Adrian C. Pirtea

Divine Incomprehensibility and Human Wonder: *Tehrā/Temhā* in Isaac of Nineveh and Early Syriac Ascetical Literature

In memory of Mary T. Hansbury (1941–2021)

Abstract: Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Rolle des Staunens in dem Aufstieg des Menschen zur Gotteserkenntnis. Es wird gezeigt, dass das dynamische Verhältnis zwischen Staunen, Wissensdurst und Erkenntnis, das Platon und Aristoteles beschreiben, in ähnlicher Form auch in der syrischen Patristik erkennbar ist. Nach einer skizzenhaften Geschichte der Begriffe *tehrā* und *temhā* ('Wunder', 'Staunen') in der frühsyrischen Literatur, wird die komplexe Theologie des Staunens bei Isaak von Ninive eingehend behandelt.

Keywords: Syriac ascetical literature, wonder, ecstasy, knowledge of God, Greek philosophy, Greek-Syriac translations

The Bible repeatedly asserts that humans, as created and limited beings, cannot fully comprehend God.[1] The prophet Isaiah says that there is "no searching of God's understanding" (Isa 40:18), while according to the *Book of Job* God does "great and unsearchable things" (Job 5:9). After asking God to show his glory on Mt Sinai, Moses is only allowed to see God's "back," since no one can see God's face and live (Exod 33:18–23). God is said to dwell both in "darkness" (Ps 18:11) and "unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16), a paradox that led Christian mystics like Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, and John of Dalyāthā to speak of God's inaccessible dwelling place as

1 Research for this publication has been carried out as part of the project *MONASBYZ – The Making of the Byzantine Ascetical Canon: Monastic Networks, Literacy and Religious Authority in Palestine and Sinai* (University of Vienna, 2020–2022). The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under the Marie-Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement no. 841476. I wish to thank Jason Scully for his very valuable feedback on a previous draft of this paper. I also wish to thank Valentina Duca for her helpful comments on Isaac of Nineveh, as well as Vittorio Berti, Andrew Hayes and Ivan Petrov for sharing their published and unpublished work with me. All remaining errors are my own.

Adrian C. Pirtea, Wien

Open Access. © 2023 bei den Autorinnen und Autoren, publiziert von De Gruyter. (cc) BY-NC-ND Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter der Creative Commons Namensnennung - Nicht-kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 International Lizenz.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111022406-014

a "luminous darkness."[2] God's transcendence and incomprehensibility is already a major theme in Philo of Alexandria, who limits human knowledge of God to an understanding of His powers (δυνάμεις), but not His essence (οὐσία).[3] At the same time, the Gospels and the apostolic writings proclaim that true knowledge of God is possible through the mediation of the incarnated divine Logos, Jesus Christ (John 1:18, etc.). This apparent tension between God's transcendence and incomprehensibility on the one hand, and the promise of being able to truly *see*, *know*, and *partake* in God on the other (Matt 5:8, John 17:3, 1 John 1:1–4, 2 Pet 1:4, 2 Cor 3:18, etc.), has remained an inexhaustible source of Patristic discussions and debates on the possibility and limits of knowing the Divine.

Taking this theological dilemma as a starting point, this chapter explores the historical development of the concept of *wonder* in late antique Syriac ascetical literature. As I will argue below, wonder, usually denoted by the almost interchangeable Syriac pair *tehrā* and *temhā* (sometimes also *dummārā*), played an essential role in resolving the tension between divine incomprehensibility and the human capacity for knowing God. Although the term "ecstasy" (ἔκστασις) may evoke different connotations than "wonder" in contemporary English usage, in late antique Greek and Syriac the two words share an essential feature in common, since they both describe a subjective state of amazement, or being "beside oneself" (*ek-stasis*), in response to an unexpected or inexplicable occurrence. Oftentimes the terms are associated with strong emotions of fear and terror, especially with regard to God's presence.[4] Therefore, in modern translations of Syriac ascetical treatises, *tehrā* and *temhā* have been variously rendered as "ecstasy," "wonder," "amazement," or "stupor."

With the flourishing of Greek and Syriac ascetical discourse in Late Antiquity and the later periods, these terms developed specialised meanings for describing different facets of the mystical experience of God that ascetics aimed to achieve. My key concern here is to see how *tehrā* and *temhā* acquired a distinct *epistemological* or *cognitive* dimension (as opposed to a mere 'emotional' or 'subjective' one) and

2 See Gregory of Nyssa, *Mos.* 2.163: λαμπρῷ γνόφῳ; cf. Ps.-Dionysius, *Myst. th.* 2: ὑπέρφωτον γνόφον; John of Dalyatha, *Letters* 46.3 (Robert Beulay, ed., *La collection des lettres de Jean de Dalyatha* [Turnhout: Brepols, 1978]): ܥܪܦܠܐ ܢܗܝܪܐ.

3 Philo, *Post.* 167–169.

4 See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant.* 15 (*GNO* VI: 446); John Chrysostom, *Incomprehens.* 1.198–212. This type of religious awe may be connected to what Rudolf Otto famously termed the "numinous" or the *mysterium tremendum*. On Otto's concepts and their influence on twentieth-century scholarship on religion see Stuart Sarbacker, "Rudolf Otto and the Concept of the Numinous," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 31.08.2016, doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.88; Michael Stausberg, "The Sacred, the Holy, the Numinous – and Religion: On the Emergence and Early History of a Terminological Constellation," *Religion* 47 (2017): 557–590.

were used to explain how and to what degree a direct, experiential knowledge of God was possible.

The epistemological aspects of the Syriac mystical vocabulary have been addressed in several studies,[5] but my approach here is somewhat different in so far as it takes its cue from the Platonic and Aristotelian definition of wonder (τὸ θαυμάζειν) as the *beginning of philosophy*. In doing so, I am not suggesting a direct historical link between the Platonic-Aristotelian notion and the concept of wonder in Syriac mysticism. However, as I hope to show, Plato and Aristotle's elucidation of the intrinsic connection between *wonder*, the recognition of one's *ignorance*, and the *pursuit of wisdom* can serve as a model for explaining, at least partially, the function of wonder (*tehrā/temhā*) in the writings of some of the most complex Syriac authors, such as Isaac of Nineveh.

1 Wonder and the Pursuit of Wisdom in Plato and Aristotle

The relationship between wonder and the acquisition of knowledge/wisdom is most clearly brought to light in two passages from Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* respectively. In Plato's dialogue, after Theaetetus expresses his wonder and dizziness (θαυμάζω . . . σκοτοδινιῶ, *Theaet.* 155c9–10) at the apparent puzzle that six dice are, at the same time, *more* than four dice and *less* than twelve dice, while not undergoing any change (*Theaet.* 154c1–155c7), Socrates praises his interlocutor for this feeling (πάθος) of wonder and exclaims: "For this feeling, wonder (τὸ θαυμάζειν), properly belongs to a philosopher; there is no other beginning of philosophy (ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας) except this one" (*Theaet.* 155d2–4). The apparent puzzle of the dice, which is resolved later in the dialogue, is part of Socrates' larger argument that perception (αἴσθησις) cannot be identical to knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), as Theaetetus had initially assumed (*Theaet.* 151e1–7).[6]

5 See, e.g., Serafim Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature* (PhD Thesis, University of Helsinki, 2002); Jason Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 This passage in the *Theaetetus* has been often discussed in scholarship (for a recent interpretation, see Mario Piazza, "Plato and the Dice: A Reassessment of *Theaetetus* 154A-155D," *CCJ* 58 (2012): 231–256). The textual and philosophical problems raised by the "puzzle of the dice" cannot be addressed here, but the overall aim of Socrates' example seems to be the following: perception alone (defined by Plato as the capacity to discern simple differences, such as colours, shapes, tastes, sounds, etc.) cannot account for *why* an object or a group of objects can appear to be 'more' *and* 'less' (or larger *and* smaller) than something else *at the same time*. A higher faculty, namely reason,

The role of wonder in this context can be summarized as follows: The initial reaction to an apparently contradictory and unexplainable state of affairs (e.g., as perceived by the senses) is puzzlement, dizziness, or perplexity. Exposed to such contradictions, a philosophically disposed individual will *wonder* about the cause of the contradiction and seek to resolve it through rational investigation. Although the example of the dice may seem trivial (cf. the similar example of the three fingers in *Resp.* 7,523a–525a), Plato's point is that any philosophical inquiry begins from the same sense of wonder at an apparent contradiction, which puzzles the mind, but also awakens the desire to understand and explain it. One finds the same "mechanism" of wonder at work in Plato's multiple expositions of Socratic *aporiai*, the ultimate goal of which is to awake one's desire to overcome the feeling of perplexity through philosophical investigation.[7]

The same function of wonder as a catalyst for the philosophical study of nature is famously described by Aristotle in the first book of his *Metaphysics*. Although Aristotle's primary concern in this section is the *historical* origin of (natural) philosophy, his basic argument about wonder largely coincides with Plato's account, which is more concerned with the *individual* (psychological) origin of philosophy:

> For it is owing to their *wonder* (τὸ θαυμάζειν) that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize (ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν); they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties (τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀπόρων θαυμάσαντες), then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g., about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. *And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant* (ὁ δ᾽ ἀπορῶν καὶ θαυμάζων οἴεται ἀγνοεῖν) (whence even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of wisdom, for myth is composed of wonders); therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, *evidently they were pursuing science in order to know* (διὰ τὸ εἰδέναι), and not for any utilitarian end.[8]

---

is required to resolve the apparent paradox that presents itself to the senses, since it is by way of reason, not perception, that one can make the mathematical distinctions necessary to explain quantitative differences and numerical relations (i.e., 4 < 6 < 12). By contrast, the faculty of sight, *stricto sensu*, is only able to distinguish shapes and sizes, not numerical or geometrical relations. Socrates expounds a similar line of reasoning in *Resp.* 7 (523a-525a), where Plato describes the same dynamics of the soul's puzzlement followed by inquiry (ἀπορεῖν καὶ ζητεῖν, 524e5).

