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Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and "Fear" as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*[1]

This study examines the disproportionately heavy reliance on the word deḥltā *("fear") and its cognates in two related sixth-century Syriac martyr texts from the Sasanian Empire, and how this usage reflects both an acknowledgement of and an attempt to transcend the religious diversity of the sixth century. It begins by describing the contents and historical background of the two martyrdoms and highlighting their broad, even elastic, usage of* deḥltā *and its cognates. The origins of the wide semantic range of* deḥltā *are attributed to Syriac translation literature, especially the Peshitta, the Syriac version of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. After a survey of how this term appears in earlier East Syrian martyr acts, the study turns to the close engagement with Zoroastrianism found in the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh and then to an examination of how "fear" relates to the texts' theological and ethical concerns. It is suggested that fear is an embodied form of knowledge evoked in these texts at the same time that it operates in the textual process of coercion that creates religious subjects.*

By the mid-sixth century CE, Christianity had become firmly established in several regions within the Sasanian Empire, and its broad diffusion had affected the upper echelons of society. For over a century, upwardly mobile Sasanian subelites were converting to Christianity and simultaneously stories of Zoroastrian nobles suffering martyrdom for their acceptance of Christ

proliferated.[2] At least according to some martyr texts, these converts openly challenged the Zoroastrian priestly establishment, the cult of Hormizd (Ahuramazda), and, in doing so, threatened what were for some Zoroastrians the political-theological underpinnings of the empire.[3] A key element in the discursive strategy of such martyr texts is the deployment of the Syriac word *deḥltā* (plural *deḥlātā*), which literally means "fear."[4] The most striking usage of this word and its cognates appears in a pair of related texts, the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*, the heroes of which were martyred respectively in 542 and shortly thereafter.

In the past, scholars understood Christians in the Sasanian Empire as a religious sub-community that had developed, as did the Jews of Mesopotamia, a working relationship with the Sasanian authorities. This religious minority status in turn would continue under the *dhimmi* system that developed after the Arab conquest. The situation on the ground, however, seems more fluid. Instead of seeing the highly ideological texts of the diverse religious communities of the empire as representative of the actual communal differences that existed, we should rather read these texts as attempts to form starker boundaries, where the material evidence suggests they were weak. In other words, the more integrated Christians were within the Sasanian Empire, the more confrontational their martyr texts became. Furthermore, if we follow common scholarly practice and translate "fear" (*deḥltā*) as it appears in the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh as religion we miss the work these texts do in contentiously producing communal boundaries. For they employ "fear" specifically as an emotional state evoked by either correct or incorrect knowledge, as an affective and epistemological category that helps to simultaneously emphasize and explain the difference between Christians and others.

Theoretical Background

In recent years, scholars of religion repeatedly have chastised themselves and their predecessors for universally applying a static category, "religion," in the analysis of different social worlds existing at different times in different

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[2] Most recently, see Richard Payne, "Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity" (diss. Princeton, 2009). On the martyr acts in general, see Sebastian P. Brock, *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts: Fascicle 1* (Piscataway, NJ, 2009).

[3] On religious life in the Sasanian Empire, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London, 2008), 321–95. On the political structure, see Ze'ev Rubin, "The Sasanid Monarchy," in Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, Michael Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14 (Cambridge, 2000), 638–61.

[4] Because of the special meaning attached to "fear" in this study, the scare quotes will be maintained when this special meaning is intended.

places. Instead, "religion" should be understood as a historical product of discursive processes, a modern category such as "magic," "science," "economics," and other spheres that both objectively and subjectively make up the "modern" world (even if some, such as magic, have premodern pedigrees).[5] For example, the triad magic-science-religion has been examined recently as a relational paradigm that functions, both historically and in the present, to allow for, evoke, and restrict a variety of practices, thoughts, and feelings.[6] As a tool for analysis, especially of premodern cultures, religion must remain a second-order category; thus some scholars are rightfully anxious about using the term "religion" without scare quotes.[7] But even if religion is a historical product of modernity, it nevertheless has a longer history, and some scholars have suggested that its first clear contours can be traced to Late Antiquity.[8] This is in part because Christianity, which is the religion par excellence in the west, comes into being in this period, and its features, including the exclusivity and communal boundaries advocated by some Christians, are typical characteristics of what is commonly labeled "religion."

