

# Narsai

Rethinking his Work and his World

Edited by

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and Robert A. Kitchen

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ISBN 978-3-16-159349-9 / eISBN 978-3-16-159808-1

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-159808-1

ISSN 1436-3003 / eISSN 2568-7433 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

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The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Minion typeface, printed on non-aging paper by Laupp & Göbel in Gomaringen, and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

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## An Early Syriac *Apologia Crucis*

### *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'*

Kelli Bryant Gibson

Since Alphonse Mingana's 1905 publication of many of Narsai's *mēmṛē*, these homilies have justly attracted the scrutiny of scholars.<sup>1</sup> However, *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross'* has garnered negligible interest. There is not yet a published modern translation of the *mēmṛā*,<sup>2</sup> and Luise Abramowski's 2004 article on the *mēmṛā*'s christological titles is the only scholarly treatment of it.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this *mēmṛā* rewards careful attention. It is one of the earliest Syriac homilies for the annual Feast of the Discovery of the Cross (Feast of the Cross), and so it is a significant witness to the development of the East Syrian liturgical year.<sup>4</sup> Abramowski considered this *mēmṛā* primarily in terms of the fifth-century Trisagion controversy, but attention to the piece as a whole points decisively, or so I will argue, to another conflict altogether: a dispute over the veneration of the cross. Narsai's homily is thus an early witness to an apologetic theme that only became prominent more than a century after his death. Narsai's focus on defending the veneration of the cross problematizes earlier attempts at establishing a likely date for this *mēmṛā* based on the homily's christology, but it also yields more nuanced considerations for the dating of the *mēmṛā*. Most importantly, the homily offers unexpected insight into social pressures and theological concerns in the Church of the East apart from the continuing strife of christological controversy.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905).

<sup>2</sup> An English translation by the present author will be published under the auspices of the project directed by the editors of this volume.

<sup>3</sup> L. Abramowski, "Narsai (ca. 415?–502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114–130: 'Unser König Jesus', der 'gekreuzigte Mann,'" in P. Gemeinhardt and U. Kühneweg (eds.), *Patristica et Oecumenica: Festschrift für Wolfgang A. Beinert zum 65. Geburtstag* (Marburg: Elwert, 2004), 157–166.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas most traditions celebrate the Feast of the Cross on 14 September, the Church of the East celebrates it on 13 September.

## The Occasion of Composition

One might reasonably wonder whether the scribal title, “On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross,” truly reflects the purpose for which this *mēmra* was originally written. The oldest manuscript witness for the homily dates to the nineteenth century, and it is difficult to tell how old the scribal title is or whether it reflects authorial intent. To this end, it is helpful to trace the development of the Feast of the Cross among Syriac-speaking Christians. The Feast of the Cross had become a permanent and popular fixture in Jerusalem’s liturgical calendar by the time of Egeria’s visit *circa* 381–384. Egeria reported that it was celebrated at the same time as the Encaenia of the Holy Sepulchre because the cross was found at the time of the church’s construction, though she did not reveal how the cross was found or by whom.<sup>5</sup> While there are earlier references to fragments of the True Cross,<sup>6</sup> Egeria’s *Itinerary* is the earliest source to connect the alleged discovery of the cross with the liturgical celebration. Composed in 395, Ambrose’s *De obitu Theodosii* is the first documented attribution of the discovery to Constantine I’s mother, Helena.<sup>7</sup> The rapid spread of wooden fragments purporting to be pieces of the True Cross along with an evolving legend of its discovery by a popular royal saint likely contributed to the Feast of the Cross spreading in farflung places, while the Encaenia remained primarily a local Jerusalem feast.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 48–49 (ed. A. Franceschini and R. Weber, *Itineraria et alia geographica*, vol. 1 [CCSL 175; Turnhout: Brepols, 1965]; trans. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* [3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxbow Press, 2006]).

<sup>6</sup> The earliest is Cyril of Jerusalem, who mentions the relic several times ca. 348–351. See *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.10, 10.19, and 13.4; see also *Letter to Constantius*, 3. The standard Greek edition for the Catechetical Lectures is still W.H. Reischl and J. Rupp, *S. Patris nostri Cyrilli Hierosolymorum Archiepiscopi Opera quæ supersunt Omnia* (Munich: Sumptibus Librariae Lentnerianae, 1848–1860). For English translation, see L.P. McCauley and A.A. Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1970). For the Greek edition of the *Letter to Constantius*, see E. Bihain, “Épître de Cyrille de Jérusalem à Constance sur la vision de la Croix (BHG 413),” *Byzantion* 43 (1973): 264–296; a recent English translation is in E. Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem* (London: Routledge, 2000), 68–70.

<sup>7</sup> Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* (ed. O. Faller, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, Part 7 [CSEL 73; Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1955], 369–401; trans. J.H.V.G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005]).