7 See Christoph Horn, Jörn Müller, and Joachim Söder, eds., *Platon-Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2017), 260–263 (s.v. "Aporie", with bibliography).

8 Aristotle, *Metaph.* A 982b 11–21. Trans.: Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), italics mine. Greek text: διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν, ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀπόρων θαυμάσαντες, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν οὕτω προϊόντες καὶ περὶ τῶν μειζόνων διαπορήσαντες, οἷον περί τε τῶν τῆς σελήνης παθημάτων καὶ τῶν περὶ τὸν ἥλιον καὶ ἄστρα καὶ περὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως. ὁ δ᾽ ἀπορῶν καὶ θαυμάζων οἴεται ἀγνοεῖν (διὸ καὶ φιλόμυθος ὁ φιλόσοφός πώς ἐστιν· ὁ γὰρ μῦθος

Like Plato's Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, Aristotle identifies the feeling of wonder (τὸ θαυμάζειν) as the starting point of philosophical curiosity. Perhaps even more explicitly than Plato, Aristotle describes this form of wonder in purely cognitive terms: wonder and perplexity are not simply emotional reactions, they arise from the *realisation of one's ignorance* (ἀγνοεῖν) and instil a desire to escape it (διὰ τὸ φεύγειν τὴν ἄγνοιαν) through the pursuit of knowledge. Human beings are disposed by nature to undergo this process of knowledge acquisition, since "all humans naturally desire knowledge" (πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει, *Metaph.* A1, 980a21).[9] Aristotle also adds that the mind can *progress* from the investigation of "obvious difficulties" (τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀπόρων, cf. the example of the dice in Plato's *Theaetetus*) to the study of ever greater puzzles of nature and the universe, culminating in the wonder at, and investigation of Being as such (which is the proper subject of metaphysics).

One important point shared by Plato and Aristotle is the *double aspect* of wonder (θαυμάζειν). On the one hand, wonder denotes the (negative) state of "dizziness" (Plato) or "ignorance" (Aristotle) in front of an *aporia*, or, in other words, the *incapacity* of the mind to comprehend a perplexing phenomenon it is confronted with. On the other hand, wonder can refer to the genuine (positive) desire, arising from that initial perplexity, to overcome the feeling of ignorance and discover the source of that wonder. As the passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* suggests, these two states constantly follow upon each other as philosophers progress in their investigation of nature. In short, through the alternation of these two moments, i.e., the acknowledgment of one's *ignorance* and the desire for *knowledge*, *wonder* emerges as the key factor that enables, drives, and sustains the pursuit of wisdom.

An early Christian adaptation of this language of wonder can be found in Origen, who famously presents the incarnation as the source of the greatest astonishment: "the narrowness of human understanding is bewildered and, struck with amazement at so great a wonder (*tantae ammirationis stupore perculsa*), it knows not which way to turn, what to hold to, or whither to take itself. If it thinks of God, it sees a human being; if it thinks of a human being, it perceives him returning from the dead with spoils after conquering the kingdom of death."[10] Although Origen is concerned here specifically with Christology, the bewilderment of the mind at the paradox of Christ's incarnation is described in very much the same terms as those

---

σύγκειται ἐκ θαυμασίων)· ὥστ' εἴπερ διὰ τὸ φεύγειν τὴν ἄγνοιαν ἐφιλοσόφησαν, φανερὸν ὅτι διὰ τὸ εἰδέναι τὸ ἐπίστασθαι ἐδίωκον καὶ οὐ χρήσεώς τινος ἕνεκεν.

9 See Giuseppe Cambiano, "The Desire to Know (Metaphysics A 1)," in *Aristotle's* Metaphysics *Alpha: Symposium Aristotelicum*, ed. Carlos Steel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 1–42.

10 Origen, *Princ.* 2.6.2. Trans.: John Behr, ed., *Origen: On First Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

of Plato and Aristotle. Moreover, just like philosophical θαυμάζειν, Origen's "theological wonder" does not end with perplexity and dizziness, but rather engenders a desire to *know* that source of wonder, i.e., the incarnated Logos.[11]

However, in a monotheistic context that presupposes God's incomprehensibility and transcendence, one fundamental question remains: Is there a point beyond which theological investigation is no longer possible and where wonder in its purely "negative" aspect (the recognition of one's ignorance) is the only legitimate response? In their reaction to Eunomius of Cyzicus, Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom seem to imply that this is indeed the case: Human knowledge of God is limited by the realisation *that* God exists and the acknowledgment of God's incomprehensibility.[12] However, authors such as Gregory of Nyssa seem to envisage the possibility of a continous growth in the knowledge of God, both here and in the hereafter, which is marked by a dynamic interplay of knowledge and an ignorance that is "above knowledge."[13] As I hope to show below, at least for some Syriac mystics like Isaac of Nineveh, *tehrā* and *temhā* are used to describe precisely the same double-sided nature of the process by which human beings know God in a way that is to some degree analogous to the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of philosophical wonder.

11 Origen's theory of Scriptural allegory could also be explained using the same dynamics of wonder, since spiritual exegesis also begins from those "stumbling blocks" in Scripture which defy any rational explanation and entice the mind to seek the deeper meaning of a particular verse. For a case study of Origen's allegorical method, see Adrian Pirtea, "Konkrete und abstrakte Räume in der spätantiken Allegorese: Exegetische Methodik und die Deutung des Perlengleichnisses (Mt 13,45–46) bei Klemens von Alexandria und Origenes," in *Denkraum Spätantike. Reflexionen von Antike im Umfeld des Koran*, eds. Nora Schmidt, Nora K. Schmid and Angelika Neuwirth (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016): 235–268.

12 Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 234.2: ἐγὼ δέ, ὅτι μὲν ἔστιν οἶδα, τί δὲ ἡ οὐσία ὑπὲρ διάνοιαν τίθεμαι [. . .] εἴδησις ἄρα τῆς θείας οὐσίας, ἡ αἴσθησις αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας; John Chrysostom, *Incomprehens.* 5.393–394: οὕτως ἀρκεῖ πρὸς εὐσέβειαν τὸ εἰδέναι ὅτι ἔστιν ὁ θεός. Eunomius' extant fragments are edited in *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, ed. Richard Paul Vaggione (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). On Eunomius and the Eunomian controversy, see Elena Cavalcanti, *Studi Eunomiani* (Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1976); Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lucas Francisco Matteo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, eds., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 298–319 (s.v. "Eun I and II," "Eun III," "Eunomius").

13 On Gregory's mysticism, see the classic studies of Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944) and Walther Völker, *Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1955); see also Martin Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration," *JR* 79/4 (1999): 592–616; Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78–94; Mateo-Seco/Maspero, *Dictionary*, 68–73 (s.v. "Apophatic Theology"), 203–205 (s.v. "Darkness"), 263–268 (s.v. "Epektasis"), 519–530 (s.v. "Mysticism").

In the present study, I will mostly focus on Isaac of Nineveh's use of *tehrā* and *temhā*, although the same Platonic-Aristotelian definition of philosophical wonder could be usefully applied to the study of John of Dalyāthā and other Syriac mystics. Before I turn to Isaac's works, however, it will be useful to briefly sketch the history of the terms *tehrā* and *temhā* in early Syriac literature.

2 Wonder and Ecstasy in Early Syriac Literature

2.1 The Syriac New Testament

In the earliest Syriac translations of the New Testament (Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshitta), *tehrā* and *temhā* usually render the Greek term ἔκστασις.[14] This is an appropriate translation, given that both the Greek word and its Syriac counterparts share the same variety of meanings, ranging from surprise and amazement at something unusual to a supernatural (mystical or prophetic) visionary experience. In addition, the Syriac verbal roots THR and TMH (but also DMR) translate a series of Greek verbs that express astonishment, e.g., ἐκπλήσσω, θαμβέω, θαυμάζω.[15] While in most cases ἔκστασις describes the witnesses' reactions to Christ's healings, His teachings or, indeed, His resurrection (Mark 16:8), there are a few passages in the New Testament where ἔκστασις refers specifically to a supernatural mental or psychic state. In Peter's vision of the sheet with unclean animals (Acts 10:10), the prophetic ecstasy (ἔκστασις) that befalls the apostle is translated in the Syriac Peshitta as *temhā* (Gr. ἐγένετο ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἔκστασις, Syr. *npal ʿlaw[hy] temhā*). However, when Peter later recounts his vision in Acts 11:5 (cf. Paul's similar statement in Acts 22:17), the Syriac version omits the overt references to ecstasy found in the Greek original (Gr. εἶδον ἐν ἐκστάσει ὅραμα [11:5], γενέσθαι με ἐν ἐκστάσει καὶ ἰδεῖν αὐτόν [22:17]; cf. Syr. *ḥzīṯ b-ḥezwā*, "I saw in a vision" [11:5], *wa-ḥzīṯēh b-ḥezwā*, "and I saw Him in a vision" [22:18]). This suggests that although in the earliest layers of Syriac Biblical literature the equivalence ἔκστασις-*temhā* was known, it was not yet considered particularly relevant.

14 See, e.g., Mark 16:8, Luke 5:26, Acts 3:10, etc. and the discussion in Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 335–337. For a comparison of the various Syriac versions of the two Gospel verses, see George A. Kiraz, ed., *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels: Aligning the Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshîṭtâ and Ḥarklean Versions*, 4 vols (Leiden: Brill 1996), 2.251; 3.90. For the use of *tehrā/temhā* in the Syriac Old Testament, see Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 331–335.

15 Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 336–337 and n. 46 (with references).

