

DENDRITES AND OTHER
STANDERS IN THE
*HISTORY OF THE EXPLOITS OF
BISHOP PAUL OF QANETOS AND
PRIEST JOHN OF EDESSA*[†]

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ABSTRACT

*This paper summarizes evidence for tree-dwelling monks in late antiquity and outlines a little-known, fifth-century hagiography that has a peculiar focus on trees: the History of the Exploits of Bishop Paul of Qanetos and Priest John of Edessa. In the text, there is an encounter with a long-bearded dendrite living in a mountaintop tree and a duel with an Arabian tree-god. An edition of the text—along with an introduction and an annotated translation by Hans Arneson, Christine Luckritz-Marquis, and Kyle Smith—is in preparation.**

[†] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Syriac Studies Symposium V at the University of Toronto (June, 2007). I would like to thank Lucas Van Rompay, Susan Ashbrook Harvey, and Sebastian Brock for their comments and criticism. Work on *Paul and John* began in a

In 1767 a young Italian of noble birth, the Baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, acted with unparalleled defiance. Refusing to eat the platter of snails served to him for dinner, he pushed back his chair, exited the dining room, and scurried up an oak tree in the garden. In protest against the mores of society, as much as those of his aristocratic father, Cosimo resolved to live the rest of his life in an airborne, arboreal existence. Never again would he set foot on solid ground. Yet Cosimo was not an unlettered misanthrope, but rather a patron of the poor and a man of erudition who would insist that anyone “who wants to see the earth properly must keep himself at a necessary distance from it.”¹ Cosimo is the hero of Italo Calvino’s 1957 neorealist novel, *The Baron in the Trees*, and his decision to take to the trees addresses—much like the Syriac hagiography that is the topic of this paper—the existential division between the solitary life and the worldly one, between duty to oneself and civic responsibility.

While keeping a distance from the world is imperative for any ascetic, in late antiquity “the primary contrast” between a dendrite and a stylite was, as Susan Ashbrook Harvey notes, the degree to which each was bound to society: “The tree-dwelling ascetic,” she says, “seems to have maintained the life of a recluse without the demands for spiritual and political patronage that generally plagued the late ancient holy man.”² Dendrites were, of course, not completely isolated from society, but various texts do confirm that their level of social engagement was not that of their column-dwelling brethren. In the rare references to dendrites in late ancient hagiography, a literary genre that Harvey appropriately describes as one “in which form is as important as content in understanding the text,”³ living in trees “seems to have been a temporary discipline in ascetic careers marked by changing locations and practice.”⁴ Whereas stylitism was often an enduring ascetic and public vocation, dendritism was typically the precursor to other forms of

graduate seminar at Duke University directed by Lucas Van Rompay; Hans Arneson and Christine Luckritz-Marquis joined me in that seminar.

¹ I. Calvino, *The Baron in the Trees*, trans. A. Colquhoun (New York: Random House, 1959), 144.

² S. A. Harvey, “Dendrites,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, eds. G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 407.

³ S. A. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xiii.

⁴ Harvey, “Dendrites.”

asceticism. As an ascetic practice, dendritism was rooted not just in Syria, although, interestingly, even the Greek sources that refer to dendrites typically specify that the tree-dwellers were of Syrian (or Mesopotamian) origin. David of Thessalonica, for example, a dendrite originally from Mesopotamia, inaugurated his ascetic feats by spending three years in an almond tree. Only after this relatively short stint as a dendrite did David then confine himself in a cell outside the city walls, a cell where he would remain for the next twenty years.⁵ Maro the Dendrite, known to us from John of Ephesus's *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, lived in a hollowed-out tree near where his brother, Abraham, presided as the resident stylite of their monastery. Unlike David of Thessalonica who, it seems, welcomed visitors to his cell, Maro the Dendrite would shut the door of his tree and remain silent whenever someone approached in search of healing.⁶ When Abraham died, Maro reluctantly left his enclosure in the tree and took his brother's place atop the column, evidently displeased to be inheriting not only his brother's pillar but

⁵ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 69, in *The Spiritual Meadow (Pratum Spirituale)* by John Moschos (also known as John Eviratus), trans. J. Wortley (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 51–53. According to John, another monk of Thessalonica, Adolas, shut himself up in the hollow of a plane tree, even carving out a little window through which he would speak with those who came to see him (*Pratum Spirituale*, 70). Though David of Thessalonica spent only a few years of his long ascetic career in the almond tree, it seems that this early period of his ascetic life is what is remembered most: a fourteenth-century fresco depicting David remains on the walls of the Chora Monastery in Istanbul. See C. P. Charalampidis, *The Dendrites in Pre-Christian and Christian Historical-Literary Tradition and Iconography*, *Studia Archaeologica* 73 (Rome: «l'Erma» di Bretschneider, 1995): plate 14. See also A. Vasiliev, "Life of David of Thessalonica," *Traditio: Studies in Ancient Medieval History, Thought and Religion* 4 (1946): 115–147.