<sup>8</sup> For two contrasting approaches to the development of the legend, see J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) and S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991). An example of how the legend spread alongside distribution of the relics may be found in Paulinus of Nola’s *Letter 31* to Sulpicius Severus (ed. with German trans. M. Skeb, *Epistolae = Briefe* [Freiburg: Herder, 1998]; trans. P.G. Walsh, *Letters of St Paulinus of Nola: Letters 23–51* [London: Longmans, Green, 1967]).

The widespread practice of recounting the Helena legend in homilies for the feast day suggests, but does not demonstrate, that the legend was a catalyst for the geographical spread of the feast day.

One can only hazard a guess as to when Syriac churches began to adopt the Feast of the Cross. Ephrem's writings, of course, evince no awareness of the feast,<sup>9</sup> although a caché of natural and biblical types of the cross similar to those found in Ephrem's corpus appear in later Syriac homilies for the feast day. The *Doctrina Addai*, written in the first third of the fifth century,<sup>10</sup> is the earliest Syriac text to show awareness of the legend of Helena's discovery of the cross. Protonike's "first discovery of the cross" is clearly modelled on the Helena legend.<sup>11</sup> Next, the tradition attributes *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross to East Syrian Narsai (d. ca. 500) and West Syrian Jacob of Serugh (d. ca. 521). If the Helena legend was indeed a catalyst for the popularization of the Feast of the Cross, Syriac-speaking churches likely began to celebrate the feast day relatively soon after their reception of the legend. It is thus not chronologically improbable that Jacob or Narsai wrote their homilies for this feast day. Furthermore, if both communities were celebrating the feast by this time, it is reasonable to suppose that Syriac-speaking Christians began to celebrate the feast sometime during the first third of the fifth century and prior to the Council of Ephesus in 431. This was the very time when the Feast of the Cross was growing in popularity elsewhere.

One may also compare Narsai's *Mēm̄rā* 54 with other, admittedly later, Syriac texts for the Feast of the Cross to determine if they have thematic similarities.<sup>12</sup> There are, in fact, remarkable resonances. Here I will only highlight the common themes that Narsai shares with these texts, but more detailed discussion will follow below. Nearly every extant Syriac *mēm̄rā* mentions Constantine's vision and/or Helena's discovery of the cross.<sup>13</sup> Notably, two Syriac liturgical poems in

<sup>9</sup> Ephrem's death preceded Egeria's testimony about the Feast of the Cross in Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup> S. H. Griffith, "The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Fifth-Century Edessa," *Hugoye* 6 (2003): 291.

<sup>11</sup> S. Heid, "Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende," *AB* 109 (1991): 84.

<sup>12</sup> For an indepth study of these materials, see K. Bryant, *Festal Apologetics: Syriac Treatises for the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross* (D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 2015), especially chapters 3, 6, and 7. The thematic similarities are shared across denominational boundaries, and here I draw from both East and West Syrian texts: Narsai's *Mēm̄rā* 54, Jacob of Serugh's *Mēm̄rā* 'On Queen Helena and the Discovery of the Cross', David Eskolaya's *Mēm̄rā* 'On the Discovery of the Cross' (date unknown), a treatise by John of Dara (d. ca. 860), two works by Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903), and a treatise by Dionysius bar Šalibi (d. 1171). The supplement to the dissertation contains a diplomatic Syriac edition and English translation of the works by John of Dara, Moshe bar Kepha, and Dionysius bar Šalibi.

<sup>13</sup> Most of the *mēm̄rē* discuss the invention legend briefly, but Jacob of Serugh's homily is entirely devoted to the narrative. It is preserved in several manuscripts, for which, see A. Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēm̄rē-Dichtung des Ja'qōb von Serūg* (CSCO 344; Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973), 2.218. See also a helpful critique of Vööbus in M. Kohlbacher, "Die Taufe Kaiser Konstantins und ihr geheimer Held. Anmerkungen zu einem des Jakob von Batnan in Sarug (BHO 1070. 1072 [syr.]/1071 [arab.])," in M. Tamcke (ed.), *Syriaca: Zur Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie, und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirchen. 2. Deutsches Syrologien-Symposium (Juli 2000, Wittenberg)* (Münster: Lit, 2002), 72–75. Thanks to the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, I was able to consult a digitized version of ms. Mardin, Church of the Forty Martyrs 130, ff. 203r–205v.

the East Syrian *Ḥudrā* recount the discovery of the relic.<sup>14</sup> Like the invention legend, particularly the Judah Kyriakos version, which is rife with anti-Jewish themes,<sup>15</sup> Syriac *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross frequently contain polemic against religious rivals, whether they be other Christians, pagans, Jews, or, later, Muslims. It is also common to list types of the cross from nature and scripture.<sup>16</sup> Several treatises cite or explicate 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, as Narsai does at length. The *Ḥudrā* likewise designates 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 as a reading for the Feast of the Cross.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Narsai's defense of the veneration of the cross also anticipates themes in *mēm̄rē* written after the Arab conquests.<sup>18</sup> One might try to argue that the combination of these themes led a later scribe to assume erroneously that Narsai wrote the *mēm̄rā* for the Feast of the Cross. However, it is simpler to conclude that Narsai's *mēm̄rā* was actually written for this feast day, and it is thus the earliest representative of the East Syrian homiletical tradition for the Feast of the Cross.

