹ The Armenian lectionary also associates the Encaenia and the Feast of the Cross with the dedication of Solomon's temple. The appointed gospel reading is John 10.22-42, in which Jesus has a tense encounter with 'the Jews' on the day of the dedication of the Temple whilst he walks in the Portico of Solomon. The setting of the pericope links the festal occasion of the reading to the dedication of the Jewish Temple. The theological content of Jesus' encounter with the Jews showcases their unbelief and rejection of his identity as the Son of God even as others see the signs he performs and believe in him. Not only does the gospel episode occur in the right place and time, but it also buttresses Christian claims to have superseded the Jews as the True Israel.⁶² Thus, the Encaenia may have bequeathed an anti-Jewish stance to the later developments of the legend of the discovery of

⁵⁹ The whole speech is in Eusebius, *Church History* 10.4.3. The comparison to Solomon does not stand alone. Eusebius also tries out a 'new Bezalel' and a 'new Zerubbabel', so Paulinus of Tyre's biblical predecessors are those who furnished the tabernacle, built the first temple, and rebuilt the temple after the Babylonian captivity. Curiously, Matthew Black asserted that Eusebius called Constantine a new Solomon in his panegyrics for the dedications of the basilicas in Tyre and Jerusalem, but it seems that he only calls Paulinus of Tyre a 'new Solomon'. M. Black, 'The Festival of the Encaenia Ecclesiae in the Ancient Church with Special Reference to Syria and Palestine', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 5 (1954) 78.

⁶⁰ On Eusebius' creative use of rhetorical forms, see the analysis of C. Smith, 'Christian Rhetoric in Eusebius' Panegyric at Tyre', *VC* 43 (1989) 226-247.

⁶¹ As in the East Syrian Encaenia ecclesiae, which celebrated four dedications of the Old Testament: the Tabernacle in the wilderness by Moses, the Tabernacle when it was set up at Shiloh, the Temple of Solomon, and the Second Temple rebuilt by Zerubbabel. Matthew Black suggests that these East Syrian feasts and the Jerusalem Encaenia go back to a common Eastern festival, but this seems too speculative. It seems more likely that the common connection between dedications of churches in general with the Old Testament precedents could give rise to the East Syrian variant. See Black 'The Festival of the Encaenia Ecclesiae', 82.

⁶² For more on Jews and the Encaenia, see J. Schwartz, 'The Encaenia of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Temple of Solomon, and the Jews', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 43 (1987) 265-81.

the cross and also to subsequent celebrations of the Feast of the Cross,⁶³ as we shall see in due course. As Egeria had said, the passages were indeed selected with care.

2.4. Concluding Remarks

The three earliest accounts of Helena's discovery of the cross are heavily influenced, albeit in different ways, by the association of her discovery with the building of the Jerusalem basilicas. Rufinus leans heavily on Eusebius' account of the building of the basilicas in the *Life of Constantine*, and this explains some of his distinctive features, such as the important role played by bishop Macarius and the exclusive focus on eradicating the pagan presence from the holy sites. Whether by Rufinus or his alleged source Gelasius, the Helena legend as told by ecclesiastical historians is designed as a continuation of Eusebius' account, and it is important that any cognitive dissonance between the two be averted. Paulinus too expresses his great dismay at the pagan temples built on top of Christian holy sites. Paulinus and Ambrose both polemicise against the Jews, and Ambrose imagines the Jews' admitting their shame at the revelation of the wood of the cross:

'[W]e have crucified Jesus so that Christians shall not only rise after death, but reign though dead. ... We thought that we had conquered, but admit ourselves conquered. ... Now for us the struggle is greater, now the battle against him is more furious. We have spurned him whom kingdoms attend, whom the powerful serve. How shall we stand against kings? Kings bow before the iron of his fetters!'⁶⁴

Meanwhile, the gospel reading appointed for the first and second days of the Encaenia presented Jesus' encounter with hostile Jews who found his claims blasphemous, contrasting them with those who recognized Christ's deeds as signs that he was the Son of God. This very theme – that the discovery of the cross puts pagans and Jews alike to shame because of

⁶³ For a study on anti-Jewish themes during Holy Week festivities in Syriac churches, see A. Heinz, 'Antijudaismus in der christlichen Liturgie? Das Beispiel der syrischen Kirchen in der „Großen Woche“', in *Syriaca II: Beiträge zum 3. Deutschen Syrologen-Symposium in Vierzehnheiligen 2002*, ed. M. Tamcke (Münster, 2004) 307-25.

⁶⁴ *De obitu* 49. *Ambrose of Milan*, tr. Liebeschuetz, 200-1.

their disbelief even as the cross demonstrates its power – comes to the fore in the legends which became the most popular in the Syriac-speaking milieu, the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos legends.

3. The Syriac Legends of the Discovery of the Cross

The Syriac tradition knew three different versions of the discovery of the cross.⁶⁵ The version favoured by the Latin and Greek historians played a far more subdued role in the Syriac tradition. By medieval times, there were Syriac translations of Socrates and Theodoret available,⁶⁶ and both of these fifth-century Greek historians had included the discovery of the cross in their histories. It seems that the Helena legend of the historians, however, played a minor role in Syriac. Indeed, the West Syrian historians include the discovery legend in their chronicles for the first time only in the ninth century.⁶⁷ Far more popular in Syriac were the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos versions.⁶⁸ After a brief summary

⁶⁵ One might even count it as four versions, considering the unique invention of the cross given in the Syriac Dormition traditions. See S. Shoemaker, 'A Peculiar Version of the *Inventio Crucis* in the Early Syriac Dormition Traditions', *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006) 75-81.

⁶⁶ When John of Litarba asked Jacob of Edessa about the origins of the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross, Jacob informs his friend that he checked the account of the discovery of the cross in Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History*. For this passage in the unpublished letter, see BL Add. 12,172, f. 85b. Whilst Jacob may have read Socrates in Greek, there are fragments of a Syriac translation of Socrates in a manuscript of the Wellcome Institute that may be dated paleographically to the seventh or eighth century. N. Allan, 'Syriac Fragments in the Wellcome Institute Library', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1987) 43-45.

⁶⁷ It appears for the first time in the *Anonymous Chronicle to 846* (*Chronica Minora II*, ed. E.W. Brooks and tr. J.-B. Chabot; CSCO 3-4, *Scriptores Syri* 3-4 (Louvain, 1955-60) 193 (text), 149 (trans)). Later it occurs in the *Chronicle of Séert* (*Histoire nestorienne: Chronique de Séert*, ed. and tr. A. Scher; PO 4 (Paris, 1908) 263-4); Michael the Syrian (*Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199)*, ed. and tr. J.-B. Chabot; 4 vols (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899-1924) 4:122-3 (text); 1:242 (translation)); the *Anonymous Chronicle of 1234* (*Chronicon anonymum ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, ed. and tr. J.-B. Chabot; CSCO, *Scriptores Syri* 36 and 56 (Louvain, 1965-74) 1:150-2 (text), 1:119-20 (translation)). Michael the Syrian also incorporates the Protonike legend into his chronicle (*Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4:96 (text), 1:157-8 (translation)). They all report the version favoured by the fifth-century historians.

⁶⁸ For Syriac texts of both legends from various manuscripts, see E. Nestle, *De Sancta Cruce* (Berlin, 1889). For an edition and English translation of the Protonike legend in the *Doctrina Addai*, see *The Teaching of Addai*, tr. G. Howard (Chico, CA, 1981) 21-35. The French translation is accompanied by useful notes: *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, tr. A. Desreumaux (Turnhout, 1993) 65-73. For an edition and translation of the Judah Kyriakos legend, see *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers.

of the two legends, this section will discuss their transmission and survey the current scholarship on their origins. The conclusion of the chapter will reflect on how the prevalent themes of these two legends affected the meaning of the discovery of the cross in Syriac communities.

In the legend that bears her name, Queen Protonike, the fictional first-century consort of Claudius Caesar, is converted to Christianity in Rome when she sees the apostle Peter performing miracles. The zealous new believer longs to see Jerusalem, where the Lord also performed mighty deeds, so she sets out, with her two sons and virgin daughter in tow. Upon arrival in Jerusalem, she meets the apostle James, who performs wonders like Peter's. When she inquires about Golgotha, the cross, and the grave, James sadly reports that the Jews control these things and do not permit the Christians to see them, but rather they persecute the Christians to keep them from preaching the Gospel. Protonike summons the leaders of the Jews and orders them to deliver these things to James and the Christians. This done, she goes at once to see the grave. Upon entering she finds three crosses, and, suddenly, her virgin daughter falls down dead. Protonike prays, fearful that this catastrophe will encourage the Jews and idolaters to mock her conversion. Meanwhile, her eldest son suggests that this has all happened according to divine providence: to demonstrate which cross is the cross of Christ. He suggests touching the three crosses one at a time to the dead girl, and they do so. When the third cross touches her, the girl revives immediately. Rejoicing, Protonike gives the cross to James and builds a great building over the tomb and Golgotha. She returns to Rome, where she reports to Claudius all that happened, and Claudius issues an edict expelling the Jews from Italy (cf. Acts 18.2).

The Judah Kyriakos version still features Helena as the instigator of the search for the cross, but it is Judah, a Jew of Jerusalem, who finds and identifies the cross for her. Upon arrival in Jerusalem with her retinue, Helena interrogates the Jews about the location of the

cross, gradually narrowing down her informants to the most knowledgeable. When Judah, one of their number, reveals that his crypto-Christian forebears secretly passed down a warning that the cross would one day be sought, the others hand him over to the queen. Helena interrogates him, but since he does not know the location, she imprisons him in a dry well for a week. After seven days, he announces that he will find the cross, and they release him. When Judah prays to God for guidance, a sweet fragrance wafts from the place, and they dig and find three crosses. The True Cross is distinguished from those of the thieves by restoring a dead person to life at a touch. Speaking through a demon-possessed man, Satan laments his defeat through this 'second Judas' and vows to tempt him to renounce Christ,⁶⁹ but Judah successfully rebukes Satan in the name of Christ, and the demon leaves the man. Helena places the wood in a jewel-encrusted silver shrine and she builds a basilica at Golgotha. Judah converts to Christianity, changing his name to Kyriakos, and is ordained a priest. When the standing bishop of Jerusalem dies, Helena sees to it that Judah succeeds him as bishop of Jerusalem. He later helps Helena find the nails of the crucifixion, which she fashions into a bridle for Constantine's horse in fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 14.20. Helena stirs up a persecution of the Jews and orders that they be expelled from Judaea. Finally, she gives gifts to Jerusalem and entrusts the care of the poor to the bishop. She instructs all Christians to commemorate the discovery of the cross every year.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ This anticipates the martyrdom of Judah Kyriakos which follows the discovery of the cross in the two earliest manuscripts. Drijvers and Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross*, 67 n. 28. For the martyrdom: I. Guidi, 'Textes orientaux inédits du martyre de Judas Cyriaque, évêque de Jérusalem: I. Texte syriaque', *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* I, 9 (1904) 79-95, and N.V. Pigulevskaya, 'Le martyre de saint Cyriaque de Jérusalem', *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* III, 6 [26] (1927-1928) 305-356.

⁷⁰ The Judah Kyriakos legend in the earliest manuscripts (both sixth-century) therefore refers to the Feast of the Cross, and this is perhaps the setting in which it would have been read.

3.1. The Manuscript Tradition of the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos Legends

The history of the transmission of these two legends is so intertwined that it is difficult to discuss them independently. Appendix A contains a fuller discussion of the manuscript tradition with a detailed chart of the manuscript witnesses, the manuscript catalogues, and the main secondary sources. Here I will only summarise those findings. The earliest manuscripts containing the Protonike legend transmit it as a part of the final redaction of the *Doctrina Addai*, which dates from the first third of the fifth century.⁷¹ The *Doctrina Addai* is the foundation myth of the Edessene church,⁷² and in its final redaction the Protonike legend plays an important role in the evangelisation of the city's elite. An early fragment of the Protonike legend, accompanying the *Doctrina*, is found in London BL Add. 14,654, which Wright dated to the fifth or sixth century.⁷³ The earliest testimony to the entire Protonike legend within the *Doctrina* is Leningrad Syriac manuscript 4,⁷⁴ which van Esbroeck dated paleographically to the late fifth- or early sixth-century as well.⁷⁵ This manuscript also contains the Judah Kyriakos legend, followed by the account of his martyrdom in the time of Emperor Julian. With only two exceptions, when the Judah Kyriakos version appears in a manuscript, it follows the Protonike legend.⁷⁶ In one of these

⁷¹ I discuss the approximate date of the final form of the *Doctrina Addai* below. Here I follow the dating of S.H. Griffith, 'The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Fifth-Century Edessa', *Hugoye* 6 (2003) 291.

⁷² In addition to the editions and translations cited in n. 68 above, there are a number of helpful studies on the *Doctrina* and the traditions it uses. See especially: S.P. Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. H.W. Attridge and G. Hata (Leiden, 1992) 212-234; A. Desreumaux, 'La Doctrina Addai: le chroniqueur et ses documents', *Apocrypha* 1 (1990) 249-268; H.J.W. Drijvers, 'The Image of Edessa in the Syriac Tradition', in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman*, ed. H.L. Kessler and G. Wolf (Bologna, 1998) 13-31.

⁷³ W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*; Gorgias Reprint Series 30 (Piscataway, NJ, 2002) 3:1082.

⁷⁴ A photographic reproduction of the manuscript can be found in E.N. Meshcherskaia, *Легенда об Авгаре: раннесирийский литературный памятник* (Moscow, 1984).

⁷⁵ M. van Esbroeck, 'Le manuscrit syriaque Nouvelle Série 4 de Leningrad (V^e siècle)', in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont. Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux*, ed. P. Cramer; Cahiers d'Orientalisme 20 (Genève, 1988) 211.

⁷⁶ One of the exceptions is a fragment of the legend found at Sinai. The other is fifth-century London BL Add. 14,644, which begins with an imperfect copy of the *Doctrina Addai*. Based on its similarity to Leningrad Syr. 4, it probably once had a full copy of the *Doctrina*, in which case this would no longer be an exception to the rule since the Judah Kyriakos legend would indeed follow the Protonike legend.

cases, the Judah Kyriakos version is called the ‘second’ discovery of the cross, so it still assumes the existence of the Protonike legend.⁷⁷ More frequently, especially in later manuscripts, the Protonike legend circulated independently of the *Doctrina Addai*, when it is almost always in the company of the Judah Kyriakos version.⁷⁸

Sometime prior to the ninth century, these two legends began to circulate as a sort of ‘diptych’. John of Dara’s (d. 860 CE) *Homily on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross* is an important witness to this development. John ends his homily with a summary of Protonike’s discovery of the cross and an allusion to Helena’s discovery.⁷⁹ He attributes the Protonike story to the apostle Addai. John’s sermon is the earliest extant text in which the Protonike legend is separated from the *Doctrina Addai*, and it is noteworthy that he carefully indicates its provenance. John is also the first witness to the use of a transitional piece, a narrative ‘hinge’ for the diptych. An anonymous interlocutor asks, ‘[H]ow did the Jews take the wood of the cross back and dig and deepen and bury it in the ground whence Helena brought it back up?’⁸⁰ The questioner simply assumes that the Jews are at fault, but inquires how and when this occurred. John explains that during Trajan’s reign, the emperor encouraged persecution against the Christians, and the Jews tortured the bishop Simon son of Cleopas, took the cross from him, and buried it. It remained buried until it was found by Helena. With that, John ends his homily. His later contemporary Moshe bar Kepha also recounts these stories in chapters 20-22 of his *Questions on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross*.⁸¹ Following John’s lead, bar Kepha tells the Protonike legend (also attributing it to

⁷⁷ London BL Add. 14,644.

⁷⁸ In one collection of hagiographies, Protonike’s discovery of the cross is grouped with tales about other holy women, and not with the Judah Kyriakos legend. The manuscript is Paris Syriac 234. See H. Zotenburg, *Manuscrits orientaux. Catalogues des manuscrits syriaques et sabéens (mandaites) de la Bibliothèque nationale* (Paris, 1874) 184; see also Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 47.

⁷⁹ The allusion is too brief to mention Judah Kyriakos, but since the Helena legend with Macarius as the key assistant is otherwise unattested in Syriac literature up to this point, John almost certainly refers to the Judah Kyriakos version.

⁸⁰ John of Dara, *On the Cross* 11.6.

⁸¹ These chapters are edited and translated by F. Nau, ‘Sur la fête de la croix’, 229-246.

Addai), the narrative ‘hinge’, and the full Judah Kyriakos legend. These two ninth-century texts are important witnesses to developments in the transmission of the legends: they are about three hundred years younger than the earliest manuscripts containing the *Doctrina Addai* plus the ‘second’ discovery of Judah Kyriakos and about three hundred years older than the first hagiographical collections that contain the Protonike-Judah Kyriakos diptych. Sometime between the sixth and ninth centuries, the Protonike-Judah Kyriakos diptych became the preferred method of transmission, and, to answer the questions that such an arrangement would presage, a story accounting for the loss of the cross was added to transition smoothly between the two.⁸² Paulinus’ early account of the Helena legend, with his preoccupation with how and why the cross had been lost, indicates that there was already a hunger to resolve such questions. As the next chapter will show, some sixth-century Syriac writers, both East and West, believed that the Jews had tried to destroy the cross and buried it. When the two discoveries of the cross began to circulate together as a diptych, there was more pressure to find a concrete, historicised answer to these burning questions.

The rest of the manuscripts, bar one,⁸³ contain this diptych with the transition piece. These are all hagiographical collections, two from the twelfth century and five from the modern period (all copied between 1869-1934). One should note that Desreumaux’s description of the five manuscripts containing three accounts of the invention of the cross is misleading.⁸⁴ Desreumaux says that the three accounts are the discoveries of Protonike, *Helena*, and Judah Kyriakos, but he seems to have inferred this from Chabot’s more elusive comment that the Paris manuscripts contain three inventions of the cross.⁸⁵ It is far more

⁸² This transition story itself is probably inspired by other contemporary apocryphal tales. For example, it may have some relationship to the *Transitus Mariae* tradition (J.W. Drijvers, ‘The Protonike Legend, the *Doctrina Addai* and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa’, *VC* 51 (1997) 315 n. 63).

⁸³ Paris Syriac manuscript 234, of the 12th or 13th century, contains the Protonike legend without Judah Kyriakos in a group of hagiographies about holy women.

⁸⁴ A. Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 47-48.

⁸⁵ Chabot describes the fifteenth item in the manuscript, ‘Histoires de la première (fol. 290 a), de la seconde (fol. 296 a) et de la troisième (fol. 300 a) Invention de la Croix.’ He gives no further comment on the character of these inventions. J.-B. Chabot, ‘Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale

likely that Chabot's three 'inventions' are in fact Protonike, the transitional story, and Judah Kyriakos, as is the case in the other three manuscripts Desmeureaux cites here.⁸⁶

3.2. The Origins of the Protonike Legend

The Protonike legend is unique to the Syriac tradition, apart from later translations into Armenian.⁸⁷ It is clearly based on a variation of the Helena legend, but otherwise its precise origins are debated. There are three main theories about how the Protonike legend developed. M. van Esbroeck argued that Bishop John II of Jerusalem invented the trilogy of the Protonike legend, the Judah Kyriakos legend, and the martyrdom of Judah Kyriakos,⁸⁸ but S. Heid and J.W. Drijvers have highlighted the problems with this theory.⁸⁹ One major problem with van Esbroeck's theory is that there is no evidence for the Protonike legend amongst Greek-speaking communities of Jerusalem,⁹⁰ as it existed only in Syriac (and later Armenian). Whilst the Judah Kyriakos legend certainly seems to be transmitted as a pair with his martyrdom, it is less obvious that it was written to be read alongside the Protonike legend, which invariably accompanies the *Doctrina Addai* in the earliest manuscript witnesses. Van Esbroeck reads too much into the description of the Judah Kyriakos version

acquis depuis 1874', *Journal asiatique* IX, 8 (1896) 258. His remarks on Paris Syriac manuscript 326 are identical (p. 274). Referring to the legends by these names is a more recent development, first suggested by J. Straubinger in 1912.

⁸⁶ See Appendix A for more in-depth discussion.

⁸⁷ For recent studies on the reception of the *Doctrina Addai* in Armenian, see A. Drost-Abgarjan, 'Zur Rezeption der Abgar-Legende in Armenien', in *Edessa in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit: Religion, Kultur und Politik zwischen Ost und West*, ed. L. Greisiger, C. Rammelt, and J. Tubach (Würzburg, 2009) 69-74; and B. Outtier, 'Une forme enrichie de la Légende d'Abgar en arménien', in *Apocryphes arméniens: transmission – traduction – création – iconographie*, ed. V. Calzolari Bouvier, J.-D. Kaestli, and B. Outtier (Lausanne, 1999) 129-145.

⁸⁸ M. van Esbroeck, 'Jean II de Jérusalem', and *idem.*, 'L'opuscule *Sur la Croix* d'Alexandre de Chypre' (see n. 43 above). The account of the martyrdom follows the Judah Kyriakos legend in Leningrad 4 and London BL Add. 14,644, both from the sixth century. The two are literarily linked by a prediction of Kyriakos' future martyrdom in the discovery narrative.

⁸⁹ S. Heid, 'Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende', 75-77. Heid argues that if John II had invented the trilogy, he would have told the whole thing to Melania the Elder when he gave her a piece of the cross, and she in turn would have told Paulinus. One would then expect Paulinus to at least mention a 'first' discovery or a person called Judah Kyriakos. The Protonike legend does not seem to be known in Jerusalem before 399 CE.

⁹⁰ S. Heid, 'Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende', 75-6.

as the ‘second’ discovery; this is too thin a string to carry the weight of his argument.⁹¹ Van Esbroeck also argues that the ‘trilogy’ represents the interests of a Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, but there is no evidence for the existence of such a community separate from the wider Jerusalem church for this time period.⁹²

A second, more plausible theory is that the Protonike legend once circulated as an independent text which a redactor later incorporated into the final version of the *Doctrina Addai*. The redactor of the *Doctrina Addai* does indeed create a coherent theological document from a number of apocryphal materials current at the time: the portrait of Jesus, Abgar’s correspondence with Tiberias,⁹³ the testimony of Ursinus, the *Didascalia of Addai*, the *Doctrine of Simon Peter in the City of Rome*, not to mention many other traditions.⁹⁴ Given the author’s penchant for incorporating oral and written traditions into the *Doctrina*, it would be no surprise if the Protonike legend itself were originally an independent narrative.

The third theory is that the Protonike legend originated as a part of the *Doctrina Addai* and was only later removed and circulated alongside the Judah Kyriakos version. The manuscript tradition as outlined above lends weight to this suggestion, since in the earliest manuscripts the Protonike legend only circulated within or alongside the *Doctrina Addai*.⁹⁵ This suspicion is made somewhat firmer by the testimony of John of Dara and Moshe bar

⁹¹ Rather than an original feature of the legend, the ‘second discovery’ could be a descriptive title invented by a scribe who had recently copied the *Doctrina Addai* into the same manuscript. Van Esbroeck does call attention to the similarity between the Judah Kyriakos legend and martyrdom and John II’s promotion of the relics of St Stephen (‘Jean II de Jérusalem’, 100). It is possible that the Judah Kyriakos legend and martyrdom emerge from a similar milieu as the invention of St Stephen’s relic, but it is much more difficult to argue the same for the Protonike version.

⁹² Drijvers and Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross*, 19.

⁹³ First attested in Greek by Eusebius, *Church History* 1.13. Egeria mentions taking a copy away when she visited Edessa because it was more amplified than the one her community had access to at home (*It. Eg.* 19.8-19). The author of the *Doctrina Addai*, ‘Labubna’, claims that he is a scribe of King Abgar who has written this account to deposit it in Edessa’s royal archives (Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 117).

⁹⁴ Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 23.

⁹⁵ This evidence is not overwhelming, however, as there are only two such manuscripts still extant.

Kepha in the ninth century. When they recount the Protonike legend, they both credit Addai as the author. Either they primarily knew the Protonike legend as a part of the *Doctrina Addai* (and not independently), or their sources did. Even later, Berlin Sachau 222, copied in 1888, credits Addai at the end of the Protonike legend. The internal evidence also suggests that the Protonike legend originated as a part of the *Doctrina Addai*, as many small details found in the Protonike legend are paralleled elsewhere in the *Doctrina*, such as an interest in Simon Peter's activities in Rome, the Spanish campaign during the reign of Emperor Claudius,⁹⁶ the intention to punish the Jews for crucifying Jesus, similar Christological statements, and the church building activities of Protonike and Abgar.⁹⁷ More substantial interests of the *Doctrina* and the Protonike legend are also held in common. For example, there is a pervasive focus on the miraculous signs that accompany apostolic preaching, leading to the conversion of those who believe and the shame of opponents.⁹⁸ This is not, of course, to deny that the redactor of the *Doctrina Addai* is using a written source for the Protonike legend, but that source is most likely some version of the Helena legend itself, which has been altered to fit the first-century circumstances of the *Doctrina*.⁹⁹ This view makes sense of the internal and external evidence, and, whilst treating the Protonike legend as a new creation, it also accounts for the use of pre-existing materials to create the legend.

When was this grand, final redaction of the *Doctrina Addai* completed? The earliest manuscript witnesses of the late fifth or early sixth century set an obvious *terminus ante quem*. J.W. Drijvers has argued that Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (r. 411/2-435/6 CE) was

⁹⁶ This anachronism is mentioned twice in the *Doctrina Addai*. See Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 66 n. 48.

⁹⁷ Limited space allows only an impression of the commonalities here. For a more in-depth analysis see Heid, 'Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende', 88-9, and J.W. Drijvers, 'The Protonike Legend', 302-5.

⁹⁸ Heid, 'Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende', 85-87.

⁹⁹ Heid, 'Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende', 84. The redactor also refers to other sources current in the fifth century in the Protonike section, such as the *Acts of Peter and Paul* or the *Doctrine of Simon Peter in the City of Rome*, and the *Transitus Mariae*. See Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 66 n. 49 and 67 n. 52, and J.W. Drijvers, 'The Protonike Legend', 315 n. 63.

personally responsible for the final redaction of the *Doctrina Addai*, and, in particular, that he initiated the incorporation of the Protonike legend, which was specially created for this purpose. Drijvers alleges that Rabbula's actions were motivated by his reported love of Jerusalem, reverence for the cross, antagonism towards the Jews, and, most importantly, his desire to connect Edessa with the Church of the Empire and the imperial house.¹⁰⁰ J.W. Drijvers' father, H.J.W. Drijvers, citing his son's study, asserts, 'The final version of the *Doctrina Addai* probably is due to bishop Rabbula.'¹⁰¹ Building on the suggestions of the elder and younger Drijvers, Sidney Griffith makes a far stronger case for the *Doctrina Addai* as originating in Edessa during the episcopacy of Rabbula, although he does not attribute it directly to the bishop. Specifically, Griffith bases his conclusion on the major themes that arise in the *Doctrina* – interest in Roman-Jerusalem connections, the apostolic tradition, the adversaries, the soft Miaphysite Christology, and the moral imperative to renounce wealth – and argues that such a constellation of themes fits best in the context of Rabbula's Edessa.¹⁰² However, Griffith also points out that the author of the *Doctrina* mentions positively the early Christians of Edessa reading from the Diatessaron,¹⁰³ a practice that Rabbula was eager to stamp out.¹⁰⁴ It is doubtful that Rabbula himself was the final redactor of a document that takes such a stance.¹⁰⁵

3.3. The Origins of the Judah Kyriakos Legend

Although the fully-formed version of the Judah Kyriakos legend is the product of many years' development, it contains features that are also attested in the earliest written

¹⁰⁰ J.W. Drijvers, 'The Protonike Legend', 307-9.

¹⁰¹ H.J.W. Drijvers, 'The Image of Edessa in the Syriac Tradition', 15-16.

¹⁰² Griffith, 'The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm', 280-92.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁰⁴ On Rabbula's suppression of the Diatessaron, see A. Vööbus, *Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac* (Louvain, 1951) 61-71; M. Black, 'Rabbula of Edessa and the Peshitta', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 33 (1951) 203-10.

¹⁰⁵ See also J.-N. Saint-Laurent, 'Apostolic Memories: Religious Differentiation and the Construction of Orthodoxy in Syriac Missionary Literature' (PhD diss., Brown University, 2009) 82 n. 35.

accounts of the discovery of the cross but not found in the Helena legend of the church historians. One observes the prevalence of anti-Jewish polemic throughout, reminiscent of Ambrose and Paulinus' accounts. Paulinus reports that Helena had consulted with knowledgeable local people, both Jews and Christians,¹⁰⁶ but in the Judah Kyriakos legend she interrogates only the Jews, gradually applying pressure on the most informed ones. As in Paulinus' account, the True Cross is identified by the miraculous resuscitation of a dead man. Ambrose's version includes a defiant speech by Helena rebuking Satan's efforts to hide the cross, whereas here Judah rebukes Satan in response to Satan's lament of being defeated and his promise of revenge. Like Ambrose's account, the discovery of the nails and their use in the emperor's bridle is a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy. As in Rufinus' account, Helena builds a church at Golgotha, deposits the cross in a silver reliquary, and performs charitable acts. The Judah Kyriakos version could plausibly emerge from the same Jerusalemite circles which produced these versions of the Helena legend.¹⁰⁷

The earliest external witness to the legend's existence is found in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1, written in ca. 450 CE. Sozomen repeats the account of Helena's discovery as the other ecclesiastical historians did, but he also signals his awareness of another version of the story. In the first place, he insists that Helena found the location through divinely inspired visions, rather than it being disclosed by 'a Hebrew man amongst those dwelling in the East... from some ancestral document'.¹⁰⁸ Sozomen explains his reasoning: 'It is closer to the truth to think that God made known (the location) through signs and dreams. For I do not think that divine matters require human information when it is

¹⁰⁶ *Letter 31 5*.

¹⁰⁷ It is in this respect that M. van Esbroeck's suggestions about a connection to John II make the most sense. One need not agree with his propositions about a Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem at the time to see similarities between the Judah Kyriakos stories and other hagiographies emerging from this setting.

¹⁰⁸ This quotation and the next one are my own translation. For the Greek edition, see *Sozomenus Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J. Bidez; *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte*; N.F., Bd. 4 (Berlin, 1995).

fitting to God (that) these things be made manifest.’ However, Sozomen approves of other elements that appear in the Judah Kyriakos legend. When he reports that the True Cross restored a dying woman to health, Sozomen mentions that some say that the cross also restored a dead person to life. Finally, with the Kyriakos version, he asserts that the discovery of the nails fulfilled the prophecy in Zechariah 14.20. He is the first Greek historian to include this detail.¹⁰⁹ Whilst both of the details that Sozomen accepts, the resurrection of a dead man and the fulfillment of prophecy, can be found in Paulinus and Ambrose respectively, it seems more likely that he is engaging with the Judah Kyriakos version which was rapidly gaining currency at the time. Sozomen does not reject the legend outright,¹¹⁰ but he selectively approves of the parts that he finds ‘more accordant with the truth’, namely, those that are not derived from mere human information but from divine manifestation. In contrast to Sozomen’s considered approach to the Judah Kyriakos legend, Severus of Antioch emphatically rejects the ‘blasphemous’ story and anathematizes its creator on the grounds of gross historical inaccuracy.¹¹¹

Mar Severus’ bitter denunciation came too late: the Judah Kyriakos version was firmly entrenched. The Judah Kyriakos legend became the favourite of the Latin West and the Byzantine East in the Middle Ages, and it was known in many vernacular versions,¹¹² most particularly Latin, Greek, and Syriac. Whilst the language of origin is probably Greek, especially if it originated in Jerusalem,¹¹³ the oldest witnesses are Syriac manuscripts of the late fifth or early sixth century, Leningrad Syriac 4 and London BL Add. 14,644.¹¹⁴ Amongst

¹⁰⁹ The only other witness to this tradition up to this point is Ambrose. J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 105.

¹¹⁰ Contra J.W. Drijvers, ‘Helena Augusta, the Cross, and the Myth’, 167, who concludes that Sozomen rejects the Judah Kyriakos legend entirely.

¹¹¹ See M. van Esbroeck, ‘Une note de Sévère d’Antioche sur Juda Cyriaque’, in *V Symposium Syriacum, 1988: Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 29-31 août 1988*, ed. R. Lavenant; OCA 236 (Roma, 1990) 183-93.

¹¹² See Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*, 194 n. 33.

¹¹³ *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. Drijvers and Drijvers, 25.

¹¹⁴ The oldest Latin manuscript is dated to the sixth or seventh century, and the oldest Greek manuscript is from the eighth or ninth century. *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. Drijvers and Drijvers,

all Syriac-speaking communities, the Judah Kyriakos legend was *the* legend of how the cross was found (for the second time).¹¹⁵ In the sixth century, the Judah Kyriakos legend began to appear in Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross, a subject that will be discussed in the next chapter.

4. Conclusion: The Influence of Protonike and Judah Kyriakos in Syriac

Whether told as a ‘diptych’ of discoveries of the cross or as separate narratives, with the Protonike legend forming a part of the *Doctrina Addai*, the legends of the discovery of the cross left a substantial mark on the Syriac tradition. Both narratives affected celebrations of the Feast of the Cross, as well as the theology of the cross that accumulated around the feast day. The next chapter will explore these themes in more depth for the period before the Arab Conquest. Before moving on, I will conclude this chapter by remarking on the most significant contribution of the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos legends for the development of the feast day: marked religious antagonism towards the Jews.

As in the narratives of Ambrose and Paulinus, both of these legends emphasise the conflict between the Christian community and the Jews. In the Protonike legend, the apostle James complains that the Jews have retained control over the holy places and the cross, which they prevent the Christians from visiting, and they also hinder the preaching of the gospel. Protonike summons the leaders of the Jews and demands that they hand these things

29-30. Despite the comparatively later date of the extant Greek manuscripts, the legend probably originated in that language. *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹⁵ However, the earliest East Syrian mention of Protonike that I have come across is Elias II ibn al-Mulqi’s (d. 1131): *Élie II († 1131) Kitāb Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. P. Gianmaria Gianazza; 2ème partie; Patrimoine arabe chrétien 18 (Beyrouth, 2005) 304-5 (ⲛⲥⲓⲟ). This raises questions for me about how early this legend was received by the Church of the East. I am indebted to my colleague Salam Rassi for pointing me to Elias II ibn al-Mulqi’s work. It is commonly asserted that Leningrad Syriac 4 may be of East Syrian provenance because the end of the Judah Kyriakos legend calls Mary the ‘mother of Christ’ whereas London BL Add. 14,644 in the same place calls her the ‘mother of God’. However, Leningrad Syriac 4 is also the base text used by the modern editions of the *Doctrina Addai*, and the *Doctrina* has widely been considered a Miaphysite text. It is a conundrum.

over to the Christians, and they have no choice but to do so. When her daughter dies suddenly, Protonike fears that the Jews and pagans alike will mock her conversion to a faith different from her ancestral religion. When, however, the cross heals her daughter, the narrator gleefully reports, ‘Then the crowd of Jews and pagans who had been happy at the beginning of this affair... became very sad at the end of it. They would have been pleased if this which they had seen had not happened, for because of it many believed in the Messiah.’¹¹⁶ Finally, when Protonike returns to Rome and reports these events to Claudius, he expels the Jews from Jerusalem.

In the Judah Kyriakos legend, the encounter between Helena and the Jews is even more developed and antagonistic. Helena arrives in the city and gathers a large crowd of the inhabitants of the city and its surroundings. The legend reports that there were no more than 3,000 Jews there because Jerusalem had been ‘almost laid waste’ in that time, probably a reference to the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE.¹¹⁷ Helena confronts the Jews for their rejection of the Messiah, an action which has brought down on them the curses of the Law. As she narrows the pool down to the most well-informed, she takes advantage of each meeting to reprove the Jews for their lack of understanding. When Judah comes forward, he reveals that his relatives, amongst whom is the proto-martyr Stephen, had given him careful instructions if someone should come looking for the cross. The Jews ask him not to reveal the cross to Helena if he knows where it is, but when Helena puts further pressure on them, they hand Judah over to her. Judah’s discovery of the cross results in his conversion to Christianity, and he praises God for delivering him from the ‘ignorance of the Jews’, changing his name from ‘Judah’ to ‘Kyriakos’. Even as Helena’s action results in the

¹¹⁶ *The Teaching of Addai*, G. Howard (tr.), 32-33.

¹¹⁷ *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. Drijvers and Drijvers, 57 n. 6.

increase of faith in Christ in the vicinity of Jerusalem, she also instigates a persecution against the Jews, driving them from Judea.

The pervasive anti-Judaism in these two narratives made an impression on later celebrations of the Feast of the Cross in Syriac-speaking communities. Nearly every homily, hymn, and liturgy for the feast day features anti-Jewish sentiment, dwarfing the anti-pagan sentiment that is also occasionally present. The Feast of the Cross was an occasion for polemic and apologetic against the religious opponents of the day, from the time of its inception in the context of the Encaenia and as expressed in the emerging legends of Helena's discovery. In every age, the Syriac writers were sensitive to religious competition with Jews.

Chapter 3: The Feast of the Cross in Syriac before the Arab Conquest

1. Introduction

As I discussed in the first chapter, the Feast of the Cross originated in the fourth century, commemorating the discovery of the relic of the cross on the second day of the octave of the Encaenia in Jerusalem. Initially, the Feast of the Cross may have had no connection to the legends of Helena's discovery of the True Cross. However, as the popularity of the legend grew rapidly, it naturally found its home in the pre-existing Feast of the Discovery of the Cross. At some point, the Feast of the Cross became more than a local feast celebrated in Jerusalem. One wonders how it was received and celebrated in new places, removed from the evocative surroundings of the Holy City.

Unfortunately, no early accounts for the development of the Feast of the Cross are extant. When asked about it by his friend John of Liṭarba, even the renowned seventh-century West Syrian scholar Jacob of Edessa could not find any clear indications in the patristic sources at his disposal of how and when the feast began.¹ The service probably featured an elevation of the cross, as on Great Friday, but beyond this it is difficult to tell.² The best sources for the feast day in Syriac prior to the Arab conquest are liturgical homilies of the fifth and sixth centuries.³ Whilst they do not offer details about the liturgy,⁴ these

¹ The unpublished letter is preserved in a ninth-century manuscript, BL Add. 12,172, and Jacob's response to this question is on f. 85b. For a description of the manuscript, see W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 2:592-605. In this letter, Jacob laments the limited number of patristic sources that discuss the matter; he can find nothing more than Socrates' account of the discovery of the cross by Helena. He still insists that the antiquity of this tradition of the church makes it worthy of continued celebration.

² *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, ed. A. Renoux, 1:224-5. See also *DACL*, s.v. 'Croix', 3.2:3137-8.

³ This is generally true for the whole liturgical year. F. Cassingena-Trévedy, 'L'organisation du cycle annuel', in *Les liturgies syriaques*, ed. I. Jurasz and F. Cassingena-Trévedy (Paris, 2006) 22-3.

⁴ One can find liturgies for the Feast of the Cross in the *Fenqitho* and the *Ḥudrā*. Due to space limitations, an exploration of these liturgical texts must wait for a later study. See *Ma'de'dono. The Book of Church Festivals according to the Ancient Rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch*, ed. Athanasius Yeshue Samuel and tr. Murad Saliba Barsom (Ludi, NJ, 1984) 366-89; *Ktāba da-qdām wad-bātar: wad-ḥudrā wad-kaškul wad-gazā w-qālā d-'udrāne 'am ktābā d-mazmūre* (Trichur, 1962) 3: ܩܕܡܐ ܘܕܒܝܬܐ [689-724].

homilies give a wealth of information about the theological significance of the Feast of the Cross in the Syriac churches prior to the rise of Islam. This chapter introduces the extant Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross before the Arab Conquest. It discusses the broad theological themes of the sermons, linking them to other sources where possible.

2. Introduction to the Festal Homilies

There are five homilies for the Feast of the Cross extant in Syriac before the Arab Conquest. One is a translation of a Greek homily falsely attributed to John Chrysostom.⁵ Its theological contents require one to date it after the Christological controversies of the fifth century, and it circulated with a collection of homilies by fathers of the West Syrian tradition.⁶ The homily begins with a lengthy introductory section that includes warm praise for the good character of the audience, followed by an invitation to listen to the important teaching to follow. The second part of the homily is primarily concerned with appropriate Trinitarian theology and Christology. Next is a long list of statements praising the manifold benefits of the cross. Finally, the author offers expository remarks about the Fall of Adam and Eve. The homily ends with a doxology. It is difficult to identify which Christian community produced this text. The homily conscientiously clarifies that Christ's divine and human natures are distinct but must be spoken of together. The homily therefore has a decidedly 'anti-Nestorian' tone, but its Christology is otherwise too ambiguous to identify as Miaphysite or Chalcedonian. This sermon had no discernible influence on later Syriac

⁵ For the Syriac text and translation, see G.M. Browne, 'Ps.-Chrysostom, In Venerabilem Crucem Sermo: The Syriac Version', *LM* 99 (1986) 39-59. Browne also published a retroversion of the underlying Greek text: 'Ps.-Chrysostom, In Venerabilem Crucem Sermo: The Greek Vorlage of the Syriac Version', *LM* 103 (1990) 125-38, in support of his other work on the versions of the sermon, *Chrysostomus Nubianus: An Old Version of Ps.-Chrysostom, In Venerabilem Crucem Sermo* (Roma, 1984).

⁶ See E. Sachau, *Königliche Bibliothek, Berlin. Kurzes Verzeichniss Der Sachau'schen Sammlung syrischer Handschriften* (Berlin, 1885) 113-21.

homilies, but since it may testify to early theological understandings of the Feast of the Cross, it is included here.

2.1. The West Syrian Homilies

Prior to the Arab conquest, the West Syrian tradition has preserved only one homily for the Feast of the Cross originally written in Syriac: Jacob of Serugh's *memra On Queen Helena and the Discovery of the Glorious and Saving Cross*. This *memra* has not yet been edited or published in a modern edition.⁷ The attribution to Jacob of Serugh is so far unquestioned, and its rendition of the legend fits his style well. Jacob of Serugh's *memra* recounts Constantine's vision of the cross of light and Helena's discovery of the True Cross with the aid of Judah Kyriakos.⁸ Jacob's unpublished *memra* is short in comparison to many of his other works, but he proves the consummate storyteller, drawing the audience in by his whimsical adaptation of the oft-repeated tale. In the only modern study to touch on this *memra*, Sebastian Brock has explored how Jacob's version of the discovery shows similarities to the sixth-century manuscripts containing the tale as well as to two poems in the East Syriac *Hudra*, likely dating from around the seventh or eighth century.⁹ Jacob of Serugh and the East Syrian *Hudra* share a common source of inspiration.¹⁰

The only other West Syrian homily for the Feast of the Cross prior to the Arab Conquest is a Syriac translation of Severus of Antioch's Cathedral Homily 31, entitled 'On

⁷ For the MSS, see A. Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmrē-Dichtung des Ja'qōb von Serūg* (Louvain, 1973) 2:218. However, see also M. Kohlbacher's critique of Vööbus, 'Die Taufe Kaiser Konstantins und ihr geheimer Held. Anmerkungen zu einem des Jakob von Batnan in Sarug (BHO 1070. 1072 [syr.]/1071 [arab.])', in *Syriaca: zur Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie, und Gegenwartsfrage der syrischen Kirchen. 2. Deutsches Syrologen-Symposium (Juli 2000, Wittenberg)*, ed. M. Tamcke (Münster, 2002) 72-5. I am grateful to the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library for allowing me to access a digital copy of MS 130 from the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin.

⁸ Jacob's version is similar to the one in Leningrad Syriac MS 4 as both add Constantine's vision of the cross of light to the Judah Kyriakos cycle.

⁹ S.P. Brock, 'Two Syriac Poems on the Invention of the Cross', 55-82.

¹⁰ For other connections between Jacob and the East Syrian offices, see S.P. Brock, 'An Extract from Jacob of Serugh in the East Syrian *Hudra*', *OCP* 55 (1989) 339-43.

the Dedication of the Holy Cross and on the Anniversary of an Earthquake That Had Taken Place' (*On the Dedication of the Cross*), which Severus delivered in Greek on 14 September 513.¹¹ Of Severus' Greek corpus little survives, but many of his writings are preserved in Syriac. His Cathedral Homilies are preserved in two Syriac translations: one completed by an anonymous translator before the mid-sixth century¹² and Jacob of Edessa's revision of the earlier translation, finished at the turn of the eighth century.¹³ Severus' homily is just what the title implies: roughly the first half contains common themes of the feast day, whilst the second half is a moving account of the devastating earthquake that struck Antioch fifty-five years earlier on the Feast of the Cross. Severus uses the anniversary of the earthquake as a ripe opportunity to urge the populace to repentance and to speak against the temptation of heresy. As I shall discuss below, Severus' homily never alludes to the legend of Helena's discovery of the cross,¹⁴ and it focuses on a theological interpretation of the feast day.

2.2. The East Syrian Homilies

From the East Syrian tradition, two homilies remain intact. Narsai's thirtieth homily is entitled 'On the Feast of the Discovery of the Holy Cross'.¹⁵ Narsai does not settle for a simple retelling of the legend. His *memra* elaborates the grand arc of the divine economy using key New Testament passages, types of the cross from nature and the Old Testament,

¹¹ Edition with French translation: *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, ed. and tr. M. Brière and F. Graffin; PO 36 (Paris, 1974), 640-65.

¹² Some have suggested that the translator was Paul of Callinicus, who translated some of Jacob's other works, eg., Graffin in his preface to the published edition (PO 36, 539), and more recently D. King, 'Paul of Callinicum and His Place in Syriac Literature', *LM* 120 (2007) 330. However, L. van Rompay rightly observes that the translator of the Cathedral Homilies is never named in the manuscripts or by Jacob of Edessa, who refers to the translators as 'they'. L. van Rompay, 'Jacob of Edessa and the Sixth-century Syriac Translator of Severus of Antioch's Cathedral Homilies', in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, ed. R.B. ter Haar Romeny (Leiden, 2008) 190-1.

¹³ The *Patrologia Orientalis* volumes are based on Jacob of Edessa's revision and form the basis for most modern studies of the text since Jacob corrected the Syriac to correspond more closely to the Greek.

¹⁴ One is tempted to suppose that Severus' sharp criticism of the Judah Kyriakos version influenced his choice here (see van Esbroeck, 'Une note de Sévère d'Antioche sur Juda Cyriaque', 183-93), but then again, the festal homily would seem a great opportunity to set the record straight.

¹⁵ *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*, ed. A. Mingana (Mosul, 1905) 114-30.

the tales of Constantine and Helena, and polemical arguments against other religions. The *memra* is only published in Syriac, and the only modern study of it focuses primarily on Narsai's Christology.¹⁶ It is a rich source for the East Syrian understanding of the feast day, and it has intriguing parallels with later West Syrian texts.