2.2 Ephrem the Syrian

Ephrem the Syrian's frequent use of the roots THR and TMH in his extensive literary corpus is diverse and nuanced, as Serafim Seppälä has shown.[16] Aside from the neotestamentary uses just mentioned, Ephrem speaks of wonder (*tehrā*) on several occasions as the *proper way of approaching the Divine*. Maintaining a state of religious awe and wonder before God is the only adequate attitude created beings should have towards their Creator. To this reverent approach, Ephrem opposes the inquisitiveness of those who try to define God using the limited and inadequate categories of human thought:

> Bound yourself *with great wonder* (*b-tehrā rabbā*), O hearer! Collect your thought from scattering! [. . .] Through faith He draws near to you. *But through investigation* (*bṣāṯā*), *you grow far from His help* [. . .]. Nor can your effort [help you] comprehend this, for without Him you cannot know that He is. If you debate on and on, He has [still] given you this: *you can know only that He is*.[17]

This quotation from Ephrem should be read against the wider background of the Arian and Eunomian controversies in the Greek East, debates of which the Syrian theologian was undoubtedly aware. Ephrem's insistence on the fact that one can only know *that* God exists mirrors exactly the arguments brought forth by Basil and John Chrysostom against Eunomius. Thus, Ephrem's use of *tehrā/temhā* remains largely restricted to the negative aspect of wonder as the ultimate limit of human knowledge of the Divine, even if, in a few cases, he employs the language of wonder to describe, at least in poetic terms, the (positive) experience of paradise.[18]

16 Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 337–340.

17 Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* 72:1–4, 6 (Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* [Louvain: Durbecq 1955]). Trans.: Jeffrey Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 346, italics mine. On the subject of wonder in Ephrem, see Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 43–46, 69–71, *passim*; Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 339; Scully, *Isaac*, 76–80; Andrew Hayes, "Wonder as an Ascetical Concept in the Theological Anthropology of Ephrem the Syrian," In *Eastern Catholic Theology in Action*, hg. von Andrew Summerson und Cyril Kennedy. Washington: CUA Press.

18 See, e.g., Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.2–3 (Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und contra Julianum* [Louvain: Peeters, 1957]), Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 340.

2.3 Graeco-Syriac Translations of the Fifth Century: Gregory of Nyssa, Apophthegmata Patrum

A significant shift in the Syriac terminology of wonder occurred over the course of the fifth century, when Greek Patristic, hagiographic, and ascetic texts began to be translated into Syriac. Although this process would require a more systematic study than I can possibly offer here, the few examples below should be sufficient to illustrate how the Syriac terms *tehrā* and *temhā* underwent a semantic narrowing and came to be used in an increasingly technical sense to refer to the mystical experience of God.

The two terms are still absent in Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, one of the Cappadocian's mature and most complex works of spiritual exegesis.[19] Gregory's *Commentary* was translated into Syriac at a very early stage (fifth century), and is still preserved in a sixth-century Syriac manuscript.[20] Commenting on Song 4:16–5:2a in *Homily* 10 (= Syriac *Homily* 11), Gregory discusses at length the spiritual meaning of *drunkenness* (μέθη, *rawāyūṯā*), which he links to the mystical or prophetic ecstasy (ἔκστασις) experienced by the prophets and apostles.[21] In the still unedited Syriac version of this homily, the anonymous translator[22] consistently avoids rendering ἔκστασις as *tehrā* or *temhā* and resorts instead to a variety of paraphrastic solutions (see Table 1).

The variety of expressions and the avoidance of *tehrā*/*temhā* in a context dealing explicitly with mystical ecstasy indicate that the two terms had not yet become established *termini technici* for describing such states when Gregory's *Commentary* was

19 See Mateo-Seco/Maspero, *Dictionary*, 121–125 (s.v. "Cant", with bibliography).

20 On the Syriac translations of Gregory, see Ceslas van den Eynde, *La version syriaque du Commentaire de Grégoire de Nysse sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1939); Martien Parmentier, "Syriac Translations of Gregory of Nyssa," *OLoP* 20 (1989): 143–193; David Taylor, "Les Pères cappadociens dans la tradtion syriaque," in *Les Pères grecs en syriaque*, eds. Andrea B. Schmidt and Dominique Gonnet (Paris: Geuthner, 2007), 43–61: 53–54. On the Syriac manuscript tradition of Gregory's *Commentary* and its reception, see van den Eynde, *Version syriaque*, 3–16; Carla Tufano, "La versione siriaca dei discorsi sul Cantico dei Cantici di Gregorio di Nissa, contenuta nel Codice Vaticano Siriaco 106," *SROC* 11 (1988): 63–80, 143–162; Marion Pragt, "Sacred Spices: The Syriac Reception of Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," in *Caught in Translation: Studies on Versions of Late Antique Christian Literature*, eds. Madalina Toca and Dan Batovici (Leiden: Brill), 104–121. I have consulted the oldest manuscripts, *Vaticanus syrus 106* (sixth century) and *Sinaiticus syrus 19* (eighth–ninth century).

21 Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 261–273, esp. 271–273.

22 Although the identity of the translator is unknown, there are two prefatory letters to the translation, which shed some light on the translator's methods and intentions. See van den Eynde, *Version syriaque*, 17–22, 69–76, 97–102.

Table 1: ἔκστασις in *Cant*.

Greek Text (*GNO* VI)	**Syriac Text (Vat. Syr. 106, f. 128r-v | Sinai syr. 19, f. 36v-37r)**
ἔκστασιν . . . τῆς διανοίας (308) “ecstasy/displacement . . . of (discursive) reason”	ܫܘܢܝܐ ܕܡܢ ܪܥܝܢܐ “departure (*šunnāyā*) from reason/mind”
πρὸς τὰ βελτίω μεταβολῆς καὶ ἐκστάσεως (309) “a change and displacement/ecstasy towards the better . . .”	ܫܘܚܠܦܐ ܕܡܢ ܒܝ̈ܫܬܐ ܠܘܬ ܛܒ̈ܬܐ ܘܫܘܢܝܐ ܕܡܢ ܪܥܝܢܐ ܦܓܪܢܐ ܠܘܬ ܪܘܚܢܐ “a change from the evil to the good (things) and a departure (*šunnāyā*) from corporeal to spiritual thought”
ἐν ἐκστάσει γενόμενος (309) “[David] entered (a state of) ecstasy”	ܘܩܡ ܒܚܙܘܐ ܕܓܠܝܢܐ “and [David] stood in a *vision of revelation*”
ὅτε ἐν ἐκστάσει ἐγένετο (309) “when he [Paul] entered (a state of) ecstasy”	ܟܕ ܗܘܐ ܒܫܠܝܐ ܕܚܙܘܐ ܕܓܠܝܢܐ ܐܠܗܝܐ “when he was in the (entered a state of)[23] silence of (variant: ‘and’) a vision of divine revelation”
πρὸς τὰ θειότερα . . . ἔκστασις (310)[24] “ecstasy . . . towards the more divine things”	ܫܘܢܝܐ ܠܢܦܫܐ ܠܘܬ ܐܠܗܝ̈ܬܐ “the departure (*šunnāyā*) of the soul towards divine things”

translated.[25] The Syriac translation alternates between focusing on the *transitional aspect* from a natural to a supernatural state, expressed by *šunnāyā*, and accentuating the visionary content of the ecstatic experience (*ḥezwā d-gelyānā*). This does not mean that the equivalence between the verb ἐξίστημι and the roots TMH/THR was unknown to the Syriac Patristic translators of the same period, as shown by the early fifth-century translations of Basil of Caesarea (e.g., *De Spiritu Sancto, Hexaemeron*).[26] However, in these latter cases the terms refer more generally to reactions of amazement, not to mystical states in a technical sense.

A similar tendency to focus on the visionary content of the ecstatic state without using the terms *tehrā/temhā* can be observed in some of the earliest Syriac translations of Greek ascetical and monastic texts.[27] In one of the oldest Syriac recensions of

23 The translation of ἔκστασις as *šelyā* (“silence”) reflects the tradition of the Peshitta to Gen 2:21 and 15:12 (the ecstasy of Adam and Abram, respectively).

24 See also *Cant*. 5 (*GNO* VI: 156): πρὸς τὸ θειότερον ἡ ἔκστασις (Syriac paraphrases this expression, V, 103v.

25 See also Gregory, *Cant.* 15 (*GNO* VI: 446), where ἔκπληξις and θαῦμα are translated as *tawhtā* and *dummārā* respectively (ms. Vat. Sir. 106, fol. 151rc).

26 See, e.g., Basil, *Spir.* XIII.30 (David Taylor ed., *The Syriac Versions of the De Spiritu Sancto by Basil of Caesarea* [Leuven: Peeters, 1999], 58).; *Hex.* V (Robert Thomson, ed., *The Syriac Version of the Hexaemeron by Basil of Caesarea* [Leuven: Peeters, 1995], 66).

27 For a good overview of the use of *ekstasis* as a term in early Byzantine ascetic literature, see Bettina Krönung, “Ecstasy as a Form of Visionary Experience in Early Byzantine Monastic Literature,”

Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* (R3, fifth/early sixth century),[28] ἐξίστημι and ἔκστασις are usually rendered as "hidden vision" (*ḥzāṯā ksīṯā*), whereas *temhā* is reserved to denote 'ordinary' forms of surprise, in line with the common neo-testamentary use of the term. By contrast, in the *Paradise of the Fathers* attributed to the seventh-century East Syriac author ʿEnanīšōʿ, some passages of the *Historia Lausiaca* contain *tehrā* and *temhā* as technical terms to denote *mystical ecstasy*.[29] One such example is found in the life of Macarius the Great (*HL* §17), where *tehrā* is inserted to further clarify the nature of Macarius' mystical experience (Table 2).