### Dating

The text offers only the vaguest suggestions about its provenance and date. In the most forthcoming passage, Narsai contrasts the rapid, counterintuitive spread of Christianity with older, rival religions' alleged failure to spread widely.

Look and be amazed at all the teachings on earth –  
 how the crucified man perfected and brought them to an end.  
 By the rays of his saving symbol religions fell,  
 and evil spirits fled and were put to shame, and their ministers ceased.  
 Chaldeanism held sway for 4,000 years,  
 but it was unable to subject everything to its teaching.  
 Although the sore had spread in the world in its antiquity,  
 the cross at its manifestation uprooted it, cast it down, and exposed its deceit.  
 In the same way the Law of Moses, the firstborn of prophecy,  
 also held sway for 1,500 years.

<sup>14</sup> S. P. Brock, "Two Syriac Poems on the Invention of the Cross," in N. el-Khoury, H. Crouzel, and R. Reinhardt (ed.), *Lebendige Überlieferung: Prozesse der Annäherung und Auslegung. Festschrift für Hermann-Josef Vogt zum 60. Geburtstag* (Beirut: Friedrich-Rückert-Verlag, 1992), 55–82.

<sup>15</sup> See H. J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross: The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac* (CSCO 565; Leuven: Peeters, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Moshe bar Kepha's and John of Dara's *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross both contain *florilegia* for the types of the cross that are uncannily similar in content to Narsai's *catena*. See Bryant, *Festal Apologetics*, 259, for a chart comparing types of the cross in Syriac *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross.

<sup>17</sup> P. Kannoakadan, *The East Syrian Lectionary: An Historico-Liturgical Study* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yagam, 1991), 58.

<sup>18</sup> For example, John of Dara's entire *mēm̄rā* is devoted to the subject. See fn. 12 above.



Although the prophets, priests, and kings were its preachers, not one of the nations converted and came to its teaching. Behold, [it is] also 1,000 years since Magianism began, and its festering sore spread among many. For it was not sufficient, even though kings arose in aid of it with the judgments [by] which they upheld it in the wrath of their threats. With dreadful torments and harsh deaths they killed [people] of all ranks, but they were unable to convert a single person to their teaching. Although they were rash and attacked the Mother of Jesus, an innumerable [multitude] turned from what was theirs and believed in Jesus. By means of the church they tasted the living spring of baptism, and they became advocates on behalf of the confession of our faith. The torments of savage, bloodthirsty men were powerless, and the children of the holy church multiplied innumerable. The error of all Magianism thus held sway among rulers and harsh kings who sprang up by it. Now, in more or less five hundred years, the crucified One<sup>19</sup> drew all peoples near to his teaching.<sup>20</sup>

Narsai's numbers here are much too approximate to help establish a firm date, but his comments about Chaldean astrology and Magianism do fit a Persian context well.<sup>21</sup> Noteworthy too are Narsai's pathos-filled words about Magian persecution of Christians. Whereas Chaldeanism and Judaism receive only two couplets apiece, Narsai describes at length the institutional support for Magianism, state-sponsored persecution of Christians, and the alleged growth of the church despite harsh opposition. Although Persian persecution may not have been of the precise character that East Syrian hagiography would have us believe,<sup>22</sup> the experience of persecution and perception of social marginalization nevertheless did shape the self-understanding of the Church of the East. The likelihood of a Persian context suggests a *terminus post quem* after Narsai's departure from Edessa, perhaps circa 471. Beyond this, a more precise date based on the content of the *mēmṛā* is elusive.

Abramowski attempted to narrow the date of authorship through the study of the christological titles used in the *mēmṛā*. The most frequent titles for Christ in this *mēmṛā* all emphasize Christ's manner of death: "the crucified King (*malkā šlibā*)," "the crucified Man (*gabrā šlibā*)," and simply "the crucified One (*šlibā*)." Although Narsai prefers to use the passive participle of the verb *šlb*, that is, *šlibā*, for these titles, he sometimes uses the synonym *zqipā* with no discernible dif-

<sup>19</sup> Or "the cross."

<sup>20</sup> *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.119.17–120.11).

<sup>21</sup> Abramowski, "Narsai (ca. 415?–502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114–130: 'Unser König Jesus', der 'gekreuzigte Mann,'" 157–158.