This emergent late antique entity, often coercively formed by communal elites, is exemplary of a new, religiously self-defined form of community (although it ultimately derives in part from Israelite religion) that would become common in the Middle Ages in Europe, the Mediterranean, and eastward into Central Asia. Building on this, we can see that the religions of Late Antiquity share a number of characteristics, which, because of our Christian cultural background, we recognize as common to religion (for example, an emphasis on scripture; monotheism, or rather henotheism; a distinction between earth and heaven and the possibility of ascending from the former to the latter). This apparent shift in Late Antiquity may be understood next to the once and again popular notion of the axial age,[9] or J.Z. Smith's distinction between locative and utopian religions.[10] Furthermore, some recent

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[5] For critiques of attempts to define religion as a transhistorical entity, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and the Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), 27–54; and Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York, 2000), 3–118.

[6] Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2004).

[7] See, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religious, Religions," in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998), 269–84; and William Arnal, "Definition," in Willi Braun, R.T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London, 2000), 21–34.

[8] E.g., James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2007), 208–9.

[9] E.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 151, or Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, Susan Emanuel, tr., (Chicago, 2009), 5–6.

[10] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990), 110, 121–42.

scholarship has focused on the possible shift in Late Antiquity away from social genus and ethnicity as the fundamental categories of human sociality and toward the spread of religious community as a core social concept.[11] Recent scholarship, however, has also shown how Christians themselves were often engaged in an ethnic discourse.[12]

Furthermore, religion as it is defined and drawn out in modernity is inextricably tied to politics, whether it be through the elimination of public religion in liberal political theory or the dream of subsuming politics into religion within certain revivalist movements, such as those commonly labeled fundamentalist. The mutually constitutive and often tense relationship between religion and politics is especially apparent in Christian martyrology, which offers a discursive space in which we can discern the production of an autonomous form of religion within the late antique period. Martyrdom forced a wedge between the binary of ancient political theology, distinguishing between political authority, which it took to be primarily an indifferent entity, and the "evil" piety of those who held that authority. In denying the ancient gods but not ancient political forms, Christian martyr texts further delineated a space for what would eventually be religion (and secular politics).

Moreover, the indigenous terms that roughly approximate religion in a pre-modern context often concern difference: piety and impiety, your piety and mine. Such categorical differentiation has come to the fore most often in a martyrological context, whether it be at times when Christians have been threatened, such as during actual instances of state authorized violence in the second and third centuries, or when new circumstances have presented practical and theological problems, such as in reaction to Islamization in ninth-century Córdoba,[13] or even when attempts to limit Christian expansion have been treated as Satanic persecution, as we find in the later Persian Martyr Acts (and among some contemporary American Christians).[14]

The purpose of this investigation is not to highlight one step in the many that led to our modern category and notion of religion, which is part of the coercive political-theological project often anemically referred to as the separation of spheres or the "disembedding" of religion. This is a long way off,

[11] Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, 2001), e.g., 289; Adam H. Becker, "The Ancient Near East in the Late Antique Near East: Syriac Christian Appropriation of the Biblical Past," in Gregg Gardner, Kevin Osterloh, eds., *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World* (Tübingen, 2008), 394–415.

[12] E.g., Aaron Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford, 2007).

[13] E.g., Jessica A. Coope, *The Martyrs of Córdoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion* (Lincoln, 1995).

[14] On contemporary American martyrology, see Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York, 2007), 172–96.

and Syriac sources comprise an intellectual trajectory different from that of western Europe. They are thus not comparable to, for example, the Latin works of Lactantius, whose "redefinition of *religio* marks an important moment in the emergence of 'religion' as a distinct category in the western intellectual tradition."[15] Rather, this study treats what ultimately may be understood as a categorical dead end, the temporary constitution of an imaginary space sharing certain overlaps with our modern category religion but which is not identical with it.