⁶ Michael Whitby, "Maro the Dendrite: An Anti-Social Holy Man?" in *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, eds. Michael Whitby, P. Hardie, and Mary Whitby (Oak Park, Ill.: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), 309–317. In this article, Whitby sets Maro in contrast to the classic expression of the late ancient holy man, thereby confirming Harvey's thesis. Maro, according to Whitby, "is the saint who questions the validity of a certain type of socially-engaged holiness" (311). While a difference in form should probably be noted between dendrites who, like Maro, shut themselves up *inside* trees and those who stand in the open among a tree's branches, the connection between dendritism and relatively minimal social involvement seems to hold.

also the requisite public responsibility that came with it.⁷ John of Ephesus describes in no uncertain terms Maro's frustration over being cast in the role of a holy man:

[it was] very hateful to him that anyone should come and bring him a sick person or one possessed with a demon, but he would at once drive him out, saying these words: "O wretched men, what has misled you into leaving God's altar and his great power which took up its dwelling in the saints who were slain for his name, and loved him and did his will, and coming to me the wretched man and provoker of God? ... It was because of my sins that I came up here to ask mercy like every man, not because of my righteousness."⁸

Maro's anxiety over public adulation and demands for spiritual assistance is echoed by the story of another dendrite, an anonymous monk who lived atop a cypress tree in the village of Irenin, near Syrian Apamea. By way of thwarting the devil—who reveled in shoving the monk from his literal and spiritual perch—the man tethered his ankle to a main branch so that when the devil attacked and threw him down from the tree he would not come crashing to the ground. This tactic was not entirely successful. After a bout with the devil the poor man would invariably be left suspended upside down by his foot until one of the local villagers happened along and helped him back up into the tree. As his reputation for holiness grew (apparently only after he was able to restore himself to an upright position unaided) the dendrite began receiving so many visitors that he finally abandoned his cypress and went out into the desert. There, he believed he would be immune to the distractions of the villagers and sheltered from the vainglory brought about by his celebrity.⁹

Yet another story about a dendrite tells of a prince who escaped to a monastery without his father's permission. The king found his son after much searching, but, once he found him, the

⁷ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 4, trans. E. W. Brooks, PO 27 (Paris, 1923), 56–84. See also the discussion about Maro in Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*, 50–52. It should be noted that Abraham, too, endured a period of asceticism prior to ascending his column; John of Ephesus does not, however, indicate what form this period of testing took, explaining only that Abraham ascended the column "after he had broken himself for a space of ten years by great labours" (Brooks, 57).

⁸ *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, Brooks, 64.

⁹ F. Nau, "Opuscles maronites," ROC 4 (1899): 337–40. See also H. Delehaye, *Les saints stylites*, Subsidia Hagiographica 14 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1923), clxxiv.

king, too, decided to live the rest of his days in a monastery. In mourning after the king's death, the prince climbed a tree and never came down, rather morbidly keeping the decapitated head of his father always before him.¹⁰ Two other glancing references customarily taken to indicate ascetics who might be dendrites must be added to the foregoing list. The first, from Eusebius, indicates that, according to Philo, when ascetics “begin the philosophical way of life ... they give their possessions away to relatives, and, renouncing life's concerns, go beyond the walls and live in *lonely fields and gardens*.”¹¹ The clear implication for Eusebius is that contact with non-ascetics hinders the budding monk, but it seems to be a bit of a stretch to suggest that a renunciatory flight to “lonely fields and gardens” should be taken to mean an initiation into the dendritic life. Another, perhaps slightly more concrete, reference to dendrites is from the early eighth century in the poetry of George, Bishop of the Arabs. He mentions monks who are tossed about by the winds, sustaining themselves on the fruits and leaves of trees.¹²

While these examples are too few and too rooted in rhetorically formulaic hagiography to develop any substantive phenomenology of late ancient dendritism, a recently translated Syriac text, the *History of the Exploits of Bishop Paul of Qanetos and Priest John of Edessa*, provides another intriguing perspective to the study of dendrites among Syrian ascetics.¹³ The *History of Paul and John* is preserved in at least five Syriac manuscripts, including one that is dated 569 CE and two others that are safely datable to the sixth century as well.¹⁴ The Greek version of *Paul and John* was

¹⁰ Vasiliev, “Life of David,” 133.