<sup>22</sup> As R. E. Payne argues in his recent study, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 23–58.

ference in connotation. Understandably, the titles “crucified King” and “crucified Man” reminded Abramowski of the Trisagion controversy, which was stirred up by the Miaphysite bishop of Antioch, Peter the Fuller, who reigned intermittently between 470–488. To the traditional Trisagion prayer, “Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal, have mercy on us,” Peter had inserted the phrase, “Christ the King, who was crucified for us” before the ending petition. Abramowski found Narsai’s christological title “crucified King” evocative of passages from Philoxenus’ *Letter to the Monks of Tell ‘Adā*, which likewise discusses the Trisagion controversy.<sup>23</sup> In the letter, Philoxenus denounces as “Nestorian” the Chalcedonian bishop, Calendio, who reigned in Antioch while Peter the Fuller was in exile between 482–484. Thus, Abramowski concluded that Narsai purposefully used the title “crucified King” in response to the Trisagion controversy, and she suggested a date of composition between 482–484 or shortly thereafter.<sup>24</sup>

What Abramowski’s article lacks, however, is thorough consideration of these titles in the context of the *mēmṛā*. What are the key themes of the *mēmṛā*, and do these seem to fit the context of the Trisagion controversy? How do Narsai’s christological titles function in their immediate context? If the preference for certain christological titles might be better explained by other considerations, do Abramowski’s conclusions about the date for this *mēmṛā* still hold? The rest of this article will unpack the broad contours of Narsai’s *mēmṛā*, after which I will return to these questions and reassess Abramowski’s argument.

### *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’*

*Mēmṛā 54* contains 295 couplets arranged in three main sections: 1. a theological exposition on the cross and crucifixion in the divine economy (ln. 1–123); 2. a *catena* of types of the cross found in nature and scripture (ln. 124–212); 3. an apologetic section that defends the veneration of the cross against accusations of idolatry and ends with a closing exhortation (ln. 213–295). As a whole, these three parts work together to justify the veneration of crosses. I will address each section in turn, showing how they contribute to the overall argument.

#### *The Theological Exposition: An Apologia Crucis*

The first and longest of the three sections of the *mēmṛā* is a theological exposition on the significance of the cross and crucifixion for the divine economy. 1 Corin-

<sup>23</sup> For the Syriac text of the letter with Italian translation, see I. Guidi, “Le lettera di Filosseno ai monaci di Tell ‘Addā,” *Atti della Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Serie Terza: Memorie della Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 12 (1884): 449–501.

<sup>24</sup> For the full argument, see Abramowski, “Narsai (ca. 415?–502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114–130: ‘Unser König Jesus’, der ‘gekreuzigte Mann,’” 163–166.

thians 1:18–25 is foundational to this section, and it influences Narsai's polemic in the final section. Because this passage inspires the overarching theme of the entire *mēmra*, it is worth quoting in full:

<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." <sup>20</sup> 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? <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.<sup>25</sup>

The echoes of this passage in the beginning of the *mēmra* are strong. In lines 12–13, Narsai paraphrases 1 Corinthians 1:21: "For this reason by the wisdom of the God of all, / all the world did not perceive the power of his wisdom. | By the contemptibility of the Gospel the Creator wished / to save and to redeem humanity by means of the crucified Man."<sup>26</sup> Despite overwhelming natural evidence that should have led human beings to contemplate their Creator,<sup>27</sup> they failed to perceive God due to their "hardness of heart."<sup>28</sup>

Narsai interprets 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 as a prophetic word about the global success of the gospel over against rival ideologies. In his view, Greek philosophers thought that their teachings illuminated the world, but the cross shone forth and obscured the light of the philosophers, and all the world "ran and cleaved to" the crucified Man.<sup>29</sup> Narsai concludes, "Therefore, the word of Paul, the herald of the Spirit, was fulfilled, / so that the wisdom of the Greeks failed and perished."<sup>30</sup> Whereas the downfall of the Greeks was made evident by the nations being gathered to the crucified Man, Narsai asserts that the inverse is true of the Jews. Just as the cross purportedly "obscured" the light of Greek philosophy, it likewise "abolished the laws and the teachers of the Jews."<sup>31</sup> Narsai imagines a Jewish interlocutor demanding signs like Moses',<sup>32</sup> and he retorts that the signs of Moses did very little good. The signs themselves did not convince a single Egyptian to worship the Creator, and even Moses' own people failed to keep the Law and

<sup>25</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>26</sup> *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.115.1–3).

<sup>27</sup> *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.115.3–20).

<sup>28</sup> *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.115.21).

<sup>29</sup> *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.116.4–8).

<sup>30</sup> *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.116.9–10).

<sup>31</sup> *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.116.12).

<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor 1:22; cf. John 6:30–32.

worshipped “cast metal images.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike the Gentile peoples, whom the cross gathered to the crucified One, the Jews were dispersed to the ends of the earth.<sup>34</sup>

Although Narsai’s explicit focus on the passage in 1 Corinthians 1 is concentrated in the first 48 lines of the *mēmṛā*, the passage continues to influence the whole, particularly as Narsai addresses religious rivals, whether Jews or pagans. In line 54, Narsai invites his audience to examine the “mighty acts” of the cross.<sup>35</sup> Having just admonished the Jews for past episodes of idolatry, Narsai now polemicizes against pagan cults in a similar manner. 1 Corinthians 1:21 states that the world failed to recognize the Creator through wisdom, but the passage gives no further detail of this poor exercise of wisdom. Narsai uses Romans 1:18–32 to fill in the gaps. In Romans 1:19–20, Paul argues concerning the Gentiles, “For what can be known about God is plain to (humanity), because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.”<sup>36</sup> However, human beings failed to recognize what ought to have been plain to them, and they worshipped created things instead of the Creator. Paraphrasing Paul, Narsai explains that humankind “exchanged the glory (of the Creator) for the work of (the Creator’s) hands.”<sup>37</sup>