The Syriac *deḥltā* ("fear") was not often used in the later Islamic period in the sense addressed here.[16] When missionaries and Syriac Christians began to translate western terms in the nineteenth century, they employed a variety of words to express the term "religion," such as the Syriac *tawditā* ("confession," "acknowledgment") or the neo-Aramaic *mazhab* (Arabic *maḏhab*). American Protestant missionaries retrieved *deḥlat alāhā* ("fear of God") to render the English word "religion" in the sense of piety, but this usage did not become the norm. In short, this study addresses a category that is emergent, but that does not come to full fruition (which is perhaps a Eurocentric way of saying that it is not ultimately taken up in westernized discourse).[17] Although the tendency to use "fear" in the manner discussed in this article does not continue, it is nonetheless related to the broader evolution of a specifically religious notion of community, which in turn would ultimately help to constitute modernity's "religion." In the destabilized milieu Christianity produced in ancient political theology, there were a variety of tendencies for constituting *religious* community, some of which, such as the discourse of "fear," died out.

The Martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh and their Historical Context

The martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh, published in 1895, are little-examined texts.[18] One therefore might start by providing a brief summary of the two, followed by a description of the historical context of the events they

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[15] Jeremy M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2008), 105–6.

[16] Although it does occasionally appear, e.g., Theodorus Bar Kōnī, *Liber Scholiorum*, Addai Scher, ed. (Paris, 1912), 343.12–13, 20.

[17] On a parallel problem in the history of capital, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 2007), 47–71.

[18] Paul Bedjan, ed., *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha et trois autres Patriarches, d'un prêtre et deux laïques nestoriens* (Paris/Leipzig, 1895), 347–415; Jérôme Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse, sous la Dynastie Sassanide (224–632)* (Paris, 1904), 178–81; J.-M. Fiey, *Saints syriaques* (Princeton, 2004), no.177 (pp. 86–7), no.462 (p. 195). For a partial translation, see Georg Hoffmann, *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer* (Leipzig, 1880), 78–91.

narrate. The *Martyrdom of Gregory* begins by describing a period of peace in the church in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Gregory, a general responsible for the northern regions of Georgia (Iberia) and Caucasian Albania, comes from an elite Zoroastrian family. When he confesses Christ and openly blasphemes Hormizd, the king strips him of his property and places him in a pit. Eventually his position and status are restored, but he then is taken prisoner by the Romans. "Caesar" treats him as a guest, but Gregory decides to return because of the false Christology he finds in the west. After Satan inspires envy in the magi the king has him stripped of his wealth again and tortured. Khusro offers Gregory his wealth back if he renounces Christ, but he refuses to do this. Khusro then has the magi select a wise man to instruct him. The chief magus volunteers to do this, but Gregory refutes his teaching and is returned to prison. Many come to see Gregory after he is moved to a village, Zaqqārtā of Bēt Bālān, east of Ctesiphon, and Christ induces good will in the king, who allows the door to be open to visitors. Despite tortures, he performs wonders and many convert. Because of his influence over others, Gregory is sealed into a house alone for seven days, but he emerges unharmed and transformed. Many come to wonder at him and his unwounded body, and he heals one of his persecutors. Concerned about the danger Gregory offers to their piety, the magi decide to ask the king to kill him. Because of the magi's complaints, the king has Gregory brought to him secretly the following day in order to prevent a fight from breaking out between magi and Christians. One morning during the sixth week of Lent Gregory, prepared for his own death, goes through the streets rejoicing as one who has triumphed in battle. After having a vision of Christ, he is interrogated by the chief magus, but again refuses to renounce Christ. The nobles then unsuccessfully invite Gregory to recognize his good birth and background, renounce Christ, and acknowledge their piety.

On Good Friday, the guards take Gregory to be executed. On his arrival at the spot of his execution Gregory prays and everyone notes his radiant joy, "his face like the face of an angel." After encouraging his frightened executioner and giving away his possessions, he calmly allows himself to be beheaded. The sun darkens from Good Friday "until the Friday after the Confessors" (this is presumably what is commonly known as the "Friday of the Confessors," that is, the first Friday after Easter, a day dedicated to earlier martyrs under Shapur II). Gregory's body is removed to Māḥozā, whereas his other remains are taken elsewhere. The location of his martyrdom becomes a place of blessing and a shame to magi and pagans. Many benefits flow out from it and this is why the author and his audience have come there for pilgrimage (Syriac *ḥaggā*).