¹¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.* II.17.5. My emphasis.

¹² See V. Ryssel, *Georgs des Araberbischofs Gedichte und Briefe, aus dem Syrischen übersetzt und erläutert* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1891).

¹³ Summaries of this text have been published previously, but, to my knowledge, there is no published translation in any language—for a further explanation, see note 14 below. For the summaries, see F. Nau, “Hagiographie syriaque,” *ROC* 15 (1910): 56–60; and S. Brock, “Syriac on the Sinai: The Main Connections,” in *Eukosmia: Studi Miscellanei per il 75. di Vincenzo Poggi, S.J.*, eds. V. Ruggieri and L. Pieralli (Catanzaro: Soveria Mannelli, 2003), 104–105.

¹⁴ (1) *BL Add. 14,597*, f. 144v-156r, dated 569; (2) *BL Add. 12,160*, f. 134v-146v, 6th c.; (3) *BL Add. 14,646*, f. 178v-194v?, 6th c.—most of the text in this manuscript, from folio 183 to 194, is difficult to read because it is overwritten with a 10th c. hand; (4) *Paris Syr. 235*, f. 19r-25v, 13th c.—this is an acephalous copy preceded immediately by the *Man of God*; and (5) *Damascus Patriarchate 12/18*, 12th/13th c. For the Damascus

published on the basis of a single tenth-century manuscript that has some considerable lacunae.¹⁵ Neither the Syriac text nor a modern translation of either the Greek or the Syriac has yet been published; however, an edition and English translation of the text is presently in preparation. Further research is necessary to more definitively determine whether the original language of composition was Syriac or Greek, though it seems more likely that it was Syriac. Nevertheless, biblical quotations in the text occasionally reflect the Greek Bible rather than the Peshitta. Additionally, there are geographical considerations. Bishop Paul, the hero of the text, is said to be from Attaleia in Pontos in the Greek text, but this is echoed by only one of the Syriac manuscripts. The others indicate that Paul is from Qanetos, a city of *Italy*, not Attaleia.¹⁶ Whatever the origin of the text, the language and style are idiomatic Syriac

manuscript, to which we have not had access, see Y. Dolabani, R. Lavenant, S. Brock, and S. Samir, “Catalogue des manuscrits de la bibliothèque du Patriarcat Syrien Orthodoxe à Homs (auj. à Damas),” *ParOr* 19 (1994): 612. Mention must also be made of “Rahmani’s manuscript” (or, as we are calling it in our edition, “ms. X”). This manuscript was found in a fifth volume of *Studia Syriaca* that was apparently never published and was shelved in the library of the Pontifical Oriental Institute formatted only in its galley proofs. The volume contains an un-annotated version of *Paul and John*, lacking both an introduction and a translation. Supposedly, an edition and translation of *Paul and John* was prepared by François Nau and given to Ignatius Rahmani. Nau’s edition was never published, and it is unclear whether the galleys of *Studia Syriaca* V preserve the (unfinished?) work of Nau or Rahmani. Nau explains: “Nous avions préparé aussi l’édition de l’histoire de «Paul l’évêque et Jean le prêtre.» Nous l’avons remise à Mgr. Rahmani, en août 1907, avec introduction, traduction, copie du texte grec, et copie ou collation de quatre mss. syriaques.” See F. Nau, “Littérature canonique syriaque inédite,” *ROC* 14 (1909): 35, n.1. Sebastian Brock, through Lucas Van Rompay, brought the contents of this unpublished volume of *Studia Syriaca* to my attention.

¹⁵ BHG 1476 (Cod. Coislin. 303, 10th c.). See A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Analekta Hierosolymitikés Stachyologias* V (St. Petersburg, 1888), 368–83.

¹⁶ Sebastian Brock comments, “The name of the town of which Paul is said to have been bishop is Attaleia in Pontos in the Greek; in the Syriac, PN̄TWS (Pontos) is found only in *Add. 12160*; the other manuscripts have QNȲTWS, QYN̄TWS, and ‘Italy’ [ȲTLY] instead of Attaleia [TLY]. Since Attaleia is in Pamphylia, not Pontus, perhaps Nau is right to suggest that the Greek may be an adaptation of the Syriac, rather than the other way around.” See S. Brock, “Syriac on the Sinai,” 104–105.

and there are many stock expressions and concepts common to Syriac ascetic literature. Since Rabbula and Edessa are mentioned prominently on more than one occasion, one might presume that the bilingual milieu in Edessa could be the text's place of origin. In what follows, I will briefly summarize some highlights of the text, noting especially the references to trees and dendrites.