When Narsai details the depths of human depravity, his description is transparently inspired by Romans 1:18–32. According to Narsai, unsatisfied with mere idolatry, people sacrificed their own children and indulged all manner of sexual lusts. Their homes and cities overflowed with countless gods and goddesses, social disputes and divisions multiplied, and wars abounded.<sup>38</sup> Narsai observes that the praise of God had ceased because everyone’s tongues were “wearied by vain (words), / by the praise of evil spirits and the adulation of unclean demons.”<sup>39</sup> By the end of his catalogue of human vices, Narsai is speechless himself: “Unutterable is the sin that the world committed previously, / and inexplicable is the wickedness that it worked in all ages. | Speech is (too) feeble to speak of the kinds of iniquity / that all humanity committed before the advent of the crucified King.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.116.13–22).

<sup>34</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.116.13, 25).

<sup>35</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.117.8–9).

<sup>36</sup> The same passages from 1 Corinthians 1 and Romans 1 inspire Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*, another text which has been described as an *apologia crucis*. The hermeneutical approaches of Athanasius and Narsai differ too much to indicate direct influence, but it is notable that there appears to be a shared tradition of interpretation. For an introduction to the Syriac reception of Athanasius, see R. B. ter Haar Romeny, “Athanasius in Syriac,” *CHRC* 90 (2010): 225–256.

<sup>37</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.117.11–12). Narsai paraphrases Romans 1:23.

<sup>38</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.117.10–118.15).

<sup>39</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.117.17–18).

<sup>40</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.118.15–18).

Nevertheless, this dismal state of affairs does not get the last word. According to Narsai, when the crucified Man appeared from within the People,<sup>41</sup> he abolished idolatry and its wicked trappings, and he caused all the peoples to return to the one God. At the close of this first section, the victory Christ achieved through the cross stands in stark contrast to Narsai's preceding polemic on the alleged inefficacy of other religions and the wickedness of idolatry. Those whose tongues were previously wearied by the praise of demons now join in an unanimous, multilingual doxology:

Praise be to the crucified One, who killed death by his crucifixion  
and proclaimed peace to all (people), distant and near.  
He is our peace who made the two with one consent,  
and he destroyed the hedge that stood before humanity.<sup>42</sup>

...

Praise be to the crucified One, by whose manifestation mortals are saved  
and by whom spiritual things and physical things find peace.  
Praise be to the crucified One, who changed and destroyed all blasphemies  
and uprooted false worship from within the People and the Gentile peoples.  
Praise be to the crucified One, who made the (whole) human race equal,  
so that from within the earth they will be heirs in the kingdom on high.  
It is the crucified One who purified creation from stink  
and wiped the hateful smell of foul deeds from it.  
It is the crucified One by whom the human race is gathered  
into a single church, the peaceful haven of the one God.<sup>43</sup>

This utterance of praise to the "crucified One" is particularly striking. Here Narsai simply uses the word *šlibā*, and several of the lines could reasonably be translated with either "the crucified One" or "the cross." Narsai's ambiguous use of the word *šlibā* causes the reader to wonder which meaning he intends. In a *mēmṛā* devoted to the defense of the veneration of the cross, this easy confusion may well be purposeful. When Narsai directs his attention explicitly to the veneration of the cross, this close connection between the crucified One and his cross undergirds his explanation: "The wood of the cross, although it is humble in its nature / ... is highly honored because of Jesus."<sup>44</sup> What the crucified Man effects for human salvation is done only through his cross, so what can be said about one can be said about the other. People adore the cross because it bears the "great image of the King Jesus."<sup>45</sup> The proliferation of the adjective *šlibā* and the noun *šlibā* in this homily certainly seems to identify the cross with the cru-

<sup>41</sup> As is common in Syriac texts, Narsai refers to the Jews as "the People," and the Gentiles as "the peoples."

<sup>42</sup> Eph 2:13–15.

<sup>43</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.118.22–119.9).

<sup>44</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.127.12–13).

<sup>45</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.127.15–19).

cified One, thus justifying its veneration. Overt polemic against the Miaphysite Trisagion is absent.

### *Types of the Cross*

So far Narsai has used a fairly traditional approach to construct an *apologia crucis*, and he has gradually extended his theology of the crucifixion to defend the cross itself. The second section of Narsai's homily is entirely devoted to types of the cross found in nature and scripture. Many of these types are scattered throughout Ephrem's corpus and found in other early Christian texts. Narsai's innovation is to gather them in one place and to organize them sequentially. I will make general observations about Narsai's *catena* rather than discussing each type in detail.