The *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh* begins where the preceding text left off: others are inspired by Gregory's example. The magi, hoping that Christians

will be frightened by Gregory's death, send for Yazdpaneh, who had been imprisoned in Khuzistan because he had begun to debate with magi after being baptized. At the time of Gregory's death, Yazdpaneh is brought to Māḥozā, but despite the rewards promised for renouncing Christianity, he continues to refute the magi. On his way back to prison he gives a speech on the joy of martyrdom and the futility of fearing death. He returns to prison, and then the magi take him to Māḥozā. On the way, they again try to convince him, but he resists. On their arrival at the village of Taymā his captors, who have become enraged, decide to kill him. Like Gregory, he encourages the inexperienced executioner. 'Abrodaq of Behardashir,[19] an elite Christian, has Yazdpaneh's body brought to Māḥozā where it is buried with that of Gregory. When believers from Peroz Shapur come and find no body at the place of his execution, they take dust from the spot and build a shrine there.

The historical context of both texts is the reigns of Kawād I (488–497, 499–531) and Khusro I (531–579). The *Martyrdom of Gregory* demonstrates an explicit interest in the political, military, and diplomatic affairs of the period stretching from the latter part of the first Sasanian-Byzantine War of the sixth century (502–532), through the eight-year period of the "eternal peace" of 532, and into the early years of the second Sasanian-Byzantine War (540–562).[20] According to the text, Christians enjoyed total peace "from the reign of Peroz the king until the tenth year of Khusro the king" (348.14–16), that is, from ca. 459 to 540.[21] The text begins by providing an idealized, rosy description of the conditions for Christians in 538/539 (347.01). This situation comes to an end in 540 when mass persecution begins anew (348.16). The text then moves back in time to Gregory's conversion, which takes place in 518 (351.4), after which, contrary to the previous statements of conversion being licit, he was put into the aforementioned pit for three years (357.16). After his rehabilitation, the Persians and Romans clash, probably in the context of hostilities that were reinvigorated in the late 520s, especially in the northern regions.[22] During a Roman incursion into

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[19] See Bedjan, *Histoire*, 232.10; Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 89–90 n.810; Bradoúkios at Procopius, *Wars* 2.28.41.

[20] See Geoffrey Greatrex, Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part 2 AD 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook* (London, 2002); Beate Dignas, Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge, 2007); and Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502–532* (Leeds, 1998).

[21] This is an idealized rendering of the period of the Sasanian rulers Peroz (459–484), Balash (484–488), Kawād I (488–97/499–531), Jamasp (497–499), and Khusro I (531–579). In contrast, the Catholicos Bābōi was executed by Peroz in 484, Addai Scher, ed., *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 7.2 (1911), 101–2.

[22] For this text in the context of these events, see Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War*, 141–2, 145.

the region under his charge, according to the martyrdom, Gregory is taken prisoner. A treaty then is made, Khusro becomes Shah,[23] and an emissary from Khusro seeks Gregory's return (360.07).[24] This last event may be related to, or at least reflect, the peace negotiations leading to the treaty of 532 between Khusro and Justinian. After a brief rehabilitation Gregory spends another seven years in prison (366.14). Khusro's well-known assault on Antioch in 540 then occurs (367.08). In "the following year" (367.13), Khusro engages with the Hephthalites, or White Huns.[25] After the text leaves off, the Persians and the Sasanians continued to contend until negotiations in the late 550s resulting in the Treaty of 562, which was broken in 572 with the outbreak of what is known as the third Byzantine-Sasanian War (572–590).

It is around the time of Khusro's battle with the Hephthalites that "persecution" began again (348.16). The general persecution described by the two texts may be correlated to what we find in the *History of Mār Abā*, the Catholicos who spent most of his time in office harassed by the authorities and several years under house arrest (540–552). The *History* accuses the *mobed mobedān*, Dādhormizd, of being the instigator of this persecution.[26] There is little corroborating evidence, however, for a general persecution. It is more likely that these are all individual instances of pressure being put on specific elite converts rather than a broader state policy.[27] The "persecution" seems to be a result of the texts' hyperbole.