The *History of Paul and John* is not a very long text, but it is rich in adventure and intrigue. The text details the life in Edessa and the subsequent voyage of two men to the monasteries of Mount Sinai: one is Bishop Paul, a pious, miracle-working foreigner who toils as a day-laborer and conceals that he is a bishop and a holy man; the other is John, a priest native to Edessa, who had hired Paul for a building project and found out only through stealthily watching Paul pray that he was a man of great spiritual power. Both before the two leave Edessa for the Sinai, and while they are on their journey, they encounter various forms of ascetics: troglodytes, mourners, mountaineers, and even a dendrite. As John's great love for Paul is slowly revealed, the text verges on becoming something of a romantic epic.¹⁷ Paul and John's journey is alive with demons, visions, revelations and a run-in with a band of Arabs who imprison the two pilgrims and threaten to sacrifice them. Paul and

¹⁷ John's zealous, and unrequited, love for Paul is clearly evident in the text. For example, John pleads with Paul that he might stay and live with him, calling upon Paul as his beloved. Later in the text, when Paul surreptitiously leaves town, John is heartbroken and spends six months searching for him. This sort of one-sided attachment of one monk to another has parallels in other texts. Take, for example, Derek Krueger's vivid translation of Leontios of Neapolis' *Life of Symeon the Holy Fool*. When Symeon declares to his fellow monk, also called John, that he is leaving after twenty-nine years of ascetic practice together with him in the desert, John begs Symeon to stay. He says to him, "do not leave wretched me ... You know that, after God, I have no one except you, my brother, but I renounced all and was bound to you ... we agreed not to be separated from each other. Remember the fearful hour when we were clothed in the holy habit, and we two were as one soul, so that all were astonished at our love." See D. Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 142–43. Krueger has done interesting work on what he calls "monastic companionship," pointing out instances of strong love between monastic friends. In addition to his forthcoming work, see also his "Homeroetic Spectacle and the Monastic Body in Symeon the New Theologian," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, eds. V. Burrus and C. Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 99–118.

John encounter an anonymous dendrite, who tells the story of Abraham, the “head of the mourners.” They discover a community of mountaineers, whose abbot secretly invited a young woman disguised as a eunuch to live among his monks, causing great commotion when her true identity was revealed. The text demonstrates stylistic parallels to the Syriac *Life of the Man of God*, and episodes in the text echo those in the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* and the *Life of Rabbula*.¹⁸ Like Alexis, the Man of God, the Syriac text indicates that Paul, too, came to Edessa from Italy, that he worked among and with the poor, and that he distributed what little money he earned as a laborer to those at the *xenodocheion*. Moreover, Rabbula is mentioned twice as the reigning bishop of Edessa, thereby placing Paul and John’s adventures sometime between 411 and 435 CE. In the first reference to Rabbula, his see is described as “a city of the Parthians” and, in the second, John gains permission from Rabbula to live with Paul in a cave “with the blessed ones” during the winter months, and then in a house in Edessa where they would work during the summer months. Linking *Paul and John* to other Syriac hagiographies, Paul’s healing of a woman who had suffered many years with an incurable disease has narrative similarities to both the hermit’s miracle that spurred Rabbula to convert to Christianity and the nighttime watch that the Man of God kept over the poor who slept at the threshold of the church.¹⁹

At least four major themes are evident in the text. First, an insistence on the necessity of using one’s labor to benefit the poor: Paul’s decision to come work as a day laborer in Edessa, and,

¹⁸ To cite just two examples among the many likely parallels, see the *Lives* of Paul of Antioch and Paul the Anchorite in John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, PO XVIII: 671–75 and 112–17. Paul of Antioch is described as a strenuous worker who labored in the day and served the sick at night; he is said to have worked in one city for a while before moving on to another place, eventually getting as far as the sea of Pontus. Paul the Anchorite, on the other hand, went to a cave inhabited by evil spirits where he put up a cross, arranged stones in the shape of an oratory, and knelt in prayer as phantoms of snakes arrayed against him; eventually, twenty brothers joined him to make a monastery in the cave. In *Paul and John*, our Paul is a day laborer (a builder) who stays in one town only until he acquires a reputation for holiness, at which point he moves on. In the text’s account of John secretly watching Paul pray, Paul stands in a cave in prayer, oblivious to the ferocious snakes and asps that appear before him as manifestations of the adversary.