Narsai's types from nature are comparatively short, covering a total of 19 lines. Perhaps Narsai abbreviates his types from nature because he has already asserted that humanity failed to seek God through natural wisdom. Any natural objects with a cross-like shape or comprised of four parts meet the criteria for inclusion in Narsai's list. For example, Narsai invokes the cross-like shape of a bird in flight, an image already familiar from Ephrem.<sup>46</sup> While Narsai passes over most of these natural types in quick succession with little elaboration, the type of the cardinal directions is particularly evocative because of how Narsai uses the same imagery in the preceding section of the *mēmṛā*. Before criticizing Chaldeanism, Judaism, and Magianism for their inability to spread widely despite their greater antiquity, he beckons the hearer to consider the incredible spread of Christianity among many peoples in a short amount of time:

If you wish to learn the power of the crucified man,  
in your mind look whence his gospel message extends:  
Namely, see in the east how he has emitted the power of his rays,  
and Persia, which is darkened by idolatry, has been illuminated.  
Let the mind of your soul be raised to the west,  
and see there his powerful greatness through his worshippers.  
He has caught all the kings and warriors in his net,  
and he set them firmly upon the foundation of his doctrine.  
In your thoughts look at the south and observe in it  
what the cross by its manifestation<sup>47</sup> has accomplished for its inhabitants.  
Ascend in your understanding also to the whole region of the north,  
and see the power of his name, the victory of the man hung (on the cross).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> See especially the natural types of the cross in *Hymns on Faith* 18 (ed. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* [CSCO 154–155; Leuven: Peeters, 1955]). See also 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.

<sup>47</sup> Or, "the crucified one by his manifestation."

<sup>48</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.119.9–17). Narsai uses *gaḇrā* *zqīpā* synonymously with *gaḇrā* *šlībā* at the end of this passage.

Narsai's *catena* reminds the audience of the earlier image. In a practice of communal imagination, they have visualized the sign of the cross spanning the known world, tracing it together in their minds.

Narsai's types of the cross from the Old Testament are far more developed than his types from nature. These types break fairly evenly into three sections ordered canonically: types from the lives of the patriarchs, types from the life of Moses, and types from the life of Elisha. Narsai has thus carefully organized these types of the cross so that they form a chain across the story of scripture. The criteria for selection varies. Narsai invokes several types that foreshadow aspects of the divine economy. An obvious example is the binding of Isaac, which in Narsai's view anticipates Christ's sacrifice. Some types are performative actions, like Moses' outstretched arms at the battle of Amalek. Still others are material objects that proved to be efficacious agents of salvation, such as the bronze serpent on the pole.<sup>49</sup>

Most importantly, the *catena* is not a haphazard or random diversion from the subject at hand, but rather these types collectively contribute to the larger themes of the *mēmṛā*. The types that illustrate different aspects of the divine economy reinforce the arguments in the preceding *apologia crucis*. The types of efficacious objects provide precursors to the veneration of the cross, a practice which Narsai will defend at length in the final section of the *mēmṛā*. Even the performative actions may be used in a polemical way. For Narsai, when Abraham walked the length and breadth of the Promised Land, he inscribed the land itself with the sign of the cross in order to indicate by what sign a person will enter the kingdom above. Narsai addresses the Jews directly with this particular type: "O Jews, see how the leader of your nation engraved / the great type of the sign of the cross on the land that he inherited."<sup>50</sup> The polemical intention of Narsai's list of types from nature and scripture becomes even more apparent at the close of this section of the *mēmṛā*: "Whoever is headstrong and contends against these symbols, / he knows that his contention is not against us, | (but) against his Lord who traced out his symbols in every generation."<sup>51</sup> For Narsai, to reject the types of the cross in nature and in scripture is to attack the Lord himself. Here one sees again the close connection between the cross and the crucified One, but there is still no hint of the Trisagion controversy.

<sup>49</sup> Numbers 21:4–9. It is perhaps worth noting that in six of the eight manuscript witnesses for *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Feast of the Discovery of the Holy Cross', a *mēmṛā* entitled 'On the Bronze Serpent' (*Mēmṛā* 55) follows. See the codicological information in W. F. Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," *OCP* 39 (1973): 275–306.

<sup>50</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.122.17–18).

<sup>51</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.126.5–7).



### *Defending the Veneration of the Cross*

The third and final section of the *mēmṛā* directly addresses the concern that has motivated Narsai all along. Narsai again alludes to 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 at the beginning of this section: “So then let us speak against the pagans and the Jews / who in their stubbornness scoff together at our gospel message.”<sup>52</sup> The scoffing targets the veneration of the cross: “The erring suppose that the holy church worships the wood / ... and honors it as a god instead of God. | Because they worshipped created things instead of the Creator, / they arise with false accusation and revile us for the wood of the cross.”<sup>53</sup> After his previous invective against the idolatry of pagans and Jews, Narsai must explain how the veneration of the cross differs from idolatry:

The church does not worship the visible material  
but the sign of the crucified King who conquered by the wood.  
But if the church worshipped the wood, as they suppose,  
why does it also make the cross from other sorts (of materials)?  
From all sorts of things – small, large, and valuable –  
the church makes the revealed image (*ṣalmā*) of the hidden King.