The second East Syrian text is a festal homily by an otherwise unknown David Eskolaya, which has been transmitted with a collection of Narsai's homilies.¹⁷ All that is known of this figure is in the title to the homily: David was a teacher of the school in the village of Kefar 'Ezzā,¹⁸ who was considered 'a great luminary'.¹⁹ His *memra* contains many traditional elements, such as Old Testament types of the cross and the vision of Constantine, but it shows far more concern for religious polemic than does Narsai's. The *memra* gives no hint as to the historical setting in which it was written. It makes no reference to Islam and seems particularly concerned to refute Miaphysite interpretations of the crucifixion. It is written in verse, but does not contain the literary devices, such as rhyme, that became popular in the medieval period. Consequently, I will treat this homily alongside other pre-Arab Conquest homilies, although one cannot be entirely sure that his homily pre-dates the rise of Islam.

At one time the East Syrian collection of the *Causes of the Feasts*²⁰ included a *Cause of the Feast of the Finding of the Cross* written by Ḥenana of Adiabene (d. ca. 610). Like many other works by this controversial head of the school of Nisibis, this treatise is now

¹⁶ L. Abramowski, 'Narsai (ca. 415?-502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114-130: "Unser König Jesus", der "gekreuzigte Mann"', in *Patristica et Oecumenica. Festschrift für Wolfgang A. Beinert zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. P. Gemeinhardt and U. Kühneweg (Marburg, 2004) 157-66.

¹⁷ Published in *Homilies of Mar Narsai Published by the Patriarchal Press* (San Francisco, 1970) 1.2: 598-613.

¹⁸ This village and its nearby monastery were near Erbil, between the city and the Lesser Zab. For more on Kefar 'Ezzā, see J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne* (Beirut, 1965-8) 1:174-6.

¹⁹ A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur: mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn, 1922) 197.

²⁰ *Idem.*, 'Die nestorianischen Schriften "De causis festorum"', *OC* 1 (1901) 320-42.

lost.²¹ There is, however, a ‘Cause of the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross’ written by the Syrian Orthodox scholar and bishop Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903), who apparently adapted some of the East Syrian cause literature for his own community.²² Most of bar Kepha’s work is derivative of earlier writers, but, if he did alter a ‘Cause of the Feast of the Cross’, it is impossible to tell whether and to what degree he modified it. Bar Kepha’s text will be discussed in chapter seven, but it is worth mentioning its possible relation to the pre-Islamic East Syrian texts here.

3. Key Themes in Syriac Homilies before the Arab Conquest

It is clear from the descriptions of the homilies given above that their contents and aims varied widely. Nevertheless, comparison of these sermons reveals that there are certain themes which arise repeatedly regardless of the author’s theological perspective or aims. No single homily features all of the themes outlined here, but the coincidence of concerns suggests that by the sixth century the Feast of the Cross had acquired certain traditional interpretations that a homilist could manipulate to his own ends. This section will examine four key themes that recur in these homilies: the legends of Constantine and Helena, religious apologetic and polemic, biblical exegesis, and the reversal of shame and honour. Finally, this section will explore Narsai’s defence of the veneration of the cross against charges of idolatry, a theme that is not present in any other homilies for the feast day before the Arab conquest but which becomes critical after the rise of Islam.

²¹ Two of Henana’s *‘Ellata* are still extant. *Traité d’Issai le docteur et de Hnana d’Adiabène sur les martyrs, le vendredi d’or et les rogations, suivis de la confession de foi à réciter par les évêques avant l’ordination*, ed. and tr. Addai Scher (Paris, 1911).

²² J.F. Coakley, ‘The Explanations of the Feasts of Moše Bar Kepha’, in *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen – Oosterhesselen 10-12 September)*, ed. H.J.W. Drijvers, et. al.; OCA 229 (Roma, 1987) 403-10; *idem.*, ‘Mushe bar Kepha and a Lost Treatise of Henana on Palm Sunday’, *LM* 120 (2007) 301-25.


3.1. The Legends of Constantine and Helena

Of the five homilies consulted, only three mention the legends about Constantine's vision of the true cross and Helena's discovery of the relic. The homilies of Pseudo-Chrysostom and Severus of Antioch, both originally written in Greek, make no allusion to the vision or the discovery. The other three sermons include the discovery legend, but they cover rather different ground from one another. Jacob of Serugh recounts the entire cycle of legends, from Constantine's vision to Helena's discovery of the cross and the nails. Narsai allows only eight verses out of 294 for his brief account of the vision and discovery. As for David Eskolaya, his *memra* includes Constantine's vision of the cross but only alludes to its subsequent discovery. This section will discuss how each author uses the legendary material, comparing and contrasting their approaches.

3.1.1. Constantine's vision

Constantine's dramatic vision of the cross of light in the sky is the most popular account in these homilies. The authors of these three *memre* all highlight the way that the glory of the cross was made known in the heavens and then on the earth. Constantine's vision is a foreshadowing of the glory of the relic to be unearthed, which in turn foreshadows Christ's ultimate eschatological victory. Narsai's homily treats Constantine's vision and victory briefly, his emphasis always on Christ the King 'who by his cross made wars cease on every side' (v. 275).²³ Narsai begins abruptly, stating only that Constantine saw the sign²⁴ in the sky, blazing like the glory of the sun, but otherwise he shows no interest in what the sign looked like. Narsai's co-religionist David Eskolaya also begins with the sudden appearance of the cross to Constantine, but he elaborates on the way that the starry hosts

²³ References for Narsai's homily are to the verse numbers from my own translation. See Appendix B for corresponding pages in the Mingana edition.

²⁴ The usual word for the sign that Constantine saw and took into battle is . It is also used interchangeably with other terms for the sign of the cross in other contexts.

arranged themselves into a fiery cross in the sky, which he calls an ‘imperial letter of fire’, telling Constantine that he will conquer by this sign (v. 88).²⁵ David cannot hold back praise for the mute stars that were nonetheless preachers of the power of the cross (vv. 89-93). Jacob of Serugh tells the story at greater length (vv. 22-31).²⁶ His version includes Constantine, faced with an innumerable host waiting across the Danube,²⁷ praying humbly for divine assistance, repenting of his former idolatry, declaring his allegiance to the Crucified One, and asking for a sign. Constantine sees a vision of a man with a cross held aloft, telling him that he will conquer by this sign.

Each *memra* also recounts Constantine’s victory in battle. Narsai reports that Constantine carried the sign at the head of his troops and that his enemies fell down before him (v. 274). For Jacob of Serugh the battle was likewise without contest (vv. 32-7): Constantine urges his troops to worship the cross. He orders that all the bows, swords, and shields be collected because the cross is the only necessary weapon against the foe. They stand facing their adversaries, beating their weapons, as the blazing cross appears to both armies. The enemy flees. For his part, David Eskolaya only makes oblique references to Constantine’s victory in battle. He says that the vision ‘brought tidings of the power of his victory to the king who was wearied’ (v. 90). Apparently uninterested in the historical victory, David Eskolaya alludes to it only to remind his audience that the cross is a symbol of victory for everyone who believes (cf. v. 105).

²⁵ References for David Eskolaya are to the verse numbers from my own translation. See Appendix B for the corresponding pages in the Patriarchal Press edition.

²⁶ In Appendix B I have given the manuscript folios of MS 130 of the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin corresponding to my verse numbers.

²⁷ The account of Constantine’s vision in the Judah Kyriakos legend in Leningrad Syriac MS 4 also places the battle at the Danube rather than the Milvian Bridge (*The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers, 36 (text), 54 (translation)), as does the *Actus Silvestri*. See *ibid.*, 22 n. 45.

3.1.2. The burial of the cross

These three *memre* share another important feature: interest in how the cross had been buried. As discussed in the previous chapter, from at least the middle of the ninth century the legends of Protonike and Judah Kyriakos were circulating as a diptych, connected by a transition narrative about how the cross was lost. The homilies from before the Arab conquest do not report the loss of the cross during the reign of Trajan, so it seems that this tradition was a later development. All three Syriac homilies do, however, assume that the Jews had buried the cross. Narsai's comments are brief, referring to those who buried the cross as 'wicked people' and claiming that from the day that the cross had been covered over 'people journeyed as though in the darkness until it dawned' (v. 279). Jacob of Serugh begins his narrative with a dramatic mob scene in which the Jews attempt to burn the cross (vv. 11-9). Their action is compared to the cry of the crowd at the crucifixion, 'Crucify him!' Their intentions are foiled, however, by the power of the cross: its power chases them away when they try to construct the bonfire, and when they manage to set it alight, the wood of the cross refuses to burn and instead becomes 'like purified gold'. They finally dig a deep pit and bury it. Later when Constantine prays to be able to find the cross, it is revealed that the Jews have buried it at Golgotha in Jerusalem (v. 59). David Eskolaya also knows the tradition that the Jews buried the cross, but rather than dramatically describe the scene, he focuses on the motives of those who buried it (vv. 94-103). He suggests that a demon instructed them to destroy the cross in order that it would not be worshipped and instead would be forgotten. David imagines them kindling a fire but finding that the cross will not burn, and then they consider throwing it in the sea, but they are afraid that it will resurface again. In the end, they settle for burying it.

For none of the Syriac writers, however, was the concealment of the cross merely a devious plan of their religious opponents. It also happened in accordance with God's plan

to reveal the relic of the cross at the opportune time. For Narsai, the uncovering of the cross resulted in the spread of the gospel to the four corners of the world so that the darkness of idolatry vanished (v. 280). Jacob of Serugh states that, whilst the cross was in the ground for a long time, the Son of God was waiting to show a great wonder, for ‘the truth is accustomed to being patient with the headstrong’ (v. 18). In the fullness of time, Jacob envisions the earth bellowing, ‘Go up from me, O Cross, whose power fills me to bursting / and all the nations and hosts [of armies] will be subdued by you (v. 19)!’ After Constantine’s victory, a report goes out to all the nations that ‘there is no god like Constantine’s God’ (v. 39). Likewise, after Helena’s discovery of the cross, Jacob imagines Satan crying out in despair:

Woe, what shall I do then?
 My kingdom has been brought to naught and the Cross rules over
 created things.
 As long as it was in the earth and buried and hidden from humanity,
 Idols and images were worshipped in [all] places.
 Now that it has wished and revealed itself and shown its power,
 And all sacrifices and unrighteous ones have failed, it alone is
 victorious!²⁸

As Eusebius had understood Constantine’s vision and victory in terms of vanquishing idolatry, so the Syriac authors of these *memre* interpret the entire invention cycle as the triumph of Christianity over polytheism as well as Judaism.

3.1.3. The Helena legend

Both Narsai and Jacob of Serugh recount the story of the discovery of the cross. Narsai’s version is succinct: Helena seeks the wood of the cross, and when she goes to Jerusalem, its location is made known by a sweet fragrance wafting up from the ground, as it does in the Judah Kyriakos version.²⁹ For Narsai, the sweet fragrance is the confirming

²⁸ Vv. 122-5. Compare Satan’s interruption in the Judah Kyriakos version: *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers, 48-9 (text), 66-7 (translation).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-9 (text), 64-7 (translation).

sign that this is the True Cross, which is witnessed by the people of all nations who are gathered there (vv. 276-7). He makes no mention of other crosses or of the need to differentiate Christ's cross from the others, so there is no miraculous healing in his brief account. Narsai also reports that Helena built beautiful churches and kept the dominical feasts (v. 278).

Jacob of Serugh, on the other hand, tells the entire Judah Kyriakos legend with his characteristic artistic license. There are many small details that one could consider, but because space will not allow an itemized analysis, here I will focus on the most distinctive aspect of Jacob's narrative: his account of the conversions of Constantine and Judah.³⁰ Jacob constructs these two conversions so that they mirror each other. Both men find themselves in dire straits. Whereas the Judah Kyriakos legend just says that Constantine was 'very anxious and concerned' at the sight of the barbarian forces opposing him, Jacob's account emphasises Constantine's humility, great sorrow, and anxiety at the prospect of battle. Similarly, Judah expresses anxiety in the face of a potentially slow, agonising death. Both men pray and confess faith before receiving reassuring signs. These prayers are Jacob's most elaborate addition. Constantine prays,

O God, [who is] hidden and concealed [from those who] make requests of
you,
send your power and deliver me, my Lord, from this war.
Until now I have strayed after idols in vain,
and I have offered sacrifices to unclean demons, and I have not been
helped.
Therefore, henceforth I will worship you, O Crucified King.
Send me, my Lord, a sign of [your] mercies so that I may worship
it.³¹

As Constantine repents of idolatry and worships the 'Crucified King' before receiving the sign of the cross, so Judah confesses Christ and his fear to believe until now:

O Son of God, whose essence descended and put on a body

³⁰ The conversion and vision of Constantine occurs in vv. 22-30, and the conversion of Judah is in vv. 88-99.

³¹ Vv. 23-5.

and died by his own will, as is written, and vivifies all things;
 O One who gave himself to sufferings and shame and to be a sacrifice,
 hear me quickly and perform your great miracle by my hands.
 Son of God, in whose crucifixion creation exults,
 let my mind exult in the Cross of Light³² whose vision I catch.
 I want to confess you, but I am afraid of the Jews,
 this people who have stiffened their neck according to your will.
 At the beginning, Stephen, who confessed your name,
 they surely stoned, and they were not struck with terror by the rulers.
 Nicodemus, who spoke the truth, they shattered his feet,
 as in a rage they cast and threw him out from among them.
 After your hidden power has willed and revealed itself,
 grant me not to cease from your praise, O Christ the King (vv. 89-95).

Having renounced their previous faiths and confessed Christ, both men also receive a heavenly visitor. In Constantine's case, it seems that he actually sees a vision of Christ himself, holding the sign of the Cross of Light. Rather than carrying the *labarum* into battle, the heavenly Cross of Light appears directly to his army and their enemies, and the enemies flee before it. An angel appears to Judah and reassures him that his prayer has been heard and that God will direct him to the cross. When the cross appears to both men, their respective communities also revere the cross and give praise to Christ. Constantine commands his soldiers to give praise to Christ. Even the barbarians, as they flee the sight of the Cross of Light, declare that there is no God like Constantine's God. When the cross resurrects the dead young man, the People³³ declare, 'Praise to you, O Crucified One, who conquered / and redeemed the nations from the error of the unrighteous' (v. 120). By taking artistic license with the conversion and vision narratives, Jacob of Serugh emphasises that the manifestation of the cross draws Jews and Gentiles alike to Christian faith.

³² 'Cross of Light' is Jacob's favourite way to refer to the cross, and he applies it to Constantine's vision and to the relic.

³³ Although this could just refer to a generic crowd, I think that Jacob is purposefully paralleling the Gentile and Jewish responses, and it seems best to interpret ܩܘܡܐ as referring to the People, i.e. the Jews, as it does so often in early Syriac texts.

passage from Deuteronomy in Romans 10 lies behind his interpretation. Paul's influence is reflected in David's misquotation of the passage: whereas the Peshitta says the Lord will entice the people of Israel to jealousy by a 'foolish people', David says that the Lord will make those who are not his people 'a chosen people'. The question of how God could reject the past chosen people for a new people is a perennial issue for Christian theology dating back to New Testament times, so one need not assume that David aims his comments at a contemporary group.

Narsai's anti-Jewish apologetic also has Pauline roots, but his text of choice is 1 Corinthians 1.18-2:6, with especial attention paid to 1.20-3:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

It is no surprise that this passage featured in the early lectionary readings for Good Friday³⁸ as well as for the Feast of the Cross.³⁹ Whilst Paul's original statement declares that some among the Jews and Gentiles alike came to believe in Christ, 'the wisdom and power of God', Narsai's treatment is different. He celebrates the way that the 'puffed up' Greek

³⁸ A. Renoux, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, 2:280-93; F.C. Burkitt, *The Early Syriac Lectionary System*, 9. The reading occurs on Holy Saturday in some manuscripts of the *Hudra*; P. Kannokadan, *The East Syrian Lectionary: an Historico-Liturgical Study* (Rome, 1991) 44. Whilst Burkitt considered the early lectionary a precursor to later lectionaries, Baumstark rightly warned against assuming early conformity and suggested that the lectionary published by Burkitt (which Baumstark styles as the 'Comes') was a local variety and of limited long-term influence. A. Baumstark, 'Neuerschlossene Urkunden altchristlicher Perikopenordnung des ostaramäischen Sprachgebietes', 1-22.

³⁹ The *Hudra* includes this passages in the readings for the Feast of the Cross (see P. Kannokadan, *The East Syrian Lectionary*, 58). Also, BL Add. 12,139, dated by Wright to the 9th or 10th century, includes this passage among the readings for the Feast of the Invention of the Cross. W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Library*, 1:157.

One hesitates, however, to assume that lectionary readings were the same from place to place. The scant evidence that remains suggests great variety in the early period, with more uniformity enforced at a later period. See A. Baumstark, *Comparative Liturgy*, tr. F.L. Cross (London, 1958) 16-8; K.D. Jenner, 'The Relation between Biblical Text and Lectionary Systems in the Eastern Church', in *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts. Essays in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman*, ed. A. Rapoport-Albert and G. Greenberg (Sheffield, 2001) 376-411.

philosophers found their wisdom to be emptied by the proclamation of the cross,⁴⁰ and the pagans came flocking to Jesus' side (vv. 32-6). In contrast, Narsai's description of the Jews is strictly negative: he observes that the cross scattered the Jews and nullified their laws. Paul gives only a passing mention of the Jews' request for signs, but Narsai expands it into a sample polemical dialogue. Should the Jews ask for signs like the ones from the days of Moses and the Exodus, Narsai instructs his fellow believers to retort that the signs of Moses did very little to evoke faith in the People (who later turned to idolatry), much less in the Egyptians or other nations. In contrast, whilst the cross was initially considered contemptible, the Gentiles were converted, and the Jews fled and were scattered (vv. 37-48). Narsai's time in history clearly affects his application of this passage: the world has seen Christianity's rapid spread following the favour and conversion of Constantine, whereas Narsai's Jewish contemporaries presumably remain unmoved. Whilst other parts of the *memra* make clear that Narsai also has pagan opponents, he interprets 1 Corinthians 1.18-31 in a strictly anti-Jewish manner.

In keeping with this theme, Narsai expands his apologetic to argue against other religious rivals. He describes the depravity of humanity in terms borrowed from Romans 1.22-7, culminating in sexual immorality and rampant idolatry (vv. 55-78). By Narsai's account, only 'the Crucified Man' was able to abolish all of these things (v. 79), and Christ's power to reverse the perversity of humankind is unique among all religions. Narsai observes that other faiths have been around for centuries: Chaldean astrology for 4,000 years, Judaism for 1,500, and Magianism for 1,000, but none of them have been able to spread to the ends of the earth (vv. 99-105). Christianity, however, has only been around 'more or less 500 years', but, despite its relative youth, the Christian faith has 'brought all people near to its teaching' (v. 110). According to Narsai, it has also vanquished its competitors: it caused

⁴⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 1.19.

Chaldean astrology to cease; Jerusalem fell and the Jews no longer had a prophet, priest, or king; and the altars of Magianism were uprooted and burnt offerings came to an end (vv. 111-6). Narsai sums up the success of the cross with a return to his Pauline theme: ‘The cross, which had been a curse to humankind in the sentence of its judgement, / acquired transformation and set humanity free from curses. | The cross, which was considered a reproach by the Gentiles and Jews alike, / put an end to reproach and the sentence of judgement from the guilty’ (vv. 119-20). Again one sees the theme of the universality of the gospel displayed prominently in a carefully crafted sermon for the Feast of the Cross.

3.2.2. Christological controversy

The Christological controversies of the fifth century also evoke apologetic and polemic from these authors. In some cases, the writers’ statements simply serve to mark their location on the Christological spectrum and to demonstrate their orthodoxy to the audience. For example, in his homily, whilst acknowledging that heretics will revile his position, Pseudo-Chrysostom advocates always speaking of the humanity and divinity of Christ together: ‘And when you hear “Christ”, do not simply think of Christ or the economy of the flesh... because I know that Christ became hungry, and I know that, from five loaves and two fish, the same one nourished five thousand...’.⁴¹ Pseudo-Chrysostom lists several such paradoxes of the Incarnation. The author never says more about the dissenting ‘heretics’, but he clearly wishes to disassociate himself from extreme dyophysitism. Severus of Antioch denounces several competing Christologies for their inadequacy to speak rightly about the death of Christ on the cross: the Dyophysites for ‘dividing the unity’ and identifying which of the two natures was crucified, Apollonarius for ‘eliminating the intelligence of the divine incarnation’, and Eutyches for reducing the crucifixion to a mere

⁴¹ G.M. Browne, ‘Ps.-Chrysostom, In Venerabilem Crucem Sermo: The Syriac Version’, 54-5.

fantasy.⁴² Famous though Severus was for passionately defending his Christological position, this particular passage feels more pastoral than polemical in tone.

David Eskolaya's *memra* argues more forcefully than the others for a particular Christology of the crucifixion. He gives a careful description of his Christology: 'I call him and the power that prevailed by him one; / although I distinguish that they are two, they are called one. | Two in nature – one spiritual and one physical – / and one in honour – the Son of God who is indivisible. | Word and body – one from the height and one from the depth; / two that are one, not in nature but by love' (vv. 113-5). David unpacks the ramifications of this theology for the event of the crucifixion, saying that it was only the human nature, not the divine, which endured the crucifixion, but that the human being was able to triumph over death by the divine power that was joined to him by grace. Taking Philippians 2.6-11 as his main text, David argues that the fact that Christ suffered in the form of a servant undermines the position of the Miaphysites, whom he nicknames 'crucifiers of the Word' (v. 117).⁴³ A few lines later he reprimands them as 'empty-headed ones' (v. 123),⁴⁴ both on the basis of what he considers a blatant disregard for scripture and also because of the troublesome implications of his opponents' Christology for Trinitarian theology. He rejects the idea that the Word could share an *ousia* with the Father and the Holy Spirit and also suffer death whilst they suffered no harm (v. 125-6). He objects that if the Word died, he is limited in time (v. 127-8), which David regards as an unspeakable blasphemy against God. For him, the Feast of the Cross gave an opportunity for the careful exposition of the East Syrian orthodoxy against their Miaphysite opponents.

⁴² *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 660–1.

⁴³ Elsewhere, David Eskolaya refers to the Jews as 'crucifiers': *Homilies of Mar Narsai*, 604, 611, 612.

⁴⁴ The actual phrase is 'ones deprived of mind', *ܗܘܢܐ ܥܘܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ*.

3.2.3. Hellenistic philosophy and idolatry

As seen above, Severus of Antioch's homily contains polemic against Christian heretics, yet his primary concern is the allure of Greek philosophy and idolatry.⁴⁵ Using a biblical scene from Ezekiel in which an angel of the Lord marks those who are righteous on the forehead to save them from the outpouring of divine wrath on Jerusalem,⁴⁶ Severus artfully transitions from traditional biblical types of the cross to a theological interpretation of an earthquake that devastated Antioch fifty-five years prior.⁴⁷ He gives graphic, stirring descriptions of the aftermath of the earthquake, hoping to move his audience to repentance from their wayward beliefs. After his summary rejection of Christological heresies,⁴⁸ Severus aims his darts at idolatry and Greek philosophy. In regard to idolatry, Severus agrees with the psalmist that 'all the gods of the Gentiles are demons',⁴⁹ and the cross chases away demons.⁵⁰ His polemic against idolatry is thus traditional and brief. Severus devotes far more energy, however, to rebutting Greek philosophy, constructing an imaginary dialogue to propel his argument. He imagines an opponent who concedes that the cross may chase away demons but objects that it has not prevailed over the wisdom of the Greeks. Severus responds that, for all their reputed wisdom and loquacity, Greek philosophers have failed to persuade the majority, whereas people submitted themselves readily to the word of the Cross spoken by uneducated fishermen. Severus observes how the teachers of the church have successfully refuted the criticisms of pagan philosophers such as Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian, and they all came to a bitter end and so are despised and pitied.⁵¹ Severus also mocks those who attempted to escape the divine wrath of the earthquake – whether by embarking from the

⁴⁵ *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 660-3.

⁴⁶ Ezek 9.3-6.

⁴⁷ This is the estimate given by the editors of the homily: *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 641 n.1.

⁴⁸ *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 660-1.

⁴⁹ Ps 96.5 (LXX).

⁵⁰ *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 660-1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 662-3. Julian's death in battle during the Persian War is common knowledge, but I do not know whether Celsus and Porphyry met similarly sticky ends.

port at Seleucia and trying to follow the flight of the birds or by taking shelter in the shrine of Daphne.⁵² He muses about the lunacy of those who think they can escape the hand of the Almighty. He quotes Jeremiah: ‘Whoever flees from the terror, will fall in the hole; and who comes up from the hole, will be caught in a trap.’⁵³ Severus’ conclusion is that the city must repent of its waywardness by rejecting sin and Daphne and by seeking shelter in the only safe harbour: the bosom of the church, where with prayers and tears they shall await mercy from on high.⁵⁴

3.3. Biblical Exegesis

It is artificial to separate biblical exegesis from other aspects of the works of these authors. Indeed, in the sections above, it has been impossible to address the common themes of these *memre* without also considering the biblical texts that inspired them. Thus we have already discussed passages such as 1 Corinthians 1 and Philippians 2 which commonly appear in sermons for the Feast of the Cross. Here I will discuss a few biblical features of the texts that do not neatly fit under other headings: *catenae* of types of the cross in nature and the Old Testament and the recapitulative typology of the trees in Eden and the wood of the cross.

3.3.1. Old Testament types of the cross

One of the most common features of later homilies for the Feast of the Cross is a *catena* of Old Testament types of the cross. These *catenae* had an apologetic function: to demonstrate that the cross was not an accident of history but rather a part of God’s divine plan all along and that the types which foreshadowed the cross were hidden in plain view

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Jer 48.44.

⁵⁴ *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d’Antioche*, PO 36; 664-5.

and are now made apparent by the revelation of the cross of the Lord. Severus of Antioch delineates several types of the cross.⁵⁵ Although Jacob of Serugh's homily for the Feast of the Cross is a narrative of the invention, in another homily, 'On the mysteries, types and images of Christ', he also mentions several of the common types that occur in homilies for the Feast of the Cross.⁵⁶ Since nearly a third of Narsai's homily is taken up with an extensive collection of types of the cross in nature and in the Old Testament, this section will primarily focus on his work. Generally speaking, these types are not unique to Narsai. Some of his types, such as the bronze snake Moses raised up in the desert, were in use as early as the composition of the gospel of John (3.14), and others can be found in early anti-Jewish polemic, such as Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Many of these types of the cross had also already appeared in Ephrem's *memre* and *madrashé*⁵⁷ and other patristic sources.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it is important that Narsai has carefully set forth these types as the theological foundation for his community's celebration of the Feast of the Cross.

In comparison to the many Old Testament types that follow, Narsai's types from nature are brief.⁵⁹ Narsai's main point in producing this list appears at the beginning of the section in verses 124-5: 'All [of creation] bore and lifted up the sign of our Lord (ܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ) / and at its establishment it carried the mystery and type of his glory | for the shame of the enemies who were not persuaded / and for the joy of all the children of the holy church.' The four quarters of the earth make the sign of the cross (vv. 127-8, 135). The year cannot be completed without passing through four seasons, and the rising and setting of the sun in

⁵⁵ The types he mentions are the trees in Eden, Noah's ark, Moses' staff, Moses' staff and arms at the battle with Amalek, and Ezekiel's vision of a man marking the foreheads of the righteous in Jerusalem.

⁵⁶ Note, however, that this homily may be a compilation of types from Jacob's works rather than an authentic composition of Jacob's: J.A. Konat, 'A Metrical Homily of Jacob of Serugh on the Mysteries, Types, and Figures of Christ: Authentic or Compilation?', *LM* 118 (2005) 71-86.

⁵⁷ See *passim* Karim, *Symbols of the Cross in the Writings of the Early Syriac Fathers*.

⁵⁸ G.T. Armstrong, 'The Cross in the Old Testament according to Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and the Cappadocian Fathers', 17-38.

⁵⁹ Compare with P. Yousif, 'St Ephrem on the Symbols of Nature', 52-60.

these seasons makes the sign of the cross (vv. 129-34). A bird must make the sign of the cross in order to fly (vv. 136-8), and, in the same way, a person who is not marked by the cross is unable to ascend to heaven on the day of resurrection (vv. 139-40).⁶⁰ Narsai finishes with the type of trees which bear seeds according to their kind,⁶¹ comparing them to the cross which bore the body of the Crucified One (v. 141).

Narsai quickly transitions to the types of the cross found in the Old Testament. He lists them roughly in canonical order, beginning with types found in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. Abraham traced the sign of the cross on the Promised Land by his wanderings (vv. 147-53), thus indicating that those marked by the same sign will enter the Kingdom. Narsai next produces the story of the binding of Isaac and the common typology of the ram in the tree (vv. 154-7).⁶² Jacob's story provides several types of the cross: his dream of the ladder to heaven (vv. 158-9), the crossing of his arms when he blessed Ephraim and Manasseh (vv. 160-6), and the way in which he arose from his bed and worshipped on his staff (vv. 167-9).

Next, Narsai presents a cycle of types from the life of Moses. The wonders performed by Moses's staff are types of the wonders performed by the cross (vv. 170-4). Moses staff divided the sea and destroyed the Egyptian army (vv. 175-80). Narsai's next type is the famous episode in which the Israelites triumph over the Amalekites because Moses stretches his arms out with the staff in his hand (vv. 181-7). Narsai also sees the sign of the cross in the wood that sweetened the bitter waters of Marah (vv. 188-9). Finally, Narsai comes to the most ancient of Old Testament types for the crucifixion: the bronze snake that Moses set up in the desert (vv. 190-5).

⁶⁰ Cf. Ephrem, *HFid* 18, stanzas 2 and 6.

⁶¹ An allusion to Gen 1.11-12. How this corresponds to the cross is unclear.

⁶² The binding of Isaac is an important type for Syriac writers. See S.P. Brock, 'Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition', in *Mélanges Dominique Barthélemy: études bibliques offertes à l'occasion de son 60^e anniversaire*, ed. P. Casetti, O. Keel, and A. Schenker (Göttingen, 1981) 1-30.

Narsai finishes his Old Testament types of the cross with examples from the lives of the prophets. He beckons the audience to consider the prophet Elisha and how he revived the son of the Shunnamite woman by stretching himself out upon the youth and walking back and forth in the room, both actions that Narsai claims traced the cross (vv. 196-204). Even more poignant for Narsai is the story of the iron axe head that fell into the waters. When the prophet dropped a piece of wood into the water, it sank and the axe head floated to the surface, just as the cross descended with Christ at the harrowing of hell and brought the dead out of Sheol (vv. 204-9).⁶³ As shall be seen in due course, Narsai's *catena* of natural and biblical types of the cross has important parallels with later treatises dedicated to the feast day.⁶⁴

3.3.2. The trees of Eden and the cross

The interpretation of the trees planted in the middle of Eden cannot be entirely separated from a discussion of Old Testament typology. Regardless of whether a homily offers a *catena* of biblical types, many of them reflect on the type of the cross found in the trees in Eden.⁶⁵ Pseudo-Chrysostom devotes the final section of his homily to a careful exposition of Genesis 3, intent on explaining how it was God's intention that, as transgression occurred 'through the wood', salvation also would come through the wood. Both Severus of Antioch and David Eskolaya regard the trees in Eden to be types of the cross. The typology is modelled after Paul's theology of recapitulation in Romans 5, with its emphasis on death coming through the first Adam and life through the second Adam.

⁶³ For more on early Syriac theology of the harrowing of hell, see T. Buchan, *'Blessed is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol': Christ's Descent to the Dead in the Theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*; Gorgias Dissertations 13 (Piscataway, NJ, 2004). Unlike Narsai's application here, Ephrem seems not to have suggested that the cross descended with Christ into Sheol. The concept is present in other early Christian texts, eg., *Gos. Pet.* 10.

⁶⁴ See Appendix C, which gives tables of comparison for types of the cross used in homilies and apologetic texts.

⁶⁵ For Ephrem on the trees in Eden, see P. Yousif, 'La croix de Jésus et la paradis d'Eden dans la typologie biblique de Saint Éphrem', *PdO* 6-7 (1975) 37-45.

This recapitulative theology easily expands to the trees in Eden and the tree on Golgotha, just as other patristic writers compare Eve and Mary.⁶⁶ In this way, the type of the trees provides a vehicle of paradox for the mysteries of the faith. As David Eskolaya put it,

By the weapon by which our father Adam sinned in the place of Eden
the second Adam was victorious upon Golgotha.
Through the tree the first sinned and condemned his children,
and through the tree the second conquered and gave victory to his
people.
By the consumption of fruit Adam sinned and received death,
and through the cross our Saviour conquered and dissolved death.
By the tree death sprang up against us in Eden,
and by the top of the wood, life journeyed for us to Golgotha.⁶⁷

Christians exploited these types because of their explanatory power regarding what happened in Christ, since it was apologetically important to argue that the Christian gospel is the rightful heir of the Old Testament promises.

The typology was also sufficiently flexible to allow theological expansion, and our authors take full advantage of that flexibility. David Eskolaya finds the question of divine foreknowledge pressing. He argues that God knew that the wickedness of the children of Adam would result in the crucifixion of the man assumed by the Word, and so God put the type of the trees at the very beginning so that when the crucifixion took place, people would believe the gospel message (vv. 55-6). To argue in this fashion, David must explain that Adam was always mortal and corruptible and that those attributes were not the result of the Fall as many people believe (v. 54). Because Adam was already susceptible to weakness, God could see that harm and insult would come to his Son. According to David Eskolaya, all of this reaches its fulfilment in the divine economy, which he portrays in a dyophysite way:

The innocent one became guilty by the eating of fruit so that he went astray
and did wrong,

⁶⁶ For example, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:22.4. For the theme of Mary as the second Eve, see G.A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY, 2001) 75-97; R. Murray, 'Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers', *ECR* 3 (1971) 372-84.

⁶⁷ Vv. 32-5.

and he died and caused his whole race to die in his defeat.
The Kind One had pity on the humility of the one innocent of spirit
and sent his Son, and he went out, [and] put on [humanity]
lovingly....
I said [he sent] his Son, the Eternal Word, the person that is from him,
whose love dwelt in the Son of Adam so that he might visit Adam.⁶⁸
He made one of his children the middle between him and his children
in order to heal through him the sores of all his children.
The weak ones of iniquity saw the healer who was among them
and they contended and departed and were impudent, [and] crucified
him iniquitously.
The Son of Adam suffered in the likeness of Adam on the tree,
and he died like his father, and he returned, and he lived by the power
of his assumer. (Vv. 60-5)

David's discussion of the trees in Eden thus opens up an opportunity to present an East Syrian orthodox view of the divine economy.

Severus of Antioch also finds the trees of Eden a useful motif. His *memra*, as we have seen above, is focused on a call to repentance in the face of the potential outpouring of divine wrath. In the trees of Eden, Severus can explore his ethical concerns about right and wrong whilst also dealing a blow to idolatry. For Severus, the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was only forbidden to Adam because he was not yet mature enough to eat from it. In its proper time, this Tree would have been permitted to Adam, too.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, he and Eve believed the snake's lie that eating from the forbidden tree would make them like gods, so they ate. Severus informs the audience that the reference to 'gods' foreshadows the wickedness of idolatry into which the future generations of Adam's descendants would fall.⁷⁰ The situation is different for Christians, who have been tutored by the Law, the prophets, and the Gospel: they are permitted to eat allegorically from both the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The gospel has enabled

⁶⁸ The last 'Adam' here means 'humanity'.

⁶⁹ *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 642-3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 642-5. The Hebrew of Gen 3.5 uses *Elohim* here, so it is ambiguous whether the noun is singular or plural. The early versions all opt for the plural: the LXX reads θεοι; the Vulgate reads *dii*; the Peshitta reads ܘܢܘܩܕܝܫܝܢ. It is therefore unsurprising that Severus of Antioch and Pseudo-Chrysostom (p. 51 [Syriac]/58 [English]) both say they will be like 'gods' and not 'God'.

Christians to discern between what is good and what is bad, and to pursue the former by professing sound Trinitarian doctrine and to reject the latter by renouncing sin, especially the sin of idolatry. Severus says that it is only possible to truly discern good and evil without confusion by looking through the lens of the cross, since those who had the Law and prophets in the past still eventually worshipped idols instead of God.⁷¹ Severus' unpacking of the Genesis story thus also provides some ammunition against the adversaries he targets at the end of the *memra*: Christian heretics who do not profess the faith rightly and the idolatrous purveyors of Greek philosophy.

3.4. Reversal of Shame and Honour

One of the most consistent themes in Syriac *memre* for the Feast of the Cross is the reversal of shame and honour. Two of the most common biblical texts associated with the Feast of the Cross inspired this theme. 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.6, with its recognition of the scandal of the message of the cross to Jews and Greeks but its wisdom and power for believers, is one of these key passages. According to Paul, God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong. Another important passage is Matthew 24.30-1, where Jesus tells his disciples that the 'sign of the Son of Man' will appear in the heavens, and then the Son of Man will come on the clouds with great power and glory. As a result, all the peoples of the earth mourn, but the Son of Man will gather his elect from the four winds. The transformation of the cross from an object of shame to one that shares the honour and victory of Christ is replayed throughout salvation history: through the Old Testament types that prefigured the cross, the crucifixion and resurrection, the discovery of the relic, the lives of ordinary believers, and the cross' ultimate vindication when it precedes Christ at the *parousia*.

⁷¹ *Les Homiliae cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, PO 36; 644-7.

The East Syrian homilies both recognise that the cross, on its own, is a humble and shameful object, and that the message of the cross is truly a scandal. David Eskolaya acknowledges that there are some who declare the cross unworthy of praise (v. 167), and Narsai defends the Christian veneration of the cross from the charge of idolatry from Jews and pagans, as will be discussed below. Both admit that the cross is a humble, even despicable, object in its nature, but that it is highly honoured because of the honour due to Christ. David wonders at how Christ could be exalted by so hated, scorned, and despised an object as the cross (cf. v. 67). For David, the cross is supremely paradoxical: as an instrument of death, it shares in death's shame at the resurrection of the Crucified Man (v. 26), but, by the same token, it shares in the exaltation of the resurrected Christ (v. 68). Whilst defending the veneration of the cross, Narsai admits that the wood of the cross is by nature humble but it is honoured because of Christ (v. 234), just as a denarius stamped with the profile of a king is honoured for the king's sake (v. 236). This transformation of the cross from an object of shame to one of glory and honour recurs throughout salvation history.

Several of the Old Testament types of the cross that Narsai lists prefigure the cross' change from an object of shame to one of honour, from lesser to greater, and from descent to ascent.⁷² The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ is the pivotal event that makes the Old Testament types discernible and provides the logic for Christian hope of the ultimate triumph of believers. It has the ring of familiar paradoxical theology, especially as made famous by Ephrem's poetry. Glorifying in this paradox, Narsai writes, 'By his crucifixion he put the rulers and authorities to shame / and by taking off his flesh he stripped them bare before the eyes of the on-lookers.... By the contemptibility of the Gospel the Creator wished / to save

⁷² His treatment is much indebted to Ephrem's emphasis on the replacement of the People (the Jews) by the Church of the Peoples (believers). In addition to R. Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (n. 36 above), see also R.A. Darling, 'The "Church from the Nations" in the Exegesis of Ephrem', in *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen-Oosterhesselen 10-12 September)*, ed. H.J.W. Drijvers, et. al.; OCA 229 (Roma, 1987) 111-21.

and to redeem humanity by means of a Crucified Man' (vv. 11, 13). David Eskolaya gleefully concurs: 'At the point of death the Son of mortals prevailed over death / and overthrew it and expelled it and mocked and laughed at its fall' (v. 28). Jacob of Serugh builds the theme of the reversal of honour and shame into his narrative by working it into the prayers of Judah Kyriakos. When the imprisoned Judah prays from the depths of the dried cistern, he addresses the Son of God, who became incarnate and gave himself over to suffering, shame, and sacrifice, and asks to be shown the cross in which the church exults (vv. 89-91). Judah's own experience of imprisonment in a deep pit and his elevation after the angel assures him that he will find the cross mirrors the fate of the relic itself. Later in the company of Queen Helena and the crowd, Judah prays for the cross to be revealed so that the believers will rejoice and unbelievers will be ashamed (vv. 107-9).

Such is the cross' manifest glory that its Jewish opponents must literally heap shame upon it – by burying it under dirt and rubble. The shaming of the cross by burial sets up the next episode of the reversal theme: the vision of Constantine and the discovery of the relic by Helena. It gives the humble Constantine military victory and, removed from the ground, the relic is worshipped by the queen and all believers. Just as the cross conquered Constantine's military foes, so also does its appearance chase away demons and puts them to shame. The church, too, shares in this victory, consecrating all of her activities with the sign of the cross (Narsai, vv. 251-8). David Eskolaya urges Adam to take heart and put his mourning aside, for 'by [Christ's] exaltation, he gave exaltation to the feebleness of our race' (v. 107).

At long last, the Cross will precede Christ at the *parousia*, and the reversal of shame and honour will be complete. David Eskolaya recalls how human eyes only regarded Christ's outward smallness, but at the end they will see him coming in glory. He declares,

Behold, in all corners of the earth the sound of his preaching resounds,
and the uprooting of error and the devils are shamed with the Jews.

Behold, in all corners of the earth he makes his cross triumph before every
eye and in all things,
whilst the nations and kings worship him in grand, solemn
procession.
The peoples and kings worship his crucifixion perpetually
to the shame of the People who were headstrong and crucified his
Magnificence (vv. 148-50).

David celebrates how the cross, which had been despised, is now honoured by all peoples, and he anticipates even greater rejoicing in the fullness of time when ‘the sign of his shame comes before him with great pomp / and by it the peoples who mocked his dignity are put to shame’ (v. 164). Inspired by Matthew 24.30, in which the nations mourn at the coming of the sign of the Son of Man, David imagines the words of contrition that the *parousia* will inspire Christianity’s enemies to speak as they beg for mercy (vv. 173-5). The reversal of shame and honour will thus one day be complete.

3.5. Defending the Veneration of the Cross

Of the extant homilies for the Feast of the Cross prior to the Arab Conquest, Narsai’s is the only one that answers accusations that the Christian veneration of the cross is idolatry. As we shall see, on the eve of the Arab Conquest, this is a matter that came to the fore in Jewish-Christian interaction, so Narsai is an early witness to how this debate developed in Syriac-speaking circles.⁷³ After the lengthy *catena* of Old Testament types, Narsai refutes the allegation, made by both Jews and pagans, that because Christians venerate the wood of the cross they are guilty of idolatry (v. 213). Returning the blow, Narsai retorts that the accusers are inclined to see the veneration of the cross as idolatry because they themselves

⁷³ There are a few other East Syrian texts of the sixth century that mention controversy over venerating relics and crosses. For defence of the veneration of martyrs’ bones, see Ishai, *Cause on the Martyrs 7. Traités d'Isaï le docteur et de Hnana d'Abiabène sur les martyrs, le vendredi d'or et les rogations, et de foi a réciter par les évêques nestoriens avant l'ordination*, ed. Addai Scher; PO 7 (Paris, 1911) esp. 38-43. Barhadbshabba reports that Abraham of Bet Rabban was accused of idolatry for his devotion to an icon of Christ and a cross painted on his door. *La seconde partie de l'histoire ecclésiastique de Barhadbesaba 'Arbaïa et une controverse de Théodore de Mopsueste avec les Macédoniens: texte syriaque édité et traduit*, ed. F.Nau; PO 9 (Paris, 1913) 624-5.

have been idolaters (v. 214). He describes how soon after the Exodus, the Israelites fell into idolatry, worshipping the golden calf at Horeb (vv. 222-6).⁷⁴ He likewise attacks pagans for turning aside from the straight path and worshipping created things instead of the Creator (vv. 227-30). In Narsai's view, both the Jews and the pagans have acted shamelessly in their idolatry.

Narsai defends the veneration of the cross in two ways. First, he maintains that the Church does not worship the physical material, but rather the 'sign of the Crucified King who conquered by the cross' (v. 216). Indeed, to venerate the cross is to worship the Lord himself, not corruptible materials (v. 221). This notion that worship directed at the cross passes on to the Crucified One, however, needs further explanation. Narsai offers an example from life: one treats things imprinted by the king – whether it be coins, words, or the imperial seal – with honour because of the honour due to the king (vv. 236-48). The substance composing these objects might even be contemptible dirt, but if it bears the seal (ܐܘܬܘܪܐ) of the king, it becomes precious (v. 242).⁷⁵ In the same way, the cross is honoured because the Lord 'sealed his words with the great sign of his crucifixion (ܐܘܬܘܪܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܣܝܘܬܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ)' (v. 245)⁷⁶. If it is right to honour the seal of an earthly king, Narsai concludes, then how much more worthy of honour is the cross of the King on High (v. 247)? Narsai's

⁷⁴ Later apologetics for the veneration of the cross make much use of positive examples of the veneration of holy objects in the Old Testament cult, such as the Ark of the Covenant. See pp. 163-6, 190, and 209.

For a mystical text on the cross that draws on the type of the Ark of the Covenant, see the treatise attributed to Isaac of Nineveh appended to Bedjan's edition: *Mar Isaacus Ninivita, De perfectione religiosa*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris, 1909) 589-600. Note, however, that this text is may be pseudonymous, like other texts in the appendix to Bedjan's edition. See J. van der Ploeg, 'Un traité nestorienne du culte de la croix', *LM* 56 (1943) esp. 118-9. Van der Ploeg argues for pseudonymity based on the Christology of the text, but this conclusion could be made stronger (or perhaps questioned) by comparison with Isaac's undisputed writings. The mystical character of the treatise, with no reference to contemporary events, makes it difficult to date. See also B.F. Fairaday, 'Isaac of Nineveh's Biblical Typology of the Cross', *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001) 385-90; this essay refers mainly to the 'second part' of Isaac's work: *Isaac of Nineveh, 'the Second Part', Chapters IV-XLI*, ed. and tr. S.P. Brock; CSCO 554-5 (Leuven, 1995). As van der Ploeg's suggestions about authorship pre-date Brock's discovery of the rest of Isaac's mystical treatises, it would be useful to revisit them, but space does not allow that here.

⁷⁵ For the use of clay seals in the Sasanian Empire, see R. Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings in the A. Saeedi Collection*; *Acta Iranica* 44 (Lovanii, 2007) 17-71.

⁷⁶ Narsai exchanges the term ܐܘܬܘܪܐ here for a synonym, ܐܘܬܘܪܐ, for the sake of a play on words.

argument has much in common with the iconophile treatises of later years, and his argument anticipates the defence of the cross after the rise of Islam.