¹⁹ See *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa*, trans. R. Doran (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 2006).

ultimately, his departure to Nisibis for the same task underscores this. Even when Paul and John are on Mount Sinai, Paul desires to get back to his work in Edessa, and more than once Paul voices apprehension at benefiting from the labor of others. A second theme is the prevalence of visions, which functions as both a mechanism for foreshadowing events in the text and as a way that secrets and hidden identities are revealed: for example, Paul's vision that impels him to leave Italy and come to Edessa; the visions of both John and the abbot of the mountaineers that reveal to them that Paul is no ordinary laborer, but actually a bishop from Italy; and, the vision of a cave-dwelling anchorite that Paul and John would be captured on their way to Sinai but would ultimately convert their captors to Christianity. Third, there is the importance of anonymity and concealed identity: Paul's anonymity is reckoned as imperative in that he wishes no one to know that he is a bishop, and, like the anonymous Man of God, desires to serve the poor without gaining a personal reputation for holiness. Paul came from Italy to Edessa to work anonymously on behalf of the poor, and, while in Edessa, as soon as word spreads that he healed a woman from her chronic suffering, he quickly departs for another city where he is not known. Likewise, the woman living in disguise as a eunuch among the mountaineers is forced, by necessity, to conceal her identity from her fellow monks. The dendrite of the text, too, is anonymous: the villagers who process with "torches and incense" to bury him after his death know that he died only on account of yet another vision, not because they frequented his tree seeking his patronage or cures for their ailments. In fact, the dendrite specifically tells Paul and John that he has been alone for decades, excluding only occasional visits by two men who deliver bread and water to him.

The fourth major theme of the text concerns trees. In the three episodes of the text that deal with trees, the narrative goes from discussing an Arabian tribe that worships a tree-god, to comparing the cave-dwelling monks of Edessa to trees in paradise, and then to relating the story of the dendrite who lived alone on a mountaintop tree for decades. These "tree" sections of the text begin with Paul and John departing Edessa, bound for Sinai to see the place where God descended. Nothing is said about their journey from Edessa, but, when they reach the base of Mount Sinai, they are captured by a band of Arabs who take them down to the land of the Himyarites (or Homerites) where they are shackled, kept in a tent, and told that they will be sacrificed the next day. In the middle of the night, however, a girl in the camp awakens everyone, wailing that fiery

arrows are coming from Paul and John and striking her in the face. Paul calmly explains to the enraged Arabs that the only way this torture can cease is if the girl believes in Jesus Christ and receives baptism. The girl, of course, consents to this, her pain is quenched, and all those who witnessed the miracle are also baptized. When news of these events reaches the king of the Arabs, he is infuriated and sends his warriors to round up Paul and John and all those they baptized so that they may be sacrificed to the god of the camp—a palm tree. Paul then speaks with the king, saying, “Well, then, gather and bring here all your power and when your god is standing in his place, we will also call our god. And they will battle with one another, and that god which is victorious, you will deliver his host from the sword.” The king heartily accepts this challenge, and Paul invokes the god who “planted all the cedars of Lebanon” to send his wrath upon the palm tree and “uproot it” so that he and John “might plant many after it.” Immediately, the Spirit descends, tears up the roots of the palm tree and withers its fruit and branches. The king and all of his men are converted on the basis of this miracle and Paul and John baptize them and make a church out of a great tent.

This episode in the narrative is quite interesting. The Himyarites, a southwestern Arabian tribe from the mountains of Yemen, are known in Syriac circles from the fragmentary *Book of the Himyarites* and (according to Irfan Shahid) from a letter attributed to Simeon of Beth-Arsham, wherein the persecution of the Christians of Najran by Himyarites led by a Jewish king in the early sixth century is described in detail.²⁰ The Himyarites were known,

²⁰ The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work, trans. A. Moberg (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1924); *La lettera di Simeone vescovo di Beth-Arsham sopra i martiri omeriti*, trans. I. Guidi, Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei. Memorie della Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, ser. 3, vol. 7 (Rome, 1881). See also I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents*, Subsidia Hagiographica 49 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1971); and “Byzantino-Arabica: The Conference of Ramla, A.D. 524,” *JNES* 23 (1964): 115–131. The date of the persecution is disputed. A letter by Jacob of Serug indicates a date of 518; the other sources attest to the later date of 523. For Jacob’s account, see G. Olinder, *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae quotquot supersunt*, CSCO 110 (Louvain, 1937), 87–102. For more on the persecution of the Christians of Najran, see J. Beaucamp, F. Briquel-Chatonnet, and C. J. Robin, “La persécution des chrétiens de Nagran et la chronologie himyarite,” *ARAM* 11 (1999–2000): 15–83; and J. Ryckmans, “Les rapports de dépendance entre les récits hagiographiques relatifs à la persécution des Himyarites,” *Le Muséon* 100 (1987): 297–305. For accounts of the women martyrs of Najran, see