...  
The church is not misled by trees or images  
nor by material things or objects that exist because of human beings.  
When it worships the saving sign that is depicted,  
it worships the Lord and not corruptible materials.<sup>54</sup>

Narsai anticipates two apologetic arguments that became prominent in Byzantine defenses of the veneration of the cross during the second quarter of the seventh century.<sup>55</sup> Later Christian apologists also argued that the variety of materials used to fashion crosses indicates that the material itself is not worshipped. Some observe that if Christians did worship the material, rather than the cross, they would worship that material no matter where they found it and in whatever shape. As this is not the case, surely Christians do not worship the material. The claim that to worship the sign of the cross is to worship the Lord is ubiquitous in the later treatises that discuss the topic. Narsai’s homily is an important early witness to the development of these apologetic arguments.

Next, Narsai presents the veneration of the cross as analogous to the respect shown to objects because of whom they represent. Coins, for example, bear the image of an earthly king, and “the covetous grasp (them) as if to take hold of the

<sup>52</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.126.7–9).

<sup>53</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.126.9–12).

<sup>54</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.126.13–21).

<sup>55</sup> A valuable introduction to the anti-Jewish literature of the period is V. Déroche and G. Dagron, “Juifs et chrétiens dans l’orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): 17–273.



king” himself.<sup>56</sup> Even more apt is the example of a royal seal (*ṭabʿā*).<sup>57</sup> Even if it is stamped on contemptible dirt, those who receive a letter from the king stamped with his seal honor it as though it were the king himself.<sup>58</sup> Christians treat the scriptures and the cross in the same way: “So then how much more is this true for the seal (*ṭabʿā*) of Jesus Christ our King, / who sealed (*ḥattem*) his words with the great seal (*ṭabʿā*) of his crucifixion? | ... If the seals of temporal kings are honored on the earth, / how much more then should we honor the seal of the cross of the King on high?”<sup>59</sup>

After offering more palatable analogies for the veneration of the cross, Narsai presents positive reasons for revering the cross. Narsai begins with the prevalence of the sign of the cross in the life of the church. Blameworthy people are made holy and perfected when they are marked with the cross in baptism. The sign of the cross sets priests apart in the rite of ordination. The priest seals every church building with the sign of the cross. By the sign of the cross, all of the sacraments of the church are consecrated.<sup>60</sup> Narsai then declares the wonders that the cross performs beyond the walls of the church. At the sign of the cross, demons “flee from its dazzling rays and hide like bats.”<sup>61</sup> Diseases and pains are healed. The martyrs owe their victory to the power of the cross, with which they run the evil one through as though with a spear.<sup>62</sup> Making the sign of the cross is an ancient, uncontroversial gesture, and the cross had long been heralded as a means of triumph over disease, sin, Satan, and death. Narsai evokes cherished practices and convictions in order to advocate the apparently more controversial practice of venerating crosses. Finally, Narsai recalls Constantine’s vision of a cross of light in the sky and Helena’s discovery of the True Cross which had been buried.<sup>63</sup> “From that day when the holy wood was covered, / humanity journeyed as though in darkness until it dawned. | And now it has dawned. His light has become radiant to the ends of the earth, / and it gladdens heavenly and earthly things with its beauty.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps Narsai hopes that Constantine’s heavenly vision and his mother’s alleged discovery of the True Cross, narratives that were regularly recounted during the Feast of the Cross, will reassure the audience that a relatively new feast and liturgical practice are fully in line with East Syrian orthodoxy. Narsai ends his *mēmṛā* with a final exhortation to embrace the veneration of the cross: “Behold! Multitudes upon multitudes of watchers and people worship / and honor (the cross) with hymns and glorify it. | Come, let us

<sup>56</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.127.15–16).

<sup>57</sup> The same word is commonly used as a synonym for the sign of the cross.

<sup>58</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.127.20–128.4).

<sup>59</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.128.2–7).

<sup>60</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.128.11–22).

<sup>61</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.128.23–25).

<sup>62</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.129.1–2).

<sup>63</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.129.14–25).

<sup>64</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.129.25–130.3).

confess it (in) one confession with the spiritual beings. / Glory be to him who exalted our race by his cross!”<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