Further examination would shed light on the historicity of the events described. For example, Zabargan, the emissary who arrives to make peace with "Caesar" and asks for Gregory's return after he is taken prisoner (360.10, 361.06, 362.01), seems to be the Zaberganes who shows up several times in Procopius' works as a Persian envoy in the early 540s.[28] Even if its account is confused—the purpose of the *Martyrdom* is not to provide an accurate military and diplomatic history—the inclusion of this material illustrates the degree of awareness of interimperial politics that Christians, particularly those near the royal seat, could have had in the mid-sixth century. Moreover,

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[23] Bedjan, *Histoire*, 360.06–07 is unclear. See Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 80, and Greatrex, Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 99, 268 n.58.

[24] On this date, see also Greatrex, Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 268 n.59.

[25] Bedjan, *Histoire*, 227.15.

[26] Bedjan, *Histoire*, 226.12.

[27] Aside from the *History* (Bedjan, *Histoire*, 206–74), see Addai Scher, ed., *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)* 2.1, *Patrologia Orientalis* 7 (1909), 147 (55), 160 (68).

[28] J.R. Martindale, ed., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire. Volume 3. 527–641* (Cambridge, 1990), 1410; Hoffmann (*Auszüge*, 80 n.731) suggests it is not an uncommon name. There is also a reference to a Zabargan, *marzbān* of Bēt Arāmāyē, associated with the Catholicos Bābai (497–502/503), but this is probably an earlier person: J.S. Assemani, ed., *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* 1–3 (Rome, 1719–1728) 1.358.

although the reality of the story of Gregory and his stay in Constantinople is difficult to confirm, Procopius tells us of Narses, the Persian commander in the northern regions who defected to the Roman side, and who, judging from his brother's name, Isaac, we may speculate was a Christian.[29] We also know that the Persians and the Romans engaged in hostage exchange and held prisoners in their ongoing conflict. This was so prevalent that it became part of the Christian hagiographical imagination.[30]

These two texts seem to have been written in the generation after the deaths of the two martyrs they depict. Typical of the hagiographical genre, they explicitly address an audience who have gathered for the festival of the two saints. Although there are no clear internal references, the absence of any sign of the Arab conquest suggests that they were composed during Sasanian rule, which ended in 651; they may derive from the late sixth century.

The linkage between the two texts and these two saints in one cult belongs to the process of "twinning" we find involving other saints in Late Antiquity, whereby two associated saints are coupled, for example, Sergius and Bacchus or the apostles Peter and Paul. Both saints were killed outside of Māḥozā, and although according to both texts their respective cults also developed elsewhere, their bodies were brought to the city, the body of Yazdpaneh being set in the shrine built around that of Gregory. Furthermore, the depiction of Gregory suggests his saintly persona was part of the burgeoning contemporary phenomenon of military saints (for example, 362.06–364.11; 379.16–381.06). The most famous in the region were Sergius and Bacchus, whose cult center at Rusafa was a nexus for exchange between the two empires.[31] The metaphorical military language used in both texts suggests that Yazdpaneh also was drawn into this typology (412.14–413.05). Of the two saints, Gregory seems to have become the more popular one, for he was taken up in the Armenian tradition, where he is connected to the saint Yazdbozid (d. 553).[32]

Fear in All Its Forms

The most striking feature of these two texts is the repeated reliance on the word *deḥltā*, literally meaning "fear", and other words based upon the same Syriac root, *d-ḥ-l*. This usage is quantitatively as well as qualitatively noteworthy even if the various nuances the word and the root take in these two texts

[29] Procopius, *Wars* 1.15.31–33.

[30] Brock, *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, section 48 and passim.

[31] Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, 1999).

[32] Fiey, *Saints syriaques*, no.463, 195–6. See also Nina Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient* (Louvain, 1999), 228–9.

have precedents, addressed below. The most common use of *deḥltā* is as a general category to refer to both Christianity and Zoroastrianism: *deḥlat alāhā* ("fear of God") and *deḥltā* ("fear") for Christianity,[33] and *deḥltā* ("fear") for Zoroastrianism (also variously as "the fear of the magi," "the king's fear," "our fear," etc.).[34] These instances alone are more than one finds in all of the other martyr acts combined. A clear distinction is set up in this usage: there is good fear, the Christian fear of God, which is epistemologically true and based upon reality, and there is bad fear, which is false and based upon ignorance and deception.