4. Conclusion

The Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross from before the Arab conquest present a diversity of approaches to the celebration of the feast. Despite this diversity, there are some themes that occur frequently. The one feature shared by all of the *memre* is the presence of polemical and apologetic argumentation. This is unsurprising, as many sermons of the time, whatever the occasion, include polemical remarks against religious opponents or apologetic defence of the speaker's own position. Although the Feast of the Cross is not unique in occasioning inter-religious debate, one can still get a sense of the issues important to the writer and his community at that particular time and place. At the same time, the occasion of the Feast of the Cross did sometimes determine which polemical issues occur, as when David Eskolaya argues for a dyophysite understanding of the crucifixion or when Narsai defends the veneration of the cross against charges of idolatry.

The *memre* that were originally written in Syriac, regardless of confessional loyalties, have more in common with one another than they do with the translations from Greek. All three at least mention the legend of the discovery of the cross, perhaps suggesting that, whilst the legend may not have been a part of the earliest celebrations of the feast day in Jerusalem, its popularity may have been influential in the Syriac churches' adoption of the feast day. This would explain why Ephrem, who died in 373, two decades before the legend developed, did not know of the feast. They all refer to the Judah Kyriakos legend, which suggests that this was the favourite for liturgical and hagiographical purposes alike. The presence of the feast in both West and East Syrian circles suggests that it had been

adopted, and was well-established, in Syriac churches prior to the separation of the churches after the Council of Ephesus in 431.⁷⁷ Based on these facts, although one cannot discern with precision how the feast day was celebrated, one can still safely conclude that the feast was accepted in Syriac-speaking communities sometime in the first three decades of the fifth century.

The homilies that originated in Syriac also share two other themes. All three have anti-Jewish content, unlike the homilies translated from Greek. As the previous chapter discussed, the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos legends both contain anti-Jewish material. Other traditional material about the cross and crucifixion also polemicalised against the Jews. The legend and traditional material made for a heady mix, and it seems that the original celebrations of the Feast of the Cross in Syriac involved inter-religious apologetic. The Syriac texts and the translations do share an interest in biblical types, whether in a *catena* or an extended reflection on the type of the trees in Eden, which perhaps reflects an older feature of the feast day, prior to the legend's growth in popularity. The Syriac homilies have a hybrid character: they show dependence on the Helena legend, the popularity of which led to the feast's celebration in Syriac circles, but they also retain features of the nascent Feast of the Cross, prior to the development of the legend.

The analysis in this chapter showcases the themes that were important in Syriac celebrations of the cross, and these provide a basis of comparison for the homilies written after the Arab conquest. Before turning to those homilies, however, there is other ground to cover. The seventh century was an age of cataclysmic change for the Syriac-speaking communities, and even their homiletical production needs to be put in the context of those

⁷⁷ Sozomen, in the 450s, is the first written evidence of the Judah Kyriakos legend, but the use of the legend in East and West Syriac communities at a time of bitter divisions suggests that date for the legend is probably before 431 CE.

massive social changes. The next chapter discusses the events of the seventh century and the resulting implications for the veneration of the cross.

Chapter 4: The Religious and Social Upheaval of the Seventh Century

1. Introduction

The seventh century was a time of tremendous societal and religious change in the Near East. The last Byzantine-Persian war filled nearly the first three decades of the century, during which Persia occupied Byzantium's eastern provinces and North Africa. Byzantium itself had been rocked by Phocas' violent overthrow of Maurice in 602 CE, followed by another violent (but more popular) coup by Heraclius in 610. After the Persians were finally defeated in 628, the Byzantine Empire enjoyed only a few years of peace before their first skirmishes with Arab forces. In what must have seemed the blink of an eye, the Arabs seized control of Persia, won the eastern provinces so lately restored to Byzantium, and eventually took North Africa as well. These were troubled times, and they surely required a reassessment of the triumphalist theology that attributed the might of the country to the power of the cross. To understand the later Syriac writings for the Feast of the Cross, it is crucial to have a grasp of just how much had changed in this period.

This chapter has two sections. In the first section, I offer an overview of two issues in Heraclius' reign before the Arab Conquest that have direct bearing on the perception of the cross in the seventh century and beyond. First, I will discuss the Persian capture of the relic of the True Cross in 614 and Heraclius' restoration of the relic to Jerusalem in 630. Second, the Persian invasion and the reign of Heraclius saw renewed animosity between Jews and Christians, and this provides important background to the following chapter on Christian apologetic arguments defending the crucifixion and the cross.

The rest of the chapter discusses the consequences of the Arab conquest,¹ particularly its implications for the perception of the cross. Records of Muslim antipathy towards the cross are as old as the foundational documents and traditions of Islam itself, and the visibility of this antagonism grew with increased contact between Muslims and Christians. Other scholars have already ably traced the history of the public suppression of the symbol of the cross as well as interreligious polemic about it following the Arab Conquest.² Consequently, this section will only give a brief summary, selecting the background material most relevant for Muslim-Christian debate over the cross in the eighth and ninth centuries. This discussion will begin with the suppression of the cross as a public symbol from the time of the conquest until the early Abbasid period. Muslim perceptions of the Byzantine emperors Constantine and Heraclius as well as *aḥādīth* traditions are also concerned with the public sign of the cross. Finally, the focus will turn to the traditional Muslim beliefs about the crucifixion and death of Jesus according to the Qurʾān and the early Muslim *tafsīr* tradition.

2. The Reign of Heraclius before the Arab Conquest

The reign of Heraclius was a tumultuous period in Byzantine history. When Heraclius overthrew the usurper Phocas in 610 CE, the Byzantine Empire was already in dire straits. The Persians had taken advantage of Byzantine unrest, and they had begun seizing Byzantine fortresses and cities in the eastern provinces between 608-10, amongst

¹ At the beginning of this period, Heraclius still reigned, but because the regions where Syriac-speaking Christians lived were now in Arab hands, he drops out of view in the second half of the chapter apart from a brief discussion about the Arab perception of Heraclius.

² See especially S.H. Griffith, 'Images, Islam and Christian Icons: a moment in the Christian/Muslim encounter in early Islamic times', in *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam, VII^e et VIII^e siècles. Actes de Colloque International. Lyon – Maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen. Paris – Institut du Monde Arabe. 11-15 Septembre 1990*, ed. P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey-Coquais (Damas, 1992), 121-38. See also M.N. Swanson, 'Folly to the Ḥunafā': The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD' (PhD diss., Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 1992) 65-95.

them Dara, Mardin, Amida, and Edessa.³ Despite Heraclius' efforts to make peace, the Persians pressed on, and in 614 they seized Jerusalem, brutally slaughtering much of the populace and capturing the Patriarch of Jerusalem along with the relic of the True Cross. By 619, the Persians had seized control of Egypt. At long last, Heraclius roused himself and drove the Persians back, using diplomatic as well as military strategies to restore former territories to the Byzantine Empire. In 628, Heraclius finally triumphed, taking back the provinces that the Persians had seized. The hard-won peace did not last. Within just a few years, the Byzantines found themselves again on the battlefield, this time fighting Arab invaders who would ultimately strip the eastern provinces and North Africa from Byzantine rule permanently. Nearly all of the provinces that Heraclius had won back from the Persians in the second decade of his rule were lost to the Arabs by the time of his death in 641 CE.

2.1. The Capture and Restoration of the True Cross

One of the best documented events of the Byzantine-Persian war of the seventh century is the Persian sack of Jerusalem in 614.⁴ Many of these documents were written at the end of the war, so they can interpret these events through the lens of the eventual triumph of the Byzantine forces against the Persian foe. Nevertheless, they recount the sack of Jerusalem in gruesome detail, mourning the slaughter of the population, the destruction of churches and monasteries, and the capture of the True Cross and the ecclesiastical authorities of the city. As violent as the Persian invasion was, the contemporary Christian accounts exaggerate the devastation wrought on Jerusalem, and the archaeological evidence points to less destruction and more continuity.⁵ Documentary evidence also suggests that the pre-

³ W.E. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2003) 39.

⁴ For discussion of the sources, see B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VII^e siècle*, 2 vols (Paris, 1992) 2:129-36.

⁵ The authors' intentions to interpret the event in terms of biblical and apocalyptic narratives results in exaggeration of the destruction and loss of life. For discussion of the archaeological evidence, see Y.

existing social and administrative structures continued into the period of Persian rule and even after the Arab Conquest.⁶ In any case, the sense of political and spiritual insecurity that followed the sack of Jerusalem was severe. Strategios' *Lamentations* claims that Chosroes taunted the patriarch of Jerusalem, Zachariah, with the words, 'How can you say there is no god but your god? Behold, now I know that my religion prevails over your religion and my god over your god!'⁷ There were reports that the captives from Jerusalem were forced to walk upon the relic of the cross on the threshold of the prison where they were held in Ctesiphon.⁸ The *synaxarion* published by Sternbach depicts Chosroes enthroned with his feet resting upon the reliquary of the True Cross.⁹ Strategios declares that the Cross has left the Holy City twice in its history: with Christ to Golgotha and with the patriarch into Persian captivity.¹⁰ Strategios thus perfectly captures the sorrow and gravity of this event for the Christians of Jerusalem.¹¹

Once the war was won, Heraclius acquired the relic of the True Cross, and he used it to its full political and spiritual advantage. He distributed fragments of the True Cross on

Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross: the Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and Byzantine Ideology of Anti-Persian Warfare* (Wien, 2011) 15-23.

⁶ C. Foss, 'The Persians in the Roman Near East (602-630 AD)', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 13 (2003) 149-70.

⁷ Quoted in Flusin, *Saint Anastase le perse*, 2:137.

⁸ A. Frolov, 'La Vraie Croix et les expéditions d'Héraclius en Perse', *REB* 11 (1953) 97.

⁹ *Non vidi*. See B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le perse*, 2:129, which cites L. Sternbach, 'Analecta Avarica', in *Dissertationes philologicae Academiae Litteratum Cracoviae*; vol. 30 (Cracovie, 1900) 297-365; for the image of Chosroes, p. 335.

¹⁰ Strategios, *The Capture of Jerusalem* 13. See Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 221.

¹¹ Some have suggested that Heraclius' long delay between the sack of Jerusalem in 614 and his offensive campaigns from 622 indicates that the Byzantines were not overly concerned. As S. Alexander puts it, '[T]here is no evidence that the capture of the True Cross outraged the Byzantines' ('Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology, and the David Plates', *Speculum* 52 (1977) 220). Frolov also notes the conspicuous absence of concern for the True Cross before the end of the war ('La Vraie Croix et les expéditions d'Héraclius en Perse', 91-3). It is true that many of the documents written about the sack of Jerusalem and the capture of the True Cross were written after Heraclius had brought the relic back to Jerusalem, and they understand the event retrospectively. However, it seems likely that the delay in responding to the Persian invasion also had to do with Heraclius' need to consolidate power in the capital after his coup over Phocas (see Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 100-1). Furthermore, the sack of Jerusalem may have affected different sections of Byzantine society differently. Even if Strategios is looking back on the event from the vantage point of Byzantine victory, the emotional intensity with which he gives his account does sound as though the sack of Jerusalem was an outrage, particularly to the Jerusalem clergy and monks.

his way to the Holy City.¹² Upon arrival at Jerusalem on the 21st of March, 630, Heraclius stripped himself of his imperial regalia and entered the Holy City barefoot by the same gate Jesus was said to have used on Palm Sunday,¹³ the cross in its silver reliquary with him. An elaborate ceremony followed in which the clergy checked the seals on the reliquary, confirming that they had not been broken and the relic within was unmolested.¹⁴ Through the efforts of his panegyrist, George of Pisidia, Heraclius cultivates an image of himself as a new Constantine and a new David. George points out the similarities between Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and Heraclius' entrance with the True Cross. Heraclius is a new Constantine because God has entrusted to him the empire and the cross.¹⁵ George further likens Heraclius to King David, especially when he compares the True Cross to the Ark of the Covenant, which David recaptured from the hands of the Philistines.¹⁶ The restitution of the True Cross and the associated solemnities in 630 CE reinvigorated celebrations of the Feast of the Cross and stimulated the growth of the cult of the True Cross.¹⁷

2.2. Jewish-Christian Relations

For the minority Jewish population of Palestine, the Persian victory had initially seemed to be a providential event.¹⁸ It would not be surprising for the Jewish minority to

¹² Frolov, 'La Vraie Croix et les expéditions d'Héraclius en Perse', 99-100.

¹³ This perhaps has echoes in the Muslim historians' memories of Heraclius as a pious and humble man. See pp. 130-1.

¹⁴ This is curious given the report that the captives had been made to trample on the relic and that the True Cross suffered other ignominies during its captivity. In addition to those infringements, Heraclius was said to have distributed pieces of the cross as he travelled. Frolov observes that this ritual probably has to do with the authentication of the wood of the cross after so long in captivity, two years after the war had ended ('La Vraie Croix et les expéditions d'Héraclius en Perse', 99).

¹⁵ S. Alexander, 'Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology and the David Plates', 225-6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 227-34.

¹⁷ A. Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews: Some recent Work on Early Byzantium', *BMGS* 20 (1996), 267.

¹⁸ It did not last long, as the Persians soon switched their favour to the more populous Miaphysite Christians in the region. For a comparison of Jewish and Christian perspectives on Persian rule and Byzantine recovery of lost provinces, see B.M. Wheeler, 'Imagining the Sasanian Capture of Jerusalem', *OCA* 57 (1991) 69-85.

have pro-Persian leanings.¹⁹ The surviving accounts, all by Christian writers, accuse the Jews of forming an alliance with the Persian invaders, destroying churches and monasteries, and killing Christians. One should surely heed warnings against taking these accounts at face value,²⁰ but it is true that for a short time the Persians gave the Jews of Palestine more influence over civic affairs, and this may have provided an opportunity to vent frustrations built up over centuries of marginalisation. In any case, the Byzantine authorities took the allegations of Jewish collusion with the Persians seriously,²¹ and in 632 Heraclius issued an edict requiring all Jews of the empire to be baptised.²² Although the edict was impossible to enforce, as well as unpopular,²³ it was later reissued by Leo III and Basil I.²⁴ In keeping with ancient Roman tradition, Heraclius assumed that religious unity was essential to the unity of his empire.

The events of the seventh century, particularly the Persian war and the Arab Conquest, led to a heightened Christian awareness of the presence of the Jews, and the polemic of the following era reflects this, as the next chapter will discuss more fully. For now it is important to note that this is the very era that witnessed a fresh flowering of Christian apologetic treatises against Judaism, and they featured new topics, such as Byzantine military failure²⁵ and whether veneration of the cross, icons, and relics was idolatry. These topics tie directly into the iconoclast controversy in the next century because they laid the foundation for the iconodule arguments in favour of the veneration of icons. In

¹⁹ See the discussion in Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross*, 46-54.

²⁰ A. Cameron, 'Jews in Seventh-Century Palestine', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 13 (1994) 78-80; *idem.*, 'Byzantines and Jews', 253-6.

²¹ It is worth noting that when Heraclius' brother Theodosius massacres a number of Jews at Edessa for allegedly insulting the emperor and inciting Persian resistance, Heraclius listens to the complaint of the Jews and orders Theodosius to stop. Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 180.

²² *Ibid.*, 216-8. One Christian apologetic text, *The Doctrine of Jacob the Forcibly Baptised*, a fictional dialogue, is set in precisely this context. Forced to be baptised under Heraclius' edict, Jacob experiences a real conversion to Christianity and sets out to convince his fellow Jews to follow suit.

²³ See V. Déroche and G. Dagron, 'Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII^e siècle', *TM* 11 (1991) 35-8, on the lack of clerical enthusiasm for this edict.

²⁴ A. Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews', 257.

²⁵ See page 172-3 in chapter five for more detail.

On Divine Images, John of Damascus quotes Leo of Neapolis and Stephen of Bostra's seventh-century anti-Jewish treatises, which defended the veneration of the cross and icons.²⁶ As there are no Jewish anti-Christian apologies from the same time period,²⁷ it seems that far more was at stake for the Christians, for whom the embarrassment of defeat at the hands of the Persians and the Arabs was still fresh. The iconodule writings from the eighth century evince a pronounced anti-Judaism.²⁸ Despite losses to the Arab conquerors, in their apologetic literature the Christians continued to harangue the Jews about the fact that they no longer had king, priest, or prophet.

3. The Cross in Political Propaganda and Religious Debate after the Arab Conquest

The Arab conquest had immense implications for the Christian veneration of the cross. The early evidence suggests Muslim antipathy for the symbol of the cross, which was gradually removed from public spaces. Emergent Islam had a visceral distaste for the very idea of the prophet Jesus being crucified. This section will investigate the political and religious opposition to the cross in early Islam.

3.1. The Cross in Political Propaganda from the Conquest to the Early Abbasid Era

There are reports from various Christian sources about the animosity of the Arab conquerors toward the cross. A certain Anastasius, a monk at Sinai (not to be confused with

²⁶ The parallel here is not exact, however, because the iconoclasts promoted the veneration of the cross even as they suppressed the veneration of icons. J. Moorhead, 'Iconoclasm, the Cross, and the Imperial Image', *Byzantion* 55 (1985) 165-79. John of Damascus' argument has particular force because he demonstrates that the arguments in favour of the veneration of the cross, with which his opponents agreed, applied to the veneration of icons, the practice they eschewed.

²⁷ De Lange, however, suggests seeking Jewish responses to these events and to Christian challenges in other genres of writing. See N.R.M. de Lange, 'Jews and Christians in the Byzantine Empire: Problems and Perspectives', in *Christianity and Judaism. Papers Read at the 1991 Summer Meeting and the 1992 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. D. Wood (Oxford, 1992) 27-9.

²⁸ Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews', 268-9.

his later and more famous namesake), reported as much in the first half of the seventh century during the first Arab invasion.²⁹ Nevertheless, several reports of early conquest treaties with conquered cities show that there was some effort to protect the Christians' rights to parade with crosses on holy days. The treaty with Ḥīra in the year 12/633 permitted Christians to beat the *nāqūs* (the *semantron*) and parade with crosses on their feast days.³⁰ That there was a need explicitly to protect this right suggests that it was under threat. These arrangements, however, were negotiated city by city with the result that some cities were treated differently. The treaty of Raqqa (Callinice), for example, denied Christians the beating of the *nāqūs* and making processions, the latter presumably including the public display of the cross.³¹ Whilst some have questioned the authenticity of these treaties, Milka Levy-Rubin has argued cogently for the authenticity of these reports based on their similarity to treaties between Byzantines and Persians with conquered cities prior to the Arab Conquest.³²

There are also reports of various early caliphs issuing decrees limiting or suppressing the public display of the cross.³³ The first repression of the cult of the cross reportedly began during the caliphate of 'Umar (I) al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-44), a companion of Muḥammad and the second of the four 'rightly guided caliphs'. According to these reports, on the advice of 'Umar himself, the Muslim governors of Syria and Ḥīra allowed Christians to carry the cross in procession only once a year. At the same time, it was 'Umar who issued an edict of protection for crosses in the regions of Palestine, Lydda, and elsewhere, indicating strong

²⁹ Griffith, "Images, Islam and Christian Icons," 126. F. Nau, 'Le texte grec des récits de moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sināi', *OC* 2 (1902) 82.

³⁰ A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beyrouth, 1958) 38. The same conditions were negotiated for the city of 'Anāt, pp. 39-40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

³² See the first chapter of M. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge, 2011) 8-57. For a detailed description of the contents of early treaties up to the *Shurūṭ 'Umar* (Covenant of 'Umar), see Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam*, 18-69.

³³ Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*, 76-7; Griffith, 'Images, Islam, and Christian Icons', 122-31. Griffith's article was especially helpful in writing this summary.

aversion to the public display of crosses on the part some of the populace. Despite these edicts, the *Chronicle* of Theophanes³⁴ reports that during the reign of ‘Umar I, ‘Christ’s enemies took down many crosses’.³⁵ When he mentioned ‘Christ’s enemies’, Theophanes was referring to the Jews, but it was ‘Umar I’s policies that allowed this action to take place. Theophanes and Michael the Syrian both report that the mosque ‘Umar was building on the Temple Mount could not stand until they removed the cross from the Church of the Eleona (or possibly the Church of the Ascension), on the other side of the Kidron Valley.³⁶ During the reign of ‘Uthmān (r. 644-56), the emir ‘Amr ordered the destruction of crosses and forbade their public exhibition during festivals.³⁷ According to some reports, Christians were distressed at the Jews’ enthusiasm for following this ruling.³⁸ The reigns of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-707) and his son al-Walīd (r. 707-715) saw an intensification of competition for the public display of religious beliefs. ‘Abd al-Malik supposedly ordered the removal of all crosses from public spaces. He famously constructed the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem with its explicitly anti-Christian slogans from the Qur’ān, including Q 4.157, which has usually been understood to deny the crucifixion of Jesus.³⁹ He also instituted numismatic reform. Up until his day, the coinage of the caliphate was modelled on previous Byzantine coins, with ruling figures holding a staff topped with a cross. ‘Abd

³⁴ The chronicle covers up to 813, and was largely written by Theophanes’ friend George Syncellus. See C. Mango, ‘Who Wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes?’, *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta XVIII* (Belgrade, 1978) 9-17; repr. in *Byzantium and Its Image* (London, 1984), text 11.

³⁵ See Theophanes Confessor, *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor; repr. (Hildesheim, 1963) 1:342. For an English translation (quoted here), see *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, A.D. 284-813*, tr. C. Mango and R. Scott (Oxford, 1997) 476. See also Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4:421 (text) and 2:431 (translation).

³⁶ Theophanes Confessor, *Theophanis Chronographia*, 1:342. Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 2:431 (translation) and 4:421 (text). See also *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, 1:260-1 (text), 1:204 (translation); Chronicle of Séert, *Histoire nestorienne*, 304.

³⁷ Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4:422 (text), 2:432 (translation); *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, 1:262 (text), 1:205 (translation). For an English translation of this section see A. Palmer, S.P. Brock, and R.G. Hoyland (eds.), *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993) 78.

³⁸ Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 2:432 (translation) and 4:422 (text).

³⁹ See pp. 135-6.

al-Malik's reforms removed the crossbar of the staff, and the human figures of rulers were eventually removed, too.

Further restrictions against the *dhimmīs* occurred during the short reign of 'Umar (II) b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (r. 717-20). According to some sources, 'Umar II continued to enforce previous rulings by 'leaving no cross left unbroken'.⁴⁰ Some reports describe how he ordered that all painted crosses and displayed images be whitewashed, and he prohibited displaying crosses on top of churches. He was also allegedly a caliph who engaged in religious controversy with Christians, as reflected in the letters of 'Umar II and Leo III.⁴¹ The letters preserved under 'Umar's name are pseudonymous,⁴² but it is still interesting that he is remembered as engaging in debate with Christians.⁴³ To the pseudonymous author, debate about the veneration of the cross was a realistic topic of conversation between the two parties.⁴⁴ Al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) followed 'Umar II's lead by requiring that all crosses be removed from the tops of churches.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Griffith, 'Images, Islam, and Christian Icons', 128.

⁴¹ Reports of this correspondence occur in Greek, Armenian, and Arabic sources. There are purported letters preserved in Latin (PL 107, 315-24) and Armenian (A. Jeffery, 'Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between Umar II and Leo III', *HTR* 37 (1944) 269-332; repr. in N.A. Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.): Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, PA, 1993) 47-132). The Armenian and Latin texts originated independently of one another. See Griffith, 'Images, Islam, and Christian Icons', 133 n. 51; here Griffith also mentions a notice of an unpublished Christian Arabic version of Leo's letter.

⁴² S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III; with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*; CSCO 346 (Louvain, 1973) 162-71. The so-called Letter of Leo was probably originally written in Armenian.

⁴³ Theophanes reports that 'Umar wrote to Leo III, but does not mention a response from Leo (*Theophanis Chronographia*, 1:399; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 550). The Arabic Christian chronicler Agapius of Manbij reported that 'Umar wrote to Leo, inviting him to embrace Islam, but Leo answered with a cogent argument in favour of Christianity and refuting Islam (Agapius of Manbij, *Kitab al-'Unvan = Histoire universelle* (Paris, 1947) 503). Reports of the correspondence also occur in Armenian chronicles. See Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III*, 46. For an attempt to recover the Arabic letter, see J.-M. Gaudeul, 'The Correspondence between Leo and 'Umar: 'Umar's Letter Re-Discovered?', *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984) 109-57, who based his study on an the Arabic tract in D. Sourdel, 'Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d'époque 'Abbāsīde contre les chrétiens', *Revue des études islamiques* 34 (1966) 1-33.

⁴⁴ The Armenian account in which the letter is embedded is from the 11th or 12th century, but the bulk of the letter may date from the 8th or, more likely, the 9th century.

⁴⁵ Theophanes Confessor, *Theophanis Chronographia*, 439; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 607.

The more oppressive *Shurūt ‘Umar* (also called the *Covenant of ‘Umar*), despite its claims to go back to the reign of ‘Umar I, may be better associated with the policies that emerged during the reign of ‘Umar II. It was a later development that emerged from years of controversy over the status of *dhimmī* populations, especially in cities built by Muslims and conquered cities with a rapidly growing Muslim population.⁴⁶ The *Shurūt ‘Umar* likely did not come to ascendancy over other approaches to *dhimmī* populations or receive its final form until the time of Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), the first caliph to issue an edict containing most of the clauses of the final form of the *Shurūt ‘Umar*.⁴⁷ The restrictions of Mutawakkil’s edict included clothing restrictions, distinctive saddles, the destruction of new prayer-houses, seizure of a tenth of the houses of *dhimmīs*, the nailing of an image of a demon on their doors, prohibitions against non-Muslims serving in government and against their children attending Muslim schools or being taught by Muslims, the prohibition against public processions on Palm Sunday, and the levelling of graves that resembled Muslim graves.⁴⁸ Historical evidence from Muslim and non-Muslim sources suggests that Mutawakkil’s decree was widely enforced and that the same set of restrictions were renewed by various Muslim rulers century after century.⁴⁹

3.1.1. Muslim histories on Christian emperors and the cross

The historical accounts outlined above suggest that many Muslim rulers considered the sign of the cross was worthy of public censorship. In part, the public censorship of the cross was a way to purge the residual marks of former Byzantine hegemony and to discourage lingering popular feelings of loyalty to the Byzantine state. Muslim historians

⁴⁶ For discussion of the development of the *Shurūt ‘Umar* through conflict over the status of *dhimmī* populations, Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*, 58-87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁸ Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*, 103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-112.

take note of Christian emperors and their devotion to the cross as a symbol of power, both religious and political.⁵⁰ Constantine and Heraclius appear in Muslim histories, but their treatment by Muslim authors differs greatly: Constantine's memory is negative, whereas Heraclius' reputation is uniformly positive. This section will discuss the way in which Muslim writers perceived Constantine, the first Christian emperor, and Heraclius, Muḥammad's Byzantine contemporary, particularly with regard to their devotion to the cross. Analysis of the accounts shows that their treatment of each emperor has more to do with internal apologetic agendas than with relating historical events.

3.1.1.1. Constantine and the cross in Muslim writings

Constantine's reputation in the Muslim sources is the inverse of that of the Christian historians. As seen in Eusebius' writings, Christians celebrated the way that Constantine's rise to power ultimately resulted in the peace of the Church, its increasing prominence, and the proclamation of the apostolic faith in the Nicene Creed. The Christian tradition remembers Constantine as a saint. In contrast, the Muslim sources consider Constantine an originator of theological corruption within Christianity, as measured against the teachings of the Qu' rān and the *ḥadīth*. One of the earliest Muslim sources to mention Constantine, Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī's (d. 934) history has relatively little to say about the emperor. Apart from his acceptance of Christianity and the establishment of the new capital at Constantinople, the only activities al-Ṭabarī attributes to Constantine have to do with the belief in the crucifixion:

[Constantine] banished the remaining Israelites from Palestine [Filasṭīn] and Jordan [al-Urdunn] because, as he asserted, they had slain Jesus. Constantine found the wooden cross upon which they believed Christ had been crucified, and the Romans subsequently revered it and placed it among their treasures, where it remains to this day.⁵¹

⁵⁰ For an introduction, see N.M. El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

⁵¹ Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *The Ancient Kingdoms*, tr. Moshe Perlmann. *The History of al-Ṭabarī* 4 (Albany, NY, 1987) 98.

Twice in his short passage about Constantine, al-Ṭabarī signals his disagreement with the belief in the crucifixion of Jesus. His concern with Constantine has more to do with recording developments in Christian ‘error’ than with the emperor himself.

The concern about idolatrous worship of created things, both Christ and the cross, is another prominent theme in Muslim texts. Al-Ṭabarī’s comment that the cross was revered and treasured moves in this direction, but later writers charged Constantine with idolatry more sharply. Of the Muslim sources, ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s eleventh-century *Tathbūt dalā’il al-nubuwwa* (*Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophecy*)⁵² develops this theme most strikingly, using earlier Muslim and Christian sources to their utmost polemical effect. In the fifth chapter, he attempts to prove that Christianity had deviated from the true religion preached by Christ, alleging that Paul and Constantine both compromised the faith to fit in with the Roman pagan practices of the day. ‘Abd al-Jabbār informs his readers that this ‘Christianity’ was just paganism called by a new name. At the beginning of his account, ‘Abd al-Jabbār explains that, although the Christians had been faithful to Christ’s teachings for a couple of generations, they soon began to make additions and adjustments to make their religion more amenable to the Romans. For ‘Abd al-Jabbār, all of the Christians’ objectionable practices and beliefs can be explained as a compromise with Roman culture. He contends that the Romans did not become Christians, but rather the Christians were Romanised.⁵³

After recounting Paul’s compromises with Roman religion, ‘Abd al-Jabbār turns to the celebrated first Christian emperor, Constantine, and he cleverly uses the city of Ḥarrān

⁵² Arabic edition: *Tathbūt dalā’il al-nubuwwah*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān (Beirut, 1966). For an English translation of the section discussed here, see S.M. Stern, ‘‘Abd al-Jabbār’s Account of How Christ’s Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs’, *JTS* 19 (1968) 128-85, and, more recently, *Critique of Christian Origins: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, ed. and tr. G.S. Reynolds (Provo, UT, 2010).

⁵³ Stern, ‘‘Abd Al-Jabbār’s Account of How Christ’s Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs’, 140.

as a device to show that Constantine's forced Christian conversion of the empire⁵⁴ was little different from the paganism that preceded it. Polytheistic religion continued to flourish in Ḥarrān well into the Islamic period, only disappearing in the eleventh century CE, and its prevalent polytheism is attested in both Christian and Muslim sources.⁵⁵ Given its long history as a stronghold of paganism, it is no surprise that 'Abd al-Jabbār incorporates it into his polemic against Constantine, whom 'Abd al-Jabbār considers a great corruptor of Christianity. Ḥarrān is prominent in the account:⁵⁶ Constantine's mother Helena is said to have been an innkeeper from Ḥarrān and, after converting to Christianity and persecuting the philosophers and educated pagans of Athens, Constantine turns his fury on those in Ḥarrān. The emperor forces the 'Šabians' of Ḥarrān to eat cooked beans, a food forbidden in their religion, and any who refuse, he kills with the sword. 'Abd al-Jabbār's polemical intent guided his decision here. The patristic writers called Ḥarrān 'Hellenopolis' ('city of heathens'), which could easily be confused for the city in Bithynia named after Helena, 'Helenopolis', where Procopius thought she was born.⁵⁷ 'Abd al-Jabbār would not need to know Procopius' account to confuse the two homophonic place names, and it would suit his

⁵⁴ 'Abd al-Jabbār insists that Constantine imposed his version of Christianity by force after the Council of Nicea, and he killed all the pagans and the true followers of Jesus who refused to consent to the new creed. See *ibid.*, 144-5.

⁵⁵ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. 'Ḥarrān', accessed 11 October 2014, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/h-arran-COM_0270. See also *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, s.v. 'Harran' (Piscataway, NJ, 2011). For more on local religious practices in Ḥarrān, see T.M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden, 1992).

⁵⁶ The prevalence of the city of Ḥarrān in the account led Stern to contend that one of 'Abd al-Jabbār's sources must have been written by a pagan of Ḥarrān. Stern's idea certainly has more to its credit than S. Pines' theory that the source was an otherwise unknown Jewish-Christian sect (S. Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source* (Jerusalem, 1966)), but there are still several problems with Stern's theory. His strongest point is that the account records that the Sabians did not eat beans and that this suggests an inside source. However, there are other Christian and Muslim sources that report the same fact, so it is not decisive. (See Stern, 'Abd al-Jabbār's Account of How Christ's Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs', 164.) It is also unclear why a pagan of Ḥarrān would wish to claim Empress Helena as a fellow citizen. Stern's suggestion that the source used a Syriac tradition that Helena had been born in Kefar Paḥḥār, also near Edessa, and changed it to Ḥarrān may have more to it. (For the Syriac tradition, see *The Canons Ascribed to Mārūtā of Maipherqat: and related sources*, ed. A. Vööbus; 2 vols; CSCO 439-40 (Lovanii, 1982) 21 (text), 16 (translation)). However, it makes much more sense that 'Abd al-Jabbār himself made this adjustment for polemical purposes rather than that a Ḥarrānian pagan source that he used did so. There is no conceivable motive for the latter, and ample motive for the former.

⁵⁷ Procopius, *Buildings* 5.2.

literary aims well for Helena to hail from the ‘city of heathens’. This gives more sting to ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s report that, although Constantine outwardly practiced Roman religion, secretly his mother was teaching him the love of the cross, Christian practices, and belief in Christ. ‘Abd al-Jabbār summarises Constantine’s post-conversion religious reforms this way:

Constantine himself publicly worshipped Christ and the cross. But he left the religious practices of the Romans as he found them... The only thing which Constantine abolished was idolatry, and the only thing which he added was the veneration of Christ, belief in his divinity, and the worship of the cross.⁵⁸

In other words, even with Constantine’s conversion, not much had changed. Every mention of Ḥarrān fits this pattern: Constantine’s Christian education begins there, and his persecution of the polytheists of Ḥarrān emphasises that he is merely replacing the old idolatry with the worship of the cross and Christ. ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s decision to focus on the city of Ḥarrān makes perfect polemical sense in the context of showing that the Christianity of Constantine was substantively no different from the paganism that preceded it.

In addition to the blunt charge of idolatry, the Muslim sources also report other events concerning Constantine and the cross, particularly the events celebrated on the Feast of the Cross. The Muslim sources report Constantine’s vision of the cross, his victory with the cross as his new banner, and his subsequent devotion to the Christian faith. When compared to Christian sources, there are minor variations in the story, but the main thrust is the same: Constantine emerged from the battle victorious brandishing the sign of the cross as the symbol of the empire.⁵⁹ They also report that Constantine was responsible for the discovery of the wood on which Christ was believed to be crucified. In keeping with Muslim tradition, in each report they clearly indicate their belief that Christ was not crucified. In connection with the discovery of the wood of the cross, some of the Muslim historians had

⁵⁸ Stern, ‘‘Abd al-Jabbār’s Account of How Christ’s Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs’, 143-4.

⁵⁹ El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, 114-5.

clearly heard some version of the legend of the discovery of the cross.⁶⁰ Amongst refutations of alleged miracles, Muslim authors included the report that the touch of the wood of the cross supposedly resurrected a dead man. One Muslim author even connects this story with the annual Feast of the Cross.⁶¹

3.1.1.2. Heraclius in Muslim sources

In contrast to Constantine's bad reputation amongst Muslim writers, Heraclius was remembered as a pious and wise leader, even a would-be convert to Islam, if only his people would have considered the Prophet's claims.⁶² The historians do record Heraclius' devotion to the cross, reporting how he rejoiced at its recovery from the hands of the Persians and how he prayerfully returned it to Jerusalem. However, these sources do not condemn Heraclius' devotion to the cross. Instead they focus more on his evident piety and prayerfulness. In Muslim sources, Heraclius is a witness to the prophethood of Muḥammad.⁶³ In some accounts, Heraclius is even depicted as inviting his subjects to embrace Islam, but they refuse and threaten civil unrest, and he is unable to convert them.⁶⁴ It is perhaps a rather unexpected angle for Muslim historians to take, but the apologetic importance of Heraclius as a contemporary ruler with Muḥammad who confirmed his prophethood set the tone for the entire treatment of his reign, even his reverence for the relic of the True Cross.

In the Muslim sources, Heraclius is considered a wise and noble ruler because he recognised the identity of Muḥammad as a prophet of God. Al-Ṭabarī reports that Heraclius,

⁶⁰ G.S. Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd Al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins* (Leiden, 2004) 177-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² For the following description and a broad survey of Heraclius in Islamic sources, see El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, 39-54.

⁶³ For example, as depicted in the letters supposedly written between Heraclius and Muḥammad. See, *ibid.*, 43-6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

whilst he was in Jerusalem following the return of the True Cross from Persia, had a dream that troubled him. In his dream, he saw a circumcised man and was made to understand that this man would be triumphant, even ruling over the ground beneath his feet. When he awoke, Heraclius inquired of his advisors, and they suggested that the dream was referring to the Jews and that he should consequently initiate a persecution against them.⁶⁵ At just that moment, a messenger from among the Arabs reported the battles taking place in Arabia. Upon being deprived of his clothing(!), the Arab proved to be circumcised, and Heraclius intuited that Muḥammad was the figure indicated by the dream.⁶⁶ It is interesting that Heraclius' dream takes place in Jerusalem, just as Heraclius is returning the cross from the Persians. The account casts him as an antithesis to Constantine. He has a dream, not of his own victory, but of another conqueror, who will take Jerusalem, once more the home of the True Cross. In this case, the sign of the cross will not prevent the ground under his feet from being conquered and ruled by another. Even if Muslim sources were somewhat circumspect about whether the Byzantine Empire would withstand Arab advances,⁶⁷ this is a firm rejection of the Christian belief that the Byzantine Empire could not be fully defeated because of its trust in the cross.⁶⁸

3.1.2. The cross in Muslim *aḥādīth* and Christian apocalypse

The *ḥadīth* (plural *aḥādīth*) literature reflects concerns about the public display of the cross and the religious tension concerning it between Muslims and Christians. The cross appears in several *aḥādīth* as a feature of anti-Christian and anti-Byzantine polemic.⁶⁹ In

⁶⁵ Might this be a garbled memory of the animosity against the Jews earlier in Heraclius' reign?

⁶⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, et. al. (Leiden, 1879-1901) 3:1563; *The History of al- Ṭabarī, Volume VIII: The Victory of Islam*, tr. Michael Fishbein (Albany, NY, 1997) 101-2.

⁶⁷ The Arab armies' repeated failure to capture the city resulted in a tradition that placed the capture of Constantinople in the *eschaton*. See El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, 64-71.

⁶⁸ See pp. 189 n. 33.

⁶⁹ For the following examples of the cross in *ḥadīth*, see Swanson, 'Folly to the Ḥunafā': The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD', 66-7.

some *aḥādīth*, the cross is identified as a political symbol of the Rūm (the Byzantines), who are considered the enemies of Islam. Heraclius no doubt reinforced this connection when, just before the rise of Islam, he recaptured the cross from the Persians and piously paraded with it to Constantinople and Jerusalem. Another *ḥadīth*, transmitted on the authority of ‘Ā’isha, recounts Muḥammad’s personal distaste for the cross, removing everything cross-shaped or marked with a cross from his house. More poignantly, the cross is negatively associated with eschatology. According to one tradition, in addition to killing swine and abolishing the *jizya* (the poll tax on the *dhimma*), at his return ‘Īsā (Jesus) will break the cross into pieces. Another tradition confidently predicts the damnation of Christians, here called ‘the companions of the cross’, for their idolatrous worship of ‘Īsā.

The eschatological *aḥādīth* that mention the cross are of particular interest. These seem to issue a pointed challenge to the usual Christian teachings regarding the cross. For instance, an ancient Christian tradition held that the cross would precede Jesus at his second coming, based on Matthew 24.30: ‘Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples on earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and in great glory.’ From the late seventh century, apocalyptic texts emerged in response to the rise of Islam and in the context of the civil wars,⁷⁰ and the Christian apocalypses often anticipate the return of a victorious Greek king, conquering under the cross once again, and placing his crown upon the cross once his task is accomplished.⁷¹ Whilst one cannot show definitively that those who transmitted the *aḥādīth* were responding directly to these Christian traditions, the resonances are striking. The

⁷⁰ It was a time when Muslim, Jews, and Christians alike produced apocalyptic texts. For a brief overview of the Jewish texts, B. Kedar, ‘The Arab Conquests and Agriculture: A Seventh-Century Apocalypse, Satellite Imagery, and Palymology’, *Asian and African Studies* 19 (1985) 1-15. For Islamic texts, M. Cook, ‘An Early Islamic Apocalyptic Chronicle’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52 (1995) 25-9; W. Madelung, ‘Apocalyptic Prophecies in the Ḥimṣ in the Umayyad Age’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986) 141-85. See also the four articles on Islamic, Zoroastrian, and Christian apocalypses in *Medieval Encounters* 4.3 (1998).

⁷¹ See the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius: *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, ed. and tr. G.J. Reinink; CSCO 540-1, *Scriptores Syri* 220-1 (Lovanii, 1993) 44-5 (text), 71-4 (translation).

inversion of the Christian tradition – not that the cross will precede Christ at the *parousia*, but that he will return to break the cross – is very interesting indeed. The *ḥadīth* that condemns Christians for worshipping ‘Īsā and calls them ‘companions of the cross’ is also intriguing. In Christian apologies against Judaism and Islam, the authors repeatedly insist that whatever worship they offer to the cross is actually offered to the one who was crucified upon it. In this way, through the transmission of this *ḥadīth* early Islam firmly refuses to accept this explanation, even on its own terms.

By discussing the political themes that appear in *aḥādīth*, we approach explicitly religious perspectives of the cross. In the Islamic tradition, the animosity towards the cross and Christian belief in the crucifixion has its roots in the Qur’ān and the traditional understanding of its teachings about ‘Īsā son of Mary. The Muslim suppression of the public display of the cross cannot be fully understood without looking closely at the Qur’ān and the traditional *tafāsīr* (‘commentaries’; singular *tafsīr*) that clarified the holy book’s more obscure points.

3.2. The Rejection of the Death and Crucifixion of Jesus in Islam

The censure of the public display of the cross was not entirely down to politics. It is difficult to know how much nascent Islam motivated the first waves of Arab armies in their conquest, but it was not long before the religious impulses of the new faith began to shape every aspect of life. The Qur’ānic passages that touch on the fate of Jesus and the early *tafāsīr* that interpret them play a pivotal role in the Muslim-Christian debate over Christ from the beginning of Islam to the present day.

3.2.1. The death and crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'ān

It is common for introductory textbooks on Islam to assert that the Qur'ān clearly denies the death of Jesus on the cross.⁷² Most Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified and has not died, rather he was taken up bodily into heaven by God whence he will return at the end of time before the final judgement. According to this account, Jesus is a mortal, but his death is a future event, not a thing of the past. Nevertheless, a look at the Qur'ānic material on the death of Jesus and his crucifixion reveals more ambiguity unless read in keeping with traditional exegesis. There are three main subjects to consider in these passages: references to the death of Jesus, the denial that the Jews crucified Jesus, and the ignominy of death by crucifixion.

3.2.1.1. The Death of Jesus in the Qur'ān

There are several passages in the Qur'ān on the death of Jesus. One of these passages is Q 19.33, in which the infant Jesus speaks miraculously from his cradle, 'Peace be on me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised.'⁷³ A little earlier in *āyah* (verse) 15, essentially the same thing is said in the third person about John the Baptist. The frequent polemic against Christians in *surah* 5 includes several allusions to the death of Jesus. *Āyah* 17 says, 'Unbelievers are those who say, "God is *al-Masīh*, the son of Mary." Say to them, "Who can exert control over God in any way if he wishes to destroy *al-Masīh*, the son of Mary, his mother and all who are on earth?"' Here the Qur'ān is primarily concerned with asserting God's omnipotence, but it is noteworthy that it does so by reference to God's ability to destroy Christ. Similarly, *āyah* 75 reads, 'The *Masīh*, the son of Mary, was only a messenger, before whom other messengers had passed away,' implying that since

⁷² See, for example, B. Walker, *Foundations of Islam: The Making of a World Faith* (London, 1998) 200.

⁷³ Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of the Qur'ān are from Alan Jones (tr.), *The Qur'ān* (Exeter, 2007).

he is human like other messengers, Jesus is also mortal. Finally, *āyah* 117 of the same *sūrah*, in the midst of Jesus' own account before God about his teachings, says, 'I said to them only what You ordered me to say, "Serve God, my Lord and your Lord". I was a witness over them as long as I was among them. When *You took me*, it was You who were the watcher over them.' The English translation here masks the reference to Jesus' death that one could perceive in the Arabic. The Arabic verb here translated as 'you took' (*tawaffaytanī*) is used for God causing someone to die in nearly every other case when, as here, it is found in the fifth form.⁷⁴ Q 3.55 contains a similar reference to God receiving Jesus, this time spoken by God: 'O Jesus, *I am going to take you* and raise you to Me and cleanse you of those who do not believe and set those who follow you above the unbelievers till the Day of Resurrection.' The phrase translated 'I am going to take you' also uses a form of *tawaffā*. In the twenty-three other times that the verb occurs in the Qur'ān, translators consistently understand it to mean 'to cause to die'.⁷⁵ The only reason that it is translated 'to take' in Q 5.117 and 3.55 is because Jesus is the direct object of the verb. Such a translation choice owes more to traditional exegesis than to lexical meanings or grammar.⁷⁶

3.2.1.2. The denial that the Jews crucified Jesus

In the passages discussed above, the Qur'ān either directly discusses the death of Jesus or at least alludes to it. As Gregory Parrinder has observed, these passages taken on their own do not imply that Jesus' death is a future event,⁷⁷ although traditional *tafāsīr* insist that his death is yet to take place (see below). Jesus' crucifixion is mentioned somewhat elliptically in Q 4.156-9:

156. Because [the people of the Scripture] disbelieved and uttered a great calumny

⁷⁴ See A.H.M. Zahniser, 'The Forms of Tawaffā in the Qur'ān: A Contribution to Christian-Muslim Dialogue', *Muslim World* 79 (1989) 14-24.

⁷⁵ G.S. Reynolds, 'The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?', *BSOAS* 72 (2009) 239-40.

⁷⁶ Reynolds, 'The Muslim Jesus', *passim*.

⁷⁷ G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (New York, 1977) 105.

- against Mary,
157. And because they said, ‘We killed *al-Masīh*,
Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of God
- 157a. - They did not kill him nor crucify him,
But it was made to seem so to them.
Those who disagree about him are in doubt about it.
They have no knowledge of it
And only follow conjecture.
Certainly, they did not kill him.
158. No. God raised him to Himself.
God is Mighty and Wise.
159. There is not one of the people of Scripture
But will truly believe before his death.
On the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.