Table 2: ἔκστασις in the Syriac recensions of the *Historia Lausiaca.*

Greek Text[30]	**Sixth-century Translation**[31]	***Paradise of the Fathers* attributed to ʿEnanīšōʿ (I,141)**[32]
ἐλέγετο γὰρ ἀδιαλείπτως ἐξίστασθαι, καὶ μᾶλλον πλείονι χρόνῳ θεῷ προσδιατρίβειν ἢ τοῖς ὑπ' οὐρανὸν πράγμασιν.	ܐܡܪܝܢ ܥܠܘܗܝ ܕܒܟܠܥܕܢ ܐܝܟ ܪܘܝܐ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܒܚܙܬܐ ܟܣܝܬܐ ܘܝܬܝܪ ܡܢ ܕܒܥܠܡܐ ܗܢܐ ܘܡܢ ܨܒܘ̈ܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬ ܫܡܝܐ ܠܥܠ ܠܘܬ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܬܘܗܝ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܗ ܡܬܦܢܐ.	ܐܡܪܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܗܟܝܠ ܥܠܘܗܝ. ܕܒܟܠܥܕܢ ܒܬܗܪܐ ܕܚܙܬܐ ܐܠܗܝܬܐ ܐܬܘܗܝ ܗܘܐ. ܘܐܝܟ ܪܘܝܐ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܒܚܙܬܐ ܟܣܝܬܐ ܘܡܢ ܨܒܘ̈ܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬ ܫܡܝܐ. ܠܥܠ ܠܘܬ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܬܘܗܝ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܗ ܡܬܦܢܐ.
It is said that he was constantly in ecstasy, and (that he) spent more time conversing with God than with the things below heaven.	They say about him that at all times he became like a drunken man *in some hidden vision* (*ba-ḥzāṯā ksīṯā*), and that his mind was above, turned towards God, rather than in this world and (concerned) with the things below heaven.	They also say about him that he was at all times *in a state of wonder at some divine vision* (*b-tehrā da-ḥzāṯā alāhāytā*), and that he became like a drunken man *in some hidden vision*, and that his mind was above, turned towards God, rather than (concerned with) the things below heaven.

in *Dreaming in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. Christine Angelidi and George T. Calofonos (Farnham: Ashgate: 2014): 35–53.

28 The Syriac versions and recensions of Palladius are extensively discussed and edited in René Draguet, ed., *Les formes syriaques de la matière de l'Histoire lausiaque* (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1978).

29 For a bibliography on ʿEnanīšōʿs *Paradise of the Fathers*, see Grigory Kessel and Karl Pinggéra, *A Bibliography of Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 74–76.

30 Cuthbert Butler, ed., *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 44.

31 *Sinai Syr*. 46, fol. 106v; Draguet, *Histoire lausiaque*, 124.

32 Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Book of Paradise Being the Histories and Sayings of the Monks and Ascetics of the Egyptian Desert by Palladius, Hieronymus and others: The Syriac texts, according to the Recension of ʿAnân-îshôʿ of Bêth-ʿÂbhê* (London, 1904).

Around the same time as the earliest Syriac translations of Palladius, i.e., at the turn of the sixth century, one can observe the first stages in the process of terminological specialisation of *tehrā* and *temhā* in the earliest Syriac translation of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The sayings of the Desert Fathers collected in the same manuscript that transmits Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* (*Sinai Syr.* 46, copied in 534 AD) contain several accounts of ecstatic experiences (ἔκστασις) of Egyptian anchorites.[33] Unlike the early translations of Gregory of Nyssa and Palladius, the Syriac translation of these sayings indicates that *tehrā* and *temhā* were on their way to becoming specialised terms for describing mystical/prophetic ecstasy. As the examples in Table 3 show, the terms still required some qualifiers specifying *what type* of wonder/ecstasy was meant (presumably as opposed to the ordinary experience of wonder).

These early examples show that the Syriac translations of Greek ascetic texts, especially the *Apophthegmata*, were an important factor in shifting the meaning of *tehrā* and *temhā* towards the technical sense of mystical ecstasy at the beginning of the sixth century.[34] The other decisive influence on the Syriac terminology of wonder was John the Solitary.

2.4 John the Solitary

The ascetical writings attributed to John the Solitary of Apamea (fifth century) represent a turning point in the development of the pair *tehrā/temhā* towards their later, technical meaning in Syriac mysticism.[35] In many instances, John continues to speak of wonder in a sense similar to the early Syriac usage (Bible translations, Ephrem). At the same time, John appears to be the first Syriac author to make an explicit connection between *wonder* and *eschatology* (the life of the 'New World,' i.e., the life after the resurrection), a connection that proved extremely consequential for later ascetical and mystical literature in Syriac.[36]

33 On this early Syriac collection of *Apophthegmata*, see Bo Holmberg, "The Syriac Collection of Apophthegmata Patrum in MS Sin. syr. 46," *StPatr* 55 (2013): 35–58.

34 A comprehensive research on the origins and development of Syriac monastic and ascetic terminology, which would take into account other important translations of the period (*Vita Antonii*, the *Corpus Macarianum*, translations of Evagrius, etc.), would certainly refine the provisional conclusions that I present here.

35 For a comprehensive bibliography on John the Solitary, see Kessel/Pinggéra, *Bibliography*, 142–156; see also Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue: John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity," *JECS* 20 (2012): 303–331; Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer and the Ship of Stirrings: The Praying Self in Late Antique East Syrian Christianity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2019): 66–78.

36 On John's eschatology and the New World, see Scully, *Isaac*, 48–72.

Table 3: ἔκστασις in *Apophthegmata.*

Alph., *Silvanus 2a* (VIII.10)[37]	***Sinai syr.* 46, fol. 6vb (II.216)**[38]
Ὁ αὐτὸς καθεζόμενός ποτε μετὰ ἀδελφῶν, ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκστάσει, καὶ πίπτει ἐπὶ πρόσωπον·	ܒܙ ܝܬܒ ܗܘܐ ܐܒܐ ܣܝܠܘܐܢܐ. ܘܐܚ̈ܐ ܠܘܬܗ. ܗܘܐ ܒܬܗܪܐ ܕܠܘܬ ܐܠܗܐ. ܘܢܦܠ ܥܠ ܐܦܘ̈ܗܝ.
Once, when the same (i.e., Abba Silvanus) was sitting with some brothers, *he was in ecstasy* and fell on his face (. . .)	Once when Abba Silvanus was sitting and some brothers were with him, he entered (a state of) *wonder towards God* (*tehrā* [var. *temhā*] *da-lwāṯ alāhā*) and fell on his face (. . .)
Alph., *Silvanus 3* (XVIII.27)[39]	*Sinai syr*. 46, fol. 7ra (II.217)[40]
Εἰσῆλθέ ποτε ὁ μαθητὴς τοῦ ἀββᾶ Σιλουανοῦ Ζαχαρίας καὶ ηὗρεν αὐτὸν ἐν ἐκστάσει . . .	ܒܪܡ ܬܘܒ ܚܕ ܐܬܐ ܠܘܬܗ ܬܠܡܝܕܗ ܙܟܪܝܐ. ܘܐܫܟܚܗ ܒܬܗܪܐ ܕܨܠܘܬܐ . . .
Zacharias, the disciple of Abba Silvanus, once entered (Abba Silvanus' cell) and found him *in ecstasy* (. . .)	Another time, his disciple Zacharias came to (Abba Silvanus) and found him in an *ecstasy/wonder of prayer* (*b-tehrā da-ṣlōṯā*) . . .

For John the Solitary, the resurrected state will be characterised by true life, the partaking of divine wisdom, unmediated knowledge of God, and spiritual worship. All these various aspects of the way of life of the New World can be summed up in one word: *wonder* (*tehrā*). According to John, in the world to come the human mind will "not remember nor think anything, apart from that wonder (*tehrā*) at the majestic glory of the Lord of all".[41] This eschatological state of wonder at God's glory is equivalent to a superior form of *knowledge*, as John stresses on several occasions. In the world to come, "the rich mystery of [God's] knowledge will be eternally revealed in *a new knowledge* (*īdaʿtā ḥdattā*)".[42] The eschatological state of humans resembles the angelic mode of existence. John's description of the eternally chanted seraphic *Sanctus* as a "wonder of their knowledge about God"

37 Jean-Claude Guy, ed., *Les apophthegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, 3 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1993–2005).
38 Paulus Bedjan, ed., *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, tomus septimus vel Paradisus Patrum* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1897).
39 Guy, *Apophthegmes.*
40 Bedjan, *Acta.*
41 John the Solitary, *Letter to Hesychius* §19. Trans.: Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, CistSS 101 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 86, modified. The Syriac text remains unedited. I have consulted ms. BL, Add. 18814 (7th–8th cent.), fol. 63r.
42 John the Solitary, *Second Dialogue with Thomasius*, in *Johannes von Apamea. Sechs Gespräche mit Thomasios: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Thomasios und Johannes und Drei an Thomasios gerichtete Abhandlungen*, ed. Werner Strothmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972): 14.

(*tehrā d-īdaʿthōn d-ʿal alāhā*) will equally apply to the human worship of God after the resurrection.[43] As John explains elsewhere, service towards God at the level of the spirit consists in "wonder at God" (*tehrā d-alāhā*) and is reserved for the world to come.[44]

To this immutable and eternal state of wonder and knowledge, John opposes the imperfect and mediated knowledge that is attainable in this world. Echoing Ephrem and the Cappadocians, John argues that the signs and symbols in this world can only teach us *that God exists*.[45] While it remains unclear to what extent John believed that a glimpse of the future mode of life and knowledge could be attained in this world,[46] later East Syriac authors like Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyāthā argued that this experience was indeed possible as a *pledge* (cf. 2 Cor 1:22, etc.), albeit only for very few accomplished ascetics. Even so, John the Solitary's insistence on linking *wonder* with a supernatural form of *knowledge* and the *eschaton* (the world to come) laid the foundation for most of the later discussions of *tehrā* and *temhā* in Syriac mystical literature. Already before Isaac, East Syriac ascetics such as Gregory of Cyprus or Babai the Great elaborated on John's ideas and seem to have treated these topics jointly, but their works have not yet been systematically studied from this particular vantage point.[47]

43 John the Solitary, *Third Dialogue with Thomasius*, in Strothmann, *Johannes,* 27. See Scully, *Isaac*, 82–85.

44 John the Solitary, *Dialogues on the Soul* 4.87 (Mary Hansbury, ed., *John the Solitary on the Soul* [Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013]).