Although it was common in antiquity to acknowledge that different people had different gods, religious diversity was not conceptualized as explicitly as we find here, that is, as a common affective response leading to certain ritual practices and based upon correct or incorrect knowledge. This is qualitatively distinct from the simple recognition of a diversity of gods worshipped. Furthermore, the use of "fear" in the plural form creates a common ground between Christians and others, while at the same time Christian difference is maintained by the hierarchy implicit in the fact that some "fears" are wrong and only one "fear" is right. The pluralization of "fear" can be found in earlier Syriac sources, especially martyrological ones, but never to such a degree.

Other uses of "fear" in these two texts reveal the variety of ways in which the term is used to refer to an emotional response to both legitimate and illegitimate sources of fear. When challenged, the martyrs say "I fear God" (356.01, 382.04, 398.11), not death (365.06). We are told that Gregory "did not fear" death or the king (385.09, 385.10, 386.15). Yazdpaneh again says, "I will not fear death" (406.02). "Fear" prevents the village priests from baptizing Gregory (353.11, 353.13). "They feared human beings more than God" (353.11). Martyrs' deaths are "frightening" (349.06, 385.06). His captors hope that Yazdpaneh "will fear" once he hears of Gregory's death (400.05). For they "try to scare him" with the story of Gregory's death (400.16). After Yazdpaneh refutes his interlocutors they exclaim, "Are you trying to scare the hell out of us (*mdaḥḥālu mdaḥḥel*), and is it that the Messiah is the judge of all the world, and Hormizd is not?" (408.14–15).

By his survival in the pit, Gregory "set" the king "in great fear" (358.16). In response to Gregory's wondrous deeds, "great fear seized all the pagans" (374.08–09). After they saw his own fearlessness, "great fear fell upon" those

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[33] Bedjan, *Histoire*, 348.05, 349.03, 350.06, 363.10, 368.06, 370.08, 372.04, 372.05, 375.02; 394.03, 394.07, 396.10, 396.15, 402.09, 415.09–10, and ibid., 365.03, 368.03, 369.09, 374.14, 376.01; 400.18, 401.18, 403.04, 407.15, 409.14 respectively.

[34] Ibid. 353.03, 353.18, 356.17, 357.05, 357.06, 357.12, 362.11, 365.02, 368.13, 368.15, 369.04, 376.07, 376.17, 381.01, 381.13; 395.03, 396.17, 397.02, 397.16, 398.06, 399.17, 401.02, 402.06, 402.11, 402.12, 403.04, 403.12, 403.13, 404.01, 404.02.

aiming to kill Gregory (386.16–17). His nervous executioner "was greatly afraid" (387.03), and ironically Gregory, who is about to be slaughtered, says to him, "Do not fear" (387.05, 408.08), which is what Yazdpaneh also says to his inexperienced executioner (409.08). Again "great fear seized all the pagans" when they saw that Gregory's body still pulsed after execution (388.16). Common to angelic apparitions since the Hebrew Bible, "fear" is the immediate response one usually has in the presence of an angel. Gregory is "in great fear" after an angelic apparition (351.16). He is told, "Do not fear" (358.09, 380.10–11), whereas in debate Yazdpaneh quotes Mt 10:28, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul" (399.04–05). Even Gregory's shrine is characterized as not being a "place of solitude or source of fear for passersby" (392.11).

The use of "fear" in these texts is striking because the term and its cognates embrace such a broad semantic range. As will be discussed below, some earlier literature attests a categorization of a diversity of pieties, *deḥlātā*, literally, "fears." In the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh this proliferative usage continues (Zoroastrians have their "fear," whereas Christians have their own "fear," etc.), but we also find a self-conscious etymological play on the word "fear" itself. As the examples in the preceding paragraphs attest, "fear" has various causes in both texts, but these causes are always things that should ultimately not bother a true Christian: that is, threats of violence, painful death, or miraculous events. The only time that "fear" is used actively as a verb in either of the texts in a positive way is when a character is described or quoted as saying that he fears God. This usage in conjunction with an intellectual critique of Zoroastrian ignorance suggests an embodied, affective form of knowledge of the divine. The heavy reliance on "fear" in the two texts links on one axis the realms of the intellect and the affect, and, as we will see below, on another axis it creates a discursive bridge—a shared space—between Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