This passage, particularly *āyah* 157a, features prominently in Muslim-Christian discussion of the crucifixion from its first appearance in controversial literature in the eighth century to the present day. The words *wa-lakin shubbiha lahum* (‘but it was made to seem so to them’) are notoriously vague; the verbal root *sh.b.h.* (شبهه) in this passive form occurs only here in the Qur’ān.⁷⁸ Furthermore the pronoun ‘it’ can refer to the event of crucifixion (as in Jones’s translation above) or to the crucified person, as it does in Bell’s translation: ‘though they did not kill him and did not crucify him, but he was counterfeited for them’.⁷⁹ The latter seems a more difficult interpretation to justify on the basis of the passage, and likely it reflects the early *tafsīr* tradition as discussed below. The idea that the verb refers to the event itself begs the question: does the passage intend to deny that Christ was killed or does it simply convey that the Jews were unable to contravene God’s will regardless of whether they crucified Christ? That is to say, if Christ died, did he die according to the will of the God or according to that of the Jews? Despite the fact that many scholars continue to assert that the Qur’ān denies the crucifixion, one could reasonably hold that the language is simply too vague.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ T. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’ān: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford, 2009) 33.

⁷⁹ R. Bell (tr.), *The Qur’ān* (Edinburgh, 1937) 1:89.

⁸⁰ As do Reynolds, ‘The Muslim Jesus’, 238; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’ān*, 18.

3.2.1.3. The ignominy of death by crucifixion

One possible reason for the denial that Christ died at the hands of the Jews by crucifixion is that such a death was considered to be too ignoble for a prophet. Thus aside from Q 4.157, the Qur'ān mentions crucifixion as a punishment on five other occasions, four of which mention it as Pharaoh's favourite way to execute criminals.⁸¹ The fifth occurs in Q 5.33:

The recompense of those who wage war against God and his messenger
And who wreak mischief in the land
Is that they will be slaughtered or crucified
Or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides
Or will be banished from the land.
That is shame for them in this world,
And in the next world they will have a grievous punishment.

This verse lists crucifixion amongst other punishments worthy of those who 'wage war against God and his messenger', and it gives legal grounds for crucifixion to be used as a punishment for heresy.⁸² Those who endure such punishments receive shame in this life and worse punishment in the next. On the basis of this verse, some argue that according to Islam crucifixion is too shameful a death for so renowned a messenger of God as Jesus, son of Mary.

In summary, the evidence of the Qur'ān alone is inconclusive.⁸³ Several passages directly speak of Jesus' death without any reference to his death taking place in the future. A straightforward reading of these passages, without recourse to 'reading them backwards',⁸⁴ suggests rather that his death took place before his ascension. The famous passage in Q 4.157 which claims that the Jews 'did not kill him or crucify him, *wa-lakin shubbiha lahum*' proves to be more ambiguous than a surface reading suggests. The association of crucifixion with punishments fit for heretics and opponents of God and the

⁸¹ See Q 12.41; 7.124; 20. 71; 26.49.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ However, some have even concluded that the Qur'an *affirms* the crucifixion. See S.A. Mourad, 'Does the Qur'ān Deny or Assert Jesus's Crucifixion and Death?' in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London, 2011) 356-7.

⁸⁴ Reynolds, 'The Muslim Jesus', 245.

Prophet in Q 5.33 might be extended to mean that it is an unfit manner of death for a prophet of God, but the Qurʾān never says so directly. To get a fuller picture of the development of traditional Muslim understanding on this point, one must turn to the early commentary tradition, the *tafāsīr*.

3.2.2. The crucifixion in the early *tafāsīr* traditions

In chapter 100 of his *De Haeresibus*, John of Damascus interprets Q 4.157 as a denial of the crucifixion of Jesus, providing one of the earliest instances of this interpretation amongst Muslims and Christians alike.⁸⁵ Likewise, from its inception, most traditional Muslim commentaries have assumed that this verse unambiguously denies the crucifixion of Jesus.⁸⁶ This section will focus on the early Muslim traditions,⁸⁷ ending with the *tafāsīr* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/ 923). Al-Ṭabarī's *tafāsīr* collects earlier traditions on verses of the Qurʾān, each introduced by an *isnād* (a chain of transmission), and he judges which are the most trustworthy explanations. Al-Ṭabarī is thus a useful resource for the early traditions as well as an interpreter in his own right who heavily influenced the *mufasssīrūn* (commentators) who came after him.

By far the most common understanding of the passage until the time of al-Ṭabarī is that a substitute was killed in Jesus' place whilst God took Jesus up into heaven. There are

⁸⁵ On John of Damascus and Islam, see D.J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The 'Heresy of the Ishmaelites'* (Leiden, 1972).

⁸⁶ The exception to this general rule are Shiʿī Ismaʿīli commentators. See T. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qurʾān*, esp. pp. 75-89.

⁸⁷ Todd Lawson's book *The Crucifixion and the Qurʾān* is an extensive survey of the history of the *tafāsīr* on Q 4.157 from the earliest attributed sources to the modern period. It is useful for an introductory overview of the traditional, and diverging, Islamic opinions. However, this book should also be used with caution. David Thomas' scathing review objects to an important printing mistake, the repetitive presentation of material, and the fact that two of the substantive chapters had already been published as articles so a monograph study was hardly required (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130 (2010) 319-21). My own objection is to the presentation of material, which is occasionally misleading. Many of the early *tafāsīr* are only preserved in al-Ṭabarī's tenth-century work, and, as Lawson admits (p. 70), al-Ṭabarī's editorial hand is ever-present in his work. At other points, Lawson does not reveal the source for a certain tradition (eg., pp. 48-9, 56). Lawson's very first *tafāsīr* purports to be by ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687), but it is in fact only known through a tenth-century abridgement of an eighth-century text (see pp. 44-8), and beginning in this way does little to inspire confidence in Lawson's method.

a number of versions of the story. The earliest attribution (in *isnād*) goes back to Mujāhid (d.104/722), who simply explains that they crucified a man whom they mistook for Jesus because he had been made to look like him.⁸⁸ In the traditions cited by al-Ṭabarī, early *mufassirūn* suggest various identities for the substitute: a volunteer from among the disciples,⁸⁹ named as Sergius,⁹⁰ or Judas.⁹¹ Another early tradition attributed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767) explains that the one crucified was a guard whom the Jews had placed over Jesus.⁹² Al-Ṭabarī does not mention this tradition, perhaps because he did not know it or perhaps he thought it more plausible for a disciple to have died in Jesus' place rather than an enemy. Al-Ṭabarī himself favoured the two traditions attributed to Wahb ibn Munabbih (d.114/732). The main difference between the two traditions is that in the first Jesus' likeness is cast onto all of his disciples and then one of them volunteers to die, whereas in the second the likeness is cast onto Judas, who is falsely identified when he offers to hand Jesus over to the Jews and subsequently crucified. Al-Ṭabarī described the first, in which all of the disciples who are with Jesus are transformed to look like him, as the most reliable. However, his concluding comment on the traditions seems to support the following explanation as well:

...[T]he people who were with 'Īsā in the house scattered from the house before the Jews came upon him. 'Īsā remained, and his likeness was cast upon one of his companions, who still remained with him in the house. And 'Īsā was raised up, and the one who was changed into the likeness of 'Īsā was killed. And his companions thought that the one crucified was 'Īsā, because of what they saw happened to the one who was made to look like him. And

⁸⁸ Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad al-Surtī (Qatar, 1395/1976), 180. Al-Ṭabarī also lists two other traditions from Mujāhid in his *tafsīr*. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 48–49.

⁸⁹ See the first tradition attributed to Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 114/732) and those attributed to Qatāda ibn Dī'āma (d. 117-8/735-6). Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1955), 9:368–370; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 50, 54-5.

⁹⁰ See the tradition attributed to Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. 150-1/767-8): Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, 9:371-3; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 61-2.

⁹¹ See the second tradition attributed to Wahb ibn Munabbih. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, 9:568-70; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 50-2. This has intriguing resonance with the Syriac *Acts of Thomas*, which portray the apostle Judas Thomas (the *other* Judas), who evangelised India, as Jesus' identical twin brother.

⁹² Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 60-1.

the truth of the matter was hidden from them, because his being raised up and the changing of the one who was killed into his likeness happened after the scattering of his friends. ...⁹³

Regardless of differences in small details, al-Ṭabarī and other early exegetes predominantly favoured the view that someone was crucified in Jesus' place, and this traditional exegesis has affected how related passages in the Qur'ān have been understood ever since.

3.2.3. The cross and crucifixion in Muslim apologetics

Despite evident public reaction to the presence of crosses and discussion of the cross in *ḥadīth* literature, the extant early Muslim apologetic literature shows little interest in the cross, the crucifixion, or the atonement. Most focus on the Trinity and Incarnation as the main points of contention, sparing little space for other topics. In the 3rd/9th century, the Zaydī imām al-Ḳāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥasanī, in his anti-Christian writings, briefly refers to the crucifixion as a 'ransom'.⁹⁴ Later in the same century, the famous Mu'tazilī controversialist Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq (d. ca. 861) wrote a refutation of the three main sects of the Christians⁹⁵ in two parts, one focusing on the Trinity and the other on the Incarnation. His first part mentions the crucifixion briefly in his opening summary of Christian beliefs.⁹⁶ The crucifixion features more prominently in his second part, where he criticises in turn the beliefs about the crucifixion held by different Christian communities. His main objective, however, is to refute the doctrine of the Incarnation rather than to reject the historicity of the crucifixion, so he assumes the reality of the crucifixion as a way to tease out the difficulties

⁹³ Quoted in Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 71.

⁹⁴ *Al-radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, ed. I. di Matteo, 'Confuzaione contro I Cristiani dello zaydita al- Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 9 (1921-2) 301-64. See *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Incarnation'*, ed. and tr. D. Thomas (Cambridge, 2002) 17.

⁹⁵ I.e., the Melkites, Miaphysites, and the Church of the East.

⁹⁶ *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'*, ed. and tr. D. Thomas (Cambridge, 1992) 72-8.

it poses for the Incarnation.⁹⁷ The crucifixion appears in later polemics in a similar manner, questioning whether Christ, as God, could truly suffer death.⁹⁸

There is also an Islamic version of the story of Bashīr/Bēsēr, an advisor of Byzantine Emperor Leo III, who is bested in debate by a captive *mutakallimūn*, a certain Wāṣil al-Dimashqī. One of the challenges raised by Wāṣil to Bashīr is, ‘Do you worship the cross as a likeness for Jesus, Mary’s son, because he was crucified?’ When Bashīr answers affirmatively, Wāṣil wants to know whether the crucifixion happened with Christ’s ‘approval’ or ‘resentment’. Bashīr senses a trap – if he answers ‘with approval’, then Wāṣil will say that he got what he wanted, but if he says, ‘with resentment’, Wāṣil will wonder, ‘Why do you worship what he himself could not stop?’ Bashīr avoids the subject and excuses himself soon thereafter, and on the following day he returns, having recruited a priest to help him debate the wily Wāṣil.⁹⁹

Despite the relative paucity of Muslim apologetic texts that discuss the issue of the crucifixion, atonement, or veneration of the cross, the texts discussed above do reflect the questions that Christians felt compelled to address in their own apologetic writings. Frequently, Christian apologists discuss the issue of the cross in the midst of defending the doctrine of the Incarnation. Equally frequent is the dilemma question about whether the crucifixion happened according to the will of the Jews or the will of Christ. As discussed above, the context of the Qur’ānic passage which purportedly rejects the crucifixion of Christ is concerned with whether the Jews were able to accomplish their *will* to crucify Christ in contradiction of the will of God.

⁹⁷ *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity*, 116-25, 155-65.

⁹⁸ E.g. al-Nāshī’ al-Akbar [q.v.], in J. van Ess, *Frühe mu’tazilitische Häresiographie* (Beirut 1971) 83-4; al-Bāḳillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, ed. R. McCarthy (Beirut 1957) 97-8; cf. *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity*, 45 and 79 respectively.

⁹⁹ S.H. Griffith, ‘Bashīr/Bēsēr: Boon Companion of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III; the Islamic Recension of his Story in Leiden Oriental MS 951 (2)’, *LM* 103 (1990) 319.

4. Conclusion

By the middle of the seventh century, the world was much changed. The socio-political context of John of Dara's ninth-century homily for the Feast of the Cross would have been unimaginable to the sixth-century authors Jacob of Serugh and Narsai. In this new socio-political context, Eusebius' expectations that the cross was an invincible military standard would seem naïve, and at the least would require substantial reinterpretation, as one can see from the Christian apocalyptic literature of the late seventh century. The Persian invasion and its aftermath was a trying time, resulting in doubts about the power of the relic of the True Cross and renewed hostilities between Jews and Christians. The advent of Arab power and the eventual religious challenge of Islam were even greater challenges. The historical record of the suppression of the cross in the land of Islam correlates with traditional interpretation of the Qu'rān, especially as this tradition had crystallised by the early tenth century. According to Islam, the central event of the Christian gospel had simply not happened. The sign of the cross as an imperial and a religious symbol was thus a public scandal, a historical corruption, and a theological error. No wonder Christians in the eighth and ninth centuries began articulating their defences of the cult of the cross with such fervour. It is to the conflict over the cross and crucifixion between Christians, Jews, and Muslims that we now turn.

Chapter 5: The Cross in Apologetic Texts against Judaism and Islam

1. Introduction

The crucifixion of Christ had long been a standard feature of Christian apologetic regardless of the identity of the religious opponent. From the beginning, it was necessary for Christians to explain to their Jewish contemporaries why Christ had to die and how this fit with messianic prophecy. To argue their point, Christians engaged creatively with Old Testament texts, employing various exegetical arguments, amongst which were an ever expanding number of types of the cross. In the same way that Narsai's homily *On the Discovery of the Cross* brings forward type after type of the cross, from the time of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, many anti-Jewish apologies make much of the types of the cross. No two lists are identical, but they all point to the same conclusion: read retrospectively through the crucifixion of Christ, one can see the shadow of the cross in every piece of wood, in every otherwise unlikely instrument of divine power. The treatises argued for the end of the age of God's favour for Judaism, superseded by the Christian church, whose gospel had spread 'to the ends of the earth'. This confident position had been confirmed by the conversion of Constantine, and it was even held by Christians like Narsai who lived under non-Christian rule.

Whilst anti-Jewish treatises had long been a part of the Christian intellectual tradition, it is difficult to ascertain the circumstances in which each work was written. Are the treatises an academic exercise or do they reveal genuine interreligious contact? Stanley Kazan has observed how the same author, Jacob of Serugh, can sound distant and measured in his homilies against the Jews whilst his letter to the Ḥimyarite Christians who suffered

persecution at the hands of a Jewish kingdom is fiery and angry in tone.¹ Kazan's analysis is helpful and goes a long way towards demonstrating a shared polemic tradition (styled the 'tradition of Ephraem'²) in Syriac texts over the course of eight centuries. At the same time, one wonders whether the extreme circumstances of the Himyarite persecution might conjure such strong emotions that comparison with texts written in the midst of everyday coexistence might be somewhat deceptive. One could reasonably expect a more moderate tone in the latter case. In any case, it is difficult to pinpoint the historical circumstances and degree of interreligious contact for any given treatise. The question about whether the controversy reflected 'real contact' is a legitimate one, but it is difficult to answer satisfactorily.

Whilst there is legitimate reason to question whether a given polemical text indicates real contact with the religious other, particularly when it favours stereotyped arguments, it is a different thing altogether to posit that the opponent is really a stand-in for an entirely different adversary. In some cases, this leap is reasonable: Christian controversialists had long indulged in calling their opponents 'Jews', so why not assume that sometimes their ostensibly 'Jewish' opponents are not really Jews at all? After all, the Syrian Orthodox had long called Melkites and the so-called Nestorians 'the new Jews'. Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East, called the Muslims 'the new Jews' in his letters,³ and his contemporary Theodore bar Kōnī remarks that Muslims 'believe Jewishly'.⁴ David Olster makes just this leap, arguing that the seventh-century anti-Jewish treatises are really aimed

¹ S. Kazan, 'Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews', *OC* 49, 60-6.

² *Ibid.*, 70-8.

³ T.R. Hurst, 'The Syriac Letters of Timothy I (727-823): A Study in Christian-Muslim Controversy' (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1986), 35; S.H. Griffith, 'Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century', *Jewish History* 3 (1988) 65.

⁴ Although it must be admitted that he does not call his opponent Muslims, the arguments he addresses only make sense coming from a Muslim. See S.H. Griffith, 'Chapter Ten of the Scholion: Theodore Bar Kōnī's Apology for Christianity', *OCP* 47 (1981) 158-188. For the reference to 'believing Jewishly', see *Liber scholiorum: textus*, ed. A. Scher, CSCO 66 (Paris, 1912) 276 (text); *Livre des scolies: recension de Séert*, tr. R. Hespel and R. Draguet (Louvain, 1981-2) 205 (translation). The Urmiah recension of Theodore's *Scholia* has an additional section defending the veneration of the cross in chapter 9. The argument there does not add to those discussed in this chapter. See *Livre des scolies (recension d'Urmiah)*, ed. and tr. R. Hespel; CSCO 447, *Scriptores Syri* 193 (Louvain, 1983) 138-41.

at Muslim competitors.⁵ However, the texts in question, styled as anti-Jewish treatises from beginning to end, show no indication that their true targets are Muslims. Not only does this require one to read against the grain of the treatises and disregard anything that does not fit as mere window-dressing, Olster's arguments do not engage deeply with the important studies that demonstrate the historicity of conflict between Christians and Jews during the early decades of the seventh century and after the Arab conquest.⁶ Several of the anti-Jewish treatises of the seventh century are also too early to be 'in reality' responses to the religious challenge of Islam, as the new religion was still in its formative years.

Olster's misstep here is still understandable: there is indeed continuity between traditional Christian argumentation against Judaism and the development of anti-Muslim arguments. The presence of such continuity, however, does not mean that one is a substitute for the other, but rather it points to a new stage in the history of the articulation of Christian doctrine over against outside objections. Others have already elegantly and effectively rebutted Olster's claims, and there is no need to repeat their efforts here.⁷ This chapter will focus instead on both the inter-connectedness and the distinction between anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises.

This chapter will bring into closer conversation the arguments in defence of the crucifixion and veneration of the cross that appear in both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim apologetic texts. As with the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the pre-existing tradition of countering Jewish objections to the cross and crucifixion provided ready-made arguments for importation into anti-Muslim apologetics. The traditional arguments, however, are adapted along the way to fit the particular challenge of Islam, and some of the

⁵ D. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response and the Literary Construct of the Jew* (Philadelphia, 1994) 116-31.

⁶ Eg., Déroche and Dagron, 'Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII^e siècle', 17-273.

⁷ See V. Déroche, 'Polémique anti-judaïque et émergence de l'Islam (7^e-8^e s.)', *REB* 57 (1999) 141-61; A. Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews', 249-74.

arguments are new.⁸ Because many themes appear in both sets of literature, this chapter is organised thematically, showing the relationships between the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sources. When the anti-Muslim literature modifies or diverts from the anti-Jewish material, special care will be taken to explore how this is done and why.

2. Defending the Cross in Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Apologies

It is no surprise that Christian apologetic literature directed against monotheistic competitors, such as Judaism or Islam, focuses primarily on the theological complexities of the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Since Christians had long been arguing about these doctrines amongst themselves and with outsiders, particularly the Jews, they had at their disposal an arsenal of logical arguments, patristic citations, and biblical prooftexts – some of which were already conveniently drawn up into *florilegia* for use in religious controversy – that they could manipulate to answer the questions of the Muslims. In apologetic works, debate about the crucifixion and the cross occurred most frequently in two places: first, where the difficulties posed by the doctrine of the Incarnation were in focus, and, second, where there were questions over the validity of certain Christian practices, such as veneration of crosses and relics.

Nearly every anti-Jewish treatise contains extensive biblical *florilegia* for every point of debate. This includes lists of Old Testament types of the cross, most of which are already attested in homilies and other traditional materials. This is one of the most popular

⁸ For the Melkite tradition of apologetics, see M.N. Swanson, 'Folly to the Ḥunafā': The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD'; *idem.*, 'Folly to the Ḥunafā': The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy', in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. E. Grypeou, M.N. Swanson, and D. Thomas; *History of Christian-Muslim Relations 5* (Leiden, 2006) 237-56; *idem.*, 'The Cross of Christ in the Earliest Arabic Melkite Apologies', in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, ed. J.S. Nielsen and S.K. Samir. (Leiden, 1994) 115-45.

tools for ‘proving’ that the Old Testament anticipates the death of the Messiah on the cross. The typology of the cross in the Syriac homilies as well as the types of the cross used polemically against Jews and Muslims to defend the veneration of the cross are charted in Appendix C for those keen to see how these types were used in different contexts. Since types of the cross have already been discussed at some length, this section will focus on other prominent features of the apologetic literature, many of which do not occur in the homiletical material surveyed in chapter three. I offer the following chart for a basic orientation to the large number of Christian apologetic texts surveyed in this chapter.⁹ I will give more detail about these texts as they are introduced in the discussion below.

Author/Text	Date	Language	Opponent
<i>Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila</i>	Second half of 6 th century	Greek	Jews
<i>Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus</i>	Second half of 6 th century	Greek	Jews
<i>Teaching of Jacob the Forcibly-Baptised</i>	630s	Greek	Jews
<i>Dialogue of Papiskos and Philo with a Monk</i>	630s-40s	Greek	Jews
Leontius of Neapolis, <i>Against the Jews</i>	640s	Greek	Jews
<i>Trophies of Damascus</i>	Second half of the 7 th century	Greek	Jews
<i>Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem</i>	Late 7 th century (?)	Greek	Jews
John of Damascus, <i>On Heresies</i> 100	(d. 749 CE)	Greek	Muslims
<i>Dialogue of Sergius the Stylite with a Jew</i> (West Syrian)	8 th century	Syriac	Jews
Timothy I, <i>Dialogue of Caliph Mahdi</i> (East Syrian)	781 CE	Syriac	Muslims
Theodore bar Kōnī, <i>Scholion</i> 10 (East Syrian)	Late 8 th century	Syriac	Muslims
Theodore Abū Qurrah, various works	Late 8 th -early 9 th century	Greek, Arabic	Muslims, Jews
Abū Rā' itāh, <i>First and Second Risālah</i>	Early 9 th century	Arabic	Muslims
Nonnus of Nisibis, <i>Apologetic Treatise</i>	Early 9 th century	Syriac	Muslims
<i>Letter of Leo III to 'Umar II</i>	8 th or 9 th century	Armenian	Muslims
Al-Kindī, <i>Apology</i>	Early 9 th century	Arabic	Muslims
<i>The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem</i>	9 th century	Arabic	Muslims

⁹ The dates given here are only approximate, and many of these texts cannot be dated precisely. It is also somewhat misleading to call them all ‘apologetic’ texts, as they represent several different genres. Nonetheless, they all have apologetic elements that touch on the topic at hand.

This section addresses four topics. First, it explores the extent to which Christian apologists show their degree of knowledge of Muslim attitudes to the crucifixion and the cross, as discussed in the previous chapter. Second, it explores interrelated complications of the doctrine of the Incarnation that arise from the crucifixion. The question of whether Jesus is cursed is entirely limited to anti-Jewish apologetic. Both Muslim and Jews shared the view that death on a cross is too shameful to be endured by a prophet or the Messiah. The anti-Muslim treatises feature dilemma questions about whether Christ died willingly. The third part focuses on the allegation that the veneration of crosses and the relic of the cross is idolatry, a theme shared by later anti-Jewish texts and anti-Muslim texts. The final theme is the debate over worldly success, which is more loosely, but still importantly, tied to the crucifixion and the sign of the cross.

2.1. Acknowledgement of Muslim Views of the Cross and Crucifixion

Many of the anti-Muslim treatises assume knowledge of Islamic beliefs on the part of the reader and simply launch directly into the argument without comment. However, the treatises that do outline Islamic views give invaluable insight into how Christian thinkers understood the perspective of Islam and what they assumed their audience knew or needed to know. In the 100th chapter of John of Damascus' *On Heresies*, the Damascene introduces a current heresy, that of the 'Ishmaelites' or 'Saracens'.¹⁰ His treatise was foundational for later Christian responses to Islam, so the information he provides about the religion is significant. In his description of Muslim beliefs about Christ, he notes that they believe that

¹⁰ *On Heresies* is in volume four (*Liber de haeresibus. Opera polemica*) of *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, ed. B. Kotter and R. Volk (Berlin, 1969). See pp. 60-7 for chapter 100. Alternatively, for his works against Islam along with the Greek corpus of Theodore Abū Qurrah: *Schriften zum Islam*, ed. R. Gleü and A.T. Khoury (Würzburg, 1995). For an English translation, see N.A. Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.): Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, PA, 1993) 139-44. Newman's book collects several Christian-Muslim dialogues already published in translation and presents them conveniently side-by-side. For studies on John's chapter on Islam, see D.J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*; P. Schadler, 'Christian Heresiological Discourse and Islam: John of Damascus and the Last Heresy' (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2011).

the Jews unlawfully intended to crucify Jesus, but ‘they crucified his likeness (alone) (Q 4.156); but Christ himself was not crucified, [the Ishmaelites] say, nor did he die. For God took him into heaven to himself (Q 5.116) because he loved him’.¹¹ Other Christian apologists also indicate their awareness of Muslim views. The debate between Caliph Mahdi and East Syrian Catholicos Timothy I¹² permits Mahdi to present the Muslim belief that Christ did not die but was taken up into heaven, and when Timothy challenges him with Qu’rānic passages that refer to Jesus’ death, Mahdi explains that Jesus’ death will happen in the *eschaton*.¹³ The letter of Leo III to ‘Umar II¹⁴ also alludes to the fact that Muslims deny that Jesus has died.¹⁵ John of Damascus’ chapter also rebuffs Muslim accusations of Christian idolatry because of their veneration of the cross. As many Christian apologists would do in the years to come, he compares the veneration of the cross to the Muslims’ reverence for the stone of the Ka’ba.¹⁶

2.2. Arguing for the Incarnation: Defence of the Crucifixion

Both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises must respond to the challenges that the crucifixion poses for a coherent Christology. Both Jewish and Muslim interlocutors shared the view that death by crucifixion was too shameful an end for the messiah or a prophet. Although a common theological issue was at stake, responses to these rivals differed: only

¹¹ My translation.

¹² The debate supposedly occurred in 781 CE. For an edition and German translation: Timothy I, *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, tr. M Heimgartner; CSCO 244-245 (Louvain, 2011). For the English translation, see ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, in *Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshūni, Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus*, ed. A. Mingana; vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1928); repr. in Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 163-267.

¹³ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:57 (text); ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, 40-2 (translation).

¹⁴ Although contemporary histories report correspondence between the two rulers, the extant letters are pseudonymous, and they contain arguments representative of eighth- and ninth-century Christian-Muslim debate. The most extensive version of the correspondence is preserved by the Armenian historian Ghewond. For the English translation, see A. Jeffery, ‘Ghevond’s Text of the Correspondence between Umar II and Leo III’, *HTR* 37 (1944) 269-332; repr. in Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 47-132.

¹⁵ Jeffery, ‘Ghevond’s Text of the Correspondence between Umar II and Leo III’, 314.

¹⁶ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 141-2.

in conversation with Jews did Christians address whether Christ was ‘cursed’ by being hung on a tree, and only in response to Muslims did Christians have to address whether Christ died willingly.

2.2.1. Is Christ ‘cursed’?

Deuteronomy 21.23 reads, ‘... anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.’ Paul cites this verse in Galatians 3, arguing that in the crucifixion Christ became a curse for the sake of human beings in order to free them from ‘the curse of the law’ and to extend the blessing of Abraham to all nations (vv. 13-4). Whilst Paul uses Deuteronomy constructively and not polemically, by the time of Justin Martyr, Christians were using this passage as ammunition against their religious rivals. In Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, Trypho the Jew expresses doubt over whether the Messiah could die so shameful a death as crucifixion, which is cursed by the Law.¹⁷ Justin alludes to the afflictions of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 to offer proof that the crucifixion was predicted. Trypho clarifies his concern: he accepts that the prophets foretold that the Messiah would suffer, but he objects to the manner of death because a crucified person is cursed in the Law.¹⁸ To counter Trypho’s objection, Justin offers a few types of the cross:¹⁹ the blessing of Joseph, Moses’ outstretched arms at the battle of Amalek and the bronze snake set up in the desert.²⁰

The question of whether Christ’s death by crucifixion was cursed remained a feature of the anti-Jewish works for centuries to come. The *Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus* and the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*²¹ also discuss the passage in Deuteronomy. In the

¹⁷ *Dialogue of Trypho* 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹ He lists many types of the cross shortly before (chapter 86), so Justin gives an abbreviated list here.

²⁰ *Dialogue of Trypho* 90-91.

²¹ The *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila* is very difficult to date due to its composite nature and vague historical setting, but Vincent Déroche has suggested the second half of the sixth century. The *Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus* may be from around the same time. V. Déroche, ‘La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^e et au VII^e siècle: un memento inédit, Les Képhalaia’, *TM* 11 (1991) 276. For the Greek text of both dialogues with facing English translation, see W.C. Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues: Athanasius*

Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila, when Aquila challenges Timothy on this point, like Paul in the letter to the Galatians, Timothy argues that Christ was not cursed, but rather he destroyed the curse of the Law.²² In the *Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus*, Athanasius the Christian mentions the passage, offering Zacchaeus an opportunity to exclaim, '[Christ] is cursed then!'²³ Discussion of Deuteronomy 21.23 also appears in the eighth-century Syriac dialogue of Sergius the Stylite.²⁴ Across the centuries, the Christian answer is essentially a defensive response modelled on Paul's use of the passage in Galatians 3, and it varies little. This argument frequently precedes a recitation of common types of the cross in the Old Testament.

This argument remained a longstanding feature of anti-Jewish treatises for centuries, but the Deuteronomy-based allegation that Christ's death by crucifixion rendered him 'cursed' plays no role in anti-Muslim treatises. This is naturally the case, since the argument with Muslims was over whether Christ died at all. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here because the theme recurs in John of Dara's homily for the Feast of the Cross, and, as the following chapter shows, John of Dara mixed this argument with polemic that is related to that found in Muslim-Christian debate. Even if the category of 'cursed' plays no role in anti-Muslim treatises, the Jews and the Muslims both had religious reasons for seeing crucifixion as an inappropriate way for a godly person, much less the Son of God, to die. Above all, it was a shameful death, which only criminals deserved.

and Zacchaeus, Simon and Theophilus, Timothy and Aquila: Introductions, Texts, and Translations (Lewiston, NY, 2004).

²² Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues*, 195.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁴ For the text and an English translation, see *The Disputation of Sergius the Stylite against a Jew*, ed. A.P. Hayman; CSCO 338-339 (Louvain 1973). See also A.P. Hayman, 'The Image of the Jew in the Syriac Anti-Jewish Polemical Literature', in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us': Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner and E.S. Frerichs (Chico, CA, 1985) 423-41.

2.2.2. Shame

A topic closely related to whether Christ's crucifixion rendered him cursed is the objection that aspects of the Incarnation, most notably birth and crucifixion, were inherently shameful. The question features in both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises, albeit with some difference in emphases. In the *Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus*, a debate occurs over whether the 'Wisdom of God' could enter so 'unclean' a space as a woman's womb. Athanasius argues that the sun can shine on defiled objects whilst remaining pure itself, so this must be even more the case regarding Christ. This leads directly into Zacchaeus' accusation: 'Are you not ashamed speaking about a cross in reference to the Master and God and Power and Wisdom?'²⁵ Athanasius provides an argument from the Old Testament to show that the 'prophets had said that he would be crucified'.²⁶ A similar concern emerges in the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*, where Aquila lists the more human aspects of the Incarnation: how could God suckle milk, grow and become strong, be betrayed and bound, be mocked and flogged, be hungry and thirsty, be tempted by Satan, and be crucified and buried? This leads to a long discussion of how God could enter a womb and be born. Timothy likewise explains that all of these aspects of the Incarnation, including the crucifixion, were proclaimed beforehand by the prophets.²⁷

The anti-Muslim treatises entertain similar questions even as they reflect the change of dialogue partners. Chalcedonian and Miaphysite apologists used the humble name Jesus the Nazarene to argue that the humility of Christ demonstrates his divinity rather than problematises it. In his treatise *On the Confirmation of the Gospel*, Theodore Abū Qurrah invokes the miraculous deeds performed by the apostles 'in the name of Jesus the Nazarene,

²⁵ Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues*, 40-1.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 32-43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

whom the Jews crucified',²⁸ and not in the name of God. In the process, the nations were humbled and convinced that Christ was God and the Son of God. Similarly, in his apologetic treatise, Nonnus of Nisibis glories in the 'shameful' aspects of the Incarnation, listing them at length. He relishes the period of vulnerability in Christ's infancy: residing within the womb, being born, nursing, crawling upon the ground and enduring every stage of human development. During his life, Christ prayed, fasted intensely, and was tempted by Satan, and at the end of his life he was terrified and begged to be spared death. Nonnus describes the crucifixion in detail, too, emphasising every humiliating moment of pain and rejection. He reports that even as the disciples called Jesus by humble names, including 'the Nazarene', alongside these humble names they declared paradoxically that he was God.²⁹ To Nonnus, the truth of the gospel is demonstrated by the fact that miracles were worked in the name of 'Jesus the Nazarene', a name derived from a despicable place whence people doubted that good could come. The theme of miracles in the apologetic literature will be further explored below, but it is important to note its relation to the humble aspects of the Incarnation here.

One wonders whether the term 'Nazarene' took on particular appeal for Christian apologists against Islam because of its similarity to the Qu'rānic term for Christians, *al-naṣara*.³⁰ Prior to the rise of Islam, the name 'Nazarenes' had been used of Christians in a pejorative way. In Syriac literature, the adversaries of Christians, whether Persian or Jewish, are the only ones who call them 'Nazarenes'.³¹ It was in fact a practice in Jewish synagogues

²⁸ *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, tr. J.C. Lamoreaux (Provo, UT, 2005) 52. For an Arabic edition of Abū Qurrah's works, see *Mayāmir Thāwudūrus Abī Qurrah Usqf Harrān*, ed. Qustantin al-Basha (Beirut: Maṭba'at al-fawā'id, 1904). All English quotations are from Lamoreaux's translation.

²⁹ Nonnus of Nisibis, *Traité apologétique: étude, texte et traduction*, A. van Roey (Louvain, 1948) 29-31. Van Roey's edition gives an introduction to the text with a Latin translation. For Nonnus' treatise as an anti-Muslim apology, see S.H. Griffith, 'The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis', *ARAM* 3 (1991) 115-38.

³⁰ On the etymology of the word, see François de Blois, 'Nasrani and hanif: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam', *BSOAS* 65 (2002) 1-30; J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, 1926) 144-146.

³¹ S.P. Brock, 'Some Aspects of Greek Words in Syriac', in *Synkretismus Im Syrisch-Persischen Kulturgebiet: Bericht Über Ein Symposium in Rheinhausen Bei Göttingen in Der Zeit Vom 4. Bis 8. Oktober*

to curse the ‘Nazarenes’.³² The Qu’rānic term *al-naṣara* may be derived from such usage. It is possible that the Qu’rān purposefully adopts the term *al-naṣara* for Christians, referring to Jesus’ earthly home, in order subtly to critique Christian views about the divinity of Christ.³³ Even if this seems too speculative, it is still plausible that such a resonance with Qu’rānic language could inspire Christians like Abū Qurrah, Nonnus of Nisibis, and John of Dara (see the next chapter) to embrace the humble name ‘Nazarene’ all the more in their efforts to defend the Christian gospel.

Another aspect of the shame of the crucifixion is the concern that according to the Qu’rān, such a death would be unsuitable for a prophet of God.³⁴ In Timothy I’s debate with Caliph Mahdi, the caliph states, ‘It is not honourable to Jesus Christ that God should have allowed him to be delivered to the Jews in order that they might kill him.’³⁵ In the same vein, in Theodore bar Kōnī’s tenth *scholion*, the student states, ‘As for me, I do not say that he had been crucified because that would be an insult for him and for us. For Christ because it causes him to suffer injury and for Christians because it is not fitting to confess a crucified man.’³⁶ The teacher accuses the student of disregarding the Old Testament because Christ’s crucifixion was clearly prefigured there by such events as the blood of lambs smeared on doorposts during the first Passover and by the bronze snake that Moses erected in the desert. Adding the final touches to this part of the argument, the teacher says:

It is indeed the custom of God to demonstrate his power through weak things, because we know that “the wisdom of God is stronger than that of people”. But if by these things God has not been diminished but more exalted, the

1971, ed. Albert Dietrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 80-108; repr. in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (1984).

³² J. Bonsirven, *Le judaïsme palestinien au temps de Jésus-Christ: sa théologie*; 2 vols (Paris, 1934-5) 2:145-6. The portion of the prayer that refers to ‘the Nazarenes’ is in section 12.

³³ S.H. Griffith, ‘The Quran and Its Religious Context: Al-Naṣara in the Qur’an: A Hermeneutical Reflection,’ in *New Perspectives on the Qur’an: The Qur’an in its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds; vol. 2 (London, 2011) 315.

³⁴ See pp. 137.

³⁵ ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, 42.

³⁶ *Liber scholiorum*, ed. and tr. A. Scher, 271 (text); *Livre des scolies: recension de Séert*, tr. Hespel and Draguet, 202 (French translation). The English translation here is mine.

cross of our Saviour does not deserve to be mocked – it is truly “the power of God and the wisdom of God”.³⁷

The Muslim debater in the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* offers a similar objection,³⁸ and he admonishes the monk that this is an insult to Jesus.³⁹ Both Timothy I and the monk in the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* respond that the Jews had also killed the prophets, even though they were honourable in the sight of God.

The crucifixion is also considered an insult to God. Ḥabīb ibn Hidmah Abū Rā'īṭah's *Second Risālah on the Incarnation*⁴⁰ reports the Muslim objection that, if the Incarnation is true, then killing and death is slander against God. The imaginary interlocutor wonders, ‘What speech is more abominable and a greater absurdity than this?’⁴¹ Here and elsewhere in the treatise, Abū Rā'īṭah takes pains to maintain his Miaphysite convictions whilst clarifying that nothing of the crucifixion or death could reach the divine being. In comparing various treatises, one can see how each author's own Christology shaped his approach to the challenge. Abū Rā'īṭah spills much ink in order to preserve the Miaphysite shibboleth that Christ is one nature out of two natures, but that this does not mean that crucifixion ended the unity of the Incarnation nor that death affected the divinity. On the other hand, when a Muslim emir challenges the East Syrian monk of Bēt Ḥālē, the monk can offer a radically dyophysite illustration from nature of how the divinity was united to the humanity through will, not ‘mingling’, ‘mixing’, or ‘confusion’:

([A]s for) how [the divinity] was unharmed and did not suffer, hear two proofs... Just as (when) the sun rests upon a wall, and you take a pickaxe

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 272. My translation.

³⁸ The *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* shows uncanny resemblance to the *Dialogue of Timothy and Mahdi* at this point, perhaps suggesting that the former is dependant upon the latter. First published in a German translation based on a privately owned manuscript: K. Vollers, ‘Das Religionsgespräche von Jerusalem’, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 29 (1908) 29-71, 197-22. For an English translation from the German, Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 269-353. All quotations here are from Newman's translation.

³⁹ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 304.

⁴⁰ For the Arabic text with English translation and historical introduction, see S.T. Keating, *Defending the ‘People of Truth’ in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rā'īṭah* (Leiden, 2006). Abū Rā'īṭah was an Arabic-speaking West Syrian of the early ninth century, whose life was contemporaneous with that of Nonnus of Nisibis.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 292-3.

and you demolish the wall, the sun is not stunned and neither does it suffer, so also the body (which Christ took) from us died, and was buried, and arose, whilst the divinity did not suffer. ...⁴²

In both cases, these Christian authors use the resources of their theological tradition to explain that the crucifixion is not an insult to God.

2.2.3. Did Christ die willingly?

Perhaps the most frequent point of debate about the cross is the question of whether Christ died willingly. The anti-Jewish dialogues of Timothy and Aquila and of Athanasius and Zacchaeus both have the Jewish interlocutor ask the Christian whether Jesus died willingly.⁴³ However, in both texts, the concern for Christ's volitional agency is superficial, and the actual focus is on the crucifixion itself. Not until the mid-eighth-century Muslim-Christian debate does the question turn to whether Christ died 'willingly' and whether the crucifixion 'happened with his permission'. As seen in chapter five above, the issue arises in Islamic anti-Christian texts, such as the story of Wāṣil in the court of Leo III and his advisor Bashīr/Bēsēr.⁴⁴ The matter must have been especially vexing to Christian writers because it is one of the most ubiquitous issues in eighth- and ninth-century Christian treatises and appears across denominational boundaries more or less unchanged.⁴⁵ It is always

⁴² I am indebted to my supervisor David G. K. Taylor who allowed me to consult a prepublication version of his edition and translation of the dialogue, 'The Dispute between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Hālē: Syriac Text and Annotated English Translation', which will appear in a forthcoming festschrift for Martin Tamcke. I will reference Taylor's piece by his section numbers. The quote here is from sections 21-22.

For an important study on the subject of veneration in this text, see G.J. Reinink, 'The Veneration of Icons, the Cross, and the Bones of Martyrs in an Early East Syrian Apology against Islam', in *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. D. Bumazhnov, E. Grypeou, T.B. Sailors, and A. Toepel (Leuven, 2011) 329-42.

⁴³ Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues*, 36-7; 268-9.

⁴⁴ S.H. Griffith, 'Bashīr/Bēsēr', 293-327.

⁴⁵ Of the texts consulted for this study, the question appears in the dialogue between a Christian and a Saracen attributed to John of Damascus, the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*, Abū Rā' īṭah's *Second Risalah on the Incarnation*, Theodore Abū Qurrah's *Questions on Free Will* (and Greek fragments resembling this short treatise), the dialogue of Timothy I and Caliph Mahdi, and a controversial treatise by a certain John the Stylite. It can also be found in treatises by Ibrahim al-Tabarani, *al-Gami' wugh al-iman*, the alleged Abū Qurrah debate, and Eustathius. See the extensive discussion in Swanson, 'Folly to the Hunafā': The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD', 191-211.

worded as a dilemma question, which was designed to silence the opposition by forcing them to choose between two mutually exclusive and equally undesirable conclusions. Since the debate about Christ's willingness to die is more or less the same in every treatise, regardless of the writer, this section will begin with the Timothy I's dialogue with Caliph Mahdi, supplemented by a look at the *Second Risālah on the Incarnation* by Abū Rā'īṭah. These representatives of opposite ends of the Christological spectrum both give extensive attention to the question, and most of the other treatises offer similar but more distilled versions of the same argument.

In the late eighth-century dialogue between Caliph Mahdi and East Syrian Catholicos Timothy I, the Catholicos opens up an opportunity for the dilemma question. He says, 'So far as Jesus Christ is concerned, we say that the Jews crucified only the Christ in the flesh, which he delivered to them voluntarily, and his murder was not imposed forcibly upon him by them.'⁴⁶ Timothy cites John 10.18, where Jesus says that he has the power to lay down his life and take it up again, and no one is able to take it from him. This argument prompts the caliph to wonder why the Jews are to blame for crucifying Christ in accordance with his wishes. Timothy declares that if the Jews had intended Christ's crucifixion to result in good things, they would not be guilty, but they had intended it for his harm, so their guilt remains. God, however, raised Christ from the dead and took him up into heaven. The caliph rejects this explanation and presents a dilemma: either the Jews are not to blame because they acted according to what Christ willed, or they acted contrary to Christ's will and he was powerless to stop them. In that case, how could Christ be God?⁴⁷

Harald Suermann, the editor of the controversial treatise by John the Stylite, has suggested that the author was John of Liṭarba, the correspondent of Jacob of Edessa and George the bishop of the Arab tribes. However, there seems to be little substantive reason to attribute the treatise to John of Liṭarba. See H. Suermann, 'Une controverse de Jōhannān de Līṭārb', *PdO* 15 (1988-9) 197-213; criticisms by R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997) 516-7.

⁴⁶ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:57 (text); 'Timothy's Apology for Christianity', 42 (translation).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* This is a typical presentation of the dilemma.

Timothy's response to the question is multifaceted. First, he gives two examples of when free agents exercised their own wills in contradiction to God's will: the fall of Satan and the fall of Adam. They both acted against God's will without God's power being diminished, and, when they left paradise by God's will, they were no less guilty of their sin. In the same way, the Jews are not absolved of blame, nor does suffering crucifixion at their hands diminish Christ's power. They wanted to crucify him in order to destroy him utterly, but Christ wished it to be a proof of the resurrection to all people.⁴⁸ Their wicked intention is what makes their action blameworthy. Timothy next turns the question on the caliph, and he attempts to apply the dilemma question to those who are killed whilst fighting for God's sake. If they were willing to die for God's sake, that still does not exonerate those who killed them.⁴⁹ Timothy adds a hypothetical situation along the same lines. He imagines a palace that the caliph owns and plans to demolish and rebuild. Supposing that an enemy came and destroyed the same palace out of hatred for the caliph, would not his action be worthy of punishment, even if it achieved the end that the caliph had originally planned? The caliph agrees, saying such an action would deserve a painful death.⁵⁰ Finally, Timothy I likens the Jews' action to that of Joseph's brothers: even though they wished Joseph harm, ultimately, God intended it for good.⁵¹

Timothy also makes a positive case for Jesus' ability to save himself from the Jews if he wished. There were other occasions when people sought to seize Jesus and he escaped their grasp.⁵² Timothy also recalls the natural wonders that occurred whilst Christ hung on the cross: 'he moved the heavens, shook the earth, darkened the sun, blood-reddened the

⁴⁸ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:60-2.

⁴⁹ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:62-4.

⁵⁰ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:68-9.

⁵¹ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:66.

⁵² Lk 4.28-30.

moon, rent the stones, opened the graves and gave life to the dead who were in them.’⁵³ He saved the ‘temple’ of his body from Sheol after three days, so surely he could have saved it from the Jews. Timothy gives the primary reason for the crucifixion: the resurrection of Jesus Christ is what assures believers of their hope for immortality, so Jesus had to die. His death also had to be a public spectacle so that people would believe when his resurrection occurred in front of everyone. Finally, had Jesus exercised his power to save himself from crucifixion, it would have benefited him alone. Instead, he submitted to death at the hands of the Jews in order to conquer death, to bring benefit to all people and creation, and to be a demonstration of the truth of the resurrection.⁵⁴

Abū Rā’īṭah’s presentation of the argument is similar, although it is not constructed as a dialogue with a Muslim, but rather it is a theological treatise that responds to known anti-Christian arguments. Abū Rā’īṭah’s account begins with a discussion of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane that he would be delivered from death. Apparently, Abū Rā’īṭah worried that his opponents might seize on this story to argue that, whatever Christians may say to the contrary, Jesus did not in fact die willingly. Abū Rā’īṭah answers that this passage shows that the Incarnation was true – as a human Jesus had an aversion to death and feared it.⁵⁵ Jesus also, according to Abū Rā’īṭah, did this in order that ‘Satan and the Jews’ could not claim that the crucifixion was done ‘with his permission’.⁵⁶ ‘He was angry with them and detested the crime they had permitted, even though he permitted his [own] suffering of this at [their hands].’⁵⁷ Abū Rā’īṭah brings forth evidence from the gospels that Jesus foreknew his death by crucifixion and consented to endure it whilst also being angry with those who

⁵³ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:64 (text); ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, 45 (translation).