After a careful analysis of the main themes of the *mēm̄rā*, it is time to revisit the questions raised earlier concerning the christological titles and dating. Every piece of Narsai’s homily contributes to the end of defending the veneration of the cross, and any attempt to place the *mēm̄rā* in a wider historical context must take this into account. It is certainly true that Narsai prefers the christological titles “crucified Man” and “crucified King” in this *mēm̄rā*, and that the Trisagion controversy involved similar terms. From beginning to end, Narsai proudly displays his East Syrian christology, as when he speaks of the Lord assuming “the garment of our body”<sup>66</sup> or says, “upon Golgotha he appeared on the cross in the temple of his body.”<sup>67</sup> However, one need not interpret any of these statements as overt polemic against the Miaphysite addition to the Trisagion. Narsai may simply have been using the theological idiom that he assumed his audience shared. This stands in marked contrast to another East Syrian *mēm̄rā* for the same feast day by a certain David Eskolaya.<sup>68</sup> David Eskolaya took great pains to argue against Miaphysites (whom he calls “crucifiers of the Word”) that only “the Man who was assumed”<sup>69</sup> died on the cross. It is far more likely that Narsai privileges the titles of *gabrā* / *malkā šliḇā* to emphasize the close connection between worship of “the crucified One” (*šliḇā*) and venerating his cross (*šliḇā*). Thus, the argument for dating could just as well be made in the opposite direction: The absence of discernible polemic against the Trisagion in “On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross” might suggest a date *prior* to the controversy rather than contemporary with or just after it. If this were the case, Narsai would have composed the *mēm̄rā* after his departure from Edessa *circa* 471 and before the Trisagion controversy and Philoxenus’ *Letter to the Monks of Tell ‘Ada* in 482–484. It is perhaps more likely, however, that the absence of clear polemic against

<sup>65</sup> *Mēm̄rā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.130.20–22).

<sup>66</sup> *Mēm̄rā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.114.11).

<sup>67</sup> *Mēm̄rā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.130.6).

<sup>68</sup> David Eskolaya’s sole extant *mēm̄rā* apparently circulated with Narsai’s works and was published with them in Mar Eshai Shimon XXIII, *Homilies of Mar Narsai Published by the Patriarchal Press* (San Francisco, 1970), vol. 1.2, 598–613. All that is known of him is in the scribal title of the *mēm̄rā*; he was remembered as a teacher in Kefar ‘Ezzā and was reputed to be “a great luminary.” For more on Kefar ‘Ezzā, see J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne: Contribution à l’étude de l’histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l’Iraq* (Recherches publiées sous la direction de l’Institut de lettres orientales de Beyrouth 22, 34, 42; Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1965, 1968), vol. 1, 174–176.

<sup>69</sup> *Homilies of Mar Narsai Published by the Patriarchal Press*, vol. 1.2, 608.

the Trisagion addition has little bearing on the date of the *mēmṛā*'s composition. Narsai's primary concern in this *mēmṛā* is simply defending and promoting the veneration of the cross.

Narsai's focus on the apologetic defense of the veneration of the cross raises other intriguing questions. To whom are his arguments addressed? Why was he compelled to defend the veneration of the cross? There is clear polemic against Jews and pagans throughout the *mēmṛā*, but, especially in the first section, this could easily be interpreted as a literary construct based on 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. In the third section of the *mēmṛā*, Narsai alleges that both Jews and pagans reproach Christians for hypocrisy: Christians accuse others of idolatry, but they themselves venerate the cross, which to the casual observer may seem a transparently idolatrous act. In this section, the tone of the *mēmṛā* shifts; measured rhetoric on traditional theological themes gives way to immediacy and urgency. While the cast of opponents, Jews and pagans, is the same as the first part of the *mēmṛā*, here it could be reasonably interpreted as more than a literary construction of the other. Later, from the seventh century on, debate over the veneration of the cross was a regular feature of actual interreligious dialogue, with both Jews and Muslims. While one ought not to read actual historical encounters into every instance of anti-Jewish or anti-pagan polemic in Syriac literature, it is also problematic to interpret all polemic as mere literary construction. An easily observed practice like the veneration of the cross could naturally attract unwanted criticism from outsiders; it certainly attracted such attention a century later. The question of whether genuine interreligious debate lies behind this *mēmṛā* is perhaps best left open.

At the same time, it seems that some opponents of the veneration of the cross are members of Narsai's community.<sup>70</sup> As Narsai transitions from types of the cross to the apologetic section, he states, "Whoever is headstrong and contends against these symbols, / he knows that his contention is not against us, | (but) against his Lord who traced out his symbols in every generation; / like a stranger he attacks (the Lord's) types with (the Lord)."<sup>71</sup> While Narsai begins to rebut outsiders' accusations in the next line, here he addresses an insider whom he deems to be behaving "like a stranger" by rejecting the types of the cross in nature and scripture. Narsai's apologetic defense of the cross may begin by answering objections purportedly made by pagans and Jews, but he devotes far more space to exhorting his own community to revere the cross just as they worship their Lord. It is, of course, possible that Narsai is simply "preaching to the choir." Then again, it could be that the Feast of the Cross, a relatively recent addition to the liturgical calendar, with its heightened emphasis on the cross and its relics,

<sup>70</sup> During our 2017 workshop, Ute Possekkel suggested this homily may reflect internal conflict in Narsai's community, and I am grateful for her insights.

<sup>71</sup> *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.126.5–7).

occasioned internal debate about whether the veneration of the cross was appropriate. It may even be that Narsai sought to reassure those in his community who felt pressure or shame due to non-Christian ridicule of the practice. Whatever the case, Narsai's homily '*On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross*' provides a valuable window into the life and practices of the East Syrian church that goes beyond the christological controversies of the day. It is a significant precursor to a lively debate over the veneration of the cross that only began to flower in the twilight of Late Antiquity.