"Fear" is in part intellectual because determining what we should really fear is an epistemological act. Yazdpaneh, his martyrdom states, "was demonstrating that their fear was deception and not truth and that their fear stood only upon [governmental] authority" (402.12–14; cf. 374.14–15). This infuriates the magi, but one magus is convinced and, inspired by God, states, "Yazdpaneh speaks the truth. Come let all of us sit and debate (*nedroš*) about the fear of the Christians and our own fear, and let us see which of them is true" (403.03–05). When the shah wants to give Gregory another chance, he sends a Zoroastrian priest "to teach him this fear of magianism, how great it is" (368.13–14). The priest provides teaching every day, but Gregory, infused with wisdom from God, refutes his "fear," showing that "it is false and the teaching of the demons (*dayvē*)" (369.04–05). "Fear" is characterized as something intellectual, something to be learned, and yet its affective

status is repeatedly reinvoked in the texts. It is something both subjectively felt and objectively there: a pious feeling (subjective) and a system of beliefs and practices (objective). Below, it will be suggested that this subjective feeling, which corresponds to specific, objective epistemological affirmations and ritual practices (and the exclusion of other practices), also functions as a communal marker, rendering the Christian community, its practices, beliefs, and members socially real.

The Source of Fear: The Peshitta Old and New Testaments

There are three main sources for the notion of "fear of God" in the Syriac sources: the Peshitta Old Testament and the Peshitta New Testament, as well as the Syriac translation of early Christian references to the virtues of εὐσέβεια ("piety") and θεοσέβεια ("reverence before God"). These sources do not represent three wholly distinct semantic fields because, for example, New Testament Greek terms for "fear" were used earlier in the Septuagint to translate certain terms in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, the Greek of the New Testament is affected by the Hebrew. The biblical background to the language of fear demonstrates how the biblical text and the particularities of its translation could guide the development of vernacular piety.

"Fear" is a sentiment commonly felt before a god in a number of Semitic language traditions, and "fear of God" is a major theme in the Hebrew Bible.[35] For example, in almost 80 percent of the over four hundred instances of the word *yārē'* in the Hebrew Bible the object of fear is God.[36] Concerning "fear of God," *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* suggests that "it may be 'the earliest term for religion in biblical Hebrew, and indeed in Semitic languages in general'."[37] Commentators posit a semantic shift in biblical usage: "when the element of literal fear recedes, 'fear of God' becomes tantamount to 'religion' or 'spirituality'; that is, fear of God becomes synonymous with reverence, worship, and obedience to God's command."[38]

"Fear of God" is foremost a "fear of the numinous," a notion made famous by Otto in his 1917 *Das Heilige* (*The Idea of the Holy*).[39] The holy and terrible God, whose majesty is so great that his presence is a danger to mortals,

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[35] M.I. Gruber, "Fear, Anxiety and Reverence in Akkadian, Biblical Hebrew and Other Northwest Semitic Languages," *Vetus Testamentum* 40 (1990), 411-22; "yārē'," in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 6, John T. Willis, tr. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1974ff), 290–315. See also Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.9, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, tr. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964–1976), 199–203.

[36] Botterweck, Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 296.

[37] Ibid. 297, quoting R.H. Pfeiffer.

[38] Ibid. 298, also 298–9 for a similar development in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

[39] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, John W. Harvey, tr., 2nd ed. (New York, 1950).

who cannot look at him and live, breaks into history, performing great deeds and casting the enemies of Israel into panic.[40] God is a source of fear, and to fear him is to acknowledge his power. Moreover, "fear" appears commonly in the expression "do fear not!" (*'al tīrā'*, etc.), which is used throughout the Hebrew Bible in instances of holy war, oracles, and, of particular significance to later usage, theophanies.[41] "Fear of God" is employed heavily in Deuteronomy as a motif contributing to the book's central focus on God's covenant with Israel. It is even something Israel can "learn" (for example, Dt 4:10).[42]