⁵⁴ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:65-6.

⁵⁵ *Second Risālah on the Incarnation in Defending the ‘People of the Truth’ in the Early Islamic Period*, 284-5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 286-7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

carried it out. Abū Rā'īṭah imagines his interlocutor issuing a new challenge: how could Christ consent to what he suffered without consenting to what they did? Abū Rā'īṭah resolves the problem by differentiating between the suffering that a killer inflicts and the suffering that the one killed experiences. Like Timothy, Abū Rā'īṭah applies this logic to the case of martyrs who are killed fighting for God's sake. His conclusion is much the same as Timothy I's: the Jews are worthy of blame because they desired Christ's annihilation. However, his divine *ousia* 'rises above death and killing',⁵⁸ just as it is not touched by slander.

Timothy I and Abū Rā'īṭah both approach this dilemma question from their distinct Christological perspectives. Thus Timothy I uses the common East Syrian description of Christ's body as a temple, which makes it easy to compare with his hypothetical example of the destruction of the caliph's palace. Abū Rā'īṭah likewise uses tools inherited from the Syrian Orthodox tradition to argue for the reality of the Incarnation. His Miaphysite perspective, which insists upon speaking of the human and divine traits simultaneously, allows him to move seamlessly from the affirmation of the Incarnation in Gethsemane to gospel passages where Christ shows foreknowledge of his crucifixion and resurrection.

2.3. Answering Charges of Idolatry

Christian responses to accusations of idolatry, regardless of whether they come from Jews or Muslims, remain fairly constant. Although they alter the argument slightly in order to make the answer most appropriate to the conversation partner, the tactics are fundamentally the same. This section will outline anti-Jewish responses first, and then move on to anti-Muslim treatises. The latter build on the foundation laid by the former, adapting the argument only slightly for a new opponent.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 294-5.

2.3.1. Defending the veneration of the cross in anti-Jewish treatises

Prior to the seventh century, anti-Jewish treatises often addressed questions about the shame of the crucifixion or whether the crucifixion had happened in accordance with God's plan, but they did not address whether the veneration of crosses and the relic of the cross was idolatry. This new interest in the veneration of crosses, icons, and saints' relics has suggested to modern scholars that there was a fresh flowering of debate between Christians and Jews in the early seventh century in the context of Heraclius' defeat by the Persians. It turns up in nearly every anti-Jewish treatise of the time and afterward, amongst them: Leontius of Neapolis' treatise *Against the Jews, on the Adoration of Cross, Statues of the Saints, and Relics (Against the Jews)*,⁵⁹ the *Dialogue of Papiskos and Philo with a Monk (Papiskos and a Monk)*,⁶⁰ the *Teaching of Jacob the Forcibly-Baptised (Teaching of Jacob)*,⁶¹ the *Dialogue of Sergius the Stylite (Sergius Stylite)*, and the *Trophies of Damascus (Trophies)*.⁶²

Three of these treatises are best dated to the 630s and 640s, so it is to these that we turn first. Perhaps the earliest is the *Teaching of Jacob*, a purported account of the evangelistic efforts of a Jewish convert to Christianity at the time of Heraclius' edict that the Jews should be forcibly baptised.⁶³ Jacob fell victim to this ruling, but he also procured an active faith in Christ along the way, a faith that he attempts to share with his fellow Jews. Although the story is a work of fiction, the edict of Heraclius was not, and the editors of the dialogue more or less accept the date given by the text, suggesting that it was written

⁵⁹ Apart from excerpts preserved in iconodule writings, the work is lost. For a reconstruction of known excerpts, see V. Déroche, 'L'apologie contre les juifs de Léontius de Néapolis', *TM* 12 (1994) 45-104.

⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the manuscript is now lost and only the edition of the text remains: A.C. McGiffert, 'Dialogue between a Christian and a Jew: entitled Antibilē Papikou kai Pilōnos Ioudiaōn pros monachon tina' (PhD diss., Marburg, 1889).

⁶¹ Déroche and Dagron, 'Juifs et chrétiens dans l'orient du VII^e siècle', 69-229.

⁶² G. Bardy, *Les trophies de Damas: controverse judéo-chrétienne du VII^e siècle* (Paris, 1927).

⁶³ For the Byzantine legislation against the Jews in the seventh century, see G. Dagron, 'Le traité de Grégoire de Nicée sur le baptême des juifs', *TM* 11 (1991) 313-57.

sometime in the 630s.⁶⁴ The second early treatise is *Papiskos and a Monk*. In his edition, McGiffert proposed a *terminus post quem* for the dialogue after the 630-640s based on the treatise's account of how many years had passed since the Jews' downfall and based on the presence of an embattled Christianity throughout the text.⁶⁵ Finally, excerpts of Leontius of Neapolis' treatise *Against the Jews* are preserved in iconodule writings of the eighth century, most notably the Acts of Nicaea II and John of Damascus' *On Divine Images*.⁶⁶ Leontius was an active hagiographer in the 640s,⁶⁷ so this treatise probably also dates from about the same time.

The main outline of the argument is similar in all three. In the *Teaching of Jacob*, when the Jews question whether the veneration of the cross is good, Jacob responds with an Old Testament *florilegium*, offering a few interpretative words to guide the listener.⁶⁸ In *Papiskos and a Monk*, Papiskos leads off the entire debate with the words, 'Since God commanded not to worship stone or wood, why do you worship these things, and, after making crosses and icons from them, bow down [to them]?'⁶⁹ The monk dodges the question, asking whether Jacob worshipped Joseph's staff when he bowed down to it. When the Jew explains that Jacob was showing honour to Joseph who was holding it, the monk responds that Christians do not bow down before the cross to worship the wood but the one who was crucified on it. This was a popular response to the question, as Leontius of Neapolis

⁶⁴ Déroche and Dagron, 'Juifs et chrétiens dans l'orient du VII^e siècle', 46.

⁶⁵ Déroche and Dagron concur, *ibid.*, 279.

⁶⁶ For more on the veneration of the cross in the context of the iconoclast controversy, see H.G. Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte der ostkirchlichen Bilderlehre: Texte und Untersuchungen zur Zeit vor dem Bilderstreit* (Berlin, 1992) 330-67.

⁶⁷ C.A. Mango, 'Leontius of Neapolis: A Byzantine Hagiographer at Work', in *Byzanz und der Westen: Studien zur Kunst des europäischen Mittelalters*, ed. I. Hutter (Vienna, 1985) 25-41.

⁶⁸ Déroche and Dagron, 'Juifs et chrétiens dans l'orient du VII^e siècle', 120.

⁶⁹ McGiffert (ed.), 'Dialogue between a Christian and a Jew', 51. My translation.

had made it, too.⁷⁰ It effectively turns an ancient type of the cross into an argument in favour of the veneration of the cross.

The monk and Leontius of Neapolis both insist that the honour shown to the cross is shown to Christ, not the wood.⁷¹ In a passage concerning the veneration of crosses and icons, the monk argues that it is evident that Christians do not worship wood or icons because, when the images get old and peel, they burn them and make new ones.⁷² In the Pseudo-Athanasian *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem (Quaestiones)*, the author likewise argues that charges of idolatry are easily proven false: ‘We are able to separate the two pieces of wood and take apart the type of the cross so as... to persuade the faithless person that we do not worship the wood, but the type of the cross.’⁷³ Leontius states that if Christians worshipped the wood, they would have to worship wood wherever it was found. Going on the offensive, he rebukes his interlocutors with Jeremiah’s accusation that they worshipped trees and stones and said to them, ‘You are my God, and you have begotten me’ (cf. Jeremiah 2.27).⁷⁴ Responding to Papiskos, the monk compares the cross to important artefacts of Israel’s past in both negative and positive ways. He reminds the Israelites that they showed honour to the tablets of the Law, the cherubim, and the Ark of the Covenant. More aggressively, he recalls how the Israelites worshipped the golden calf in the wilderness.⁷⁵

In the *Trophies*, likely written sometime in the second half of the seventh century,⁷⁶ the Jews’ question is elaborated more than it was in the earlier texts. The Jewish speaker

⁷⁰ John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* 1.54. For the Greek edition, see *Contra imaginum calumniators orationes tres*, ed. B. Kotter and R. Volk; *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 3 (Berlin, 1975).

⁷¹ McGiffert, ‘Dialogue between a Christian and a Jew’, 51. John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* 1.56.

⁷² McGiffert, ‘Dialogue between a Christian and a Jew’, 51

⁷³ *Quaestiones* 41, my translation. The identity of the opponents in view here is ambiguous. The only full edition of *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem* is still *PG* 28, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857) cols. 597-700.

⁷⁴ John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* 1.56. My translation.

⁷⁵ McGiffert, ‘Dialogue between a Christian and a Jew’, 74-5.

⁷⁶ Déroche, ‘La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^e et au VII^e siècle: un memento inédit, Les Képhalaia’, 280.

objects that the Christian, who has drawn frequently on Isaiah, ought to attend to Isaiah's warnings about eating pork and making graven images.⁷⁷ He reminds the Christian of Isaiah's satire of the carpenter who fashions an idol from part of a tree and worships it whilst burning the other half of the same tree to stay warm.⁷⁸ The Jew observes that Christians strike pieces of wood in their services⁷⁹ and create icons, statues, and crosses and bow before them as the pagans do. The Christian issues a challenge in response that is similar to *Papiskos and a Monk* above: he reminds the Jews of the objects of the Old Testament cult and wonders whether they would revere them if they still possessed them. This leads to internal dissension amongst the Jews about how to respond to this challenge. The Christian also has the synagogue's copy of the Torah brought from the synagogue in order to confront the Jews with how they honour the book not because of its material but because it contains God's words.⁸⁰ In the same way, Christians worship the cross in order to remember Christ. New features in the *Trophies* – the eating of pork, the *semantron*, and the honour shown to holy books – are all features of Muslim-Christian debate as well. Since the *Trophies* dates from the late seventh century, this development is interesting indeed.

2.3.2. Defending the veneration of the cross in anti-Muslim treatises

Like the anti-Jewish treatises, the anti-Muslim treatises reject the allegation that the veneration of the cross is idolatry. They approach the topic in ways already prepared by the anti-Jewish treatises, but with subtle adjustments for a new religious rival. As the anti-Jewish treatises cited the Ark of the Covenant as an object that the Israelites venerated with God's

⁷⁷ Similarly, *Sergius Stylite* is concerned with the eating of pork alongside the veneration of crosses, relics, and icons.

⁷⁸ Cf. Is. 44.13-7.

⁷⁹ This is a reference to the wooden clappers (*semantron*) used to summon people to worship. The defence of the clappers features more frequently in anti-Muslim apologetics than in anti-Jewish apologetics.

⁸⁰ *Les trophées de Damas*, ed. Bardy, 246-7. Again, the honour shown to holy books is also a frequent feature of Muslim-Christian debate.

approval, so the anti-Muslim treatises also call upon this Old Testament example. Of the Old Testament types used by anti-Jewish treatises, the Ark of the Covenant became the favourite example in eighth- and ninth-century anti-Muslim treatises. For example, upon ascertaining that the emir is willing to hear evidence from the Old Testament, the monk of Bēt Ḥālē asks him whether the Jews ever worshipped material things. The emir confirms this, but he asserts that the Jews were being disobedient whenever they did so and were punished for it. The monk then invokes the pillar of light that led the Israelites in the wilderness, the bronze snake, and the Ark of the Covenant,⁸¹ offering explanations about how each of these items foreshadows the cross.⁸² Like the monk of Bēt Ḥālē, al-Kindī invokes the example of the Ark of the Covenant, recalling how Moses would address it as ‘Lord’: ‘Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, “Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you.” And whenever it came to rest, he would say, “Return, O Lord of the ten thousand thousands of Israel”’ (Nm 10.35-6).⁸³ For al-Kindī, when Israel worshipped before the Ark, they were really worshipping God.

The example of the Ark of the Covenant in the anti-Jewish treatises was an effective way to rebuff Jewish accusations of idolatry, since they too had venerated a material object and did so with the express approval of God. The anti-Muslim treatises also remind their opponents that the Muslims have reverence for certain physical objects as well. The favourite example is the Black Stone at the Ka‘ba. When John of Damascus defends the veneration of the cross in this way, he derides the Muslims for their hypocrisy. He alleges that their reasons for venerating the rock (its supposed connection to Abraham) are less

⁸¹ His co-religionist Theodore bar Kōnī also uses the example of the Ark of the Covenant: *Liber scholiorum*, ed. and tr. A. Scher, 270 (text); *Livre des scolies: recension de Séert*, tr. Hespel and Draguet, 201 (translation).

⁸² D.G.K. Taylor (ed.), section 46.

⁸³ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 492. For an Arabic edition, see *The Apology of el-Kindi. A Work of the Ninth Century, Written in Defence of Christianity by an Arab* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1885). Quotations and references are from Newman’s translation.

weighty than Christian reasons for venerating the cross ('through which the power of demons and the deceit of the devil have been destroyed').⁸⁴ Perhaps the most conciliatory approach is that of Abū Rā'īṭah, who compares the cross to the *qiblah*, the niche in a mosque wall marking the direction of prayer.

Christian veneration of the cross is also like Jewish reverence for the Ark of the Covenant in that the honour shown to the object is not given to the physical material of its construction, but rather it is worship to God. In the anti-Muslim treatises, this argument adds a new dimension similar to the arguments made by the monk who conversed with Papiskos, who had observed that Christians have no qualms about destroying damaged or old crosses and icons, and by Leontius of Neapolis above, who noted that if Christians worshipped the wood from which a cross was fashioned, they would perforce worship all wood everywhere. Like Leontius' arguments, many of the anti-Muslim treatises insist that it is evident that Christians do not worship the material that the cross is made of because they use many different types of materials to fashion crosses. If the material mattered so much, they would only use one kind of material. In his *Risālah On the Proof of the Christian Religion and the Proof of the Holy Trinity*, Abū Rā'īṭah makes a unique argument about the material used for the cross: whilst he concedes that the cross is an 'especially contemptible' sign, Christian veneration of it is actually a rejection of idolatry. Abū Rā'īṭah promotes the use of humble materials to make crosses rather than expensive ones, stating that Christians 'limit [themselves] from what is crafted from gold and silver, emerald and sapphire'.⁸⁵ For his purposes, the 'despised form' of the cross hewn from contemptible material is positive evidence that Christians are not in fact idolaters.

⁸⁴ *De haeresibus* 100, in *Die Schriften des Johannes de Damaskos*, 4:64; my translation. Leo III also uses this argument (Jeffery, 'Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between Umar II and Leo III', 322-3).

⁸⁵ *Defending the "People of Truth" in the Early Islamic Period*, ed. Keating, 132-3.

2.3.3. Promoting the veneration of the cross

The defence of the veneration of the cross naturally blends over into positive reasons for why the cross is worthy of honour. The anti-Jewish treatises are largely satisfied to show that the veneration of the cross is ‘something that the prophets taught us’, as Jacob the forcibly-baptised put it,⁸⁶ through Old Testament types and other prophetic words. When offering other theological reasons for the veneration of the cross, these treatises simply summarise the salvific effects of the cross: it defeated sin, death, and Satan,⁸⁷ and it vanquished demons.⁸⁸ It eliminated the bitterness of idolatry and opened the hearts of people so that the grace of the Holy Spirit could enter.⁸⁹ Further, the depiction of the cross is really the depiction of Christ, like an image of the earthly king, and it is honoured out of love for the one depicted. The sign of the cross is also a this-worldly symbol: Sergius the Stylite tells his Jewish interlocutor that when the Kingdom comes and Christians are face-to-face with Christ, they will have no need of the cross to represent him.⁹⁰ In the *eschaton*, the sign of the cross in the sky will herald the Second Coming.⁹¹

All of these positive reasons for venerating the cross appear in anti-Muslim treatises as well. What is remarkable about several of the anti-Muslim treatises, however, is the way in which the positive reasons for the veneration of the cross are elaborated. The anti-Jewish treatises spend comparatively little space giving positive reasons that are not based on Old Testament proofs. The anti-Muslim treatises more carefully explain the theological significance of the cross in the drama of salvation history. The dialogue of Timothy I and Caliph Mahdi is exemplary on this point. As the discussion turns to the worship of the cross, Timothy declares paradoxically that the cross is the cause of life. The caliph is, as expected,

⁸⁶ Déroche and Dagron, ‘Juifs et chrétiens dans l’orient du VII^e siècle’, 120.

⁸⁷ *The Disputation of Sergius Stylite against a Jew*, ed. Hayman, 31-2.

⁸⁸ *Quaestiones* 40.

⁸⁹ Déroche and Dagron, ‘Juifs et chrétiens dans l’orient du VII^e siècle’, 120.

⁹⁰ *The Disputation of Sergius Stylite against a Jew*, ed. Hayman, 32-3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 32 (text); 33 (translation).

taken aback by such a contradictory statement – surely the cross was the cause of death! Timothy declares that, whilst the cross did result in death, this was a prerequisite for resurrection which is the cause of life and immortality.⁹² Timothy artfully blends classic types of the cross into a positive theological statement about its efficacy:

It is through [the cross] that God opened to us the source of life and immortality, and God, who at the beginning ordered light to come out of darkness, who sweetened bitter water in bitter wood, who through the sight of a deadly serpent granted life to the children of Israel – handed to us the fruit of life from the wood of the cross and caused rays of immortality to shine upon us from the branches of the cross.⁹³

Timothy calls the cross ‘the root’ that bore the ‘fruit of life’ for Christians, and because of its fruit, the root is worthy of praise. He concludes that because the cross is the medium through which God showed love to all, it is most appropriate to show love to God through it.⁹⁴

Another way that the anti-Muslim treatises promote the veneration of the cross is by declaring the wonders and miracles performed by it. Not all of the wonders wrought by the cross are in the past. As al-Kindī puts it, ‘[W]e Christians... worship the power that dwells in [the cross], the help that comes from it, and the salvation received through it.’⁹⁵ Admittedly, some of these are ‘every day miracles’, like the consecration of the host, or any of the other mysteries of the church,⁹⁶ which would undoubtedly be significant to an insider but perhaps not to an outsider. The monk of Bēt Ḥālē informs the emir that the cross continues to work wonders in the present day: ‘For demons are put to flight by it, and all the sick are healed by it, and lepers are purified by it, and through it we walk on water, and

⁹² *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:52 (text); ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, 40 (translation).

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi*, 1:53-4 (text); ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, 40 (translation).

⁹⁵ Newman, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 493.

⁹⁶ See monk of Bēt Ḥālē, ed. D.G.K. Taylor, section 48; the monk considers the ecclesial mysteries of greater importance than the other miracles he reports.

through its power we may enter fire, and we drive away wicked beasts through its sign...'.⁹⁷ Perhaps the most extravagant claims for the power of the cross are made, and demonstrated, by the monk of the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*. The monk proclaims the power of the cross to work miracles, such as allowing the faithful to drink deadly poison without suffering harm, to drive out demons, and to walk upon blazing fire. His interlocutor claims that the Black Stone at the Ka'ba can also work miracles, but they would have to journey there to see them. The monk asserts that the wood of the cross is in Constantinople,⁹⁸ but it does not matter – ordinary Christians, wherever they may be, may ask in hope in the name of Christ and make the sign of the cross, and the request will be granted.⁹⁹ Having made such bold claims, the monk has to prove that this is so: he drinks poison without experiencing ill effects (whereas the other drinker of the poison dies horribly), casts a demon out of a girl, and places his hand in fire without harm, all by making the sign of the cross. The dialogue ends with the audience, Jews and Muslims alike, falling down and declaring that they believe in Christ, whom they had denied until now.¹⁰⁰

2.4. Worldly Success and Divine Approval

The subject of worldly success and divine approval is linked, especially in the anti-Jewish literature, with the consequences of the crucifixion of the Messiah. This topic occasions the greatest disparity between how anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises addressed the challenges of their religious rivals.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Heraclius had taken the relic from Jerusalem to Constantinople for safe keeping.

⁹⁹ One can see here how these texts blend references to the relic and the sign of the cross. They provide very little distinction between the relic, the use of physical crosses in the liturgy, and making the sign of the cross. Their soteriology regarding the efficacy of the crucifixion is used to defend these physical signs, and thus the same texts that defend the fact of the crucifixion easily shift to defending the veneration of the cross in the next sentence.

¹⁰⁰ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 333-40.

2.4.1. The dispersion of the Jews

Traditional anti-Jewish theology triumphantly declared that after their rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah, the Jews had suffered the loss of prophet, priest, and king, and, consequently, they were cast out of their homeland and dispersed throughout the earth. The anti-Jewish treatises vigorously reassert this theology, transforming familiar types of the cross into expressions of the inclusion of the believing Gentiles and the exclusion of the Jews. In this way, in the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*, when Aquila asks him to explain from the scriptures about the wood on which Jesus was crucified, Timothy draws on Jacob's vision of a ladder extending to heaven in Genesis 28.11-3, and he focuses on the angels ascending and descending on it. Timothy explains that those ascending the ladder into heaven are the Gentiles, whom God has accepted. In contrast, those descending are the Jews, who rebelled by crucifying the Son of God.¹⁰¹ Sergius the Stylite likewise deploys a type of the cross when he describes the cessation of prophet, priest, and king from the Jews: '[Y]ou are drinking the sour vinegar of reproach and shame in every place... because you gave vinegar to him who gave you sweet water in the desolate, stoneless wilderness by means of the secret rod of the cross.'¹⁰² For *Sergius Stylite*, as for the other anti-Jewish treatises, the crucifixion of Christ marked a point of no return for the Jews. When they strayed after idols, God punished them by stripping the kingdom from them but did not leave them without prophecy. The situation after Christ is entirely different: prophet, priest, and king have ceased and the Jews have been irreversibly scattered.

Prior to the Arab Conquest, the transformation of the holy city of Jerusalem into a Christian city is a frequent topic in the anti-Jewish treatises, as, for the Christian writers at least, it provides at a glance an illustration of Christianity's replacement of the Jews as God's

¹⁰¹ Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues*, 188-91.

¹⁰² *The Disputation of Sergius Stylite against a Jew*, ed. Hayman, 19.

chosen people. This feeling is clearly expressed in the dialogues of Athanasius and Zacchaeus and Timothy and Aquila.¹⁰³ *The Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus* draws on the words of Isaiah 62 to argue that the Christian appropriation of Jerusalem was foretold by the prophets. The Isaiah passage reassures Jerusalem, left desolate and ruined by the Babylonians, that the Lord will not rest until ‘her vindication shines out like the dawn’ (v. 1) and promises that the nations will witness this vindication and kings will see the city’s glory. It is not a great step for Athanasius to infer here a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (or 135), later glorified by the Christian ‘nations’ who rebuilt and inhabited it. Athanasius invites his interlocutor to take a look at the current situation: ‘[Jerusalem] is no longer a city of Jews, but a city of Christians.... Go there and you will see that this city belongs to Christ and is a habitation of celibates. You will see the ‘Anastasis of the Christ’ and all the kings bearing their glory there, and the Gentiles with all the peoples proclaiming its righteousness with which it was vindicated.’¹⁰⁴ In short, ‘[Jerusalem] was destroyed and dishonoured for the Jews, but it was rebuilt and glorified for the Christians.’¹⁰⁵ Timothy rehearses the dismal history of Jerusalem’s destruction under the regimes of Vespasian and Hadrian, and when Aquila presses further, Timothy cites verse after verse to show that the Gentiles will rebuild Jerusalem and rejoice in it, followed by a litany of passages referring to the Jews’ rejection by God. The fall of Jewish Jerusalem and rise of Christian Jerusalem are in microcosm the great, cosmic reversal of fortunes resulting from the crucifixion of Christ.

The final piece of this cosmic reversal in the anti-Jewish literature is the theme of the Gentiles’ repudiation of idolatry and acceptance of the Gospel. In the *Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus*, Zacchaeus asks whether, as Psalm 2 suggests, the Messiah in

¹⁰³ There is perhaps a literary relationship between the two here.

¹⁰⁴ Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues*, 56-7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

fact possesses the ends of the earth. Athanasius confirms this, offering an expansive list of places that call Christ King.¹⁰⁶ In *Papiskos and the Monk*, when the monk celebrates the triumph of Christianity over idolatry, he reminds Papiskos that ‘Christ is worshipped and glorified everywhere’. Since Christianity put an end to idolatry everywhere it spread, he wonders, how are the Jews not ashamed to accuse Christians of idolatry when they venerate the cross?¹⁰⁷ In his view, the cross was in fact the end of idolatry. *Sergius Stylite* also connects the conversion of the Gentiles to the veneration of the cross. His argument is based on Isaiah 2.18-9: ‘The idols shall completely pass away... when [the Lord] rises to subdue the earth.’ Sergius explains that ‘[the Lord] rises to subdue the earth’ refers to the resurrection of the Son of God: ‘He rose and subdued the earth by his disciples, and brought the nations and tongues into subjection, that [they] might worship his cross’.¹⁰⁸

Before moving on to the anti-Muslim treatises, it is important to address a clear change in tone regarding worldly success in the anti-Jewish treatises written during the tumultuous events of the seventh century. This section quotes extensively from the dialogues of Timothy and Aquila and of Athanasius and Zacchaeus, but both of these texts date prior to the Persian sack of Jerusalem and the Arab Conquest, and they speak triumphantly about the spread of Christianity in every place. It is unthinkable that Christians would boast as boldly as they do about possession of Jerusalem after the Arab Conquest. The seventh-century anti-Jewish treatises reflect the uncertainties of their times, with both the *Teaching of Jacob* and the *Trophies* entertaining challenges from Jewish interlocutors about why, if Christians are now God’s chosen people, they are enduring such military defeats and worldly punishments.¹⁰⁹ The crucifixion and cross drop out of the conversation about worldly

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 48-9.

¹⁰⁷ McGiffert (ed), ‘Dialogue between a Christian and Jew’, 74.

¹⁰⁸ *The Disputation of Sergius Stylite against a Jew*, ed. Hayman, 21.

¹⁰⁹ The *Teaching of Jacob* mentions the humbling of Rome several times, interpreting these recent events through the lens of the apocalyptic vision of four beasts in the book of Daniel. See *Teaching of Jacob* III.10; IV.5; V.5, 18. In the *Trophies*, a Jewish interlocutor demands to know why, if the age of peace

success in these contexts, focused as they are on explaining socio-political challenges. By the time that Christians began to respond to the religious challenge of Islam in the eighth and ninth centuries, the apologetic strategy for tackling the topic of worldly success had changed dramatically.

2.4.2. Worldly success in anti-Muslim treatises

Whereas the worldly success of the Christian movement as proof of God's favour was a major feature in apologetic arguments against Judaism, the argument clearly falls flat in the face of the military successes of the Arabs and the expansion of Islam. 'Ali al-Ṭabarī, a West Syrian convert to Islam, reflects on the success of Muḥammad and the caliphs and effectively articulates the challenge of the new situation for Christian apologists:

Who has ever claimed such a victory in the name of God since the creation of the world by God?... A victory which was realised in such a decisive and unquestionable way, in all the countries and regions of the earth, on sea and land, from the extreme Sus to the deserts of Turkestan and Tibet, by means of devotees and deeply pious leaders and by proclamations in the name of the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the rest of the prophets? ... [W]e know with certainty that such a victory undoubtedly takes the place of a sign of prophetic office.¹¹⁰

The Christian apologies constructed as dialogues put similar challenges in the mouths of Muslim opponents. At the end of his discussion with the monk of Bēt Ḥālē, the Muslim emir reportedly is convinced of the veracity of many Christian claims, but he cannot understand why God would deliver the Christians into Muslim hands, if Christianity is the true faith.¹¹¹

The Christian rebuttal of this challenge is two-fold. On the one hand, the Christians can produce historical examples of victorious kingdoms whose success neither Muslims nor

heralded by the Messiah has come, the Christian nation continue to fight and find themselves to be prisoners of war (*Trophies* III.1-2).

¹¹⁰ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 612. For 'Ali al-Ṭabarī, there is no need for Muḥammad to perform miracles to corroborate his prophethood because Islam's military successes are sufficient confirmation.

¹¹¹ D.G.K. Taylor (ed), section 55.

Christians would attribute to religious purity. When ‘Umar II claims the worldly success of Islam as a sign of its veracity, Leo III brings up the 400-year rule of the Persians. Whilst Leo can offer no explanation of why the Persians were victorious – ‘God alone knows’¹¹² – he is confident that ‘Umar will agree that it was not due to purity of religion.¹¹³ Unlike Leo III, other Christian apologists did dare to surmise why God would allow the military triumph of Islam without approving of their religion: Islam’s victory was a punishment meted out because of the sins of the conquered people.¹¹⁴ Al-Kindī offers the Babylonian captivity of Israel as an example of how God has previously punished the sins of his people. At the same time, al-Kindī makes much of the Islamic conquest of Persia, attributing the fall of Persia to their wanton sins and God’s consequent wrath towards them.¹¹⁵ For al-Kindī, the armies of Islam are indeed a chastening rod wielded by the Lord, but this does not translate into divine approval for their faith. The monk of Bēt Ḥālē’s perspective on the matter is entirely dependent on biblical examples of military success and defeat.¹¹⁶ The Babylonian captivity especially shapes the monk’s approach, which he understands as divine chastisement for Israel’s idolatry. He considers Islamic rule a divine chastisement for the sins of Christians. It has nothing to do with the relative merits of Islam, but rather with God lovingly disciplining his people when they stray, lest they be deprived of the ‘heavenly kingdom’.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the monk lists many places that have not yet been conquered by the Arabs or converted to Islam, and so he chastens the emir’s boast that God has given the Muslims power over ‘all faiths and all peoples’.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Jeffery, ‘Ghevond’s Text of the Correspondence between Umar II and Leo III’, 330.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ For an overview of the texts that offer variations on this theme, see W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992) 213-8.

¹¹⁵ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 339-40.

¹¹⁶ On one occasion, he mentions an example that he takes to be biblical – Gideon’s triumph over the Midianites, whom he assumes were predecessors of the Arabs – but he betrays a shared extra-biblical tradition with the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. D.G.K. Taylor (ed), 39 n. 199 and n. 200.

¹¹⁷ D.G.K. Taylor (ed), section 56.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, section 9.

The Christian apologists were also proactive, offering arguments that transformed the humbled social status of the church into positive evidence for the truth of Christianity. Critical to these claims is that, as the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* puts it, the true religion attracts converts ‘without sword, without compulsion, without awakening a desire for earthly things’, and it transforms the character of converts so that their lives are virtuous, focused on prayer, and unswerving in the face of torture and death.¹¹⁹ Several of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s works entertain the question of how one recognises and spreads the true religion.¹²⁰ His *On the Confirmation of the Gospel* provides a clearly structured articulation of his position. Abū Qurrah observes four dubious motives for conversion to a religion: ‘permissiveness, might, tribal zeal, and the persuasion of vulgar minds’.¹²¹ The low status of Christianity in his context allows Abū Qurrah to build a case that Christianity must be true because it is not propagated in any of these ways. According to Abū Qurrah, Christianity escapes all of these critiques: rather than being permissive, its moral teachings are rigorous; Christ told his disciples to expect persecution, so they could not have been motivated by ambition and a lust for power; people from many nations rejected natural tribal zeal to attach themselves to a man who was a Jew.¹²² Abū Qurrah lavishes attention on his final point, outlining the outrageous claims of the gospel, including Christ’s death on a cross, to show how a ‘vulgar mind’ would not be persuaded simply by the message. This leads into his positive argument: that the Christian faith is proven true by the wonders done in the humble name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jews crucified in Jerusalem.¹²³ For Abū Qurrah, the

¹¹⁹ Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 285. In the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* this discussion follows on from debate about the crucifixion.

¹²⁰ Among them are *Theologus Autodidactus, Against the Jews, That Christianity is from God, On the Confirmation of the Gospel*, and *On the Characteristics of the True Religion*. See Theodore Abū Qurrah, ed. Lamereaux, 1-57. *On the Confirmation of the Gospel* contains many of the same arguments that are developed at greater length in *On the Characteristics of the True Religion*.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 51-3.

evidence that these wonders really did take place is that the nations still flocked to Christ without the interference of false motives.

3. Assessment of Shared Themes in Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Treatises

Analysing the defence of the cross and crucifixion in the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises together allows one to see how traditional anti-Jewish arguments were preserved, adapted, and sometimes abandoned in response to Islam. The crucifixion had always presented a challenge to developing a coherent Christology, and in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim apologies the resulting concern over the theological implications of Christ's ignoble death shines through. In response to both groups of opponents, the Christian authors, particularly Chalcedonian and Miaphysite writers, emphasise the range of humble aspects of the Incarnation. In both cases, the crucial question is how the unity of the human and divine natures could remain intact at the time of crucifixion without suffering and death approaching the Godhead. The anti-Muslim treatises pick up on this longstanding apologetic argument and redeploy it against Muslim queries. At the same time, the new adversary requires the neglect of old arguments and the development of new responses. A prominent theme in anti-Jewish treatises is whether Christ is 'cursed' because of the manner of his death, but this argument over the Torah passage plays no role in the eighth- and ninth-century anti-Muslim treatises. Instead the most prominent piece of anti-Muslim defence of the crucifixion and its theological ramifications is the rebuttal of dilemma questions about Christ's will, which have no precedent in the anti-Jewish literature. Significantly, the anti-Jewish treatises written after the Arab Conquest still do not contain this important argument, suggesting that they are not simply substitutes for some other opponent.

The area where the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises show the most similarity is in response to accusations of idolatry. Despite the fact that the answer is tailored to respond to particular opponents, the strategy is undeniably the same. The anti-Jewish arguments produce lists of Old Testament types of the cross, a feature shared with other early Christian literature, including the sermons for the Feast of the Cross from before the Arab Conquest. The anti-Muslim treatises only draw selectively on the same Old Testament types to illustrate that Moses and the people of Israel venerated objects, notably the Ark of the Covenant, not merely with God's approval but in obedience to God's direct command. Interestingly, they avoid discussion of the Israelites' worship of the golden calf, a theme used polemically in anti-Jewish treatises and a story that is shared between the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the Qu'rān. The anti-Jewish treatises use Old Testament examples, alongside present-day veneration of the Torah, to argue that the Jews also venerate physical objects out of honour for God. In a similar vein, the anti-Muslim treatises refer to Muslim veneration of the stone at the Ka'ba and bowing towards the *qiblah*. Both sets of texts invoke the miracles worked by the cross to argue for the legitimacy of the veneration of the cross. Although the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises are the most similar here, they are not identical and the difference in opponent makes a discernible difference in the style of argumentation.

One encounters the most striking difference in approach when comparing the theological interpretation of worldly success in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises. After the Arab Conquest, the argument with the Jews remained the same, if a bit more strained: the Jews had still been dispossessed of prophet, priest, and king as a consequence of the rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah, the Son of God. Discussion about the cross and crucifixion is central to the anti-Jewish argument, even as Christians found themselves pressed to explain their humbled social status after the Arab conquest to their Jewish rivals.

When they later turned to their Muslim opponents, however, the argument is turned on its head. Defeat becomes an apologetic argument *in favour* of Christianity – the propagation of the Christian faith in spite of its low stature in the world is evidence of its truth. The crucifixion plays a role in this argument, but the joint victory of cross and empire is completely absent. Instead, it is the folly of the cross that is most useful: the drama of the passion and death of Christ are treated as outrageous claims that no one would believe unless they were proven true by miraculous signs. Theodore Abū Qurrah argues that the successful spread of such a scandalous gospel is the best evidence that the miracles done in the humble name of Jesus the Nazarene are really true. Ironically, it is the issue of Christianity's humbled status after the Arab Conquest that suggested to Olster that the image of the Jew in the seventh century is a mere substitute for the 'real enemy', the Persian or the Muslim. However, when one compares the treatment of the subject in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises, the contrast in the argument does indeed indicate different religious opponents.

4. Conclusion

The topic of the cross and crucifixion evoked various responses and strategies in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises, and whilst these defences are not identical, and often differ significantly, there is nevertheless a discernible interdependence, and the anti-Muslim treatises clearly adopted earlier arguments and adjusted them to fit the queries of a new adversary. Whilst the concerns of these treatises are quite different to those seen in the Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross prior to the Arab Conquest, one can discern a shared theological tradition. The sermons contain abundant Old Testament types of the cross, and the apologetic treatises invoke and use the very same types in polemically-charged ways. Authors of the sermons and the apologetic treatises alike take pains to describe the

crucifixion in Christologically-orthodox ways, often critiquing the views of other Christians at the same time. Both sets of material present the same theological perspective on the Jews: that their rejection and crucifixion of Christ resulted in their dispersion even as the Gospel spread across the face of the earth, abolishing idolatry in its wake and converting the nations. Narsai's homily has striking similarities: he describes how the Jews demand signs¹²⁴ – a theme picked up in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim literature – and he is one of the earliest writers to defend the veneration of the cross against accusations of idolatry. Placing the sermons for the Feast of the Cross side-by-side with apologetic defences of the crucifixion and veneration of the cross reveals the level of theological interdependence of these disparate genres.

There are clearly common traditions shared between the sermons for the Feast of the Cross from before the Arab Conquest and the apologetic literature vis-à-vis Judaism and Islam from the seventh and eighth centuries. It is no surprise that the faith proclaimed annually in the sequence of the church year would correlate with theology deployed on the margins of the Christian community. An intriguing question is whether the controversial material affected later celebrations of the Feast of the Cross, and, if so, how. It is to this topic that we turn next.

¹²⁴ 1 Cor 1.22. Cf. Lk 11.29, Jn 4.48.

Chapter 6: John of Dara on the Feast of the Cross

1. Introduction

The debate around the veneration of the cross between Christians, Jews, and Muslims is attested strongly for the eighth and ninth centuries CE. As Sidney Griffith observed, ‘Almost every Christian apologetic text in Syriac and Arabic of the more popular variety from the early Islamic period deals with the topic [of accusations of idolatry], at least in summary fashion.’¹ As the previous chapter has shown, Christian controversial literature reveals that this was an issue of great concern. Their treatment of the matter flows freely between the theological defence of the crucifixion and the defence of concrete religious practices like veneration. The residue of the debate also appears in texts not ostensibly apologetic in content: chronicles,² biblical commentaries,³ letters, and even homilies. John⁴ of Dara’s ninth-century homily for the Feast of the Cross (*On the Cross*) illustrates the value of this genre for understanding the debate over veneration of the cross as seen by the ordinary believer. John’s *memra On the Cross* is, in fact, wholly devoted to the defence of the

¹ S.H. Griffith, ‘Images, Islam and Christian Icons’, 121.

² For example, in Michael the Syrian’s account of John of the Sedre’s conversation with an emir, the emir requests an Arabic translation of the gospel, but with the crucifixion and other problematic things removed. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4:421-2 (text); 2:431-2 (translation). (However, this detail does not appear in the short, independent account of the conversation published by F. Nau, ‘Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l’émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716 d’après le ms. du British Museum Add. 17193, avec un appendice sur le patriarche Jean Ier, sur un colloque d’un patriarche avec le chef des mages et sur un diplôme qui aurait été donné par Omar à l’évêque du’, *Journal asiatique* XI, 5 (1915): 225-279; more recently, M.P. Penn, ‘John and the Emir: A New Introduction, Edition and Translation’, *LM* 121 (2008): 65-91.) Various chronicles record animosity to the public display of the cross. See pp. 121-5.

³ Theodore bar Kōnī’s *Scholia*, as discussed above, include defence of the cross, and one recension places a longer defence in a previous *scholion* on the New Testament (see pp. 144 n. 4). Nonnus of Nisibis’ commentary on John contains some anti-Jewish polemic in his commentary on John 3:15. See Nonnus of Nisibis, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, tr. R.W. Thomson; SBL Writings from the Islamic World 1 (Atlanta, 2014) 57-9.

⁴ In the manuscripts and other sources, John’s name is given as ‘Iwannis’, a Syriac transliteration of the Greek form, rather than the Syriac ‘Yuḥanon’. I have chosen to use ‘John’ in this thesis.

eneration of the cross, making it the first Syriac treatise to focus exclusively on the topic.⁵ John of Dara's treatise is an invaluable witness to the debate over the cross in ninth-century Mesopotamia. He artfully blends traditional themes of the Feast of the Cross with arguments from apologies against Jews and Muslims in order to make his case.

2. Introduction to John of Dara's *Memra On the Discovery of the Cross*

John was appointed metropolitan of Dara by Patriarch Dionysius of Tel-Maḥre (r. 818-845), who dedicated his famous chronicle to John,⁶ but apart from this we know very little about him. Athanasius Ḥakim replaced him as metropolitan of Dara in circa 860.⁷ Despite the near anonymity of John's life, he left behind a literary legacy, the bulk of which remains unedited. His commentary on the liturgy has been published in an edition and modern translations,⁸ and consequently it has been the subject of several studies.⁹ Arthur Vööbus' valuable article on John of Dara's writings gives information on John's unpublished treatises and where the manuscripts are held,¹⁰ summarised here in tabular form,

⁵ In his edition of Isaac of Nineveh's works, Bedjan appended a treatise entitled *On the Theoria of the Cross*, but it is shorter and, although there are some similarities to John's treatise, such as a fondness for the Ark of the Covenant as a type of the cross, it does not have the same apologetic agenda. As the title suggests, its subject matter is more theological and mystical. See p. 111 n. 74.

⁶ See Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, ed. and tr, J.-B. Chabot; 4 vols (Paris, 1899-1924) 4:334 (text); 3:111 (translation).

⁷ Ignatius Aphrem I Barsoum, *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences*, tr. M. Moosa; 2nd rev. ed. (Piscataway, NJ, 2003) 391. Barsoum bases this on Michael the Syrian, *Chronique*, 4:756 (text).

⁸ *Le 'De Oblatione' de Jean de Dara*, ed. and tr. J. Sader; CSCO 308-9 (Louvain, 1970). Sader's edition is not a critical edition. For an English translation, see B. Varghese, *John of Dara, Commentary on the Eucharist* (Moran Etho 12; 1999).

⁹ See M. Breydy, 'Les compilations syriaques sur le Sacerdoce au IXe siècle: Jean de Dara', in *Symposium Syriacum, 1976: célébré du 13 au 17 septembre 1976 au Centre Culturel "Les Fontaines" de Chantilly (France)*, ed. F. Graffin and A. Guillaumont; OCA 205 (Rome, 1978) 267-93. J. Sader, *Le lieu de culte et la messe syro-occidentale selon le "De Oblatione" de Jean de Dara. Étude d'archéologie et de liturgie*; OCA 223 (Rome, 1983).

¹⁰ See A. Vööbus, 'Important Manuscript Discoveries on Iwannīs of Dārā and His Literary Heritage', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96 (1976) 576-8, for information on the MSS and their locations.

supplemented by Aho Shemunkasho's more recent study.¹¹ The oldest witness for each work is starred.

Title	Manuscripts
On the Soul	Vat. Syr. 147 (dated 1234); Mosul Orth. O* (12 th -13 th century); Harvard Har. 35; Atšaneh 111
Resurrection of the Bodies	Vat. Syr. 100* ¹² (transcribed before 932 CE ¹³); Mosul Orth. O; Šarfēh Patr. 281; Damascus Patr. 4/5; Damascus Patr. 4/4; Birmingham Ming. Syr. 56; Vat. Syr. 581; Harvard Har. 119; Atšaneh 111; Bartelli Mār Gīwargīs 1
On the Priesthood ¹⁴	Vat. Syr. 100*
On the Heavenly and Earthly Hierarchy ¹⁵	Vat. Syr. 100*; Mosul Orth. O; Šarfēh Patr. 281; Damascus Patr. 4/4; Birmingham Ming. Syr. 56; Vat. Syr. 581; Harvard Har. 119; Atšaneh 111; Bartelli Mār Gīwargīs 1
On Paradise ¹⁶	Mardin Orth. 356* (9 th or 10 th century based on orthography); Birmingham Ming. Syr. 67; Vat. Syr. 581; Damascus Patr. 4/4
On Creation	Same as above
Against the Heretics	Same as above
On the Resurrection of the Lord	Same as above
On Pentecost	Same as above
On the Discovery of the Cross	Same as above
On the Divine Economy	Same as above
The Book on the Demons	Mardin Orth. 381* (16 th or 17 th century); Harvard Har. 112; Mār Behnām (9); Harvard Har. 106; Br. Mus. Orient. 9374; Damascus Patr. 4/5; Damascus Patr. 4/4; Damascus Patr. 4/14; Atšaneh 111; Šarfēh Patr. 77
On the doctrine of the Christians	Damascus Patr. 4/5* (copied in 1904 'from an ancient archetype'); Damascus Patr. 4/4; Atšaneh 111

¹¹ A. Shemunkasho, 'John of Dara and His References to Previous Authors', *PdO* 36 (2011) 415-21.

¹² This manuscript has been digitised and can be viewed online: http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.sir.100.

¹³ Shemunkasho, 'John of Dara and His References to Previous Authors', 417.

¹⁴ This may be by Moshe bar Kepha (Vööbus, 'Important Manuscript Discoveries', 576). Vööbus believed it belonged to bar Kepha, but he does not offer compelling reasons for this judgment ('Die Entdeckung einer neuen Schrift des Mōšē bar Kēphā über das Priestertum', *Ostkirchliche Studien* 23 (1974) 324ff). Many scholars have noted the curious overlap between writings by John of Dara and Moshe bar Kepha, and this is partially the case for their works on the cross. Vööbus did not list all of the manuscripts for this treatise in his article on John of Dara's works because he believed that it was written by Moshe bar Kepha. (For further discussion, see pp. 215-6.)

¹⁵ A commentary on the homonymous writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (Vööbus, 'Important Manuscript Discoveries', 576).

¹⁶ The beginning of this treatise is lost.

In his introduction to a commentary on Matthew, Dionysius bar Ṣalībī mentions John of Dara as one of his sources.¹⁷ As John's commentary is no longer extant, the extent of his exegetical work on the gospels is unknown.