45 John the Solitary, *Second Dialogue with Tomasius*: 13–14.

46 The passages cited by Scully (*Isaac*, 83–85) to this effect are rather ambiguous.

47 Gregory of Cyprus' works remain largely unedited and untranslated, with the exception of Irénée Hausherr, ed., *Gregorii Monachi Cyprii De Theoria Sancta quae syriace interpretata dicitur Visio Divina* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1937). Babai the Great's *Commentary on Evagrius' Kephalaia Gnostika* was published in a flawed edition by Wilhelm Frankenberg (Wilhelm Frankenberg, ed., *Euagrius Ponticus*, AAWG.PH 13.2 [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912]), but Babai's mysticism remains little studied. Recent discussions of Babai's *Commentary* can be found in: Georg Günter Blum, *Die Geschichte der Begegnung christlich-orientalischer Mystik mit der Mystik des Islams* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 47–69; Till Engelmann, *Annahme Christi und Gottesschau: Die Theologie Babai des Großen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 34–107; Adrian Pirtea, "Babai the Great and Dionysius bar Salibi on the Spiritual Senses: The Syriac Commentaries on Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika* and Their Relevance," in *Symposium Syriacum XII, held at St Lawrence College, Rome 19–21 August 2016, organized by the Pontifical Oriental Institute on the occasion of the Centenary Celebration (1917–2017)*, eds. Emidio Vergani and Sabino Chialà (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2022), 227–237.

3 Wonder, Ecstasy and Knowledge in Isaac of Nineveh

Wonder is a central concept in the writings of the influential East Syriac ascetical author Isaac of Nineveh.[48] Although some scholars have argued that the terms *tehrā* and *temhā* are not entirely synonymous for Isaac, there is still no consensus regarding the possible differences in meaning between them.[49] In an important article published in 2008, Mary Hansbury studied the language of 'wonder' in several key passages from *Parts* I–III, without assuming a neat terminological distinction between *tehrā* and *temhā*.[50] André Louf was the first to suggest a 'hierarchy' in Isaac's use of the terms. According to Louf, *tehrā* is an intermediary stage that leads to *temhā* and only the latter term refers to an intense mystical experience that anticipates the life after the resurrection.[51] However, Louf's study does not take into account those passages in Isaac's works where *tehrā* describes precisely the knowledge of God accessible to humans in the resurrected state.[52] In a reversal of the hierarchy proposed by Louf, Jason Scully interprets *temhā* as marking the boundary between the psychic and spiritual stages (*napšānūṯā* and *rūḥānūṯā*), beyond which the experience of *tehrā* can take place. According to Scully, "astonishment" (*temhā*) for Isaac denotes the *incapacity of the soul* (*napšā*) to comprehend spiritual things and is thus lower than "wonder" (*tehrā*), which positively describes the *ability of the mind* (*haunā*, *maddʿā*, *reʿyānā*, etc.) to perceive God and the New

48 The scholarly literature on Isaac's ascetical writings is extensive. Recent decades have witnessed the publication of several monographs, including: Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000); Sabino Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita: Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna* (Firenze: Olschki, 2002); Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Nestor Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika: Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Scully, *Isaac*; Valentin Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St. Isaac of Nineveh* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018).

49 For discussions on Isaac's understanding of *tehrā*/*temhā* in relation to the mystical experience see Alfeyev, *World*, 241–248; Chialà, *Ascesi*, 119–141; Seppälä, *Ecstasy*, 82–84, *et passim*; André Louf, "Temha-stupore e tahra-meraviglia negli scritti di Isacco il Siro," in *La grande stagione della mistica siro-orientale (VI–VIII secolo). Atti del 5° Incontro sull'Oriente cristiano di tradizione siriaca, Milano, Biblioteca ambrosiana, 26 maggio 2006*, eds. Emidio Vergani and Sabino Chialà (Milano: Centro Ambrosiano, 2009): 93–119; Hagman, *Asceticism,* 176–181; Scully, *Isaac*, 73–150; Vesa, *Knowledge*, 273–276.

50 Mary Hansbury, "Insight without Sight: Wonder as an Aspect of Revelation in the Discourses of Isaac the Syrian," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008): 60–73.

51 Louf, "Temha-stupore."

52 See, e.g., Isaac, I.40 (Paulus Bedjan, ed., *Mar Isaacus Ninivita: De perfectione religiosa* [Paris: Harrassowitz, 1909]), discussed below.

World.[53] In short, according to Scully's reading of Isaac, "astonishment [i.e., *temhā*] ends where wonder [i.e., *tehrā*] begins," so that "[a]stonishment falls within the realm of moral psychology while wonder is the subject of eschatology".[54] This distinction between the domains of astonishment and wonder is, however, invalidated by some of Isaac's statements, where *temhā* is described as a state of the intellect (*maddʿā*, *haunā*), or where *temhā* is associated with the mode of life in the New World.[55]

The opposite conclusions reached by Louf and Scully can be explained by the fact that Isaac *distinguishes between different levels* of both *tehrā* and *temhā*. This terminological distinction has apparently been overlooked so far.[56] While Isaac's use of *tehrā* and *temhā* is sometimes rather unspecific and seemingly fluid, there are a few key passages where Isaac is careful to differentiate between the various nuances in the meanings of the two terms. One such passage is found in Isaac's unedited *Chapters on Knowledge*, which make up the third discourse of Isaac's *Second Part*.[57] In II.3.4.47, Isaac explains that once the ascetic approaches the summit of the second stage of spiritual life and is about to enter the third and final stage,[58] *wonder* (*tehrā*) can draw the ascetic towards itself through various intellections (*sukkālē*). However, Isaac then adds the following caveat:

---

53 Scully, *Isaac*, 135–150.

54 Scully, *Isaac*, 136. Scully's conclusions are closely linked to his comprehensive analysis of Isaac's Greek and Syriac sources. Regarding the Syriac sources, Scully duly notes the importance of Ephrem and especially John of Apamea for providing a background to Isaac's own conception of wonder (*Isaac*, 73–91). On the Greek side, Scully argues that Isaac was mainly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius and Evagrius, whose ideas Isaac adapts and reinterprets (*Isaac*, 92–116).

55 See, e.g., Isaac, II.3.1.52 (ms. B, fol. 27v): the intellect/*haunā* engulfed by astonishment); II.8.4 (Sebastian Brock, ed., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): "The Second Part," Chapters IV–XLI* [Louvain: Peeters, 1995]): *temhā* at divine Nature as a revelation of the New World. For Isaac, the function of *haunā* and *maddʿā* seem to be identical, or at least to overlap to a great extent. The relationship between 'intellect' (*haunā*, *maddʿā*, etc.) and 'soul' (*napšā*) in Isaac is still an area that merits further investigation, as it is not always clear if Isaac understands the intellect to be a faculty of the soul, or of a different essence altogether; see Vesa, *Knowledge*, 128–142.

56 Alfeyev and Hansbury already indicate that Isaac uses 'wonder' and 'astonishment' in more than one sense, but they do not address the distinction between 'perfect' *tehrā*/*temhā* and their 'lesser' forms (as discussed below); see Alfeyev, *World*, 241–248; Hansbury, "Insight."

57 Paolo Bettiolo, *Isacco di Ninive. Discorsi spirituali: Capitoli sulla conoscenza, Preghiere, Contemplazione sull'argomento della gehenna, Altri opuscoli* (Magnano: Monastero di Bose, Edizioni Qiqajon, 1990); Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*. For a new English translation of Isaac, II.1–3, see Sebastian Brock, *Saint Isaac of Nineveh: Headings on Spiritual Knowledge (The Second Part, Chapters 1–3)* (Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2022).

58 On the stages of spiritual life according to Isaac, see: Hagman, *Asceticism*, 131–139; Sameer Maroki, *Les trois étapes de la vie spirituelle chez les Pères syriaques: Jean le Solitaire, Isaac de Ninive et Joseph Ḥazzaya. Source, doctrine et influence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 214–230; Vesa, *Knowledge*,

> I do not speak here of that *perfect wonder* (*tehrā gmīrā*) at the venerable nature (*kyānā*) of the *Lord of lords* (cf. 1 Tim 6:15), where the mind (*maddʿā*) is exalted above these lower (things) and completely above perception, but I speak about the *wonder* at the *dispensation* (*mdabbrānūṯā*) *full of distinctions* (cf. Eph 3:9–10), which are in the worlds and generations, that falls upon the soul.[59]

In this passage, Isaac draws a clear distinction between two levels of wonder (*tehrā*). On the one hand, *perfect wonder* (*tehrā gmīrā*) refers exclusively to the highest form of encounter between the mind and God (the "Lord of lords"), which foreshadows the state that rational beings will enjoy after the resurrection. The second form of wonder, the one Isaac is concerned with in the above context, is imperfect by comparison, since it has as its object God's *dispensation* (*mdabbrānūṯā*, or "economy"), not His nature (*kyānā*).[60] This latter type of *tehrā* (which I will call here "providential wonder"), arises from the contemplation of God's wisdom and providence *in creation* and reveals itself to individuals who are approaching the end of the *second stage* of the ascetic life.

When the ascetic enters the third and final stage, this providential wonder is gradually transformed, as the contemplative mind is redirected towards the mysteries of the New World and, ultimately, of God's nature. However, even at this level Isaac seems to distinguish between different degrees of wonder. In a passage cited by André Louf in support of his interpretation that *tehrā* is a preliminary stage leading to *temhā*,[61] Isaac describes a *partial wonder* (*tehrā mnāṯānāyā*) at "hidden things," which accompanies the ascetic from the beginning of the third stage until he reaches perfection:

> There is, indeed, among these divine gifts something more excellent than joy, that is to say, *wonder of thoughts* (*tehrā d-ḥuššābē*). Together with the mind beginning to abound in hidden things, it begins to have wonder of thoughts, and *as the mind grows in this way* it is strengthened until it arrives at what blessed Paul said when he recounted the ravishing of his mind: "Whether in the body or whether without the body, I do not know" (2 Cor. 12:2–3). [6.] *For one may not immediately nor suddenly draw near to this perfection directly, nor to this fulfillment*; but at the beginning the soul is illumined in the mysteries which are beneath this (fullness). This wonder of thoughts begins to show itself in the mind from when the mind begins to be illumined and to grow in hidden realities. So this *partial wonder* (*tehrā mnāṯānāyā*) grows in

123–128. In fact, II.3.4.47–48 belong to a series of chapters in which Isaac succinctly describes all the three stages or 'summits' (II.3.4.42–48).