especially, to make their livelihood as traders in frankincense, which is produced from the resin of a tree native to the southern Arabian Peninsula, thus their supposed reverence for trees is unsurprising.²¹ The text is not clear about what the Himyarites were doing at the base of Mount Sinai where they intercepted Paul and John, but what is clear is that tribes in this area of southwestern Arabia are known to have worshipped trees. (Among more notable examples of tree-worship in other early Christian literature, it is said that villagers initially held back Martin of Tours from felling a pine tree standing near a pagan temple because it was venerated as holy.) Indeed, tree worship was a fashionable point of research among a number of scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who took the (now much maligned) “Myth and Ritual School” approach to the study of religion.²²

What is perhaps most interesting about this episode in *Paul and John* is that it is probably the source for al-Ṭabari’s account of Christianity in Najran.²³ According to al-Ṭabari, Christianity arose in Najran from the followers of Faymiyun, “a pious man, a zealous fighter for the faith and an ascetic.” Faymiyun was a builder, an itinerant laborer who “lived entirely off what his own hand gained,” who kept his “real nature” hidden and would depart from any village once his wondrous deeds became known there. Faymiyun’s follower, Ṣaliḥ, “felt a love for him such as he had never felt for anything previously.” When Faymiyun and Ṣaliḥ were enslaved by a caravan of Arabs, Faymiyun “invoked God’s curse” on a date palm, the god of the camp, and God “sent a wind that tore it up from its roots and cast it down.” As in the story of *Paul and John*, the Arabs of the camp were thereby converted to

S. P. Brock and S. A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 100–21.

²¹ G. W. Van Beek, “Frankincense and Myrrh in Ancient South Arabia,” *JAOs* 78:3 (1958): 141–52.

²² Notably, E. B. Tylor, Sir James Frazer, W. Robertson Smith, and, later, E. O. James.

²³ Others have made this connection, but it is clear that a more comprehensive study—specifically, that is, about the connections between the Syriac “Paul and John” and al-Ṭabari’s “Faymiyun and Ṣaliḥ” and their respective roles in the legends about the origins of Christianity in Yemen—could be worthwhile. See W. W. Müller, “Himyar,” *RAC* 15 (1991): 330; J. Tubach, “Die Anfänge des Christentums in Südarabien. Eine christliche Legende syrischer Herkunft in Ibn Hisham,” *ParOr* 18 (1993): 101–11; and T. Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam*, *Eastern Christian Studies* 7 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 123.

Christianity—in al-Ṭabari’s account to “the faith of ʿIsa b. Maryam.”²⁴

The Christian missionary activity described by John of Ephesus may be a particularly apt lens through which to read the episode about tree worship in *Paul and John*. As Susan Harvey points out, “the ascetics who accompanied John [on his missions] were ‘strenuous workers,’” and, as John of Ephesus is keen to note, “Each one of them ... was strengthened to abolish paganism, and overthrow idolatry, and uproot altars and destroy shrines and *cut down trees* in ardent religious zeal.”²⁵ Presumably, this last bit about cutting down trees in their missions to convert the pagans has at least some reference to Arabian tribes such as the Himyarites.

After the Himyarites allowed Paul and John to go in peace and continue on their journey, the pair came to the mountain of God and “ascended to the place upon which the presence of the Lord had descended.”²⁶ They stayed there in prayer for five days, and then visited the cave of Moses and the “multitude of monks who were dwelling on the mountain.” But their pilgrimage did not last long. Paul soon implored John that they had to make haste to return to Edessa, for he had had a vision, seeing “men in magnificent raiment” ascend to the cave of the twelve blessed anchorites in Edessa and “cut from [the twelve] seven shoots” that were subsequently planted “in the paradise of God.” John, hearing this, agrees that they should hurry home to Edessa, and, as they made their way, “they reached a certain mountain” at the top of which stood a lone tree. As Paul and John approached, they noticed a man standing in the tree, and, in fear, called out to him, declaring themselves as Christians. The man in the tree answered that he, too, was a Christian. In response to Paul and John’s inquiries, the man then begins to explain how he had come to be in that place. A journey, he said, had called him to pass by the summit of the mountain and, as he was passing, he noticed a man standing on top of the very same tree—a man “heavy with white hair” who

²⁴ *The History of al-Ṭabari*, 920–22. See C. E. Bosworth, trans. *The History of al-Ṭabari (Taʾriḫ al-rusul waʾl-muluk*, vol. V, *The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 196–99.