The ancient manuscript in which the *memra* 'On the Discovery of the Cross' (*On the Cross*) is found contains writings exclusively by John of Dara, and this coincidence led Aho Shemunkasho to suggest that the *memre* contained in the manuscript form a single work. He bases this conclusion on the fact that there are seven treatises in the manuscript, symbolic of completion, and that the contents range from the Edenic paradise to an explanation of the divine economy in Christ's death and resurrection.¹⁸ However, at a cursory glance, the subjects of the treatises seem too disparate to warrant a claim that they form a coherent unit: the first two *memre* discuss paradise, the third is a refutation of heresies, the fourth through sixth discuss important feast days (including the Feast of the Cross), and the final *memra* is on the divine economy. There is also no internal evidence that the scribe considered the contents of the manuscript a single work. Only the first two *memre* are linked in a way that could suggest such a relationship, as the second *memra* is introduced as 'Mar John's second *memra* On Paradise' (ܡܪ ܝܫܘܥ ܕܡܪ ܝܘܢܢܐ ܕܡܡܪܐ ܕܡܪ ܝܘܢܢܐ ܕܡܪ ܝܘܢܢܐ ܕܡܡܪܐ ܕܡܪ ܝܘܢܢܐ). The rest, however, are simply introduced as 'a *memra* of Mar John on...'. Furthermore, Shemunkasho's own assessment of the characteristics of the *memre* points in the direction of these being separate treatises rather than a whole. He notes that the first four treatises incorporate many patristic quotations, whereas in the last four, biblical citations take pride of place.¹⁹ Shemunkasho even describes *memre* four through seven as sermons and observes that *memra* seven is written entirely in question-and-answer format.²⁰ The diversity of style, varied approach to

¹⁷ Shemunkasho, 'John of Dara and His References to Previous Authors', 416.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 421-422.

¹⁹ One assumes there must be frequent patristic and biblical citations in *memra* four, *On the Resurrection*.

²⁰ Question-and-answer format also appears in some other *memre* but much more in *memra* seven.

sources, and use of different genres make it more likely that the treatises in Mardin Orthodox MS 356 are separate works collected into a single manuscript rather than seven sections of a single work.

There is an edition and translation of the unpublished *memra On the Cross* in the accompanying dossier of editions and translations. As the occasion for this *memra* is a Christian festival, I will refer to it as a homily or sermon, using the two interchangeably. The conversational writing style suggests that it was meant for a popular audience. John's *memra On the Cross* contains eleven *kephalaia*²¹ of unequal length. Despite the festal occasion, the author's primary concern lies in the careful explanation and defence of the veneration of the cross. Here it will suffice to give a brief description of the contents in order to provide some context for the selective analysis of themes that occupies the rest of this chapter:

Chapter 1 (ff. 95v-100r²²) is entitled, 'The discovery of the cross and the honour of the day'. It contains diverse topics including: hermeneutical discussion of 1 Cor 1.18-2.7, debate over the guilt of the Jews at the crucifixion, responses to charges of idolatry, the miracles wrought by the cross and in the humble name 'Jesus the Nazarene', reasons why the cross is venerated, a *catena* of Old Testament types of the cross, and the importance of the cross in Christian worship. This chapter is the longest by far, comprising near half of the *memra*, and its contents anticipate the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 (f. 100r/v) argues that Christians do not worship the material or the shape of the cross but Christ.

Chapter 3 (ff. 100v-101r) explains how the cross, through which Christ is worshipped, participates in him. The argument is made by analogy with other sacraments.

Chapter 4 (f. 101r/v) argues that if Christians are condemned for idolatry, the ancients must be condemned, too.

Chapter 5 (ff. 101v-102r) explains why Christ is worshipped through a sign of his humility rather than a sign of his power.

²¹ I will normally refer to the *kephalaia* as 'chapters'.

²² The folio numbers correspond to those in the oldest manuscript, Mardin Orth. MS 356.

Chapter 6 (ff. 102r-103r) proclaims the glories of the cross and wonders worked through it in the worship of the church and the lives of the saints.

Chapter 7 (f. 103r/v) is a catalogue of New Testament passages about the cross.

Chapter 8 (ff. 103v-104r) shows that the full, transforming truth about God and the world is given only through the cross.

Chapter 9 (f. 104r/v) answers an inquirer's challenge, 'Why does the cross not perform miracles today?'

Chapter 10 (f. 104v) is a very short chapter containing types of the cross in nature.

Chapter 11 (ff. 104v-105v) contains an extensive *florilegium* of types of the cross in the Old Testament, and it concludes with the legend of Protonike's discovery of the cross. The loss of the cross after its first discovery and Helena's discovery both receive brief mention at the end of the *memra*.

The rest of this chapter will explore how John of Dara blends the traditional theological themes for the Feast of the Cross with arguments from the apologetic tradition in order to argue for the validity of the veneration of the cross. In doing so, I will revisit the themes seen in earlier homilies and apologetics, focussing on John's use of the same themes and strategies.

3. John of Dara's *Memra* and the Earlier Syriac *Memre*

Chapter three discussed four broad themes that appear in Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Cross prior to the Arab conquest: (1) the hagiographical traditions of Constantine and Helena, (2) the use of biblical passages, especially types of the cross, (3) arguments against religious opponents (both Christian and non-Christian), and (4) the reversal of honour and shame. Amongst them, Narsai's homily stands alone in offering a brief defence of the veneration of the cross. John of Dara's *memra* incorporates all of the features that appear in previous *memre* for the Feast of the Cross, but in his sermon nearly every traditional motif serves the further purpose of defending and promoting the veneration

of the cross. This section will discuss how John uses the material he has inherited from the Syriac homiletical tradition for apologetic purposes.²³

3.1. The Discovery of the Cross

John's opening words place the homily firmly in the context of the 14th of September Feast of the Discovery of the Cross, which he declares a celebration of 'our redemption' (ܗܘܝܡܢܐ) because of the likeness between the discovery of the cross and the resurrection.²⁴ Like the resurrected Christ, the cross was entombed within the earth and later emerged from it, amazing everyone, believing or not, by its wondrous deeds. John also sees significance in the number three: Christ, one of the Trinity, rose from the dead after three days, and likewise the cross was found after three hundred years. Moreover, in the scope of salvation history, the power of the cross will have been manifested three times to all: the first two times, through the discoveries by Protonike and Helena, and at the end of times when it will precede Christ at the *parousia*.²⁵ All this will result in 'the shaming of the crucifiers and the boasting of the worshippers' (ܠܫܝܡܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ).²⁶

This is the first reference to the legends of the cross associated with the imperial household. In the rest of John's sermon, the legends are downplayed. In the opening paragraph of the sermon, the manifestation of the power of the cross is the focus, not the agent of its discovery, and that remains true throughout. Apart from the introductory section, John mentions Constantine's vision in chapter six, and he recounts the Protonike legend at the end of the homily, followed by a brief explanation of how the cross was lost again after Protonike and found later by Helena. The other extant Syriac homilies, as discussed in

²³ The arguments against religious opponents fits better in the section comparing John's treatise to apologetic texts, so that topic will not appear in this section.

²⁴ *On the Cross* 1.1. The edition and translation divides the chapters into sections, and I will reference the treatise by chapter and section.

²⁵ As expected based on Mt 24.34.

²⁶ *On the Cross* 1.1.

chapter three, all at least mention Helena, but none include Protonike, so John's choice is distinctive. The placement of the story is somewhat surprising: half of chapter eleven is a long list of types of the cross from the Old Testament, following on from a brief, almost fragmentary, chapter ten of types of the cross in nature. Perhaps this is an unlikely place to append the invention legend, and the decision to do so makes the Protonike story feel like an afterthought. John introduces the story rather abruptly: 'Now, whilst these things about the cross have been discussed... it is also suitable that we should speak of those things regarding its discovery – how it took place and by whom.'²⁷ The Protonike legend features animosity towards pagans and especially Jews, and it also recounts a miraculous sign worked by the True Cross – all features that, as we shall see below, fit John's larger purposes well. However, these features are also shared with the Judah Kyriakos version, so they cannot be the main reason that John emphasises Protonike over Helena. More important are the apostolic connections throughout. Protonike is converted in Rome by the preaching of Peter, and she encounters the apostle James in Jerusalem, where he is bishop. John informs the reader that James wrote to share the news of the discovery of the cross with the other apostles, who also committed them to writing for posterity and that Addai the apostle wrote the account given here.

John apparently did not feel compelled to include the Helena legend in full – an allusion to it was enough for his purposes. He assumes his listeners will be familiar with the Helena legend, and he anticipates a question from the audience: 'And how did the Jews take the wood of the cross back and dig and deepen [the hole] and bury it in the ground whence Helena brought it back up? At what time and by whom?'²⁸ The sixth-century homilies were also interested in the burial of the relic, but by John's time an explanation of the second

²⁷ *On the Cross* 11.2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.6.

burial of the cross was in circulation, and his report is the earliest extant witness to this tradition.²⁹ He reports that the emperor Trajan made Christianity a crime punishable by death, and so ‘the horn of the Jews was lifted up’.³⁰ They tortured the bishop of Jerusalem, Simon son of Cleopas, and took the cross from him. According to John, the cross was taken away from the Christians until Helena found it and took it to Rome.³¹ With that, the *memra* suddenly ends.

Other homilies for the Feast of the Cross described Constantine’s vision of the cross of light and the words, ‘By this you shall conquer.’ Unlike those homilies, where Constantine’s vision forms an independent unit, in John’s homily, Constantine’s vision is simply the last in a list of witnesses to the varied powers of the cross. In chapter six, John describes the manifold glories of the cross, from its ubiquitous presence in the liturgy and the sacraments, to various testimonies, biblical and historical, of its great powers. John heralds the cross as an invincible weapon against demons, sorcerers, diseases, wild beasts, fire, temptations, and military foes. For each of these ‘glories’ of the cross, John offers various illustrious saints who testify to its power. Constantine is just one example, the last of a sizable list, and the emphasis is on the power of the cross, not the piety of the king. John writes,

By [the cross] righteous kings multiplied the victory and were preserved from hardships. And the king Constantine testifies [to this], who, when he was scared and shaken by the tyranny of Maxentius, saw on high a cross of light upon which was written, ‘By this you shall conquer.’ And in his dream he saw Christ saying to him, ‘Make for yourself a standard (ⲛⲓⲁ) in the form which appeared to you and by it you will subdue your enemies.’ And even to the present time his kingdom is preserved by the standard (ⲛⲓⲁ) of the cross. And he conquered and delivered his people, and he spread its worship in all corners [of the world]. And the Jews, the enemies of the cross, were put to shame.³²

²⁹ See pp. 72-3 and appendix A.

³⁰ *On the Cross* 11.6.

³¹ Even this brief allusion to the Helena legend appears to have been added by a later hand in Mardin Orth. MS 356, f. 105v.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.9.

John's limited use of the invention legends, his clear preference for the Protonike version to that of Helena,³⁵ and his treatment of Constantine's vision may be an indication of some discomfort with the public fortunes of the cross in recent centuries. In two places, John admits that the cross has suffered embarrassment. It occurs first in chapter one. In the oldest manuscript, from which the two modern copies were made, the exact context of the discussion eludes us – nearly nine lines are too damaged to read. The discussion following this *lacuna*, however, suggests that an opponent has challenged John to explain why the cross does not always show its power, since John is forced to explain that the 'standard of the cross' (صندل صليبي) will not show its power in the hands of unbelievers, not because it is weak but because they are unworthy.³⁶ Here he uses the same terminology as he used above for the standard Constantine carried into battle.

If the reference to the cross is slightly obscure in chapter one, a similar passage in chapter four clarifies the matter. Indeed, John must make his point very clear, since an opponent has just objected to the worship of the cross because it is inanimate, made of breakable materials, and can be carried from place to place, and even stolen and 'exposed' (معرضة).³⁷ After recounting the mixed fortunes of the Ark of the Covenant due to the sin or righteousness of Israel, John compares it to the cross:

In the same way, if the cross is also given into the hand of the enemies because of their³⁸ sins, with the result that they break [it] and encourage [themselves] and take [it] captive and laugh, its power is [still] not diminished. For this reason, the temple in Jerusalem was delivered to fire and the instruments of worship to captivity, and [God] was not diminished or defiled, but even [then] his power was demonstrated, this [very power], that is, which the cross worked when it was carried away into captivity from the West to the region of the East.³⁹

³⁵ Since the Protonike legend and Judah Kyriakos legend usually circulated together, it is unlikely that this simply shows a greater level of comfort or familiarity with local Edessan traditions.

³⁶ *On the Cross* 1.13.

³⁷ This could be an oblique reference to the discovery of the cross, but John does not respond to the potential critique of the occasion of the Feast of the Cross itself. *On the Cross* 4.3.

³⁸ I.e., the sin of the Christians.

³⁹ *On the Cross* 4.4.

In addition to critiquing the vulnerability of the standard of the cross to being seized and broken by enemies, John's interlocutors have reminded him of the Persian capture of the True Cross from Jerusalem in the early seventh century. John reacts as others did to the Persian and Arab conquests: assuming that the success of foreign foes was due to the sins of Christians.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, despite John's evident embarrassment at the vulnerability of the relic, he maintains that the cross continued to work its power even as it was carried into 'captivity'.

3.2. Biblical Exegesis

John's *memra* is saturated with biblical quotations and allusions as well as extended comment on certain biblical passages. Most of the passages he uses are traditional for discussing the significance of the cross, but he is not slavishly constructing his *memra* on the basis of previous models. The organisation of materials and the interpretation of passages are his own, serving the main purpose of his sermon – the defence of the cross.

3.2.1. Types of the cross in the Old Testament

Types of the cross from the Old Testament appear mainly in three places in John's *memra*: in the first, fourth, and the final chapters. Because chapter four will receive ample discussion below in the section on apologetics in John's *memra*, this section will focus on the types in chapters one and eleven. The types of the cross in *On the Cross* 1.18-21 are the most frequently evoked types in Christian literature: John works backward in time, beginning with Moses and ending with Abraham. He explains the significance of Moses' outstretched arms at the battle with Amalek, the bronze snake Moses set up in the desert, the crossing of Jacob's arms in blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, and the binding of Isaac. John's

⁴⁰ Cf. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 213-218.

introductory remarks on this short list of types give a clear indication of his primary interest: ‘Now the divine Scriptures teach us how much his cross was honoured typologically (ܠܝܝܪܘܘܢ ...ܝܘܫܘܥ) in previous generations by the just and righteous.’⁴¹ The types are directly applied to aspects of the divine economy revealed through the cross. The defeat of Amalek points to the victory that comes through the cross. The bronze snake is a type of the salvation worked through the cross. Jacob foreshadows the cross at the end of his life because ‘its true significance would be revealed to all people at the end’.⁴² As Syriac exegetes had long done, John connects the binding of Isaac with the divine economy of the cross: ‘Thus the ram which delivered Isaac from death was given by the tree, just as also by the cross the body was given, which was for us, which delivered us from death and destruction.’⁴³ John thus enlists the patriarchs as witnesses for the justification of the worship of the cross.

Chapter eleven falls into two parts. As discussed above, John ends his *memra* with the narrative of Protonike’s discovery of the cross. The first half of the chapter, however, is of a different character: it is a fairly comprehensive *florilegium* of Old Testament types of the cross.⁴⁴ Whereas John takes pains to explain the significance of the types of the cross in chapter one, here the types are simply numbered and rattled off without much commentary. The list overwhelms the audience with the number of types of the cross from the scriptures, reminding them of the types used previously and adding even more types to their number. It would also provide a convenient catalogue of types for anyone debating with religious opponents or perhaps deliberating over the matter individually. John’s *florilegium* is no mere rote list of traditional materials. It is nothing less than a bid for the religious legitimacy of

⁴¹ *On the Cross* 1.18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.20. The straightforward interpretation of ‘at the end’ here seems to be the beginning of the gospel proclamation, as it was the end of the pre-Incarnation revelation. However, throughout the *memra* John also anticipates the final triumph of the cross at the *parousia*, and he does so often enough that the possibility cannot be excluded here.

⁴³ *On the Cross* 1.21.

⁴⁴ The contents of John of Dara’s *florilegium* bear remarkable resemblance to the types invoked in Narsai’s Homily 30. See the comparative chart in Appendix C.

the Christian faith and its correlative practices in a context where religious competitors also sought to establish their claim as the true heirs of Abraham.

3.2.2. New Testament passages

The most central New Testament passage for John's *memra*, the contours of which seem to underlie the outline of the whole *memra*, is 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.16.⁴⁵ However, this passage influences his attitude to shame and honour to such a degree that it will be examined fully in the next section. Other passages from the New Testament are also important for John's argument. The title of chapter seven announces its intent to demonstrate the glories of the cross from the words of the scriptures. It produces ten passages from the gospels and the letters of Paul to illustrate the manifold benefits of the cross. Some of these overlap with the interpretation he gives to the Old Testament types: John 3.15 shows that the cross 'gives us life' and 1 Corinthians 1.21 likewise teaches that 'by the cross new life is given to people by faith'.⁴⁶ The other benefits of the cross in these passages surpass those anticipated by the old types. Familiar themes of the benefits of the cross appear: the abolishing of the Old Law (Gal 3.13), the destruction of enmity (Eph 2.16-7), the reconciliation of things in heaven and on earth (Col 1.20), and triumph over sin (Rom 6.6; Col 2.14-5). In John's view, the invitation to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow Christ teaches a perfect way of life. The benefits of the cross which surpass the Old Testament types contribute to John's supersessionist view of the Christian faith over the Jewish faith. John's main purpose in this chapter is to show the manifold benefits of the cross in order to argue his larger point: 'Therefore our Saviour is rightly worshipped by all through the cross which is the sign of his victory and the image of his grace by which we find good things such as these.'⁴⁷ John's

⁴⁵ John does not cite or comment on every verse, but the content of the passages echoes throughout John's *memra*.

⁴⁶ *On the Cross* 7.1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.2.

use of traditional beliefs about the centrality of the cross in the divine economy is one more piece in his bid to promote the veneration of the cross.

3.3. Reversal of Honour and Shame

In comparison to the fanfare of previous homilies for the Feast of the Cross, John of Dara is more sensitive to the perceived folly and weakness of the cross. The biblical passage that shapes his *memra* most is 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.16, and his use of the traditional motif of the reversal of shame and honour is best explored through his exegesis of this passage. Like Narsai, John quotes this passage early in his *memra*, but his treatment differs from Narsai's in two important ways that have to do with his distinct context. Whereas Narsai, as discussed in Chapter Three, cites the passage at the beginning of the *memra* but does not refer to it again, John makes extensive use of the passage early on and refers back to it several times throughout the following chapters. In John's *memra*, Paul's declaration that the cross was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles but the power and wisdom of God for those who believe provides the broad outlines of the whole sermon. His first five chapters address the challenge that the cross is contemptible and unworthy of worship. The first four chapters are characterised by back-and-forth debate between John and nameless opponents (see below), in which John defends the apparent shame of the cross. The fifth chapter transitions from a focus on the humility of the cross to the glory of the cross based on miraculous signs and spiritual benefits. The next three chapters elucidate those benefits and signs, occasioning an opponent's challenge that John should show the miracles of the cross in the present or admit that they are a fabrication.

A closer look at John's use of 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.16, especially in his first chapter, is therefore paramount to understanding his larger argument. Against the worldly wisdom of Jews and Gentiles, an embattled Paul defends the apparent 'foolishness' of his message

of the cross. Paul declares God's 'foolishness' to be wiser and stronger than that of the world. This foolishness – Christ crucified – is nothing less than the wisdom and power of God. Given John's correlation of the discovery of the cross to the resurrection of Christ, the appeal of a text celebrating the power and wisdom of the cross is self-evident. However, the themes of foolishness and of the embattled preacher are equally important for John. As Paul does, John begins with the 'foolishness' of the message of the cross, perhaps betraying some self-consciousness regarding the perceptions of the cross in ninth-century Mesopotamia. He urges his listeners to consider it rather as a mystery (ܠܝܫܬܐ) that can only be understood by the mature, citing 1 Corinthians 2.6-7. He contrasts the wisdom of the world, with its limited impact in time and space, with the eternal and global spread of the gospel of the cross.⁴⁸ John finds that Paul said it best: in contrast to the transitory teaching of the world, '...we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery (ܠܝܫܬܐ)'.⁴⁹

Just as Paul finds his voice, his opponents butt in: 'How can you, unskilful in the wisdom of the world, be trusted about the wisdom of God?'⁵⁰ Paul responds, 'Because we did not receive a spirit of the world, but a spirit from God.'⁵¹ John anticipates two further questions: what is the evidence that Christians have received the Holy Spirit, and what is the 'wisdom of God'? John provides evidence to corroborate the Apostle's claim: signs confirm the activity of the Spirit and so does the salvation that is perfected in human beings which is beyond human capacity. Rather than provide a definition of divine wisdom, John quotes Paul again, saying it was hidden,⁵² with the result that no one recognised it, and consequently they crucified the 'Lord of glory'.⁵³ With that, the mantle of 'embattled preacher' seamlessly slips onto John's shoulders as his imagined opponent takes aim at the contemporary

⁴⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 2.6-7.

⁴⁹ 1 Cor 2.7. *On the Cross* 1.2.

⁵⁰ *On the Cross* 1.3.

⁵¹ 1 Cor 2.12.

⁵² 1 Cor 2.7.

⁵³ 1 Cor 2.10.

Christian community. Here it will suffice to observe that John must go on the defensive in order to assert with Paul that the message of the cross is the wisdom and power of God.

After arguing at some length about the crucifixion and the cross, later in chapter one John returns to the witness of Paul. As the voice of opposition falls silent, John introduces Paul's declaration, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel.'⁵⁴ John wonders aloud what sort of perceived shame is in the gospel that the Apostle lashes out at his opponents in this way. Paul answers him, 'They reproach us by the cross and the divine economy worked through it, but I declare, "Forbid it that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ".'⁵⁵ John returns to his exposition of 1 Corinthians, declaring that the wisdom and power of God is proclaimed to believers through the operation of the cross. He and his audience stand alongside Paul in their stalwart defence of the cross against the 'opinion of fools'. He celebrates silencing the arguments of nay-sayers, interweaving postures of acquiescence with Paul's rhetorical questions in 1 Corinthians 1.20: "Where is the wise person?" And there is no one who comes forward. "Where is the scholar?" And there is no one who opens his mouth. "And where is the dialectician?" And the dialecticians keep silent and place their hands over their mouths.'⁵⁶ John repeats that the Jews asked for signs, and the cross was set against them. As for the pagans who sought wisdom, when they saw ordinary people demonstrating the power of the Crucified One, Athens was captivated and confessed Christ as the power and wisdom of God. John thus proclaims it the great and glorious wisdom of God that 'Christ is worshipped in his humility and not in the manner of his exaltation.'⁵⁷ Because people did not recognise Christ when he performed miracles, and they failed properly to investigate creation, which God made through wisdom, God chose to save those who believed in the gospel, that is, the contemptible message of the holy cross.

⁵⁴ Rom 1.16.

⁵⁵ *On the Cross* 1.14; the Pauline quotation is Gal 6.14 (cf. 1 Cor 1.29, 31).

⁵⁶ *On the Cross* 1.14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.15.

A little farther on in chapter one, a red scribal title appears: ‘Reasons why the cross is worshipped’.⁵⁸ John lists seven justifications for the veneration of the cross in rapid succession. However, most of these betray John’s continued preoccupation with shame and humility. The second reason bridges the discussion above with the material to come by reiterating that the cross, scorned by unbelievers, ought to be worshipped by Christians. In fact, John senses that some in his contemporary audience might feel discomfort regarding the veneration of the cross. He urges them not to be ashamed, since Christ was not ashamed of his humility, his sufferings, or the crucifixion, all of which took place ‘for our sake’. This very humility demonstrates Christ’s love for those who believe. In his final point, when John observes that the cross teaches how greatly Christians honour the humility of the Saviour, he also assures his readers that Christ holds their humility and troubles in honour, too. With this in mind, John urges Christians to persevere courageously in their sufferings, intent on repaying the debt which Christ paid on their behalf. If they share in Christ’s sufferings, they will also share in his glory.⁵⁹ Throughout this section, John is at his pastoral best, and his concern for his audience’s present sufferings and humility suggests that he perceives them to be under pressure, perhaps to the extent that they may hesitate to continue with potentially embarrassing practices like the veneration of the cross.

John returns to these themes in chapter five, after spending three chapters defending and promoting the veneration of the cross. The title of the chapter suggests that humility will once again be the main focus: ‘Why Christ is worshipped through the type of the cross, which is a herald of the wretched and humble and not through [the]... heralds of his power and his miracles.’ Whilst John compares the cross to a king’s sign of victory and reminds his audience that it is indeed a sign of victory over sin, death, and Satan, John’s main concern

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.17.

⁵⁹ 1 Tim 2.11-12.

is as the title suggests. He contends that the cross ‘is a herald’ of the shame and contempt that Christ endured ‘for our sake’, and Christ’s love for his followers is shown through his cross. Indeed, this herald of God’s love also reminds Christians of the good things imparted to them through it. John thus urges his fellow Christians, ‘[L]et us render thanks to the one who surrendered himself for our sake.’⁶⁰ Finally, John draws on Philippians 2.8-9 to show that the cross is the reason for the exaltation of human nature. In contrast to Adam’s pride, because of which he sinned and summoned all people to death, Christ humbled himself and was subsequently exalted. Because of the cross’ central place in demonstrating Christ’s love and its agency in the exaltation of human nature, John argues that Christians are right to worship the cross, through which they worship God, not created things.

After two chapters of demonstrating the wonders performed by the cross in the sacraments of the church and the lives of the apostles and saints and illustrating its manifold benefits through the words of the New Testament, John returns in chapter eight to his explication of the passage in 1 Corinthians, especially 1.21. Although God revealed himself through what he created in order to attract people to him, people failed to recognise God’s wisdom. For that reason, John contends, ‘It pleased God in his grace not only to bring to naught the worship of created things but also to give knowledge and discernment to all people by means of the cross, which was considered despised and wretched.’⁶¹ Tellingly, one of John’s concerns here is the low estate of the first preachers of the gospel:

[A]lthough the word was despised and [its] preachers [were] foolish and captive and small in number and lowly in power whilst the enemies were mighty and without number, nevertheless kings and dictators and the skilled and eloquent [who were on] the side of opposition failed and the side of the preachers was made famous whilst they were preaching the contemptible cross.⁶²

⁶⁰ *On the Cross* 5.1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.2.

⁶² *Ibid.*

One cannot help but think that in this regard John may have felt some commonality with the early Christians. Nevertheless, John claims, idolatry was eradicated by the humble message of the cross spoken by weak human beings. Finally, John contrasts God's work through the people of Israel with the change effected by the cross. Even though God chose Israel to be 'an example of the fear of God in knowledge and [godly] ways of life'⁶³ for all peoples, the nations continued in their idolatry and Israel itself slipped into idolatrous ways, despite the miracles God had done amongst them. In contrast to this tragic fate, the cross 'eradicated idols from the earth'.⁶⁴

The themes of shame and humility in John's treatise are intriguing. The concept of shame is present in earlier texts that feature the cross but only in reference to the shame of unbelievers and not to believers in any way. The Protonike legend and the victorious scenes of the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius provide a useful counterpoint. Whilst Christians are portrayed as persecuted and marginalized in these two texts, there is no shame enshrouding the cross. It is categorically considered a sign of victory and power. John's homily departs from these earlier texts in its concern to connect Paul's declaration that he is not ashamed of the gospel to the potential for contemporary Christians to feel shame. John shares the belief that the cross is a symbol of victory and a conveyor of divine power, but he concedes that this is a 'hidden wisdom' that can only be revealed to the mature as a mystery (ܠܚܝܫܘܢܐ). What was once self-evident to the Christian community is now a point that John finds he must defend theologically using varied lines of argumentation. It is no coincidence that this consciousness about the potential shame of the cross emerges in early Abbasid Mesopotamia. John's *memra* attempts to transform the very shame of the cross into a reason for its veneration.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

4. Defending and Promoting the Veneration of the Cross

Examination of John's use of homiletical material reveals that whilst he draws extensively from the traditional themes of the Feast of the Cross, he does so with a particular purpose in mind: defending and promoting the veneration of the cross. When one compares John's *memra* with the apologetic material, one is struck by how frequently they resonate with each other, as well as how often John incorporates apologetic material that had previously not appeared in homilies for the Feast of the Cross, even when there were other controversial topics present. Whilst it is true that the apologetic treatises use some of the same motifs as the homilies, such as the apologetic deployment of Old Testament types of the cross, John's *memra* is a remarkable fusion of the two genres. Perhaps the thematic similarity of the apologetic treatises to the previous homilies suggested this innovation to John. Unlike the apologetic treatises that were surveyed in the previous chapter, however, John devotes his entire sermon to the defence of the cross, whereas in the apologetic literature, the arguments about the cross and crucifixion are just one part of a larger argument. The remainder of this chapter will explore how John of Dara makes overt as well as subtle use of apologetic arguments throughout his homily for the Feast of the Cross, ultimately producing a unique contribution to the Syriac tradition. This section uses subtitles similar to those in the analysis of apologetic writings in chapter five for ease of comparison.

4.1. John of Dara's Defence of the Crucifixion

Near the beginning of the first chapter of John's *memra*, Paul's assertion that the wisdom and the weakness of God are stronger than that of human beings elicits a challenger's retort, 'How can you, who are not skilful in the wisdom of the world, be trusted

concerning [the wisdom] of God?’⁶⁵ The resolution of the problem is found in the 1 Corinthians passages itself: Paul’s knowledge was a gift of God’s Spirit which is greater than human wisdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 2.10-6). The apostle insists that if the rulers of this world had had such divine knowledge rather than mere human knowledge ‘they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’.⁶⁶ For John’s contemporary community, however, the challenging questions are just beginning. These opening questions form a dialogue imbedded in the *memra*, and they are drawn from both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim apologetics.

In *On the Cross* 1.4-11, John constructs a back-and-forth argument with identity-shifting opponents, and the contents of the argument are inspired by anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim debate about the crucifixion. A glance at the questions asked by the interlocutors shows his dependence on the apologetic tradition:

- 1) But someone says, ‘If [the Jews] did not know [that Jesus was the ‘Lord of glory’], why are they guilty?’ (1.4)
- 2) But someone says, ‘If they had not crucified him, by what would our debt be repaid, by what would sin be uprooted, by what would the curse be taken away, and by what would enmity be nullified, and how would reconciliation come to be? For the cross nullified enmity,⁶⁷ and it made reconciliation between earthly things and heavenly things,⁶⁸ and it united people with angels, and it blotted out the written [charge] that was against us,⁶⁹ and it opened paradise, and brought our race back there. But all of these good things took place by means of the cross. And if the Lord had not been crucified, all of these things would have ceased.’ (1.7)
- 3) But someone says, ‘Behold, the prophets prophesied that they would crucify him, and if they had not crucified him, the words of the prophets would be considered false.’ (1.8)
- 4) But the crucifiers say, ‘How did the cross of the one who was not able to save himself save others?’ (1.9)
- 5) But then they say, ‘“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”⁷⁰ And how can one who is cursed free [others] from a curse?’ (1.10)

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Cf. Eph 2.16.

⁶⁸ Col 1.20.

⁶⁹ Col 2.14.

⁷⁰ Deut 21.23.

- 6) But then they say, ‘Cursed is the person who makes graven and molten images, made by human hands, and they worship them.’⁷¹ And you worship the cross [which is] made by human hands!’ (1.11)

The questions of the interlocutors are a hybrid between those found in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treatises. The first three questions, especially when one considers John’s answers, are primarily concerned with whether the Jews are culpable for the crucifixion of Jesus. As the previous chapter demonstrated, these questions only emerge after the Arab Conquest and in debate with Muslim opponents. The last three show evident affinity with the anti-Jewish treatises. The speakers (now plural) in the fourth question are identified as ‘crucifiers’, the only time John names any opponents directly. Their question is a crafty adaptation of that of the crowd in the Synoptic gospels, who ask at the crucifixion why one who saved others cannot save himself.⁷² The last two questions tie together the familiar Old Testament passages about ‘cursed’ people, those hung on trees and those who worship idols. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the discussion over whether Christ is ‘cursed’ does not appear in the anti-Muslim literature, only in the anti-Jewish treatises.

In addition to the questions of the interlocutors, John’s responses also point to dependence on apologetic sources,⁷³ both anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic. The dilemma question in Muslim-Christian debate usually proceeds from a query as to whether Christ died willingly – assuming an affirmative answer – to why the Jews are considered guilty. John’s *memra* only includes the second half of the dilemma question, where it depends not on an affirmation of Jesus’ willing death, but rather on the inability of the powers that be to recognise the wisdom of God, with the result that they crucified ‘the Lord of glory’ (cf. 1 Corinthians 2.7-8). The interlocutor wonders, ‘If they did not know, why are [the Jews]

⁷¹ Cf. Deut 27.15.

⁷² Mt 27.42 and parallels.

⁷³ However, this may not be literary dependence. The variations in John’s approach may be due to oral apologetic practices rather than written ones.

guilty?’⁷⁴ Whilst it is not exactly the same argument as that most often found in anti-Muslim literature, it is nevertheless a close variation, and it has no precedent in anti-Jewish apologetics.

What follows suggests even more strongly that John has a Muslim opponent in mind. John offers several reasons why the Jews should have been able to recognise Christ’s true identity: based on the testimonies of the prophets, Magians, and John the Baptist, the voice of the Father proclaiming Jesus to be his beloved Son, and the miracles that Jesus himself worked. The final point leads to a short but illuminating discussion about the miracles of the ‘servants of God’ and Jesus’ unique identity. John argues that Jesus’ miracles should have helped the Jews to recognise that he was a righteous man and a great prophet, and they should have believed the words that God spoke of him (‘this is my beloved Son’) and his own claim to be the Son of God. Moses, Joshua bar Nun, Elijah, Elisha, and others also performed wonders, and they only called themselves servants of God. As they accepted the prophets’ declaration that they were only servants of God, so they should also accept the words Jesus says about himself. Unlike them, Jesus ‘called himself “God” and “Son of God”’,⁷⁵ and if he had been lying, God would not have allowed him to do such miraculous signs. In fact, he would have been opposed to God and would have suffered estrangement from God. For John, this shows that the Jews should have recognised his true identity.

The intriguing thing about this brief section is the similarity it bears to Christian-Muslim debate about the identity of Jesus. In the Qur’ān, the infant Jesus speaks from his cradle, describing himself as a servant/slave of Allah (Q 19.30). The challenge was such that the Church of the East patriarch Timothy I wrote a letter clarifying that Jesus cannot be properly called a ‘servant’ in his divine hypostasis (صمد), even though his theological

⁷⁴ *On the Cross* 1.4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.5.

tradition had commonly called Jesus ‘servant’ in the past.⁷⁶ The word servant (عبد) in Arabic implies being created and subordinate, so how the Christian tradition could apply this term to Christ and still uphold Trinitarian doctrine was at stake. John of Dara, being Miaphysite, did not feel as compelled to define the term ‘servant’ with regard to Christ as did Timothy I. But it is significant that John felt the need to differentiate the miracles of Christ from those of the ‘servants of God’ before him. Whilst he is not engaging deeply in the debate here, the challenge of Islam is clearly a part of the religious environment in which he lives and works.

Having argued that the Jews should have been able to recognise Jesus by his miraculous signs and that they should have therefore listened to his claims for himself, John issues the charge that the Jews clearly killed him out of spite, returning bad things for the good Christ had done. This begins the section mentioned above in which a Christian interlocutor suggests that the Jews are not to blame because the crucifixion of Jesus resulted in every spiritual benefit that Christians have received.⁷⁷ Essentially, the objector argues that since the effects were good, the agents of the crucifixion are not blameworthy. John also rejects this suggestion, and again he does so in a way that corresponds to the argument in anti-Islamic apologies. He proposes that the intention of the Jews is the most important thing: they crucified Jesus because of jealousy and wicked intentions (ܩܘܠܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢ) rather than because they wished for the good things that came from it. John lists illustrations of the Pharisees’ religious jealousy of Jesus from the gospels, and he observes that there was great opposition in the early church to the inclusion of the Gentiles. Whilst these examples are unique to John’s discussion, his final example is also found in anti-Islamic treatises, such as Timothy I’s debate with Caliph Mahdi: ‘[I]t was not that they desired the advantage that [was gained] by the cross, but God turned the evil that they had devised into good, just as he

⁷⁶ For more on Timothy’s discussion of the title ‘servant’, see T.R. Hurst, ‘The Epistle – Treatise: An Apologetic Vehicle. Letter 34 of Timothy I’, in *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, ed. H.J.W. Drijvers, et. al.; OCA 229 (Roma, 1987) 367-382.

⁷⁷ *On the Cross*, 1.7.

did with the brothers of Joseph: when they sold him into slavery, [God] made him a master. And although they did not desire [it], in another way the Lord accomplished his redemption.⁷⁸

Later in chapter one, outside of the context of answering the questions of interlocutors, another hint at the apologetic context appears. Having argued that the cross is, despite appearances to the contrary, the wisdom and power of God, John explains this wisdom further. John proclaims it the great and glorious wisdom of God that ‘Christ is worshipped in his humility and not in the manner of his exaltation’.⁷⁹ Because people did not recognise Christ when he performed miracles, and they failed properly to investigate creation, which God made through wisdom, God chose to save those who believed in the gospel, that is, the contemptible message of the cross. John argues that the apostles performed miracles in the humble and despised name of Jesus the Nazarene, rather than using exalted titles like ‘God’, ‘Christ’, ‘Son’, ‘Word’, or ‘Only Begotten’. As Christ still shows his power in the humble name ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, so the cross, scorned by pagans and Jews alike, continues to work miracles and is worthy of worship by believers. John declares:

For when the apostles passed through fortified places and cities and were preaching the God who was crucified, the pagans and Jews scorned them. But they immediately by the sign and type [of the cross] chased away demons, healed the sick, [and] cast down idols. For all of these things were done with this sign [of the cross] that they made in the name of Jesus the Nazarene. And the unbelievers are shamed and the believers rejoice, and so the cross is worshipped.⁸⁰

The previous chapter discussed the use of the humble name of ‘Jesus the Nazarene’ in the writings of Theodore Abū Qurrah and Nonnus of Nisibis to argue for the veracity of the

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* Compare Timothy I, *Disputation mit dem Kalifen Al-Mahdi* 67 (text); ‘Timothy’s Apology for Christianity’, 52 (translation).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.15.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.16.

Christian faith against Muslim opponents.⁸¹ John takes up these arguments, but he makes an important addition: the apostles worked miracles *with the sign of the cross* (✠) whilst invoking the humble name Jesus the Nazarene. A slight alteration to this apologetic argument for the truth of the Christian faith and the divinity of Jesus Christ renders it an argument for the antiquity of the Christian practice of making the sign of the cross.

4.2. Defending the Veneration of the Cross

John draws heavily from longstanding apologetic arguments to defend the veneration of the cross from the challenges and accusations his opponents make. In doing so, he addresses four subjects. The first three are in response to objections by opponents: 1) the accusation of idolatry, 2) why material objects are necessary if one can approach God intellectually, and 3) why corruptible materials are used to make a ‘despicable sign’. For the fourth subject of discussion, John goes on the defensive, using Old Testament examples of faithful people revering physical objects to justify the veneration of the cross.

4.2.1. Idolatry

Near the end of the first chapter, John repeats the familiar adage that the worship shown to the cross is really shown to Christ: ‘[W]e do not worship pieces of wood and stones, the folly of wrought images. Nor do we honour what is made by human hands, as do those who worship what their hands have made. But in the cross we see Christ, who was stretched out upon the cross.’⁸² In spite of this assertion, or perhaps because of it, the next chapter opens with an interlocutor’s challenge, ‘And how is a person who worships a cross, the material of which is of corruptible substances and is fashioned with all physical

⁸¹ See pp. 152-4.

⁸² *On the Cross* 1.22.

[materials] and impressed with pigments, free from the worship of created things?’⁸³ John responds to this challenge in a manner reminiscent of the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim apologies. John observes that if Christians worshipped a particular material, they would only make crosses out of that material, and they would worship that material wherever it is found regardless of whether it is in the shape of a cross. Furthermore, if the materials mattered, Christians might give varying degrees of honour to crosses depending on the value of the material of its construction. If this were the case, golden crosses would be more highly revered than wooden or stone ones. Since none of these conditions hold, John argues that Christians do not worship the material from which the cross is made, but only Christ, who is pictured in the mind.

4.2.2. The ‘work of the mind alone’

Perhaps John’s mention of picturing Christ in one’s mind prompts the next question: ‘And why is it always all physical material and not the work of the mind alone?’⁸⁴ John replies that physical creatures require physical things. He has already alluded to this point in chapter one, where he observes that Christians and non-Christians alike depend upon physical things for their spiritual worship.⁸⁵ One raises hands to God in prayer ‘as though to [something] limited’,⁸⁶ even though God is unlimited and fills heaven and earth. Even though God is present in every place, nonetheless, one will travel great distances in order to worship God in a particular temple (المسجد). This indirect statement would naturally conjure up thoughts of Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca as well as Christian pilgrimage practices. In spite of a book’s physical components of parchment made by human hands and words penned in ink by a scribe, still when one hears scripture read, one listens as though hearing

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.23.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

the very words of God. Having made these points earlier, John retorts somewhat impatiently to the opponent's question in chapter two, 'Have you also removed every physical thing from the service of your faith and [worship] God in the mind alone? And from now on cut off your members and destroy your book, and cast away the rest of the physical ways in which you offer worship to your God, and serve [your God] intellectually alone!'⁸⁷ John assumes that his opponents will not and cannot do so, and he wonders aloud why it is so strange for Christians to use physical forms of devotion. The opponent's identity is left ambiguous so that the response would fit any monotheistic challenger, whether Jewish or Muslim.

4.2.3. Contemptible materials and a despicable sign

The opponent has a final challenge to issue in chapter two: 'It is not right that you should offer worship to God [using] what is in material, which is entirely contemptible, and to understand God through this sign, which is entirely despicable.'⁸⁸ John's response is two-fold. First, he argues that all created materials are ontologically equal to one another by virtue of the fact that God created them. Because God made both wood and gold, they are both worthy of him. Second, he recalls that God has frequently used 'despicable' materials in order to work salvation, as when he delivered Noah from the flood through an ark made of wood, and when Christ healed a blind man with mud. As for the 'despicable sign' of the cross, it is worthy of worship because it is the means of redemption. Furthermore, had God used more precious material to work redemption, people may have attributed their redemption to the worth of the material rather than 'to the vivifying sign of the cross'.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.3.

4.2.4. Material cult in the Old Testament

In the first section of chapter four, John takes the offensive, constructing a long list of Old Testament examples of faithful people who worshipped God through tangible objects. John contends that if Christians are guilty of idolatry, so are the Old Testament patriarchs. The examples range from Abram to Solomon, and they include theophanies, the altar in the tabernacle/temple, and the Ark of the Covenant. Amongst the types of the cross he invokes, the Ark of the Covenant is John's favourite, yielding multiple counter-arguments to the opponents' objections. When facing the charge of idolatry, the Ark and other objects of the Old Testament cult offer an ancient, divinely-sanctioned precedent for Christian practice. The apparent humiliation of Christians living under non-Christian rule, even the seizure of the True Cross from Jerusalem, do not mean that the cross has no power, since the Ark was also captured by the Philistines, but it was still able to show its superior power against the idol of Dagon. Furthermore, God worked wonders through the Ark, just as the cross has worked wonders. As seen in previous chapters, the Ark of the Covenant was invoked as a type of the cross more frequently beginning in the seventh century in response to charges of idolatry levelled at the Christian community by Muslims and Jews.⁹⁰

4.3. Doubts about the Purported Miracles Performed by the Cross

The discussion above has touched on the importance of the wonders of the cross for John's promotion of its veneration. Chapter six shows that the sign of the cross is essential to all of the sacraments, and the apostles and the saints stand witness to its saving power. Chapter seven summarises the benefits of the cross according to the New Testament. Finally chapter eight asserts that, in response to the failure of human wisdom to find God through

⁹⁰ Ephrem's use of the image in his *Hymns against Julian* is an early example of the use of this type to address the *labarum*'s apparent failure in battle, but the type really comes to the fore in the early seventh century.

nature, God revealed his power through the ‘contemptibleness of the cross’.⁹¹ The miracles performed through Moses had only a limited effect, and not long afterward God’s chosen people still worshipped the golden calf. In contrast, when lowly preachers announced the message of the contemptible cross, the powerful who opposed them failed, and the cross ‘eradicated idols from the earth’.⁹²

John begins chapter nine with a boast, ‘When we call his name, the dead rise, the lepers are cleansed, demons are chased away, and bodily passions depart.’⁹³ His list recalls the examples from the lives of the saints in chapter six. However, John makes this boast to resolve possible doubts about the miracles purportedly done by the cross. After several chapters of silence, the voice of the opponent now demands to know whether ‘you (ܐܢܬܘܢ) do these things with the type of the cross’ (ܕܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ).⁹⁴ John defends the idea that God would show his power through believers and holy objects by invoking Old Testament types, but the opponent is unsatisfied. ‘Show me the signs that the cross did, and, if not, the reports about it are not true.’⁹⁵ John asserts that just as there were many wonders in Moses’ day but now they do not occur, miracles were numerous at the beginning of the proclamation of the cross, but now they are few. For John, the miracles were necessary at the beginning of the gospel in order to draw the Gentiles to the fear of God and so that ‘the Jews would be put to shame because a weak man cannot do miracles like these through his cross’.⁹⁶ Since now ‘his gospel message is spread abroad in the world by the power of the cross, and the Gentiles in all corners of the world worship it’,⁹⁷ abundant miracles are no longer necessary because the truthful words of Christ are sufficient for belief. Nevertheless, John is no cessationist:

⁹¹ *On the Cross* 8.2.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 9.1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

‘[E]ven now at the invocation of Christ’s name and by the sign of his cross whenever it is necessary [Christ performs wonders] among the holy ones of his believers.’⁹⁸

Signs and wonders are a prominent feature of the controversial literature of John’s time. As seen above in the section about the humble name of Jesus the Nazarene, the miracles of Jesus played a role in debate about whether he was the Son of God. In his treatise *Against the Jews*, Theodore Abū Qurrah imagines that his ‘Jewish friend’ might protest that he cannot be sure whether Christ did miracles because none of his ancestors who would have witnessed them are still alive to confirm it.⁹⁹ Muslims did not doubt the miracles of Christ, but instead they argued that the other prophets did similar wonders, so Christ is no greater than they are.¹⁰⁰ Whilst John readily argues that Christ’s miracles corroborate his identity as the Son of God, nevertheless, he shows awareness that his arguments for the veneration of the cross on the basis of miracles is more problematic. Unlike the monk in the *Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*,¹⁰¹ he does not offer to demonstrate the power of the cross before a contemporary audience.

4.4. John’s Interlocutors

Throughout John’s treatise, one encounters interruptions and objections designed to move the argument along or to introduce new information, but the identity of the speaker is unclear. At times, the questioner is undoubtedly a Christian, who speaks in the first person about the benefits received from the crucifixion. Nevertheless, since the question is about the crucifixion and whether the Jews are guilty, this Christian voice sounds curiously confused about traditional Christian beliefs.¹⁰² It is possible that this ‘Christian voice’

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ In his treatise ‘Against the Jews.’ See *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, tr. J.C. Lamereaux, 32.

¹⁰⁰ On the Muslim apologetic texts about Christ’s miracles, see D. Thomas, ‘The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39 (1994) 221-43.