59 Isaac, II.3.4.47 (ms. B, fol. 92v, italics mine). Syriac text: ܠܘ ܥܠ ܗܘ ܬܗܪܐ ܓܡܝܪܐ ܕܒܟܝܢܐ ܣܓܝܕܐ ܕܡܪܐ ܡܪ̈ܘܬܐ ܐܡܪܢܐ ܐܝܟ ܕܡܬܬܥܠܐ ܡܕܥܐ ܡܢ ܗܠܝܢ ܕܠܬܚܬ ܘܠܓܡܪ ܡܢ ܪܓܫܬܐ: ܐܠܐ ܥܠ ܬܗܪܐ ܕܡܕܒܪܢܘܬܗ ܕܡܠܝܐ ܦܘܪ̈ܫܢܐ ܕܒܥܠ̈ܡܐ ܘܕܪ̈ܐ ܐܝܬ ܐܝܟ ܕܢܦܠ ܒܢܦܫܐ.

60 See also Isaac, III.1.7 (Mary Hansbury, ed. and trans., *Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works* [Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016]).

61 Louf, "Temha-stupore," 117–118.

> it, and it proceeds to that perfection of the mind of Paul, which is called by the Interpreter (i.e., Theodore of Mopsuestia) and the solitary fathers an "authentic revelation of God."[62]

The partial wonder that Isaac describes here is apparently not identical to providential wonder, since the latter is concerned with this created order while the former is directed towards the mysteries of the New World. However, Isaac clearly contrasts both the partial and the providential forms of *tehrā* with the "fulfillment" of wonder, which Isaac likens to St Paul's mystical rapture (2 Cor 12:2–3) and which is likely identical to the *perfect wonder* mentioned in II.3.3.47. Isaac further insists that the mind *grows* (the verb is repeated three times in the passage) in its knowledge of God's mysteries and that the experience of wonder intensifies accordingly. *Tehrā*, therefore, describes a dynamic process rather than an immutable state of the mind, and it bears a clear *cognitive* dimension: it is related to the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. Isaac envisages a progression from the wonder at God's dispensation to the wonder at the mysteries of the New World. The latter form of wonder, the experience of which unfolds over the course of the final stage of the spiritual life, displays varying degrees of intensity (from "partial" to "complete"), depending on the ascetic's growth in knowledge and on the degree of the mind's mingling with the Holy Spirit.[63]

In the next *kephalaion* (II.3.4.48), Isaac makes a similar distinction between "complete" and "incomplete" astonishment (*temhā*). After describing how the sweetness of spiritual knowledge imparted to the mind as it reaches the third stage can *silence* and *astonish* (*tmīh*) the powers of reflection and memory, Isaac cautions against identifying this state with the "complete collectedness (of the mind)" (*kunnāšā kullānāyā*), "when, in divine contemplation, the movements of the mind (*haunā*) are transformed into astonishment (*temhā*)."[64] For Isaac, "collectedness" (*kunnāšā*) is the state in which any exterior influence arising from the sensible world is eliminated and the mind is fully turned inwards, becoming receptive of spiritual knowledge.[65] In the immediate context of this *kephalaion*, Isaac regards "complete collectedness" and "complete astonishment" as synonymous attributes of the mind when it receives the knowledge of God:

---

62 Isaac, III.13.5–6 (Sabino Chialà, ed., *Isacco di Ninive: Terza Collezione* [Leuven: Peeters, 2011]). Trans.: Hansbury, *Isaac*, italics mine.

63 See e.g., Isaac, II.3.2.89 (ms. B, fol. 57r): "Until the power of the Spirit is mixed with meditation of the mind (*hergā d-reʿyānā*), wonder at God (*tehrā da-b-alāhā*) will not be mingled with (the mind's) movements."

64 Isaac, II.3.4.48 (ms. B, fol. 92v): ܠܐ ܟܠ ܗܘ ܟܘܢܫܐ ܟܠܢܝܐ ܐܡܪܝܢ ܆ ܕܒܬܐܘܪܝܐ ܐܠܗܝܬܐ ܡܫܬܚܠܦܝܢ ܙܘ̈ܥܝ ܗܘܢܐ ܠܬܡܗܐ.

65 On the collectedness of mind, see e.g., Isaac, II.15.4–6 (Brock, *Isaac*); cf. Alfeyev, *World*, 214–216.

> *Complete astonishment* in prayer (*temhā kullānāyā da-b-ṣlōṯā*) and the perfect lack of perception (*lā margšānūṯā gmīrtā*) of the (things) here do not arise in any of the forms of knowledge and delights of the spirit, except in (that) *one* (knowledge, i.e., of God).[66]

In the state of "complete astonishment" (*temhā kullānāyā*) or collectedness, all the powers of the mind are silenced and any form of cognition or perception except the contemplation of God disappears. On the contrary, the incomplete form of astonishment that Isaac addresses in the same *kephalaion* represents a lower state, in which the mind is still aware of itself and the created order. This lower form of astonishment can be accompanied, according to Isaac, by the experience of *inebriation*, *fervour*, *peace*, and *joy*, but these "delights of the spirit" cease completely once the mind reaches the "perfect lack of perception" caused by the vision of God.[67] Although Isaac's use of these terms is not always clear-cut, this passage suggests that Isaac prefers to describe *temhā* primarily in negative terms, as characterised by the *lack* of cognition, perception, awareness, etc., or as a partial or complete *cessation*/*silencing* of mental activity arising from the engagement with something that transcends ordinary understanding. Scully is therefore correct in interpreting *temhā* as the incapacity to comprehend a higher reality, but this incapacity is *not* restricted to the soul (*pace* Scully), since it evidently affects the intellect as well.[68]

Isaac's differentiation between (a) providential, partial, and complete *tehrā* (II.3.4.47), and (b) incomplete and complete *temhā* (II.3.4.48) may account for the contradictory conclusions reached by Louf and Scully. If one compares passages where Isaac talks e.g., about *perfect* wonder (*tehrā*) with those texts that concern *partial* astonishment (*temhā*), the latter will seem inferior or less intense to the former, and vice-versa.[69] However, the precise function these subtle distinctions have for Isaac is far from clear: how do these concepts relate to the acquisition

66 Isaac, II.3.4.48 (ms. B, fol. 92v–93r, italics mine). Syriac text: ܬܗܡܐ ܟܠܢܝܐ ܕܒܨܠܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܪܓܫܢܘܬܐ ܓܡܝܪܬܐ ܕܗܪܟܐ܇ ܘܠܐ ܒܚܕܐ ܡܢ ܝ̈ܕܥܬܐ ܘܒܣܝܡܘܬܐ ܕܪܘܚ ܗܘܐ ܐܠܐ ܡܢ ܕܚܕܐ.

67 On these and other effects of the ecstatic experience in East Syriac mysticism, see Vittorio Berti, "Fuoco nel cuore, polvere in bocca. La scrittura della *trance* estatica nella mistica cristiana siriaca (secoli VII–VIII)," in *Esperienze e tecniche dell'estasi tra Oriente e Occidente*, eds. Luigi Canetti and Andrea Piras (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2018), 44–71.

68 Scully, *Isaac*, 141–146.

69 It should be noted that Isaac draws similar distinctions with regard to other fundamental concepts in his ascetic system, such as complete and partial 'overshadowing' (*maggnānūṯā*), on which see Sebastian Brock, "Maggnânûtâ: A Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background," in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont: Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux*, ed. René Coquin (Genève: Cramer, 1988), 121–129.

of spiritual knowledge by the ascetic? Are perhaps partial *tehrā* and incomplete *temhā* or perfect *tehrā* and complete *temhā* equivalent concepts?

It is here, I would argue, that the dynamics of philosophical wonder outlined by Plato and Aristotle can serve as a guide for better understanding Isaac's terminology. On the one hand, the 'negative' aspect of wonder (τὸ θαυμάζειν) in Plato and Aristotle, i.e., the 'dizziness' and *aporia* of the mind, fulfils an analogous function to Isaac's description of *temhā* cited above. Confronted with something that transcends the normal powers of comprehension and exposes its limitations, the human mind is confused and its powers of apprehension silenced. The philosopher or the ascetic will respond with astonishment and (ideally) the humble recognition of his own ignorance. On the other hand, Isaac's understanding of providential and partial *tehrā* shares some key features with the 'positive' aspect of the Platonic and Aristotelian definition of wonder. For Isaac, providential and partial *tehrā* draw the soul from the world of the senses towards contemplation and awaken the soul's desire to *know* the spiritual world. This desire is constantly kindled by the imparting of increasingly wondrous (*thīrā*) intellectual insights either about God's creation, His providence, or the New World.[70] Another key aspect that *temhā* and *tehrā* share with the Platonic and Aristotelian definition of wonder is the 'incremental' nature of this experience. Just as philosophical wonder increases as the mind turns its attention to ever greater mysteries of nature, spiritual wonder in Isaac also *grows in intensity* as the mind advances in the knowledge of God. At the same time, the mind will experience ever-stronger states of confusion and astonishment as it is confronted with divine mysteries that transcend its power of comprehension.