²⁵ Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*, 99; *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 659.

²⁶ The Syriac uses the word ‘*shekinta*,’ a loanword from Hebrew that is rare in Syriac; see N. Sed, “La Shekinta et ses amis araméens,” in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont: Contributions à l’étude des christianismes orientaux*. Cahiers d’orientalisme 20 (Geneva, 1988), 233–242.

was called Abraham, head of the mourners.²⁷ Abraham asked the man to stay with him for three days and spent the time telling the wayward visitor all about his various spiritual contests. After three days, Abraham died, so, the man now in the tree explains, “I brought him down and buried him, and because my soul wished for the serenity of his soul, I ascended and stood in [Abraham’s] place, and lo, I am awaiting the salvation of God ... and thirty-five years I have stood in this position and no man has noticed me except two men who come to me from time to time to bring me provisions of bread and water.” This anonymous dendrite then asks Paul and John to stay with him three days, and, unsurprisingly, on the third day the dendrite dies, mirroring his own account of Abraham’s death.²⁸ Paul and John then go to retrieve his body from the tree for burial, and, as they are bringing him down, “many people came bearing torches and burning incense” having had a vision that a holy one of God had died in that place. The villagers deposited the bones of Abraham, whom they seem to have known, along with the corpse of the anonymous dendrite together in a wood coffin and processed back to the village with their relics in tow. Even Paul and John feel compelled to take relics for themselves, bringing with them the dendrite’s plaited breadbasket

²⁷ This phrase, “head of the mourners,” (*resha d-abile*) initially seems odd in this context; if the man is alone, why is he the “head” of a group of ascetics? This can be explained if “head” is read as a term of respect—something like “most excellent of” or “first among” the mourners. The phrase used as a term of respect for a solitary shows up (probably among other places) in the *Life of Onesima* where the anchorite Dudina (Dobina/Dobinos) is referred to as the “head of the mourners” even though he has lived alone in his cell for years. See *Select Narratives of Holy Women, from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest as Written above the Old Syriac Gospels by John the Stylite, of Beth-Mari-Qanun in A.D. 778*, *Studia Sinaitica* X, trans. A. Smith-Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900): 65–66. I thank Lucas Van Rompay for the reference.

²⁸ A similar story is told by al-Tabari. Faymiyun, with *Ṣalīḥ* following close behind him, was “walking somewhere in Syria” and passed by a tree from which a man called Faymiyun’s name and said, “I have been continuously awaiting you and have kept saying, ‘When is he coming?’ until I heard your voice and knew that you were its owner. Don’t go away until you have prayed over my grave, for I am now at the point of death.” *History of al-Tabari*, 921; trans. Bosworth, 198. In his note to this passage, Bosworth reasonably suggests that the man in the tree is a dendrite; al-Tabari himself, however, comments neither about why the man was waiting in the tree nor how he knew that Faymiyun was coming.

and his pitcher of water, which “provided great healings ... through the prayer of the blessed one.”

When the text reveals that the dendrite dies after Paul and John’s third day in his company, two things happen that seem rather peculiar, especially given that the rest of the text generally mirrors traditional Syriac hagiographical forms. The first, and most obvious, oddity is that neither Paul nor John become a dendrite—in fact, they do not even seem to contemplate it. The anonymous dendrite waited with Abraham, the head of the mourners, for three days and then took his place when he died; Paul and John wait with their dendrite friend for three days, too, but then continue their voyage after his death without concern that the dendrite’s form of asceticism would be discontinued in that hallowed place. The second odd thing that happens after the dendrite’s death is that the narration of the story shifts from the third person to the first person—this is attested by only the Syriac, not the Greek. Up until this point, the third-person omniscient narrator described the story in close, but unsympathetic, detail. With the death of the dendrite, however, the narration abruptly switches to the first person plural—*we*, meaning Paul and John. Later, it is clear that it is John who is doing the talking and thereupon the pathos of the story becomes dramatically more pronounced. John’s great love for Paul and his desire to spend all his days with him is made clear early on in the story, but now the reader is struck profoundly that this is not the story of two saints, Paul and John, but that it is *John’s* story of his great love for Paul. And it is Paul who ends up breaking John’s heart when he furtively leaves Edessa and “[steals] himself away from the blessed John.” For one hundred and eighty days John searched for Paul, in Jerusalem and in every direction thereabouts, seeking Paul as far as Nisibis, “between the territories of the Persians and the Romans.” It is in Nisibis that John, after much asking about town, finally finds Paul working again as a laborer, “carrying a vessel of clay and ascending a staircase.”