¹⁰¹ See p. 169.

¹⁰² *On the Cross* 1.7.

reflects an apologetic context in which one assumes aspects of an opponent's position for the sake of the argument. Once, John refers to his questioners as 'the crucifiers',¹⁰³ the only time that he directly identifies any opponent as Jewish. Despite his apparent reticence to speak directly to Muslims, some questions are drawn directly from Muslim-Christian debate and so are the answers John gives to them. Many of the questions, particularly in chapters two and four, could have been voiced by either a Muslim or a Jew.

John does not allude to Muslims in the roundabout way that some other Syriac authors of the time did. For example, some of John's contemporaries used the word *hanpē* (ܚܢܦܐ) as cipher for the Muslims. Whilst in Syriac this term had once meant 'pagan', the cognate word in Arabic, *hanīf* (حنيف), was used for a true monotheistic believer, so it could be a delightful double entendre for the Syriac-speaking apologist.¹⁰⁴ For his part, John of Dara uses *hanpē* but only in the sense of 'pagan'. Two East Syrians, Theodore bar Kōnī and Timothy I, call the Muslims 'the new Jews'. John of Dara also does not employ this designation, although he clearly hoped that his arguments would have currency regardless of whether the opponent were Jewish or Muslim. It appears that John prefers to leave the identity of the interlocutor ambiguous. This strategy works to his advantage: John can tackle a wide range of questions and offer engaging and coherent Christian answers, equipping his audience for their own day-to-day contact with religious others. Given the content of his homily and the historical context, one can be certain that he considers Muslims, as well as Jews, to be religious rivals for his community.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1.9.

¹⁰⁴ S.H. Griffith, 'The Prophet Muhammad: His Scripture and His Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century', in *La Vie du prophète Mahomet: colloque de Strasbourg, octobre 1980*, ed. T. Fahd (Paris, 1983) 118-21.

5. Conclusion

We have encountered inter-religious polemic at every turn in this study: in the fourth-century theologies that influenced the later celebrations of the cross, in the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos legends, and in Syriac homilies for the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross before the Arab Conquest. The very themes that saturated these theologies, legends, and homilies are reworked in apologetic literature against Jews and Muslims in order to defend the veneration of the cross and even the very idea of the crucifixion. Nowhere is the synthesis of traditional festal material and apologetic argument as complete as in John of Dara's *memra On the Cross*. John of Dara seized the occasion of the feast to promote and defend the veneration of the cross, deploying classic components of the feast day for apologetic ends. His *memra* above all shows concern for the times in which he lived, a time of soul-searching in his community, as many entertained the benefits, social and religious, of switching allegiances to Islam.¹⁰⁵ For all of these reasons, John's *memra On the Cross* deserves the attention of any scholar interested in inter-religious debate in the early Abbasid caliphate.

John engages with one of the hot issues of his day, defending the traditional doctrines of the church, responding to challenges, and attempting to dissuade his community from losing heart or losing faith. His efforts did not go unnoticed. John of Dara's defence of the cross inspired other Syrian Orthodox writers to take up the pen, adapting John's work to the needs of their own communities. The next chapter examines the treatises on the cross written by his successors, Moshe bar Kepha and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī.

¹⁰⁵ The famous Syrian Orthodox convert to Islam 'Alī b. Rabbān al-Ṭabarī is John's contemporary.

Chapter 7: John of Dara's Heirs – Moshe bar Kepha and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī

1. Introduction

The influence of John of Dara's (d. 860) innovative blending of apologetic and traditional festal material is best evaluated by the ways in which later generations energetically built upon his work. His defence of the veneration of the cross was an inspiration to later generations. This chapter will discuss the works on the cross by Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903 CE) and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī (d. 1171 CE). Their use of John of Dara's homily as well as their unique contributions to the subject are indications of the lasting importance of the Feast of the Cross as an occasion for pedagogical instruction on the cross. In these later treatises, defence of the veneration of the cross remains central. This chapter will discuss Moshe bar Kepha and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī's works on the Feast of the Cross, highlighting how they reuse and reinterpret John of Dara's work and supplement it with other important traditions.

2. Moshe bar Kepha's Works for the Feast of the Cross

John of Dara's younger contemporary Moshe bar Kepha was the most prolific Syriac writer of his time, and the corpus of his works spans a wider range of topics than any Syriac author of the preceding generations.¹ Though some have been lost, many are still extant in numerous copies, both in Syriac and in Arabic translation. Bar Kepha died in 903 CE, aged

¹ For a convenient introduction to his life and works, see *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, s.v. 'Mushe bar Kipho' (Piscataway, NJ, 2011). For more detail on his life, writings, and place in history, see J. Reller, *Mose bar Kepha und seine Paulinenauslegung: nebst Edition und Übersetzung des Kommentars zum Römerbrief* (Wiesbaden, 1994) 21-61.

either seventy or ninety.² At the age of twenty, he entered the monastery of Mar Sergius, (northeast of Balad on the Tigris), and he was consecrated the bishop of Beth Raman (north of Tagrit on the Tigris), approximately ten years later in 863. He wrote extensive commentaries on the scriptures,³ various works on theological topics,⁴ and commentaries on liturgical subjects, not to mention the works attributed to him that have not survived.⁵ Amongst his many writings, bar Kepha wrote two works dedicated to the subject of the Feast of the Cross: a brief explanation of the Feast of the Cross and a longer treatise on the Feast of the Cross. These will be treated in turn below, and greater space will be allotted to the treatise because it evinces a high degree of dependence on John of Dara's homily for the feast day.

One issue of concern for the present study is the high degree of overlap between bar Kepha's writings and those of his predecessor, John of Dara. Whilst the extant corpus of writings by bar Kepha is far larger and more diverse than that of John of Dara, there are a number of overlapping subjects, in which the names of the treatises and their comparable lengths call into question which man was the author of which text. Works attributed to John

² The short *vitae* that circulated independently say 90 years, and the anonymous Chronicle of Edessa reports 70 years, the latter in agreement with a variant reading in Bar Ebroyo's *Chronicle*. See the comparison in Reller, *Mose bar Kepha und seine Paulinenauslegung*, 24-9. Assemani published the Syriac text of the *vita* of Moshe bar Kepha. See G.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* (Romæ, 1721) 2:127-31.

³ Still extant are: Hexameron (*Der Hexameronkommentar des Moses bar Kepha: Einleitung, Übersetzung und Untersuchungen*, ed. and tr. L. Schlimme; 2 vols (Wiesbaden, 1977)); on Paradise (Latin translation by Masius in *PG* 11:481-608); on the Psalms (J.M. Vosté, 'L' introduction de Moše bar Kepa aux Psaumes de David', *Revue biblique* 38 (1929) 214-28); commentaries on Matthew (partial) and Luke (A.-M. Saadi, 'Moshe bar Kepha's 'Commentary on Luke': a Ninth-Century Apology' (PhD diss, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1999); the publication of this work is forthcoming); on John (*Der Johanneskommentar des Moses bar Kepha*, ed. L. Schlimme; 4 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1978); and on the Pauline epistles (Reller, *Mose bar Kepha und seine Paulinenauslegung*). Apparently his commentaries on the Pentateuch, the historical books, the prophets, and Acts are lost.

⁴ Such as On the Soul (for comparison with other West Syrian authors, see J. Reller, 'Iwannis von Dara, Mose bar Kepha und Bar Hebräus über die Seele, traditionsgeschichtlich untersucht', in *After Bardaisan: Studies in Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers*; ed. G.J. Reinink and A.C. Klugkist; *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 89 (Louvain, 1999) 253-68); On the Resurrection of Bodies; On the Creation of the Angels; On the Heavenly Hierarchy; On Free Will (see the study by S.H. Griffith, 'Free Will in Christian Kalâm: Moshe bar Kepha against the Teachings of the Muslims', *LM* 100 (1987) 143-52); and On Demons.

⁵ For more extensive discussion of the works attributed to bar Kepha, see Reller, *Mose bar Kepha und seine Paulinenauslegung*, 59-87.

of Dara sometimes appear in collections of bar Kepha's works, as is the case for his treatise on demons.⁶ One treatise, *On the Priesthood*, is attributed to John of Dara, Moshe bar Kepha, and John Maron, and, although the order of contents varies between the three, the material is more or less the same. Arthur Vööbus declared confidently that the work belonged to Moshe bar Kepha,⁷ but Michel Breydy's more cautious suggestion that the three may depend on a common *Vorlage* seems closer to the mark.⁸ One cannot hope to make sense of these overlapping traditions so long as the works in question by both writers remain unpublished. In the present case, bar Kepha's treatise on the Feast of the Cross, whilst certainly dependent on John of Dara's work, is not a slavish copy of the earlier text, so an extended discussion of authorship need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that the final word on the relationship between the various works of these two authors has yet to be written.

2.1. *Explanation of the Feast of the Cross*

The *Explanation* (ܟܘܠܠܐ) of the Feast of the Cross (hereafter *Explanation of the Cross*) is a short, highly stylised piece of prose, far more so than the longer commentary with its simple, clearer syntax.⁹ This likely has to do with the source bar Kepha adapts for his own purposes. Once confused with his later, more extensive collection of works on the festal year, bar Kepha's explanations of the liturgical year are now recognised as a distinct

⁶ Vööbus, 'Important Manuscript Discoveries of Iwannīs of Dārā', 378.

⁷ *Ibid.*; *idem.*, Die Entdeckung einer neuen Schrift des Mosche bar Kepha über das Priestertum, 326-7.

⁸ M. Breydy, 'Les compilations syriaques sur le Sacerdoce au IXe siècle: Jean de Dara', 291; *idem.*, 'Historische-literarische Daten zu den Hauptmanuskripten der Lehre vom Priestertum bei Moshe bar Kepha', *Ostkirchliche Studien* 25 (1976) 71. Other discussions of the relationship between bar Kepha and John of Dara occur in A. Baumstark, 'Die Evangelienexegese der syrischen Monophysiten', *OC* 2 (1902) 380-1; *Moses bar Kepha, Myron-Weihe*, ed. and tr. W. Strothmann (Wiesbaden, 1973) 24-5. The latter suggests that one can discern bar Kepha's works from John of Dara's by the way that the former includes various opinions and then gives his own. This seems to me to be too weak a criterion to inspire much confidence. See also the comparison of John of Dara, Moshe bar Kepha, and Bar Hebraeus's works on the soul in Reller, 'Iwannis von Dara, Mose bar Kepha und Bar Hebräus über die Seele', 253-68.

⁹ The text and translation of the *Explanation of the Cross* are in the accompanying dossier of editions and translations.

work.¹⁰ Bar Kepha seems to have had access to the East Syrian collection of explanations (ܟܠܠܐ) of the feasts, and he has lightly edited them to make them acceptable for a West Syrian, Miaphysite audience.¹¹ The East Syrian collection dates from before the Arab Conquest, and it includes writings by several different authors, such as Cyrus of Edessa, Thomas of Edessa, Posi, Išai, and Ḥenana.¹² J. F. Coakley has shown that bar Kepha's *Explanations of the Feasts* are so heavily dependent on the East Syrian collection, that they can sometimes be used to fill in *lacunae* in the East Syrian texts,¹³ and in certain cases, bar Kepha's explanation on a given feast day may provide a witness to treatises that have been lost.¹⁴ The *Explanation of the Cross* is probably one of these, as the East Syrian collection had once included an *Explanation for the Feast of the Cross* written by Henana,¹⁵ but it, along with his explanation for Palm Sunday,¹⁶ has been lost.

The *Explanation of the Cross* is shorter than many of the other Explanations, and it has few distinctive features. Bar Kepha treats this work as he had the other borrowed Explanations: he omits the introduction, which was a recurrent feature of the East Syrian

¹⁰ J.F. Coakley, 'The Explanations of the Feasts of Moše bar Kepha', 403-10; *idem.*, 'Mushe bar Kepha and a Lost Treatise of Henana on Palm Sunday', 301-25.

¹¹ For an overview of the East Syrian collection, see A. Baumstark, 'Die nestorianischen Schriften "de causis festorum"', 320-42; T. Hainthaler, 'The Causes of the Feast, a Literary Genre of the East Syriac Church in the Sixth Century', *The Harp* 23 (2008) 383-400; A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*; CSCO 266 (Louvain, 1965) 173-7, 241, 279.

Modern publications have published the explanations by a particular author individually rather than publishing the collection as a whole. For the explanations by Cyrus of Edessa, see *Six Explanations of the Liturgical Feasts by Cyrus of Edessa, an East Syrian Theologian of the Mid Sixth Century*, ed. and tr. W.F. Macomber; CSCO 355-6 (Louvain, 1974). Thomas of Edessa's *Explanation of the Nativity* was published with a Latin translation by S.J. Carr in *Thomae Edesseni Tractatus de Nativitate Domini Nostri Christi* (Roma, 1898), but his *Explanation of Epiphany*, whilst being the subject of recent studies, has not yet been published. Išai's *Explanation on the Martyrs* and Ḥenana's on Golden Friday and the Rogations are published in A. Scher, *Traité d'Išai le docteur et de Ḥnana d'Adiabène sur les martyrs, le Vendredi d'or et les rogations: suivis de la Confession de foi à réciter par les évêques avant l'ordination* (Turnhout, 1980). Ḥenana also wrote a treatise each for Palm Sunday and the Feast of the Cross, but these have not survived.

¹² For a list of authors and their respective works, see *Six Explanations of the Liturgical Feasts by Cyrus of Edessa*, ed. Macomber, vii.

¹³ Coakley, 'The Explanations of the Feasts of Moše bar Kepha', 404-5 n. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 409-10; *idem.*, 'Mushe bar Kepha and a Lost Treatise of Henana on Palm Sunday', 301-25.

¹⁵ A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 127.

¹⁶ See n. 14.

collection, and begins the explanation abruptly.¹⁷ In fact, the initial passage scarcely has a full sentence, perhaps an indication of the poor quality of bar Kepha's condensation of his source material. The first third of the *Explanation* reels off common types of the cross: Moses' outstretched arms at the battle with Amalek and his wonder-working staff, Jacob's arms crossed in blessing, Noah's ark, the tree in Paradise, and Ezekiel's vision of marking the foreheads of faithful people.¹⁸ As an accompaniment to Paul's boasting in the cross, bar Kepha cites the apostle's famous claim, 'The message of the cross is foolishness to the pagans and a stumbling block to the Jews, but to us who believe [it is] the power of God'.¹⁹ After his list of types, bar Kepha sums up the manifold benefits of the cross. Most of the rest of the explanation recounts the Judas Kyriakos version of the discovery of the cross by Helena. Once Helena has secured the True Cross and the nails, she commands everyone to keep a commemoration of its discovery 'on the thirteenth of Elul (September)'. Bar Kepha's editorial hand has been so light that he repeats the East Syrian date here instead of changing it to the 14th of Elul, the normal date for the feast day in the West Syrian calendar.²⁰ Finally, like the other explanations, bar Kepha ends his *Explanation of the Cross* with a brief exhortation to the audience.

If any section might give the reader an idea of the context for which bar Kepha was writing, it is the exhortation.²¹ He turns to the audience and addresses them: 'Let us believe with our whole heart, brothers, and let us bear the cross of Christ, which cannot be easily

¹⁷ It seems that the promise he made in the preface to the collection that he would give an introduction at the beginning of each explanation was only due to his close copying of his source. See Coakley, 'The Explanations of the Feasts of Moše bar Kepha', 405.

¹⁸ This type was used by Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.22. The early church fathers made much of the fact that the ancient Hebrew letter 'taw', used in the Ezekiel passage for the 'mark' made on foreheads, was cross-shaped. Severus of Antioch also uses it in his *Cathedral Homily 31* for the Feast of the Cross, and it seems likely to me that Severus is the inspiration for bar Kepha here.

¹⁹ *Explanation of the Cross* 1.7.

²⁰ The Church of the East is unique in keeping the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross on 13 September, originally the first day of the Encaenia octave, whereas the other traditions all keep it the following day. In this respect, it is interesting to note that in the 380s Egeria had said that the cross was celebrated on the same day, the first of the octave of the Encaenia festivities.

²¹ *Explanation of the Cross* 3.

borne by anyone.’ He urges them to imitate the fabled Constantine and his mother by seeking out ‘the place of the worship [of the cross]’, fleeing ‘Jewish thought’, and turning to the knowledge of the truth. The exhortation assumes that such a confession of the cross may put one in danger of enduring ‘pain, death, and crucifixion’. Since Christ endured all those things for the sake of believers, they should not fear to undergo them for his sake, thus being deemed worthy of the kingdom of heaven. These exhortations would fit well with any situation in which Christians found themselves marginalised, whether in the East Syrian community in the Persian Empire or amongst Christians of any stripe under the Abbasid caliphate. Since bar Kepha follows his sources closely in this collection, perhaps one should not make too much of the exhortation as a witness to his own context. Nevertheless, the exhortation would have suited his context, too.

2.2. *Questions on the Feast of the Cross*

Moshe bar Kepha’s *Questions on the Feast of the Cross (Questions)*²² is one witness among many to the influence of John of Dara’s work on the next generation of Syriac scholars.²³ Comparing the two texts, one finds that bar Kepha leant heavily, though not exclusively, on the work of John of Dara for his own treatise. This relationship will be further examined below. First, I will speak briefly about bar Kepha’s treatise and its distinct features. *Questions* is a part of a larger corpus of works on the liturgical year, which I will call his *Festal Collection*. J. F. Coakley has plausibly suggested that this collection was

²² Because the manuscripts call this work by a variety of names, I have chosen a name that I think best describes the contents instead of using one of the historic designations attached to the work. None of manuscripts describe the text as a question-and-answer text, and the designation is my own editorial choice.

²³ For example, bar Ṣalībī uses John’s *memra On the Cross* directly, and he cites John of Dara’s commentaries on the gospels (non-extant) as sources for his own exegetical work. Moshe bar Kepha made extensive use of John’s works in his own commentaries on the gospels and his commentaries on the *myron* and liturgy. The topics of several treatises attributed to them overlap, so there is much more to discover about the degree to which John of Dara influenced bar Kepha.

compiled later than the *Explanations of the Feasts* based on the greater ‘sophistication and clarity’ of the collection of commentaries.

Whereas each of the *Explanations* follows a predictable structure based on that of the East Syrian collection, the literary genres used in the *Festal Collection* range from ordinary homilies to verse-by-verse commentary to question-and-answer.²⁴ Indeed, the manuscripts themselves name the works gathered into this collection variously, sometimes designating them ‘explanations (ܟܠܠܐ) on the feasts’, ‘homilies’ (ܚܘܡܝܠܝܐ) or ‘commentaries’ (ܟܘܡܡܝܠܝܐ). The latter terms are more or less synonymous in the sense that both could refer to homilies and often indicated a work meant to be spoken aloud,²⁵ but they could also be used for a work of more literary character. Because the treatise for the Feast of the Cross is written in a question-and-answer format, describing it as a ‘homily’ does not quite fit. It is a text more suited to the classroom than the *bema*, and it does not feel like a sermon that would have been given publicly for the commemoration of the feast day. It is better classified as a ‘handbook’.²⁶ This is where bar Kepha’s *Questions* departs from John of Dara’s homily: bar Kepha’s *Questions* relies heavily on John of Dara’s homily, but it condenses, clarifies, and amends the older material, as well as supplementing it with other sources, for a new generation. Close comparison of the two demonstrates bar Kepha’s own interests and what material he believed most important for his own context.

²⁴ Coakley, ‘The Explanations of the Feasts of Moše bar Kepha’, 48 n. 14. The question-and-answer format was a favourite device of bar Kepha’s, as it was for many of his contemporaries.

²⁵ Their verbal roots are both verbs for speaking.

²⁶ Averil Cameron also suggests this as an apt term for other question-and-answer texts, such as the *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem* and the anti-Jewish *Kephalaia* published by V. Déroche (‘La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^e et VII^e siècle, un moment inédit, les *Kephalaia*’, *TM* 11 (1991) 275-311). They are similar in character to bar Kepha’s.

Moshe bar Kepha's particular genius lay in the selection, editing, and organising of pre-existing materials for contemporary consumption. The primarily question-and-answer format of his treatise lends itself to a simple summary of the contents:²⁷

Chapter	Subject
Preface	A comparison of the Dedication of Solomon's Temple to the Feast of the Cross (which bar Kepha calls a 'renewal' (ܠܗܘܘܐ), the same word used for the Dedication)
1	a. Are we celebrating the remembrance or the renewal of the cross? b. Why do we celebrate its discovery?
2	Why did Christ die by crucifixion instead of in some other way?
3	Why do we worship the cross more than any other object of the divine economy?
4	With what materials can we depict the symbol of the cross?
5	Do we worship the material with which the cross is depicted?
6	How is it fitting for us to worship the cross?
7	When Christ is worshipped, is the symbol of the cross worshipped with him?
8	The difference between the word ܠܒܢܐ (šlība) and the word ܘܩܝܦܗ (zqīpha).
9	Why do we make the sign of the cross from above to below and from left to right?
10	Eight objections: a. Those who worship the cross worship creation. b. Why do you depict the cross in an entirely material way and not with the work of the mind? c. It is not right for you to depict the cross with despised and scorned materials, like stones or wood. d. When the cross is broken, is God's honour diminished? e. Why does the cross not do wonders and miracles today? f. It is written in the Law, 'Cursed is the man who makes graven images and worships them.' Therefore you are cursed. g. It is said, 'Cursed is anyone who is hung on a tree.' How can one who is cursed free others from a curse? h. How can a crucified man who did not save himself save others?
11	On how many miracles and operations the cross does.
12	About the types and symbols of the cross in nature.
13	About the types and symbols of the cross in scripture.
14	About Ezekiel's vision of the type of the cross (Ezek 9.3-6).
15	What are the advantages we have in the cross?
16	Why do we lift up the cross in the four cardinal directions?
17	Why do we make the sign of the cross three times in each direction?
18	Why do we cry, 'Kyrie eleison', when we lift it up?

²⁷ Here I follow the chapters given in Mingana MS 112, supplemented by the last four chapters in Nau's study, 'Sur la fête de la croix', 229-41.

19	Why do we celebrate the feast of the discovery of the cross on a different day from the Nestorians? ²⁸
20	The Protonike legend from the account of the apostle Addai.
21	How did the Jews seize the wood of the cross and bury it again, and when did Helena bring it back up?
22	The Judah Kyriakos version of the Helena legend.

An edition and English translation of Mingana Syriac MS 112, compared with Mingana Syriac MS 3, can be found in the accompanying dossier of editions and translations. The above summary aims to give the reader a general orientation to the contents in order to contextualise the discussion of the distinctive features of bar Kepha's *Questions* that follows.

Bar Kepha's talent lay primarily in the organisation and synthesis of a variety of sources, and *Questions* illustrates this skill well. As in many of his writings, bar Kepha strategically deploys a question-and-answer format in order to integrate sources from different perspectives. In this way he weaves disparate materials into a coherent whole and even plays them against one another. Because he transfers previous homily material into question-and-answer format, the homiletical material takes on a scholastic character in his hands. The format does not allow a particular idea or biblical verse to shape the whole, in contrast to the significance of 1 Corinthians 1.18ff for John of Dara's treatise. Whereas the biblical text shaped John's sermon, bar Kepha, who otherwise uses so much of John's material, only cites it once and gives no further comment. His format restricts the degree to which he could allow the biblical text to influence the overall structure.

The question-and-answer format organises materials efficiently. The format allows him to group together similar materials that were scattered throughout John of Dara's *memra*. For example, bar Kepha gathers all of the interjections of opponents from John of Dara's treatise (from chapters one, two, four, and nine), and he puts them into a single

²⁸ This chapter is not in the manuscript I consulted for my edition, but it appears in the most ancient manuscripts of the work, such as in the Paris manuscript Nau consulted for his article, in BL Add. 21,210, and in Charfeh MS 4/2. None of the extant manuscripts records an answer to the question, which is perhaps why the modern scribe of Mingana Syriac MS 112 omitted the chapter altogether.

chapter, under the heading, ‘Eight objections and their refutations’ (see below). He merges John’s sixth and seventh chapter into a single one, thus blending liturgical, hagiographical, and biblical materials that demonstrate the wonders done by the cross. Not only does bar Kepha synthesise material in this way, he also simplifies and shortens it, which allows him space to add suitable illustrations not found in John of Dara’s *memra*. Overall, his adjustments to previous sources, especially John of Dara’s, transforms a homily into a useful reference tool²⁹ that his contemporaries could easily skim for questions of particular interest.

This section will explore the major features of bar Kepha’s *Questions*, using the same broad themes as the previous chapter: the use of the invention legends, biblical exegesis, and the defence of the veneration of the cross. A final section will discuss the new materials and unique features of bar Kepha’s work.

2.2.1. The Invention narratives

The previous chapter observed that the invention legends are not of primary concern for John of Dara. His successor bar Kepha also refers to the invention legends rarely for the first nineteen chapters of his work. As in John of Dara’s homily, *Questions* mentions the Protonike and Helena legends in passing in the first chapter, but this is simply because bar Kepha has imported John of Dara’s opening paragraph more or less intact. Bar Kepha also follows John’s lead in chapter eleven, where he combines John’s sixth and seventh chapters³⁰ into one chapter on the miracles worked by the cross. Like John, bar Kepha presents Constantine as a witness to how the cross gives victory to those who believe in it. Bar Kepha’s description of Constantine’s vision is simpler and less colourful than John’s,

²⁹ This needs further investigation, but I suspect that the collection of bar Kepha’s works on the liturgical year is the work of a scribe rather than the design of the author. I doubt that bar Kepha intended this work to be read as a homily, but rather I suspect that he compiled it for teaching and catechesis.

³⁰ *On the Cross* chapter 6 is about the function of the sign of the cross in consecrating the church’s sacraments and the miracles performed by the cross in the lives of the saints. Chapter seven is a catalogue of New Testament passages on the spiritual benefits acquired through the cross.

and his reorganisation of material puts Constantine in the middle of the chapter instead of at the end of the list, a position that downplays the emperor's presence. He tells the full story of Constantine's vision in the final chapter of the *memra*, so perhaps he did not see a need to expand on it here.

However, bar Kepha gives much more space to the narration of the discoveries of the cross than John of Dara did. He has chosen to devote separate chapters to each of the legends, separating them from the list of Old Testament types in John's final chapter.³¹ Bar Kepha's accounts of the Protonike legend and the subsequent loss of the cross during the reign of Trajan³² are almost word-for-word the same as John of Dara's.³³ At the end of the legend about how the cross was lost a second time, bar Kepha includes a list of bishops of Jerusalem from the time of James, the brother of Jesus, to the time of Judah Kyriakos. Bar Kepha is clearly concerned to demonstrate the historical continuity between apostolic times and the second discovery. Bar Kepha's final chapter tells the Judah Kyriakos version of the Helena legend. His retelling of the popular legend focuses on Constantine's vision of the cross and the discovery of the nails. Regarding the discovery of the relic of the cross, bar Kepha is remarkably succinct: Judah declares that his ancestors have passed down a tradition about the cross and then he entrusts the relic to Helena, who immediately impresses it with precious stones and puts it in a silver case. Judah's imprisonment in the well, his prayers, the discovery of three crosses, and the miraculous authentication of the True Cross are completely absent.³⁴ Perhaps bar Kepha, in a desire to be succinct, omitted the miracle because it is so similar to the one found in the Protonike legend that he told two chapters

³¹ He inserts six new, relatively short chapters between the types from the Old Testament in chapter 13 and the Protonike legend in chapter 20.

³² *Questions* chapters 20-21.

³³ He seems to have copied the first legend from John of Dara, and departed from John of Dara's account of how the cross was lost during the reign of Trajan only at the end by including a list of fifteen patriarchs of Jerusalem. This list is almost identical to that in *De sancta cruce*, ed. E. Nestle, 10-11.

³⁴ The corresponding sections in the edition of the Judah Kyriakos legend are comparatively lengthy. See *The Finding of the Cross*, ed. and tr. Drijvers and Drijvers, 44-9 (text) and 64-7 (translation).

earlier. Bar Kepha spends far more time relating the discovery of the nails, which he considers a fulfilment of prophecy.³⁵ Helena commands that the 14th of Elul should be celebrated annually to commemorate the discovery of the cross, and bar Kepha makes the commemoration of the day a measurement of belief in the cross: ‘And all of the ones who believe in the cross remember the glorious day of its commemoration so that there may be for them a mention (ذكر) and fellowship in the kingdom of heaven’.³⁶

In sum, bar Kepha’s use of the invention legends in his *Questions* does not differ greatly from John of Dara’s homily. In almost every case, bar Kepha has followed John’s lead, usually simplifying and abbreviating John’s passages. When he comes to the final chapters of *Questions*, he reproduces the Protonike and Trajan legends as he finds them in John of Dara, but he adds the episcopal line of the see of Jerusalem to provide greater historical continuity with the following chapter on Helena and Judah Kyriakos. Even here, his tendency towards brevity means that he leaves out a significant part of the legend itself, focusing instead on the vision of Constantine and the discovery of the nails of the crucifixion. Although bar Kepha abbreviates the Judah Kyriakos legend, he apparently felt that his predecessor’s mere allusion to the legend was inadequate.

2.2.2. Biblical exegesis

When it comes to biblical exegesis, bar Kepha has little to add to John of Dara’s *memra*. He devotes his thirteenth chapter to the Old Testament types of the cross, which only differ from John’s types in the order of their appearance in the list.³⁷ The major difference between the two texts is the use of 1 Corinthians 1.18ff. As seen in the previous

³⁵ The usual Zech. 14.20.

³⁶ *Questions* 22.

³⁷ With one exception: bar Kepha adds Noah’s ark to the list. John had used the example of Noah’s ark in *On the Cross* 2.3 but does not include it in his list of types. The context in which the two authors use it is different.

chapter, the contours of Paul's message in 1 Corinthians shape the broad outlines of John's entire *memra* and inspire a great deal of his argument. Bar Kepha's question-and-answer format does not allow any biblical passage to influence structure and content in the same way. In *Questions*, the verse finds its modest place in chapter eleven alongside other New Testament passages about the benefits gained through the cross. Bar Kepha paraphrases the passage and offers no further comment on its meaning. The difference in this respect is striking.

2.2.3. Defence of the veneration of the cross

Since bar Kepha has made John of Dara's *memra* the foundation upon which he has built his *Questions*, it is no surprise that the defence of the veneration of the cross appears frequently throughout. Bar Kepha, however, adds supplementary materials to his main source that are worth discussing. Even as he incorporates new questions, he often repurposes material from John of Dara's *memra* to answer them. Moshe bar Kepha strives to teach clearly about the Feast of the Cross, and he takes pains to incorporate different materials into his *Questions* to enhance John of Dara's material.

2.2.3.1. Incorporation of new sources

Bar Kepha's second and third chapters draw from sources other than John of Dara, but he does not cite his source, so it is unclear precisely what those sources are or how he came to know them in Syriac. Chapter two entertains the question, 'Why did the Lord receive death on a cross when there are many kinds of death?' It is not clear where bar Kepha draws this question from, but the similarity to older controversial questions about the shameful

manner of Christ's death is apparent.³⁸ As early as the second century, 'Trypho' challenged Justin Martyr: 'But whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we are in doubt about.'³⁹ More recently, as discussed in chapter five, Christians had had to defend the shameful manner of Christ's death to both Jews and Muslims. Whilst bar Kepha's question may reflect mere curiosity, it is likely that the question carried a punch in a context of inter-religious polemic. Bar Kepha's answers are varied. He appeals to the logic of recapitulation by noting that humans left Paradise because of a tree, so it is fitting for them to re-enter Paradise through a tree. His second and third points involve the cross being lifted up in the air as a mediator between heaven and earth.⁴⁰ First he asserts that Christ had to die by crucifixion because 'we had smelled the air which was stinking with the stench of idols'. His meaning is not entirely clear.⁴¹ It is perhaps a reference to the smell of burnt sacrifices, but it also reminds the reader that the cross purportedly eradicated idol worship. Bar Kepha's third point refers to Christ's triumph over the 'ruler of the air', a reference to Ephesians 2.2, blending it with a citation of Colossians 2.15. Fourthly, bar Kepha reminds his listeners that Christ himself said that when he was lifted up he would draw all people to him (Jn 12.32). In his final point, bar Kepha appeals to reason, saying that the crucifixion was necessary because Christ's public execution made the fact of his death clear to all who came to

³⁸ The question is of a popular variety, so an oral source seems as likely as a written source. Bar Kepha is not consistent with indicating his sources – he never recognizes his dependence on John of Dara – so this is not unusual.

³⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 89; tr. M. Dods and G. Reith; in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1; ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A.C. Coxe (Buffalo, NY, 1885). Bar Kepha includes a challenge more similar to that in the *Dialogue with Trypho* in chapter ten, objection seven.

⁴⁰ Cf. Col 1.20.

⁴¹ Dionysius bar Šalībī, *Instruction on the Cross* 9, understood Moshe bar Kepha's statement this way: '[They ask,] "Why did Christ die on a cross and not (by some other form of) death?"

'We say, "So that we should know that he is the Creator and holds everything. ... [T]he four ends of the cross are held and bound by means of a middle centre, thus by divine power the height, length, depth, and width, that is, all of creation, are held. Again when Christ descended to earth and traversed it, he drove Satan away, and he fled [and] stood in the air, and when Christ pressed on after him, he ascended the cross to blot him out from all things. And by this form stretched out to all sides, he made known (that) he is in every place and that he rules over all, and that there is no place that can be taken away from his grasp. And again to make known that they did not understand (his) dying by the fact that they crucified him in a high place just as when someone is proclaimed unconquered (by) something, his victory is proclaimed in a high place before everyone's eye.'"

Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. Given the well-known Muslim rejection of the crucifixion of Jesus, bar Kepha's concern to prove the fact of Christ's death, rather than his resurrection, is noteworthy.

The next chapter asks, 'Why do we worship the cross more than all of the divine economy of Christ: more than the Virgin, and more than the cave [of the nativity]? For we do not worship these things, or the manger, or the Jordan River, or the rest.'⁴² A Greek question-and-answer text, *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem (Quaestiones)*,⁴³ contains a similar question: 'For what reason do we all, the faithful, make crosses, copies of the cross of Christ, but we do not furnish ourselves with copies of his holy lance or of the reed or the sponge? For these are holy and good things like the cross.'⁴⁴ To my knowledge, *Quaestiones* was not translated into Syriac, and, although bar Kepha's question is essentially the same, it contains enough differences that it should not be considered reliant upon this source.⁴⁵ Both *Quaestiones* and bar Kepha's *Questions* show that there was curiosity regarding the uniqueness of the cross amongst other objects involved in the divine economy. Whereas *Quaestiones* is focused on other items used in the crucifixion, bar Kepha's is a more comprehensive view of the divine economy, perhaps even challenging why Christ's death is more significant than the people or objects involved in his incarnation (the Theotokos, the location of his birth, and the manger) or his baptism (in the Jordan River).

⁴² *Questions* 3.

⁴³ *Quaestiones* is difficult to date. Because question 137 also occurs in the *Dialogue of Papiskos* and in the *Trophies of Damascus*, some have suggested that the *Quaestiones* ought to be dated before these two texts, which are both fairly securely dated to the middle of the seventh century. However, the relationship could just as easily be the other way around, with the *Quaestiones* borrowing from one or the other of these texts. Déroche urges caution since this question is the last of the collection, and it was also known to circulate independently. It also does not appear in the later, longer recension of the *Dialogue of Papiskos*. See Déroche and Dagon, 'La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^e et au VII^e siècle', 279.

⁴⁴ *Quaestiones* 41, PG 28, cols. 623-624. My translation.

⁴⁵ Again, orality is as likely a source as any.

Bar Kepha refuses to take the focus off the cross and crucifixion to focus on other parts of the divine economy. His answers are quite different to those of *Quaestiones*.⁴⁶ His first response starts with acknowledging that some people respond to this question in a similar way to the first one in the previous chapter, the recapitulative harmony of the fact that salvation came through a tree just as sin and death once had. For his part, bar Kepha rejects this application of the argument, not because he objects to recapitulative theology, but because he does not think it can be applied to physical objects. He remarks that crosses are made from many different kinds of material, not just wood. Having set this unsuitable explanation aside, bar Kepha gives no fewer than ten reasons why the cross is foremost among all other holy objects. Many of his reasons are adapted from various places in John of Dara's homily. I will not rehearse all of these here, but I will highlight the most poignant of his points. Bar Kepha's first point insists that the worship of the cross is a declaration of opposition to 'the headstrong Jews'. Here, he sharpens and rephrases John of Dara's statement that 'that which was treated with contempt by the rebellious ones should be honoured by the worshippers'.⁴⁷ Bar Kepha steps up the inter-religious polemic. Several of bar Kepha's points emphasise the cross as a demonstration of Christ's humility and his surpassing love for humankind, mapping broadly onto points made by John of Dara. From this point on, bar Kepha draws so heavily on John of Dara's *memra* that his *Questions* reads like a summary of the older text, with only a few brief insertions and light re-organisation.

2.2.3.2. John of Dara's material

Bar Kepha collects most of the opponents' questions from John of Dara's homily into a single chapter, chapter ten. Bar Kepha gives these questions in a different order. The

⁴⁶ In *Quaestiones*, the response focuses on the way that a cross can be assembled and disassembled at will, and the wood of the cross is not worshipped if it is taken apart. The author simply says that copies of the sponge or lance cannot be made in a similar way.

⁴⁷ *On the Cross* 1.17.

ancient features of anti-Jewish dialogues,⁴⁸ which had appeared early in the first chapter of John of Dara's *memra*, are the last questions in bar Kepha's chapter. Instead, bar Kepha begins his catalogue of opponents' questions with the more generic objections about the appropriateness of worshipping the cross, which are found in John's second, fourth, and ninth chapters. The first three questions are taken directly from John's second chapter. First comes the allegation that those who worship the cross worship created things.⁴⁹ Next is the query about why Christians depict the cross in a material way rather than relying on the work of the mind alone.⁵⁰ The third objection is that, if one does depict the cross, one should not use 'despicable materials', such as wood and stone.⁵¹ Bar Kepha's answers to these questions are simplified versions of John's. The fourth objection alters John of Dara's opponent's question in *On the Cross* 4.3: bar Kepha's objector wonders whether breaking the cross diminishes Christ's honour. In contrast, John's interlocutor goes on at greater length about the vulnerabilities of the cross as an inanimate physical object that cannot move itself, is insensate, is breakable, and can be stolen. It is only in John's response to this question that the concern for God's honour comes through, so bar Kepha has interpreted his source and made it more clear what is really at stake. The fifth objection is the one raised in *On the Cross* 9.2, where the interlocutor asserts that if the cross does not work miracles in the present, then the claims made for it are not true. In John's homily the identity of the questioner is ambiguous. John compares the small number of contemporary miracles to the abundance of miracles done through Moses during the Exodus. He assumes that the audience will readily agree that Moses performed wonders, even if there is no corroborating miraculous evidence in John's day. For John, the abundant wonders done at the beginning

⁴⁸ I.e., the curses on one who is hung on a tree and one who makes idols, and the query whether one who did not save himself can save others.

⁴⁹ Cf. *On the Cross* 2.1.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 2.2.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 2.3.

of the ‘teaching of the cross’ put the Jews to shame as it brought Gentiles from every corner of the world to worship the cross. A straightforward reading of John’s chapter suggests that he has Jewish opponents primarily in view, even if he hopes these arguments will resonate with the current Muslim-Christian debate about the miracles of Jesus. Bar Kepha, in contrast, explicitly calls this objection an objection of the ‘pagans’ (ܩܘܕܫܐ). He seems to have Muslim opponents in mind here, using the Syriac calque on the Arabic *hanīf/hunafā* as others of his era did, since he appeals to Moses and the other prophets, an example unlikely to have much traction with actual polytheists. Whereas Muslims may well be on the horizon of John of Dara’s discussion, bar Kepha strengthens their presence here.

2.2.4. New material on other subjects

When bar Kepha’s *Questions* diverges from John of Dara’s *memra*, there is often another patristic source that has inspired his divergence. For example, Severus of Antioch’s words on the significance of the sign of the cross shape bar Kepha’s priorities. There are a few chapters that draw from sources apart from John of Dara. One brief quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus aside, these sources are the festal homily for the Feast of the Cross by Severus and some otherwise unidentifiable apologetic materials.

2.2.4.1. Severus of Antioch’s *Homily 31*

Material from Severus of Antioch’s homily appears in two places: in the preface and first chapter of *Questions* and in chapter fourteen. Severus was an important authority for bar Kepha, as he was for other West Syrian writers, so it is no surprise that the opening words of Severus’ homily for the Feast of the Cross are given pride of place in bar Kepha’s *Questions*. In contrast, although John of Dara quotes Severus’ *Homily 31* in a different

work,⁵² he chose not to utilise it in his homily for the same feast day. John's choice not to use Severus' *memra* makes sense. More than half of the *memra* is dedicated to addressing issues of concern in sixth-century Antioch – a commemoration of an earthquake and a warning against Hellenistic paganism and old heresies – whereas the other half primarily discusses the tree of life in Eden and some Old Testament types of the cross. For John's purposes, the types could be neatly folded in with other types in his final chapter, and the extensive discussion of the tree of life seems to have made little impact. Severus had explained the Feast of the Cross by analogy with the festival of Dedication for Solomon's temple. John chooses to pen his own introduction, comparing the Feast of the Cross to the resurrection of Christ and celebrating the events at which the cross was or will be revealed.

In the preface and first chapter, Moshe bar Kepha demonstrates his skill as a compiler of traditions. He embraces both of his antecedents' approaches to the Feast of the Cross, adopting Severus' beginning as his preface and using the question-and-answer format to transition from Severus' homily to John's in the first chapter. The first paragraph of Severus' homily, comparing the feast to the Dedication of Solomon's temple makes a stylised introduction to the *memra*. Severus had called the occasion a 'dedication/renewal' (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ) as well as a 'commemoration' (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ) of the cross. Severus explains that the commemoration of the cross is unnecessary because in day-to-day life its memory is kept fresh through crossing oneself and the sacraments. The cross also has no need of renewal itself because it never ages,⁵³ but the feast is called a 'renewal' because through the cross God has renewed Christians.⁵⁴ Bar Kepha uses Severus' clarifications of terminology to construct the question that leads off his first chapter, about whether the feast is for the renewal of the cross or the commemoration of the cross. He gives the same answers Severus

⁵² Shemunkasho, 'John of Dara and His References to Previous Authors', 429.

⁵³ This is a point Dionysius bar Šalībī makes when objecting to the Armenian practice of baptising crosses (*Instruction on the Cross* 10).

⁵⁴ Severus of Antioch, *Cathedral Homily* 31, 640-3.

gave, in more succinct form. In doing so he sets up the questions that lead into John of Dara's introduction to his work. After bar Kepha has clarified that the feast is a celebration of the discovery of the cross, the question is, 'Why do we celebrate the commemoration of its discovery?' John of Dara's comparison of the Feast of the Cross to the resurrection and his allusions to the appearance of the cross through Protonike, Helena, and at the *parousia* follow in simplified form. Having given John's answer first, bar Kepha adds a second reason for celebrating its memory: 'so that we may recall those good things that have been imparted to us by it and through it.'⁵⁵

2.2.4.2. Linguistic discussion of ܫܠܒܐ and ܩܘܦܐ

Chapter eight of *Questions* discusses the difference between two synonyms for 'cross', ܫܠܒܐ (*šliba*) and ܩܘܦܐ (*zqīpha*)⁵⁶. The end of the previous chapter leads into this matter, where bar Kepha has been defending the identification of the cross with Christ: 'Just as the bread is honoured because of the body, and, although it is bread, it is [also] the body because of the union, thus also the cross (ܫܠܒܐ) is honoured because of the one who was crucified (ܩܘܦܐ) on it. However, the cross (ܫܠܒܐ) is also the crucified one (ܩܘܦܐ) because of the wood (ܩܘܦܐ).' The average reader would be excused for having read this sentence as 'the cross is also the cross...', since the two words are often used synonymously. In chapter eight, bar Kepha explains the difference between the two by reference to scripture:

We call Christ, God who was crucified, ܩܘܦܐ, as it is written in the gospel: 'They sought to break the legs of those who were crucified (ܩܘܦܐ) and to take them down.'⁵⁷ We call the saving wood, upon which our Saviour was stretched out, ܫܠܒܐ, as is written in the gospel: 'They took him down from the cross (ܫܠܒܐ) and placed him in the tomb.'⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Questions*, chapter 1.

⁵⁶ ܩܘܦܐ is also the emphatic masculine singular passive participle of the verb ܩܘܦ, meaning 'the one crucified'.

⁵⁷ Jn 19.31. One could easily find counter-examples since the Peshitta New Testament often uses the word ܩܘܦܐ for the cross.

⁵⁸ Acts 13.29.

Bar Kepha is dependent on John of Dara's *On the Cross* 3.1-2 for the answers to both questions, but by separating the discussion into two chapters, he places stronger emphasis on the distinction between ܥܘܠܒܐ and ܥܘܠܒܐ, than his source does. In John of Dara's *memra*, the difference between the terms is a subpoint to the analogy with the bread and body, and he continues to use them as roughly synonymous terms in the rest of the *memra*.⁵⁹ Bar Kepha, however, is generally consistent in his usage, preferring ܥܘܠܒܐ over ܥܘܠܒܐ, when he refers to the cross, unless his source material uses the latter.⁶⁰ Bar Kepha's stronger emphasis of this rather unclear and subordinate point in John's *memra* makes a linguistic case for treating the physical object of a cross like the one who was crucified on it. If synonymous words can point at the same time to the crucified one and to the cross, why should one not venerate the cross as though worshipping Christ who was crucified on it? Bar Kepha has taken a difficult passage from *On the Cross* 3.2, and, by clarifying John of Dara's meaning, he makes more of the argument.

2.2.4.3. Ritual and liturgy

Bar Kepha also includes some unique material that gives clues about his own concerns. Apart from a very brief question about what sorts of materials can be used to construct a cross,⁶¹ all of bar Kepha's additions involve ritual or liturgical matters. John of Dara's treatise does not explain why Christians cross themselves or how to do so properly,⁶²

⁵⁹ John of Dara usually prefers ܥܘܠܒܐ to ܥܘܠܒܐ, using the former 139 times. He uses the latter only 24 times, the majority of which are quotations from the New Testament.

⁶⁰ Bar Kepha uses ܥܘܠܒܐ only five times outside of these two chapters, and four of those are due to his sources, either passages of scripture or the invention legends. The first instance of his use of ܥܘܠܒܐ is in chapter three, before he has differentiated between the two terms. Perhaps making the distinction made him more conscious of his use of vocabulary.

⁶¹ Chapter four. Bar Šalībī preserves it in *Instruction on the Cross* 2.