The same dynamics of wonder are at work throughout all stages of the ascetic life, including the third and final stage, which foreshadows the life of the New World. Here, Isaac connects John the Solitary's description of the eschatological state as consisting in "wonder at God" with his own understanding of *tehrā/temhā* as the two facets of the inner, anagogic process which draws the ascetic closer to the contemplation of God. This is perhaps most evident in the following passage from Isaac's *First Part*, in which Isaac combines the terminology of Evagrius Ponticus and John the Solitary in order to explain how *wonder* functions as a bridge between the mystical experience in this world and the eschatological state of all rational beings:

> 'Personal contemplation' he (i.e., Evagrius) uses in the sense of contemplation concerning the primordial creation of nature. From there one is easily moved onwards toward what is called (i.e., by Evagrius) 'solitary knowledge' *which is, according to a clear interpretation, wonder in God* (*tehrā da-b-alāhā*), *this is the order of that high future state which will be given in freedom*

70 See, e.g., Isaac, II.35.1–5 (Brock, *Isaac*).

> *that lives in immortality, in that way of life which will be after the resurrection*. It will consist therein, that from that point onwards human nature will not be cut off from *constant ecstasy* (*tehrā ammīnā*) in God, to mingle itself with any created being.[71]

Isaac's aim in this passage is to explain two fundamental concepts in Evagrius' ascetical system: "personal (or: hypostatic) contemplation" (*teʾōryā da-qnōmā*), i.e., the vision of one's intellectual/spiritual nature, and "solitary (or: monadic) knowledge" (*īdaʿtā īḥīdāytā*). The latter expression appears once in the modified version of Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika* (S1) and probably translates the Greek phrase γνῶσις τῆς μονάδος ("knowledge of the [divine] Monad"),[72] by which Evagrius refers to the protological and eschatological knowledge of God that the intellects possessed and will possess.[73]

In the most recent discussion of this passage in Isaac, Jason Scully has argued that Isaac reinterprets Evagrius' "solitary knowledge" by placing it in an eschatological framework (whereas for Evagrius this knowledge was primarily 'protological'), and by linking it to the concept of *wonder*, which, again, is not typical of Evagrius, according to Scully.[74] Although it is true that Evagrius was highly invested in questions of protology, he also developed an equally complex eschatology in which

71 Isaac, I.40 (Bedjan, *Isaacus*). Trans.: Arent Jan Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh, Translated from Bedjan's Syriac text, with an Introduction and Registers* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), italics mine. Syriac text: ܬܐܘܪܝܐ ܕܩܢܘܡܗܘܢ : ܥܠ ܒܪܝܬܐ ܡܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܕܝܐ ܐܡܪ. ܕܗܢ ܗܘܝܐ ܡܚܝܠ : ܦܣܩܐܝܬ ܢܗܘܐ ܡܬܬܘܒ ܥܠ ܗ̇ܝ ܕܡܬܕܡܪܘܬܐ ܢܒܥܐ ܚܝܝܘܬܐ : ܕܐܬܬܘܗ̇ ܐܝܟ ܕܒܩܘܫܡܐ ܢܗܝܪܐ : ܬܗܪܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ. ܗܘ ܠܓܡܪܐ ܕܗܘ̇ ܕܡܕܢܐ ܕܒܬܪ : ܕܡܬܕܒܪܝܢ ܒܐܘܪܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ܕܠܐ ܡܝܘܬܘܬܐ : ܒܗܘ ܗܘܦܟܐ ܕܒܬܪ ܩܝܡܬܐ. ܒܗ̇، ܕܠܐ ܬܗܘܐ ܡܬܦܣܩܐ ܟܝܢܐ ܐܢܫܝܐ ܡܢ ܗܪܟܐ : ܡܢ ܬܗܪܐ ܐܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ : ܠܘܬ ܚܒܪ ܡܢ ܒܪܝܬܐ ܠܡܬܐܚܕܘ.

72 See Gabriel Bunge, "Hénade ou monade? Au sujet de deux notions centrales de la terminologie évagrienne," *Mus* 102 (1989), 69–91: 76.

73 Evagrius, *Kephalaia* III.22. As Gabriel Bunge observes, the original text of the *Kephalaia Gnostika* simply speaks of "the Monad," which in this context refers to the primordial and eschatological *unity of God and the intellects* (Bunge, "Hénade"; Gabriel Bunge, "Encore une fois: hénade ou monade? Au sujet de deux notions-clés de la terminologie technique d'Évagre le Pontique," *Adam.* 15 (2009): 9–42). However, since the Syriac translator S1 understood the Monad (μονάς, ܚܝܕܝܘܬܐ) to refer to *God alone*, he often modified the text to "*knowledge of* the Monad" (ܝܕܥܬܐ ܕܚܝܕܝܘܬܐ) in order to avoid any pantheistic/monistic interpretation of Evagrius' text (compare, e.g., *KG* 1.71 in S1 and S2). The influence of S1's reinterpretation of Evagrius' concept of the Monad on later Syriac authors still requires further study.

74 Scully, *Isaac*, 112–116. On the presence of Evagrian language in Isaac, see Sebastian Brock, "Discerning the Evagrian in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: A Preliminary Investigation," *Adam.* 15 (2009): 60–72; Sabino Chialà, "Evagrio il Pontico negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive," *Adam.* 15 (2009): 73–84.

the return to the Monad played a central role.[75] Moreover, echoing an idea found in Origen, Evagrius stresses in his *Great Letter*, preserved only in Syriac, that the investigation into the beginning (*šūrāyā*) of things is done *in light of their ultimate end* (*šullāmā*).[76] In the same passage from the *Great Letter*, Evagrius even draws an explicit connection between solitary knowledge, eschatology, and the experience of wonder:

> [65] For my part, *I say that this beginning doubtless occurs for the sake of that ending*. Just as the journey of one seeking to arrive at the end of all torrents will arrive at the sea, likewise the one who seeks to arrive at the power of some created thing will arrive at the 'Wisdom full of diversity' (Eph. 3:10) who established it. [66] Anyone who stands on the seashore is seized by *wonder* (*tehrā*) at its limitlessness, taste, colour and all it contains, and at how the rivers, torrents and streams that pour into it become limitless and undifferentiated in it, since they acquire all its properties. It is likewise for anyone who considers the end of the intellects: *he will be in great wonder* (*tehrā*) *and amazement* (*dummārā*) as he beholds all these various different *knowledges* uniting themselves *in the essential solitary knowledge* and beholds them all *become this one without end.*[77]

This is a rare, but all the more important instance of Evagrius using the language of *wonder* in his works.[78] Although Evagrius does not describe the eschatological unification of intellects itself as a *state of wonder* (as, e.g., John the Solitary does),

---

75 For an overview of Evagrius' eschatology, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Un philosophe au desert: Évagre le Pontique* (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 384–404.

76 Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.2. See also John Behr's introductory discussion (Behr, *Origen*, lxxx–lxxxviii). It is also worth stressing that there is an important Christological dimension to Evagrius' arguments in the same sections of his *Great Letter*. Based on an interpretation of Isa 9:6 [5] (with the variant καὶ ἐκάλεσεν ὄνομα αὐτοῦ θαύμαστος), Evagrius discusses the *miracle* (*dummārā*) of Christ's incarnation as being a source of *wonder* (*tehrā*) and the foundation of human deification culminating in the eschatological monadic union (*Great Letter* §61–64).

77 Evagrius, *Great Letter* §65. Trans.: Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 77, modified, italics mine. Syriac text: ܐܡܪ ܐܢܐ ܕܝܢ ܕܐܦ ܗܘ ܫܘܪܝܐ ܡܛܠܬܗ ܕܗܢܐ ܫܘܠܡܐ ܗܘܐ ܐܝܟܢܐ ܓܝܪ ܕܐܘܪܚܐ ܕܒܥܐ ܕܢܡܛܐ ܥܠ ܫܘܠܡܐ ܕܟܠܗܘܢ ܢܚܠܐ : ܠܘܬ ܝܡܐ ܡܛܐ ܐܘܪܚܬܗ : ܗܟܢܐ ܐܦ ܗܘ ܕܒܥܐ ܕܢܡܛܐ ܥܠ ܚܝܠܐ ܕܡܕܡ ܡܢ ܒܪ̈ܝܬܐ : ܠܘܬ ܚܟܡܬܐ ܡܠܝܬ ܦܘܪ̈ܫܢܐ ܕܐܫܬܘܬܗ ܡܛܐ : ܘܐܝܟܢ ܕܐܚܕ ܠܗ ܬܗܪܐ ܠܗܘ ܕܩܐܡ ܥܠ ܣܦܪ ܝܡܐ ܥܠ ܠܐ ܡܣܬܝܟܢܘܬܗ ܘܥܠ ܛܥܡܗ ܘܥܠ ܓܘܢܗ ܘܥܠ ܟܠ ܕܐܝܬ ܠܗ : ܘܥܠ ܕܐܝܟܢ ܐܦ ܢܗܪ̈ܘܬܐ ܘܢܚ̈ܠܐ ܘܡܬ̈ܦܩܐ ܕܢܦܠܝܢ ܒܗ : ܐܦ ܗܘܝܢ ܒܗ ܠܐ ܡܣܬܝܟܢܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܬܦܪ̈ܫܢܐ : ܟܕ ܢܣܒܝܢ ܟܠܗܝܢ ܕܝܠܗ . ܗܟܢܐ ܐܦ ܐܢܫ ܕܚܙܐ ܫܘܠܡܐ ܕܟܠ ܗܘ̈ܢܐ ܚܙܐ : ܒܬܗܪܐ ܣܓܝܐܐ ܘܒܕܘܡܪܐ ܗܘܐ ܟܕ ܚܙܐ ܕܐܠܝܢ ܟܠܗܝܢ ܦܘܪ̈ܫܢܐ ܕܝܕ̈ܥܬܐ ܡܫܚܠ̈ܦܬܐ : ܒܝܕܥܬܐ ܝܚܝܕܝܬܐ ܐܘܣܝܐܝܬܐ ܡܚܝܕܢ ܠܗܝܢ : ܘܗܘܝܢ ܟܠܗܝܢ ܚܕܐ ܗܝ ܕܠܐ ܫܘܠܡ.