And from his gladness [John] could not wait until [Paul] descended, but rose, and behold, called to him: “Paul! Paul!” And when [Paul] turned and saw him, he recognized him. And he said to him, “Wait for me while I come down.” But Paul went up and placed the vessel of clay that he was carrying upon the wall and he went out by another way and no one ever gave confirmation of him again. But John, after he had waited a long while and [Paul] had not descended, walked around the whole city asking [for him]. And when he could not find him, he went in and threw

himself into the guesthouse among the poor. Concerning the sadness and distress that had taken hold of him, a tongue is not able to speak. But in that night, when he had fallen asleep in the guesthouse, that saint Paul appeared to him in a dream, saying to him, “My brother John, do not be troubled to find me, because you will not see my face again in the life of the body. Not in order to give you peace will I divulge the true reason I departed from my city. But rise, go home and ascend to those blessed ones in the cave and with them wait for the salvation of God. For we are departing from this world in a little while, and with our Lord we will truly be gladdened with one another.”

There are a lot of loose ends in the narrative of *Paul and John*, a lot left unanswered, and here I offer only some preliminary thoughts about the continued play with the striking motif of trees in this text. There is a concerted effort to “Christianize” the symbolic importance of the tree—a trope conspicuously absent in hagiographies of stylites in late antiquity who, some have argued, also put pagan symbols (in this case, the pillar) to good employ in Christian asceticism.²⁹ The tree-god of the Himyarites is quashed by the strength of the God who “planted all the cedars of Lebanon.” In the next episode, there are obvious allusions to the Christian notion of the Tree of Life, and the common refrain in Syriac thought of the ascetic life as a return to the Garden of Eden. One thinks immediately of Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*. We hear of the seven of the twelve blessed ones in the cave in Edessa who are described as “shoots” that were cut down and “re-planted” in paradise. This is echoed in the *Book of Steps*, not only in the twenty-first *memra* “On the Tree of Adam,” but more specifically in the second *memra* that lists seven “large trees of the spiritual paradise,

²⁹ David Frankfurter makes a good case for the unspoken continuity between pre-existent, pagan instances of pillar-standing and the Christian stylites—a continuity never once mentioned in hagiographies of these stylites: “The hagiographical literature itself has traditionally been the major obstruction to any argument for continuity with the *phallobates*, for it brought up the question of Symeon’s self-consciousness. That is, could Symeon have known that he was carrying out a feat which had such a ‘pagan’ prototype? Might he have planned it that way in order to facilitate the conversion of the rural masses?” Frankfurter suggests that a way “into” Symeon’s mind is looking at the “*continuity* of rural Syrian culture through the sixth century, rather than an apologetically-presumed *rupture* with the conversion of Constantine.” See D. T. M. Frankfurter, “Stylites and *Phallobates*: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria,” *VC* 44 (1990): 189.

of which those who keep the major commandments eat.”³⁰ Of the five blessed “shoots” who remain in the cave, perhaps one can say they are like the five immovable trees in paradise from the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* (logion 19) that do not move in summer or in winter—unlike Paul and John who were said to have worked in Edessa in the summer and led a contemplative life in the anchorites’ cave in the winter. Finally, the anonymous dendrite, rooted firmly in his tree for thirty-five years, and so little known that he is visited only by two mysterious men who occasionally bring him bread and water: he can be read as demonstrating, too, the ascetic and Christian re-appropriation of the sacred tree: a place of spiritual refuge, battles with demons, and world-denying solitude.

Beyond these speculations about possible meanings of the “tree” section of the narrative, there are, as I have noted briefly already, a number of intriguing parallels and nods toward the *Man of God*, the *Life of Rabbula*, and John of Ephesus’s *Lives of the Eastern Saints* that undoubtedly merit further study. Much remains to be said. With these parallels, the text’s references to dendrites, mourners, and mountaineers, and the connection with al-Ṭabari and the history of Christianity in Arabia, the *History of the Exploits of Bishop Paul of Qanetos and Priest John of Edessa* will surely be a useful supplement to future studies of late ancient Syriac hagiography and asceticism.

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³⁰ *Book of Steps*, II.7; *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum*, trans. R. A. Kitchen and M. F. G. Parmentier (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Studies, 2004), 19. See also R. A. Kitchen, “Syriac Additions to Anderson: The Garden of Eden in the Book of Steps and Philoxenus of Mabbug,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 4.1 (2003).

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