⁶² The only place where John of Dara speaks explicitly about making the sign of the cross is in chapter six, where he explains that the sign of the cross seals all of the sacraments of the church and he recounts times when the saints were delivered from harm by making the sign of the cross. His main focus throughout is on defending the veneration of physical representations of the cross. He alludes to it when discussing the humble name 'Jesus of Nazareth' in the first chapter. Bar Kepha's interests are more diverse.

but it was enough of a concern for bar Kepha that he discusses such questions in three different places. In chapter nine, the inquiry is about why the sign of the cross is made from top to bottom and left to right.⁶³ For bar Kepha, the order of movement re-enacts the divine economy: God the Word descended from the Father, and, consequently, ‘we have gone from the left side and passed over to the right side by means of the cross’. In a list of reasons in chapter three explaining why the cross is more highly honoured than any other part of the divine economy, bar Kepha explains that by making the sign of the cross Christians make known the Trinity. He cites four passages from the gospels to illustrate his point: John 10.30, 16.28, 15.26; and Matthew 28.19. The passages from John are cited in an order that corresponds to the tracing of the sign of the cross: starting at the forehead with ‘my Father and I are one’, moving the hand down with ‘I came from the Father’, and then left to right with ‘that Spirit which comes from the Father’. Matthew’s Great Commission urges the disciple to baptise all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John of Dara and Moshe bar Kepha both considered the sign of the cross essential to the ritual of baptism,⁶⁴ so this Trinitarian passage – a rarity in the New Testament canon – suits his purposes well.

In chapter 3, when bar Kepha explains that by making the sign of the cross, Christians make the Trinity known, he cites Severus of Antioch as saying, ‘For through it we make known the Trinity.’ This is perhaps a paraphrase of Severus of Antioch’s Letter XXIV:

For indeed in each of these we confess that we know the Trinity, in that we indicate upon our faces that the sign of the revered cross is a dissolver of every evil influence and, when therefore we sign ourselves, we sign three

⁶³ Unlike the Melkites and Church of the East, the West Syrians make the sign of the cross from left to right. The correct manner of making the sign of the cross was an important issue for Dionysius bar Šalībī (see pp. 243; *Instruction on the Cross* 10).

⁶⁴ See *On the Cross* 6.1 and *Questions* 11.

times, and we show that it is through the cross that we have obtained knowledge in the Trinity.⁶⁵

Later, in chapter seventeen, when responding to a liturgical question about why the cross is raised in the four cardinal directions three times,⁶⁶ he makes a related argument that develops Severus' argument further. Bar Kepha explains that it is through the one who was crucified that Christians have perceived the Trinity. He follows up with three of the gospel passages that were used in chapter three.⁶⁷ Here, however, they take on further significance in that they were spoken by the one who was crucified, so that Christ, not the cross, is the one who reveals the triune nature of the deity. This is a good example of bar Kepha's ability to take up previous materials and develop them in new, productive directions.

The seventeenth chapter is flanked by chapters that also entertain liturgical questions. Chapter sixteen seeks an explanation of why the cross is lifted up in the four cardinal directions. Bar Kepha understands this liturgical action as corresponding to the spread of the gospel to the four corners of the world. Chapter eighteen addresses why Christians call out, 'Kyrie eleison', when they lift up the cross: because in this way Christians demonstrate that it was through the cross that God has been reconciled to people.⁶⁸ In some of the older manuscripts, this question is followed by a question about why West Syrians and East Syrians celebrate the Feast of the Cross on different days. Tantalisingly, bar Kepha leaves the question unanswered, perhaps because he has never found a satisfactory response.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch: from Numerous Syriac Manuscripts*, ed. and tr. E.W. Brooks; 2 vols; PO 12 (Paris, 1919-20) 49.

⁶⁶ Bar Kepha also discusses the sign of the cross in his commentary on the liturgy, where he expands on the meaning of this gesture and its place in the liturgy: *Two Commentaries on the Jacobite liturgy*, ed. and tr. R.H. Connelly (London, 1913) 63-5 (text); 69-71 (translation).

⁶⁷ He omits Jn 10.30: 'The Father and I are one'.

⁶⁸ He cites Rom 5.10.

⁶⁹ Much to the chagrin of modern scholars of the liturgical year. In his *Kitāb Ūṣūl al-Dīn*, chapter 15, East Syrian Elias II ibn al-Muqlī answers the same question, and he explains that the Church of the East keeps the Feast of the Cross on the 13th of September because that was the day on which the cross was found. See *Élie II († 1131) Kitāb Ūṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. P.G. Gianazza; 2nd part (Beyrouth, 2005) 305.

In chapter fourteen, bar Kepha adds an additional type of the cross from Ezekiel 9.3-6, which can also be found in Severus' homily for the Feast of the Cross. Bar Kepha seems to have had a fondness for this type, as he included it in his *Explanation of the Cross*, too.⁷⁰ In the Ezekiel passage, the prophet has a vision of a man with a writing kit passing through the streets of Jerusalem and marking the foreheads of those people who lament the evil deeds done in the city. This mark preserves its bearers when an angel sweeps through the city destroying everyone else. In Severus' homily, this type provides the perfect segue from Old Testament types of the cross to a vivid description of the earthquake that took place in Antioch 55 years before, which indiscriminately cut down men, women, and children. Severus uses the anniversary of the earthquake as an invitation to repentance and re-dedication to orthodox Christian faith. Bar Kepha's interest in the Ezekiel passage is very different – he includes it because the ritual act of making the sign of the cross is a priority of his. John of Dara does not share this preoccupation, being far more exercised by the defence of the veneration of the cross, and he omits the Ezekiel type from his list.

3. Dionysius bar Ṣalībī

Dionysius bar Ṣalībī, West Syrian bishop of Amid, died in 1171 CE. A contemporary of the Crusaders, this renowned figure of the Syriac Renaissance lived approximately two centuries after the death of Moshe bar Kepha, putting him outside of the remit of this study. However, his extensive use of both John of Dara's and Moshe bar Kepha's writings for the

⁷⁰ It is hard to know whether the type was also in the East Syrian explanation by Henana, or whether bar Kepha imported the type from Severus' homily into that work, too. The type from Ezekiel was more common in the West, used primarily in Latin texts, so it seems more likely to have its origin in Severus' writings than in the East Syrian collection. It does not appear in the *memre* by Narsai and David Eskolaya, but the lack of other East Syrian *memre* on the subject, possibly more due to the accidents of manuscript preservation rather than the historical existence of such materials, makes one hesitate to make a sweeping conclusion.

Feast of the Cross is an elegant witness to the importance of these two writers for the history of the defence of the cross amongst West Syrians in the Islamic period. Bar Ṣalībī uses their works without attribution in his *Instruction on Faith and the Cross* (*Instruction on the Cross*),⁷¹ thus separating the passages he borrows from the context of the Feast of the Cross. He does tell the invention stories, and he explains why the church keeps the Feast of the Cross on the 14th of Elul, but the broader context of his treatise is teaching on the veneration of the cross more generally.

The *Instruction on the Cross* is preserved in Mingana manuscript 215⁷² in Birmingham, England, and in Charfeh manuscript 4/1.⁷³ In both manuscripts, it occurs before his more well-known treatises on *On the Myron* and *On Baptism*.⁷⁴ In his catalogue Mingana describes this treatise as the first of a series that together comprise a ‘Sacramentary’ since the scribe calls the collection a ܩܘܪܒܢܐܢܐ ܩܘܪܒܢܐܢܐ. This designation is not merely a scribal title, as the preface on the meaning of faith is an introduction to all of the treatises and not just *Instruction on the Cross*. For the convenience of the reader, a brief summary of the contents of bar Ṣalībī’s *Instruction on the Cross* follows. An edition and translation of the full treatise can be found in the accompanying dossier of editions and translations.

Chapter	Title	Description
Preface	[On faith]	This is a preface for the whole Sacramentary rather than for bar Ṣalībī’s <i>Instruction on the Cross</i> . On the grounds that ‘the origin of all of the mysteries of Christianity is faith’, the author provides patristic quotations to explain what faith is.
1	About the holy cross	The chapter responds to the question, ‘Whence did we learn to worship the cross?’ Bar Ṣalībī gives several traditions to emphasise the apostolic foundations for the veneration of the cross.
2	[no title]	This chapter answers three questions:

⁷¹ The opening paragraph is a short note on the meaning of faith (see below), hence the title in the manuscript. The ten chapters that follow focus on the cross, so omitting ‘on Faith’ from the short title is fair.

⁷² This is the manuscript that I have used for my research. Unfortunately, it lacks most of chapter five, all of chapter six, and the beginning of chapter seven. It also contains all of bar Ṣalībī’s controversial treatises.

⁷³ I have not had the opportunity to consult this manuscript. On the contents, see I. Armat, *Catalogue des manuscrits de Charfet* (Jounieh, 1937) 71 [v’].

⁷⁴ Both are published in English translation: *Commentaries on Myron and Baptism*, tr. Baby Varghese (Kerala, India, 2006).

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why do we worship the cross more than the Virgin... and [the rest of] the economy of Christ? 2. Why did [Christ] give us the cross to worship and not something else? 3. With what materials is the cross constructed?
3	About the discovery of the cross	This chapter tells the three Invention legends: Protonike, the burial of the cross in the reign of Trajan, and the Judah Kyriakos version of the Helena legend.
4	We do not worship the material that is on the cross	This chapter addresses two charges: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why do we worship the material with the sign of the cross? 2. Accusation that Christians worship material things.
5	[no title]	The chapter is imperfect. ⁷⁵ It begins with the question, 'How can one be free of the worship of material things if the cross is made of corruptible natures like stone and wood?'
[6]		[This chapter is missing.] ⁷⁶
7	[title is missing]	[Beginning in the middle of the chapter.] It picks up at a reflection on the redemption wrought by the cross. Then it answers the allegation (again) that Christians worship created things. Then the interlocutors assert, 'It is not right for you to worship the cross which has no sensation and its pictures are corruptible and can be torn.'
8	About the cross	The chapter answers two challenges: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is Christ worshipped through the cross, which is a herald of his humiliation? 2. Show us the signs that the cross has done, and, if not, the thing that you say it has done is not true. The last half of the chapter is a summary of the types of the cross in nature and in the scriptures. An explanation that only the cross of Christ is worshipped and not those of the thieves crucified with him follows.
9	About the cross	The first two-thirds of the chapter is a summary of John of Dara's <i>On the Cross</i> 1.2-16, and the last third discusses the question of why Christ died by crucifixion instead of in some other way.
10	On when the cross became celebrated and worshipped in general	Bar Ṣalībī gives two traditions for the reason that the feast of the Cross occurs on the 14 th of Elul: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. He recounts Constantine's vision of the cross and Helena's discovery. 2. 'Others' say that the feast of the cross commemorates Julian the Apostate's failure to rebuild the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The chapter ends with contemporary issues about the cross: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An assertion that if one worships the cross, one should say that 'we confess it'. (Bar Ṣalībī limits 'confession' to the Trinity, presumably the Nicene Creed.) - Extracts from bar Kepha's <i>Questions</i> chs. 16-18.

⁷⁵ The modern scribe left about two folios blank, presumably to correspond to deficiencies in the manuscript being copied.

⁷⁶ I have not yet had the opportunity to consult Charfeh 4/1 to see whether this section is preserved there.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whether to cross oneself with one finger or two. (He refers the reader to his treatise <i>Against the Chalcedonians</i>.) - The Armenian practice of baptising crosses.
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3.1. Bar Şalībī's Use of Previous Authors

As I have already said, bar Şalībī made extensive use of John of Dara and Moshe bar Kepha, with the result that over three-fifths of his treatise is adapted from these authors. It is worth noting that he used these sources independently of one another. Bar Şalībī embraces bar Kepha's question-and-answer genre and uses it throughout. Apart from some abridgement, bar Şalībī puts bar Kepha's third chapter, on why Christians worship the cross more than other objects of the divine economy, at the beginning of his second chapter. He combines distinct features of their two treatises in chapter nine. The first two-thirds of the chapter is a simplified version of the controversial discussion in John's first chapter, beginning with the question about why Paul called the cross 'foolishness and weakness'. Unlike bar Kepha, bar Şalībī keeps the dialogue in the same order that John's *memra* imposed. Since bar Kepha had removed these questions from their context in John's *memra* and reorganized them, bar Şalībī cannot have known John of Dara's material through bar Kepha's slightly later work. The final third of the chapter introduces bar Kepha's unique material in *Questions* chapter 2, 'Why did Christ die on a cross and not by [some other form of] death?' Bar Şalībī relies on both authors, and he rehabilitates parts of John of Dara's homily that had been omitted or obscured in bar Kepha's.

3.2. New Themes in Bar Şalībī's *Instruction*

The new themes that appear in bar Şalībī's *Instruction* tell us much about the change in circumstances. The most striking difference is that bar Şalībī names Muslims directly as religious opponents. When he mentions the Jews in the same context, he places them second

and does not elaborate as much. This parallels the priorities displayed in his controversial works: in his collection of controversial treatises, an extensive volume against the Muslims comes first,⁷⁷ comprised of three *memre* with a total of thirty *kephalaia*, whereas his treatise against the Jews, which follows, is only a third as long.⁷⁸ In his *Instruction on the Cross*, bar Ṣalībī likens rival religious groups’ ritual use of physical objects to the Christian veneration of the cross. In these contexts he adds references to Islamic practices to the comparison to the Jewish cult that he has adopted from John of Dara’s *memra*. When his interlocutor declares, ‘Then you are worshippers of material things!’, bar Ṣalībī reminds the reader that ‘the Arabs honour Muḥammad through the Qu’rān... although it was written by mere people. And in their shrine in Mecca, whilst they are worshipping in it as though [worshipping] God, they also confess that it was built by people and they do not say that they are worshipping the work of human hands’.⁷⁹ Later, when challenged about the fact that the cross is an inanimate object, bar Ṣalībī observes that the shrine of Mecca is also insensate, but it is still worshipped.⁸⁰ Both of these sections in chapters four and seven are largely drawn from John of Dara and Moshe bar Kepha, but bar Ṣalībī’s is an age when he can freely name Muslims amongst his opponents, perhaps something that his predecessors were hesitant to do. All the same, bar Ṣalībī picks up the hints they laid and makes them plain.

⁷⁷ *Dionysius bar Ṣalībī. A Response to the Arabs*, ed. and tr. J.P. Amar; CSCO 614-5 (Louvain, 2005). See also S.H. Griffith, ‘Dionysius bar Ṣalibi on the Muslims’, in *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen – Oosterhesselen 10-12 September)*, ed. H.J.W. Drijvers, et. al.; OCA 229 (Roma, 1987) 353-65.

⁷⁸ *The Treatise of Dionysius bar Salibhi against the Jews. Part 1: The Syriac Text Edited from a Mesopotamian Ms. (Cod. Syr. Harris. 83)*, ed. J. de Zwaan (Leiden, 1906). An English translation is in R.H. Petersen, ‘The Treatise of Dionysius bar Salibhi “Against the Jews”: A Translation and Commentary’ (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1964).

⁷⁹ *Instruction on the Cross*, chapter 4; cf. *On the Cross* 1.11 and *Questions* chapter 10, objections 1 and 6. Bar Ṣalībī’s arguments are similar to the ones he gives in chapter 22 of his treatise *Against the Muslims*, where he calls the cross ‘our *qiblah*’. *Dionysius bar Ṣalībī. A Response to the Arabs*, 92-3 (text), 85-6 (translation).

⁸⁰ *Instruction on the Cross*, chapter 7.

In his first chapter on the cross, bar Ṣalībī adds as many traditions as he can to enhance the place of the veneration of the cross as a part of the apostolic tradition passed down orally. In a context where the religious authority of an Islamic tradition rested on reliable chains of authority going back to the Prophet and his trustworthy companions, one can see the appeal of marshalling as many ancient authorities as possible. Bar Ṣalībī lists other Christian practices that were passed down by word of mouth, among them: the renunciation of Satan at baptism, the anointing of the *myron* with the sign of the cross, three immersions in the water at baptism, worshipping towards the East, and not kneeling on Sundays or during the days of Pentecost.⁸¹ He sets out to prove that the veneration of the cross is not new, thus avoiding the charge that it is an addition to the apostolic teaching. He shares an apocryphal story in which, on the evening after the crucifixion, the Virgin Mary and the disciple John both have dreams of the prophets carrying a cross and indicating that their prophecies point to the veneration of this object. After Mary and John report their dream to the other disciples the next morning, the veneration of the cross begins.⁸² Bar Ṣalībī also considers the Protonike legend as an apostolic source for the veneration of the cross, claiming that this is when the apostle James commanded that the cross should be worshipped.⁸³ He speculates that the veneration of the cross had been mentioned by Paul in non-extant writings.⁸⁴ He adds a testimony from Clement of Rome that Christ himself taught about the veneration of the cross along with the other sacraments in the upper room after the resurrection.⁸⁵ A quote from Basil of Caesarea, asserting that the apostles worshipped the

⁸¹ Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *De spiritu sancto* 27 §66.

⁸² I have been unable to find other references to this tradition.

⁸³ The Protonike legend often ends with a statement that James wrote to all of the other apostles about these events. At the beginning of *Instruction on the Cross* 3, bar Ṣalībī claims the authority of the apostle Addai for the Protonike legend as well.

⁸⁴ In 1 Tim 4.13, the author asks for his *membranes*, scrolls, to be brought to him, leading bar Ṣalībī to speculate that oral traditions were written in these documents.

⁸⁵ I checked the Pseudo-Clementine literature and 1 and 2 Clement, but was unable to find this tradition.

cross rounds out his chapter of traditions supporting the antiquity of the veneration of the cross.⁸⁶

Bar Ṣalībī's *Instruction on the Cross* also indicates the inter-denominational rivalry of his era,⁸⁷ or at least his own intense interest in debate with Christians of other denominations. At the end of the treatise, he refers to debates with Melkites and Armenians over the sign of the cross and rituals involving crosses. He refers the reader to his treatise *Against the Melkites* where he wrote at length about why one should cross oneself with one finger rather than two.⁸⁸ He also energetically engages the Armenian practice of baptising crosses in the *Instruction on the Cross*. Despite also having already written against this practice in his treatise *Against the Armenians*,⁸⁹ here he cannot resist giving a lengthy response to their question, 'Why do you not baptise the cross as you consecrate a church?'⁹⁰ Bar Ṣalībī's argument is not different in content to the one he gives in his treatise *Against the Armenians*,⁹¹ but his comparative verbosity here, especially after the brevity of his comment on Melkite practices, is an indication of how strongly he objected to Armenian baptism of crosses.

⁸⁶ This is perhaps an extrapolation based on *De spiritu sancto* 27 §66.

⁸⁷ For studies on inter-denominational contact during the Syriac Renaissance, see H.G.B. Teule, 'It is Not Right to Call Ourselves Orthodox and the Other Heretics: Ecumenical Attitudes in the Jacobite Church in the Time of the Crusaders', in *East and West in the Crusader States: Context – Contacts – Confrontations II. Acta of the Congress Held at Hernen Castle in May 1997*, ed. by K.N. Ciggaar and H.G.B. Teule; *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 92 (Leuven, 1999) 13-27; idem., 'Reflections on Identity. The Suryoye of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: Bar Ṣalībī, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus', *Church History and Religious Culture* 89 (2009) 179-89. For bar Ṣalībī as a polemicist, see P. van der Aalst, 'Denis Bar Ṣalībī, polémiste', *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 9 (1959) 10-23.

⁸⁸ See Dionysius bar Ṣalībī's *Letter to Rabban 'Ishō'* in *Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic and Garshūni*, ed. A. Mingana; *Woodbrooke Studies* 1 (Cambridge, 1927) 19-26, 54-7. However, bar Ṣalībī's letter to Rabban 'Isho was not his only controversial treatise written against the Melkites, as it is distinct from the three books of material against the Chalcedonians found in Mingana MS 215. These are still unpublished, so it remains to be seen whether they also contain instructions on the proper way to cross oneself.

⁸⁹ *The Work of Dionysius Barṣalībī against the Armenians. Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshūni, Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus*, ed. and tr. A. Mingana; *Woodbrooke Studies* 4 (Cambridge, 1931); J.R. Russell, 'The Armenians, the Holy Cross, and Dionysius bar Ṣalībī', *St. Nerses Theological Review* 8 (2003) 1-12.

⁹⁰ *Instruction on the Cross* 10.

⁹¹ *The Work of Dionysius Barṣalībī against the Armenians*, ed. and tr. A. Mingana, 42-43.

4. Conclusion

The works by Moshe bar Kepha and Dionysius bar Şalībī show how later generations followed John of Dara's lead and answered the urgent call to defend the veneration of the cross against charges of idolatry. Whilst they use parts of John of Dara's treatise, bar Kepha and bar Şalībī both make adjustments to the organisation and contents of the material. Bar Kepha clarifies unclear parts of John's treatise and makes John's arguments more pointed. His question-and-answer format allows him to integrate new sources, to organise apologetic arguments, and to make it all accessible for catechetical purposes. He expands the horizons of his source, grouping the apologetic materials together to make room for more liturgical questions. Even as he diversifies his materials, bar Kepha's use and development of John's arguments demonstrate his shared concern for the defence of the veneration of the cross.

In the twelfth century, Dionysius bar Şalībī folds material from both of his ninth-century predecessors into part of a larger sacramentary. The debate about the veneration of the cross is thus removed from the context of the Feast of the Cross, even as the associated legends and biblical motifs still appear. Picking up the Protonike legend from both of his predecessors, bar Şalībī constructs an argument for the antiquity of the veneration of the cross. Bar Şalībī's Islamic contemporaries accused Christians of altering the original message of Jesus by adding unauthorised practices like venerating the cross. Bar Şalībī's list of traditions about the relic of the cross and the veneration of crosses from the apostolic and patristic ages make perfect sense in this context. Unlike his predecessors, who take little notice of the practices of other Christian denominations, bar Şalībī's concern over Melkite and Armenian practices reveal the special apologetic horizons of his day. In bar Şalībī's hand the traditional materials of the Feast of the Cross are applied to Christian practices more generally, and they speak to the concerns of his context. Both bar Kepha and bar Şalībī

value the apologetic work that John of Dara has done, and their creative approach to his material demonstrates how significant the debate over the cross continued to be for generations to come.

Conclusion

The Feast of the Cross celebrated the blessings of imperial piety along with the ‘triumph’ of the Christian faith over religious rivals and the experience of salvation through the cross. After the conversion of Constantine and the gradual Christianisation of the Roman Empire, this cluster of themes blended together harmoniously, but surely the fanfare would fall flat in the wake of the rise of Islam. This study began with questions about the continuation of the Feast of the Cross in Syriac-speaking communities living under Islamic rule. What did the Feast of the Cross look like in this context? How did the church and the ordinary believer alike make sense of their change of fortunes from privileged status to a marginalized community? How did these events affect inter-religious debate? Could they still maintain and defend their faith and traditions in a new situation?

In order to address these questions, I have traced the history of the Feast of the Cross in Syriac from its inception to the ninth century, with a brief look ahead to the twelfth century. The first three chapters provided a glimpse of the early celebration of the Feast of the Cross, from a local festival in Jerusalem, to the Helena legend that grew up around it and spread it abroad, to the reception of the feast as it appears in Syriac homilies from before the Arab Conquest. As a local festival in Jerusalem, the feast was just one day of the eight-day Encaenia celebrations, and it shared the supersessionist theology of the octave, emphasising Christian triumph over pagans and Jews alike. As we have seen, the Feast of the Cross never lost this polemical aspect, although the identity of the religious opponents could be altered to fit a given context. The Feast of the Cross celebrated and thus communicated a particular vision of God’s activity in history and the place of the church within it.¹ Whilst the feast

¹ It is interesting that Alexander the Monk’s *Historical Treatise on the Finding of the Cross* began with what J.W. Nesbitt has described as a popularised ‘world chronicle’. The events of Constantine’s reign in the early fourth century shaped Christian perspectives of world history, and the discovery of the cross – at least

may have initially been intended to enhance the prestige of the Jerusalem cult, in practice it attracted a wide range of themes relating to the cross, and in the early period this allowed diverse approaches to the feast to flourish, as the Syriac festal homilies written before the Arab Conquest amply illustrate.

The Persian war of the early seventh century and the subsequent Arab Conquest complicated the picture. Whereas Christians had once assumed that an imperial army bearing the *Chi-Rho labarum* would ultimately triumph, now they had to face the terrible fact that the relic of the True Cross itself could be captured by the enemy. The hope that the cross would protect the Byzantine Empire, diminished though it was, lingered on in Christian thought until the Turks finally seized Constantinople in 1453 CE. Meanwhile, outside of the Byzantine Empire, Christians were hard-pressed to defend the veneration of the cross and the very event of the crucifixion against accusations from Jews, Muslims, and perhaps even nominal Christians who were reassessing their adherence to the faith. Christian apologetic responses to this challenge blossomed in the first three centuries after the Arab Conquest.

In this drastically altered socio-political context, John of Dara penned his sermon for the Feast of the Cross, deftly interweaving traditional theological themes with more recent apologetic topics. John of Dara's sermon is the longest apologetic text on the veneration of the cross in Syriac and one of the most developed treatises on the topic from that period in any language. As a significant witness to the debate over the cross in the ninth century, John of Dara's *memra On the Cross* deserves the scholarly attention of those interested in inter-religious encounter in the Islamic world. Prepared for the communal celebration of a significant feast day, this sermon offers a rare window into the way that ecclesial authorities

as it was assumed to have taken place – was one of those pivotal events. J.W. Nesbitt, 'Alexander the Monk's Text of Helena's Discovery of the Cross (BHG 410)', in *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations. Texts and Translations Dedicated to the Memory of Nicolas Oikonomides*, ed. J.W. Nesbitt (Leiden, 2003) 25-6.

presented arguments defending the veneration of the cross to the faithful from all sections of society. For John, the Feast of the Cross was an opportunity to reinforce the confidence of Christians living under Islamic rule. In doing so, John downplays the imperial ideology and triumphalist theology of the festival, turning his attention instead to the folly of the cross, which is, in fact, the power and wisdom of God. Though his audience may well feel shame and humiliation in the present, they are companions with Christ in his humility, and they can trust in the eschatological transformation of their shame into glory. John's homily must have been well-received by his audience, or at least by his fellow clergymen, because it quickly became a classic in his own denomination, as one can see by Moshe bar Kepha's adaptation of it in his handbook *Questions on the Feast of the Cross*. Nearly three centuries later, John's main arguments still resonated with the scholarly bishop Dionysius bar Ṣalībī, this time finding their place in a sacramentary amongst ancient traditions and newly developed arguments.

This study shows that the Feast of the Cross was never just about the discovery of the relic, but rather it became an opportunity to uphold Christian beliefs and communal identity, regardless of the context. The liturgical year shaped the shared life of the community and provided regular occasions to remind them of who they were, what they believed, and why. It also proved to be an advantageous opportunity to prepare the community to answer the challenging questions they might face from their non-Christian peers. This study contributes to the growing scholarly interest in dialogue and debate in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Because of the largely theological content of homilies, modern scholarship has too often neglected this material, focusing mainly on unambiguous debate and apologetic texts. However, a sermon like John of Dara's provides indispensable insight into the nature of inter-religious contact 'on the ground' in a particular community. Just as Nicolas de Lange has suggested that one look to non-apologetic genres to uncover Jewish

perceptions of changing times,² one senses that we have scarcely scratched the surface of potential sources from the medieval Christian East. A vast number of texts remain untouched in dusty manuscripts (and even digital archives). If the rich contours of John of Dara's *memra* are any indication, there is still much of worth to find.

² 'Jews and Christians in the Byzantine Empire', 27-9.

Appendix A: The Protonike and Judah Kyriakos Legends in Syriac MSS

A. Table of the Manuscripts

Manuscript	Date	Protonike	Loss of the cross	Judah Kyriakos	References & Additional Comments
Leningrad Syr. 4	Late 5 th or early 6 th c.	In the <i>Doctrina Addai</i>	n/a	Two other hagiographical texts separate it from the <i>Doctrina</i> . Titled 'the discovery of the cross for the second time.' Includes the vision of Constantine. Followed by the martyrdom of Judah Kyriakos.	M. van Esbroeck, 'Le syriaque manuscrit nouvelle série 4 de Leningrad', in <i>Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont</i> , ed. P. Cramer (Geneva, 1988) 211-9. This manuscript is the base text for all modern editions of <i>Doctrina</i> and for <i>The Finding of the True Cross</i> , ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers.
BL Add. MS 14,644	5 th /6 th c.	[imperfect <i>Doctrina</i> ; what remains begins after the Protonike legend]	n/a	Two other hagiographical texts separate it from the <i>Doctrina</i> . Titled 'the discovery of the cross for the second time.' Followed by the martyrdom of Judah Kyriakos. (No vision of Constantine.)	W. Wright, <i>Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since the year 1838</i> (London, 1872) 3:1083-4. Published in E. Nestle, <i>De sancta cruce</i> (Berlin, 1889) and <i>The Finding of the True Cross</i> , ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers. Van Esbroeck has observed the similarities between this MS and Leningrad Syr. 4.
BL Add. MS 14,654	5 th /6 th c.	Contains a fragment of Protonike followed by a fragment of the <i>Doctrina</i> , but not in	n/a	n/a	W. Wright, <i>Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum</i> , 3:1082. This part of the manuscript contains several miscellaneous excerpts. Cf. Alain Desreumaux, <i>Histoire du roi Abgar et Jésus</i> (Turnhout, 1993) 44.

		the usual order.			
Sinai Sparagma 40	6 th c.	n/a	n/a	Fragment of Judah Kyriakos	Published in the appendix of <i>The Finding of the True Cross</i> , ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers, 74-6. See also S.P. Brock, <i>Catalogue of Syriac Fragments (New Finds) in the Library of the Monastery of St Catherine, Mount Sinai</i> (Athens, 1995) 107-17.
John of Dara, <i>On the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross</i> ; Mardin Orth. MS 356	d. 860 CE; earliest MS ca. 10 th c.	Yes, credits Addai as author	Yes, but no list of bishops	Alludes to Helena's discovery	See the text and translation accompanying this study.
Moshe bar Kepha, <i>Questions on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross</i>	d. 903 CE	Yes, credits Addai	Yes, with a list of bishops between James and Judah Kyriakos	Abridged legend beginning with vision of Constantine	Edition and translation in F. Nau, 'Sur la fête de la croix. Analyse d'une homélie de Moïse bar Cépha et du ms. grec 1586 de Paris', <i>Revue de l'Orient chrétien II</i> 9[19] (1914) 225-46. See also the English translation accompanying this study.
Bodleian Marsh 13	1173 CE	Yes; no credit to Addai	Yes (with list of bishops)	Yes (with Constantine's vision)	R. Payne-Smith, <i>Catalogi codicum manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Bodleianae. Pars sexta: Codices syriacos, carshunicos, mendeos, complectens</i> (Oxford, 1864) col 543. Translation published by D. Luftus, <i>An History of the Twofold Invention of the Cross</i> (Dublin, 1686), and collated against BL Add. 12,174 by E.

					Nestle, <i>De sancta cruce</i> , 37-8.
BM Add. MS 12,174	1196 CE	Yes	Yes	Yes	W. Wright, <i>Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since the year 1838</i> (London, 1872) 3:1131. E. Nestle, <i>De sancta cruce</i> .
Paris Syr. 234	Late 12 th /early 13 th c	Yes; grouped with hagiographies of other women	n/a (?)	n/a	H. Zotenberg, <i>Manuscripts orientaux: Catalogues des manuscrits syriaques et sabéens (mandaites) de la Bibliothèque nationale</i> (Paris, 1874) 184. E. Nestle, <i>De sancta cruce</i> .
Paris Syr. 309	1869 CE	Yes	Yes(?)	Yes	J.-B. Chabot, 'Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale acquis depuis 1874', <i>Journal asiatique</i> IX, 8 (1896) 258. Chabot describes the contents as the 'first, second, and third discoveries'. He refers to E. Nestle, <i>De sancta cruce</i> and P. Bedjan, <i>Acta martyrum et sanctorum</i> (Paris, 1890-97) 1:326ff (Constantine's vision, Judah Kyriakos) and 3:175ff (Protonike with credit to Addai, loss of the cross, the list of bishops). However, Nestle and Bedjan did not base their editions on this manuscript.
Berlin Sachau 222	1881 CE	Yes; credits Addai	Yes	Yes (but the hagiographies of Stephen and Ignatius intervene)	E. Sachau (ed.), <i>Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin, 23. Band: Verzeichniss der syrischen</i>

					<i>Handschriften</i> (Berlin, 1899) 1:289. Text published by Bedjan, <i>Acta martyrum et sanctorum</i> , 3:175ff for Protonike legend and 1:326ff for Judah Kyriakos. Translated by V. Ryssel, 'Materialien zur Geschichte der Kreuzauffindungslegende in der syrischen Literatur', <i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i> 15 (1895) 222-34.
BM Or. 4404	End of 19 th c.	Yes	Yes	Yes	G. Margoliouth, <i>Descriptive List of Syriac and Karshuni MSS. in the British Museum acquired since 1873</i> (London, 1899) 33-34.
Paris Syr. 326	End of 19 th c.	Yes	Yes(?)	Yes	J.-B. Chabot, 'Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale', 274.
Birmingham, Mingana Syr 598	1932 CE	Yes	Yes	Yes	A. Mingana, <i>Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts</i> (Cambridge, 1933) 1:1138.

B. Discussion

With only two exceptions, when the Judah Kyriakos version appears in a manuscript, it follows the Protonike legend. One of these exceptions is a fragment, so the contents of the original manuscript are unknown. The other is in London BM Add. 14,644, a manuscript of fifth- or sixth-century provenance. The manuscript begins with the *Doctrina Addai*, imperfect at the beginning and middle, and the Judah Kyriakos version is in the fourth position in the manuscript. The scribe introduces it in the way that it invariably appears in the Syriac tradition: 'The story of how the cross was found the second time.' Presumably, the manuscript once contained a complete *Doctrina Addai* with the 'first' discovery of the cross by Protonike before this 'second' discovery. In sum, the earliest witnesses of the Judah

Kyriakos designate it the 'second' discovery, and it appears in the company of the Protonike legend, which in turn is always embedded in the *Doctrina Addai*.

Sometime prior to the ninth century, these two legends began to circulate as a 'diptych'. The first witness for this arrangement is John of Dara's *Homily on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross*. John of Dara ends his homily with a summary of Protonike's discovery of the cross and an allusion to Helena's discovery.¹ He attributes the Protonike story to the apostle Addai. John's sermon is the earliest extant text in which the Protonike legend is separated from the *Doctrina Addai*, and he makes a point of indicating its provenance. John provides the first witness to the development of a transitional piece, a narrative 'hinge' for the 'diptych'. An anonymous interlocutor asks, '[H]ow did the Jews take the wood of the cross back and dig and deepen and bury it in the ground whence Helena brought it back up?' The questioner simply assumes that the Jews are the culprits, but inquires how and when this occurred. John explains that during Trajan's reign, the emperor encouraged persecution against the Christians, and the Jews tortured the bishop, Simon son of Cleopas; the cross was taken from him until it was found by Helena. With that, John ends his homily. His later contemporary Moshe bar Kepha develops the story further in chapters 20-22 of his *Questions on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross*. Like John, bar Kepha tells the Protonike legend and attributes it to Addai. He also reports the Jews' theft and burial of the cross during the time of Trajan. Bar Kepha adds that there were fifteen bishops of Jerusalem 'from the people of the circumcision' and lists them. Finally, bar Kepha goes a step further than John and tells the 'second' discovery of the cross by Judah Kyriakos, introduced by the vision of Constantine. These two ninth-century texts are important witnesses to developments in the transmission of the legends: they are about three hundred years younger than the earliest manuscripts containing the *Doctrina Addai* with the 'second' discovery of Judah Kyriakos and about three hundred years older than the hagiographical collections that tell the Protonike and Judah Kyriakos versions side-by-side, linked with the story of how the cross had been lost in the meantime. At some point between the sixth and ninth centuries, the Protonike-Judah Kyriakos diptych became the preferred method of transmission, and, to answer the questions that such an arrangement would presage, a story

¹ The allusion is too brief to mention Judah, but since the Helena legend with Macarius as the key assistant has only recently appeared in Syriac literature (in the *Anonymous Chronicle to 846*), he almost certainly refers to the Judah Kyriakos version.

of how the cross was lost was added to transition smoothly between the two.² Paulinus' early account of the Helena legend, with his preoccupation with how and why the cross had been lost, indicates that there was already a hunger to resolve such questions. As my third chapter discussed, sixth-century Syriac writers, both East and West, believed that the Jews had tried to destroy the cross and buried it. When the two discoveries of the cross began to circulate as a diptych, there was more pressure to find a concrete, historicised answer to these burning questions.

The rest of the manuscripts except one³ contain this diptych with the transition piece in between the legends. On this note, it is important to mention that Desreumaux's description of the five manuscripts containing three accounts of the invention of the cross is misleading.⁴ Desreumaux says that the three reports are the discoveries of Protonike, *Helena*, and Judah Kyriakos,⁵ but surely this is in error. Reading the last two side-by-side would be contradictory and repetitive, and it would require more than a 'narrative transition' to smooth over the discrepancies. I suspect that Desreumaux's remarks are based on J.-B. Chabot's description of the Paris Syriac manuscripts 309 and 326, which Chabot says contain three invention legends without further explanation.⁶ Chabot simply refers the reader to the legends published by E. Nestle, *De sancta Cruce* (Berlin, 1889), and P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (Paris 1890-7), 1:326ff and 3:175ff. These editions are based on other manuscripts, so Chabot must only be signaling that the text in this manuscript is similar to what they have published. Nestle and Bedjan both published the Protonike legend, the transition story, and the Judah Kyriakos version, but neither have a Helena legend different to the Judah Kyriakos version. Although I have not had the opportunity to consult the Paris manuscripts, I think that the transition story must be the second of the 'three' invention legends mentioned by Chabot, not another 'Helena legend'. The three other manuscripts Desreumaux cites here – London Or. 4404, Birmingham Mingana syr. 598, and Berlin

² This transition story itself is probably inspired by other contemporary apocryphal tales. For example, it may have some relationship to the *Transitus Mariae* tradition (J.W. Drijvers, 'The Protonike Legend', 315 n. 63).

³ Paris Syr 234, of the 12th or 13th century, contains the Protonike legend without Judah Kyriakos in a group of hagiographies about holy women.

⁴ A. Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, 47-48. This is a rare mistake in an otherwise very useful edition and translation.

⁵ Referring to the legends by these names was first suggested in 1912 by J. Straubinger, *Die Kreuzauffindungslegende* (Paderborn) v, so it is doubtful that Chabot would have considered the 'three inventions of the cross' to necessarily be those of Helena, Protonike, and Judah Kyriakos.

⁶ J.-B. Chabot, 'Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale acquis depuis 1874', *Journal asiatique* IX, 8 (1896) 258, 274.

Sachau 222⁷ – in fact have the Protonike legend followed by the Judah Kyriakos version, linked by the transition story.⁸ Thus, Desreumaux wrongly inferred that by ‘three inventions’, Chabot meant the Protonike, Helena, and Judah Kyriakos legends. This error was then repeated on Desreumaux’s authority by H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers in their edition and translation of the Judah Kyriakos legend.⁹

⁷ Bedjan based his text on this manuscript. See E. Sachau (ed.), *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, 23. Band: Verzeichniss der syrischen Handschriften (Berlin, 1899) 1:289.

⁸ G. Margoliouth, *Descriptive List of Syriac and Karshuni MSS. in the British Museum acquired since 1873* (London, 1899) 33-34; A. Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts* (Cambridge, 1933) 1:col 1138;

⁹ *The Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and tr. H.J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Drijvers, 30.

Appendix B: Verse to Page Correspondence

Narsai, Memra 30: *On the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross*

<i>Verse number</i>	<i>Page in Mingana edition</i>
1-11	114
12-29a	115
29b-48a	116
48b-65	117
66-84a	118
84b-103a	119
103b-120a	120
120b-138a	121
138b-156a	122
156b-172	123
173-189a	124
189b-207a	125
207b-225a	126
225b-243a	127
243b-261a	128
261b-279a	129
279b-294	130

David Eskolaya: *On the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross*

<i>Verse number</i>	<i>Page in Patriarchal Press vol. 1.2</i>
1-4	598
5-16a	599
16b-28a	600
28b-40a	601
40b-52a	602
52b-64a	603
64b-76a	604
76b-87a	605
87b-99a	606
99b-111a	607
111b-123a	608
123b-135a	609
135b-147a	610
147a-159a	611
159b-171a	612
171b-end	613

Jacob of Serugh, *On Queen Helena and the Discovery of the Cross*

Verse number *Folio in Church of the Forty Martyrs MS 130*

1-28a	203r
28b-56a	203v
56b-86a	204r
86b-144	204v-205r
145-end	205v

Appendix C: Types of the Cross in Homilies and Apologetic Treatises

1. Syriac Homilies for the Feast of the Cross

Type	Narsai	Severus of Antioch	John of Dara	Moshe bar Kepha 1	Moshe bar Kepha 2	Dionysius bar Ṣalībī
4 cardinal directions	x		x	x		x
4 elements			x	x		x
4 seasons	x		x	x		x
Human form				x		(ch 7)
Bird in flight	x		x	x		x
Seeds of a tree	x					
Tree of Life	(1. 209)	x	x	x		x
Noah's ark	(1. 50-54)	x	(2.3)	x	x	x
Abraham's journey	x		x	x		x
Binding of Isaac	x		x	x		x
Ram in the tree			x	x		x
Jacob's ladder	x		x	x		x
Jacob bowing on Joseph's staff	x		x	x		x
Jacob's arms crossed in blessing	x		x	x	x	x
Moses' reed ark			x	x		x
Moses' staff	x	x	x	x	x	x
Wood in the waters at Marah	x		x	x		x
Moses' extended arms	x	x	x	x	x	
Aaron's budding staff			x	x		x
Bronze snake	x		x	x		x
Ark of the covenant			x	x		x
Elijah raises the dead boy			x	x		
Elisha raises the dead boy	x		x	x		
Sinking wood and floating axehead	x		x	x		x
Marked foreheads in Ezek. 9		x		(ch 15)	x	

Narsai = *Memra on the Discovery of the Cross* (lines 127-204)

Severus of Antioch = *Cathedral Homily 31, On the Dedication of the Holy Cross and the Anniversary of an Earthquake*

John of Dara = *On the Cross*, chapters 10 and 11

Moshe bar Kepha 1 = *Questions on the Cross*, chapters 12 and 13

Moshe bar Kepha 2 = *Explanation on the Cross*

Dionysius bar Ṣalībī = *Instruction the Cross*, chapter 8

2. Old Testament Proof-Texts for the Veneration of the Cross in Apologetic Works

Type	Anti-Jewish treatises						Anti-Muslim Treatises			
	Leontius of Neapolis ¹	Papiskos and the Monk	<i>Quaestiones</i>	Jacob Forcibly- Baptised	Trophies of Damascus	Sergius the Stylite ²	'Umar II and Leo III	Al-Kindī ³	Monk of Bēt Hālē	Theodore bar Kōnī
Figure of a human being						x			x	
Arms outstretched in prayer						x				
When one puts on a coat						x				
Window of a house						x				
Yoke and plough						x				
Flowers, trees, blossoms									x	
4 evangelists									x	
Bird in flight						x			x	
4 elements									x	
4 cardinal directions						x			x	
River divided into 4 streams in Eden						x			x	
Ram in the tree						x				
Jacob bowing on Joseph's staff	x	x	x		x					
Jacob's arms crossed in blessing					x	x				
Moses' staff	x			x	x	x				
Blood on doorposts at Passover						x				x
Wood in the waters at Marah				x						
Moses' extended arms					x	x				
Aaron's budding staff	x									
Bronze snake	x				x	x			x	x
Plate worn on high priest's head							x			
Objects used in OT cult (eg. tablets, cherubim, etc)		x	x		x					

¹ Leontius is defending crosses and relics at the same time. The types of the cross are mixed with other material objects in the Old Testament that showed divine power. I have only included the types of the cross here.

² In Sergius the Stylite's dialogue, this list of types follows the traditional argument that Christ is cursed according to Dt 21.23. When he later defends the veneration of the cross at length, he does not list the types of the cross again, but defends his belief that the Old Testament speaks of the life of Christ in types.

³ Instead of offering the Ark of the Covenant as a type of the cross, al-Kindī recalls several Old Testament episodes in which people worshipped before it, giving the Christian practice Old Testament precedents.

Ark of the Covenant		x			x	x		x	x	x
Elisha raises the dead boy	x									
Sinking wood and floating axhead	x									
Psalm 86.17 ('a sign of your favour' to put enemies to shame)				x						
Isaiah 5.26 ('sign for the nations')					x					
Isaiah 53 (Suffering Servant)						x				
Isaiah 60.13 (3 kinds of wood)				x			x			
Marked foreheads in Ezek. 9				x						
Wisdom 14.7 ('Blessed is the wood by which righteousness comes')	x			x			x			

Abbreviations

Ancients Texts

<i>AdvMarc</i>	Tertullian, <i>Adversus Marcionem</i>
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Epistle of Barnabus</i>
<i>CNiS</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Carmina Nisibena</i>
<i>Cat.</i>	Cyril of Jerusalem, <i>Catechetical Lectures</i>
<i>CommEx</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Commentary on Exodus</i>
<i>CommGen</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Commentary on Genesis</i>
<i>Dem.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
<i>Gos. Pet.</i>	<i>Gospel of Peter</i>
<i>HcJul</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Hymns against Julian</i>
<i>HDis</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Hymni Dispersi</i> (ed. Lamy, <i>Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones</i> , vol. 4)
<i>HFid</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Hymns on Faith</i>
<i>HVir</i>	Ephrem the Syrian, <i>Hymns on Virginitiy</i>
<i>Itin. Burdig.</i>	<i>Itinerarium Burdigalense</i>
<i>It. Eg.</i>	Egeria, <i>Itinerarium Egeriae</i>
<i>LC</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>In Praise of Constantine (Laus Constantini)</i>
<i>Theoph.</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Theophany</i>
<i>VC</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Life of Constantine (Vita Constantini)</i>

Modern Publications

<i>AnBoll</i>	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i>
<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
<i>CCSL</i>	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
<i>CSCO</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<i>DACL</i>	<i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i>
<i>ECR</i>	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JSOTSupp</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	Journal of Theological Studies
<i>LM</i>	<i>Le Muséon</i>
<i>OC</i>	<i>Oriens Christianus</i>
<i>OCA</i>	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
<i>OCP</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
<i>OUP</i>	Oxford University Press
<i>PdO</i>	<i>Parole de l'Orient</i>
<i>PG</i>	Patrologia Graeca
<i>PL</i>	Patrologia Latina
<i>PO</i>	Patrologia Orientalis
<i>REB</i>	<i>Revue des études byzantines</i>
<i>ROC</i>	<i>Revue de l'orient chrétien</i>
<i>TM</i>	<i>Travaux et mémoires</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>

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