78 As Jason Scully notes, Evagrius has long been regarded as an advocate of a 'katastatic' (as opposed to 'ecstatic') form of mysticism; see Scully, *Isaac*, 93–98, and 94 n. 4 (with further bibliography). This passage may suggest that there exists also an 'ecstatic' dimension to Evagrius' thought. Unfortunately, we do not know which Greek term lies behind *tehrā* in this quotation (ἔκστασις?, θαυμάζειν?). Admittedly, there is one instance in which the Syriac translator added the term *tehrā* in Evagrius' *Reflections* §30, where it was absent in Greek (see Scully, *Isaac*, 108–112, with a discussion of older literature). Nevertheless, the reference to 'wonder' in the passage from the *Great*

his reference to the *wonder of contemplating the end* is in many ways comparable to John and Isaac's understanding of wonder as the mystical experience which foreshadows the life of knowledge in the New World. There is also a noteworthy parallel between how Evagrius and Isaac distinguish the various *forms of knowledge* (*īdaʿtē*) from the "essential solitary/monadic knowledge" of God.[79]

Even though John the Solitary already had described the resurrected state in terms of *knowledge* and *wonder*, Isaac's synthesis of John's language and Evagrius' concept of *monadic knowledge* makes the epistemic dimension of this eschatological *wonder* both more explicit and more precise. Furthermore, the peculiarities of Evagrius' reception in Syriac also allowed Isaac to add a new dimension to the Evagrian notion of the eschatological union. For Evagrius, the final unity of all rational beings with God is defined in terms of a *single*, *infinite knowledge* (they "become this one [knowledge] *without end*"). This final phrase, which finds a close parallel in Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika* III.88 ("Blessed is he who has reached the knowledge that cannot be surpassed", according to S2), was available to Isaac in a modified form, in which the term "knowledge" (*īdaʿtā*) was replaced by "ignorance" (*lā īdaʿtā*, S1).[80] This modification enabled Isaac to reinterpret Evagrius' eschatological statement as a description of an inner, mystical experience of ecstasy and wonder that interrupts pure prayer:

> The mind has ascended here above prayer. And, having found what is more excellent, it desists from prayer. And further there is no longer prayer, but *the gaze in astonishment* (*ḥawrā da-b-temhā*) at the unattainable things which do not belong to the world of mortals, and peace, without knowledge of any earthly thing. This is the well-known ignorance concerning which Evagrius says: 'Blessed is he who has reached, during prayer, the *ignorance which cannot be surpassed.*'[81]

In an apparent reversal of its initial aim, Isaac cites the modified Evagrian expression "unsurpassable ignorance" to characterise the state of the mind when it transcends the level of pure prayer and enters the realm of ecstatic *non-prayer*.[82] Somewhat unexpectedly, the passage shows that Isaac understood the mind's ignorance (or: unknowing) to be *not* one regarding God's essence (as in the broader apophatic tradition), but one regarding everything *except God* ("without knowledge of any

Letter is likely to go back to Evagrius, since it is integral to his central analogy of the ocean and the knowledge of God.

79 See, e.g., Isaac, II.3.4.48 (ms. B, fol. 92v–93r), discussed above.

80 Antoine Guillaumont, ed., *Les six Centuries des "Kephalaia gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1958), 134–135.

81 Isaac, I.22 (Bedjan, *Isaacus*). Trans.: Wensinck, *Treatises,* italics mine.

82 For the most recent discussion of Isaac's theory of non-prayer, see Bitton-Ashkelony, *Ladder,* 79–104.

earthly thing"). Given that Isaac uses precisely the term *astonishment* (*temhā*) in this context, a comparison to Isaac's discussion of "complete collectedness" and "complete astonishment (*temhā*)" in II.3.4.48 suggests itself. In both cases, the accent falls on the *negative*, non-cognitive aspect of the inner state described by Isaac. The mind falls silent, is stupefied, and completely lacks any perception or knowledge of any reality except the Divine, which it knows through *tehrā*.

This finally leads to the question regarding the possible equivalence between *tehrā* and *temhā*. Are the two expressions "perfect wonder" and "complete astonishment" simply synonymous for Isaac or is *tehrā* the 'positive flipside' of the negative state circumscribed by *temhā*? Although a definitive answer will only be possible on the basis of a comprehensive study of Isaac's corpus, one important clue is provided by a passage from Isaac's *Third Part.* Speaking about the "continual adoration of the Spirit," offered to God the Father through Christ, Isaac uses *temhā* and *tehrā* only a few lines apart, which suggests that the two concepts do not overlap completely:

> This (adoration) which cannot be limited, not by the body, not by a place, not by the highest (heavenly) spheres, (occurs) in the mind (*madd'ā*) by its stirrings. *It is infinite and uninterrupted astonishment* (*temhā*) on account of Him. (It happens) in that place without corporeal realities, by that way of life more exalted than the order of prayer. *Wonder* (*tehrā*) is its minister, and instead of faith providing the wings for prayer, there is true vision of that in which consists our Kingdom and our glory.[83]

The true worship of God in the Spirit, which takes place in the mystical state above prayer and which will characterise the life of the New World, is defined by Isaac as an "infinite and uninterrupted astonishment (*temhā*) of the mind." In light of the other discussions of *temhā* discussed above, there can be little doubt that Isaac understands *temhā* also in this context to describe the mind's complete silence and *ignorance* of everything else except God. In the very next sentence, however, Isaac distinguishes *wonder* (*tehrā*) as a separate, *active* element, which he compares to a minister (*mšammšānā*) engaged in the act of worship. Thus, in Isaac's analogy in this passage, just as the "true vision" (*ḥzāṯā šarrirtā*) replaces faith, *wonder* replaces the human act of prayer with spiritual non-prayer and imparts God's *monadic knowledge* to the mind. The roles assigned to *temhā* and *tehrā* in this passage, therefore, suggest that Isaac did conceive of these two terms as closely related, but nonetheless as distinct: Complete *temhā* describes the state of "blessed ignorance" in which all faculties of rational beings are reduced to silence (cf. the "complete lack of perception" in II.3.4.48), while perfect *tehrā* rather refers to the act of *knowing* and being united with God through the *monadic knowledge* imparted by the Holy Spirit.

83 Isaac, III.33 (Hansbury, *Isaac*), italics mine.

4 Conclusions

The brief survey of the Platonic and Aristotelian view on the origins of philosophy has shown that *wonder* (τὸ θαυμάζειν) is not merely an emotional response of surprise, but rather a key driving force in the pursuit of wisdom. For Plato and Aristotle, philosophical wonder begins with a feeling of puzzlement and confusion at an inexplicable phenomenon, continues with the recognition of one's ignorance, and leads to the desire for true knowledge and (ideally) its acquisition. This process repeats itself as the philosopher investigates greater and greater puzzles of nature and of Being. It should be noted that the different steps of this process are *not* to be understood as a chronological but rather as an 'analytical' sequence: confusion, bewilderment and curiosity can be triggered in the philosopher's mind all at the same time. What *does* require time, of course, is the philosophical investigation which arises from that sense of wonder and curiosity.

By way of analogy, this notion of *wonder* bears the potential to explain some central aspects of the religious epistemology developed by Christian theologians and ascetic authors in Late Antiquity and beyond. After a short overview over the history of "wonder" in early Syriac literature, I have tried to argue that the dynamics of philosophical wonder may contribute to a better understanding of Isaac of Nineveh's mystical treatises, in which the two most common Syriac terms for wonder (amazement, astonishment, etc.) – *tehrā* and *temhā* – play a central role. Isaac carefully distinguishes between different degrees of wonder in his works, such as providential, partial, and perfect wonder (*tehrā*), as well as incomplete and complete astonishment (*temhā*). In a way analogous to philosophical wonder, Isaac sees the role of providential and partial *tehrā* as awakening the mind's desire to discern God's wisdom and providence, and to ascend to the proleptic vision of the New World. Isaac conceives of the spiritual ascent as a growth in knowledge, culminating with the experience of "perfect wonder," which anticipates the life of *monadic knowledge* (in Evagrian terms) and the *wonder at God* (in John the Solitary's terms) in the *eschaton*.

Isaac's positive account of wonder (*tehrā*) as stimulating and sustaining the knowledge of God is seconded by his discussion of astonishment (*temhā*). Isaac usually describes astonishment in negative terms and associates it with the partial or complete cessation of mental activity, the lack of perception and cognition, etc. Contrary to some scholarly interpretations (Louf, Scully), the two terms *tehrā* and *temhā* do not denote two separate stages of the ascetic path. For Isaac, *tehrā* and *temhā* are two necessary and interrelated aspects of the mind's ascent to God and recur at every new level of the ascetic path leading to the mystical experience of the New World. As wonder (*tehrā*) at God and the New World intensifies, the aware-

ness of everything except that one reality diminishes, until the mind is in complete silence and astonishment (*temhā*) before God.

In his still authoritative studies on the eighth-century Syriac mystic John of Dalyāthā, Robert Beulay has argued that John also distinguishes between the concepts *tehrā* and *temhā*, associating *tehrā* with the vision of divine light and *temhā* with the mind's entry into the divine darkness. According to Beulay, John envisions this alternation of light and darkness / *tehrā* and *temhā* to continue indefinitely, even in the New World, in an eternal progression into the depths of God.[84] This vision of eternal life, which resonates to some degree with Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epektasis*, may also be interpreted using the explanatory model of philosophical wonder outlined here, since the eternal cycle of wonder and astonishment is also a cycle of ignorance, desire for, and knowledge of God. While John of Dalyāthā is certainly original in his use of *tehrā* and *temhā*, this study has hopefully shown that Isaac's works anticipate some of the ideas found in John's works. More research on the epistemic dimension of wonder in other Syriac mystical authors, especially prolific writers such as Joseph Ḥazzāyā,[85] may help uncover more of the complex history of these two terms.

84 Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha, mystique syro-oriental du VIIIe siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), 386–404; Robert Beulay, "De l'émerveillement à l'extase: Jean de Dalyatha et Abou Sa'id al-Kharraz," in *Youakim Moubarac: Dossier dirigé par Jean Stassinet* (Lausanne: L'âge d'homme, 2005): 333–343. See esp. John of Dalyāthā, *Homily* 6.22 (Nadira Khayyat, ed., *Jean de Dalyatha: Les Homélies I–XV* [Antélias: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales, 2007]). For a discussion of Isaac's influence on John with regard to *tehrā* and *temhā*, see Scully, *Isaac*, 154–159.

85 On Isaac's legacy in Joseph Ḥazzāyā's works, see Scully, *Isaac*, 159–161.