   "Fear of God" also appears as a source of morality, even ethical resistance to illegitimate authority, as in the story of the midwives who fear God and disobey pharaoh (Ex 1:15–21).[43] The ethical aspect of "fear of God," which is later integral to the martyr's resistance to his or her persecutors, is most often found in wisdom and apocalyptic literature, where "fear of the Lord" or "fear of God" is a common theme.[44] Furthermore, "fear of God" often is related to "knowledge" (Hebr. *da'at*) and "wisdom" (Hebr. *ḥokmāh*) in the wisdom tradition.[45] It is an ethical response to the divine majesty as well as a step in epistemology, that is, it is the "beginning of wisdom."[46]

   The Peshitta translation of the Hebrew Bible increases the focus on "fear" that is found in the original Hebrew text, because the Syriac root *d-ḥ-l* not only is used regularly to translate the Hebrew *yārē'* and its cognates, but also often renders the numerous other words used for "fear" in the Hebrew Bible, thus increasing the prevalence of one single term.[47] Furthermore, the absolute form of the noun, *deḥlā*, is used in the Peshitta for false gods. For example, the "foreign god" of Ps 81:9 (*'ēl nēkhār*) becomes "foreign idol (literally, 'fear') (*deḥlā 'ḥrānyā*)" in the Peshitta. This is significant because it links "fear" to false forms of piety.

   The New Testament Peshitta contributes even further to this semantic tendency by employing *deḥltā* and its cognates to translate several terms,

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[40] Botterweck, Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 300–3.

[41] Ibid. 304–6.

[42] Ibid. 306–8. For the Psalms, ibid. 308–9.

[43] Ibid. 309–11.

[44] e.g., Sir 1:8, 11, 14, 16, 18, 20, 27, 30; Prov 1:1, 29; 8:13, 9:10, 10:27, 14:27, 15:33; Job 1:1, 4:6, 28:28; ibid. 311–3; Frederick J. Murphy, "Sapiential Elements in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1986), 320.

[45] Although he too much downplays its emotionality and ultimately reduces it to a Protestant notion of faith, Von Rad is accurate in suggesting that "fear of God" is not simply an affective response in the Hebrew Bible; Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, James D. Martin, tr. (Valley Forge, PA, 1972), 65.

[46] Ibid. 66–7, also 298.

[47] E.g., *paḥad*: Ps 36:1(2), Is 2:19, 21, Job 4:14; *gūr*: Ps 22:24 (23) (*yārē'* is also in this line); *ḥīl*: Ex 15:14; Ps 77:17(16); *ḥerdāh*: 1 Sam 14:15; *ḥittāh*: Gen 35:5; hiph. of *'rṣ*: Is 8:12–3.

particularly two word groups. The first of these, φόβος ("fear") and its cognates, generally denotes the affective response of fear to all sorts of things, and on occasion can be used for the awe or reverence felt before a god.[48] In the Septuagint this word group commonly is used to translate *yārē'* and its cognates. Words in this group "always describe a reaction to man's encounter with force."[49] The philosophers gave a generally negative evaluation of φόβος, as it was taken to be an irrational emotion, ultimately reflecting a fear of death, which was at least for rational people nothing to be feared.[50] This philosophical rejection of "fear" is taken up in the martyrological rejection of the fear of death as an irrational affective response not founded upon right knowledge.

Although in the New Testament the φόβος word group often is used for mundane, earthly fears, it also can refer to the fear experienced at Jesus' performance of miracles and at the appearance of the divine.[51] Furthermore, the "Do not fear" command formula is used in the Gospels in response to Jesus' miracles, rendering them similar to divine epiphanies (for example, Mk 5:36). Several phrases, such as "fear of God" and "fear of the Lord" appear in the New Testament, whereas Luke-Acts shows a preference for the expression "to fear God" (for example, Act 10:20), which derives from the Hebrew Bible and is commonly cited as evidence that its author was interested in "God fearers," gentile adherents to the God of Israel.[52] Ultimately there is a tension in the New Testament usage of φόβος: fear is something that characterizes those who do not understand the power of God and mistake the miraculous for something malignant, but at the same time fear is the correct stance to have before God and his majesty, as we find in the Hebrew Bible.

The second word group, σέβεσθαι and its cognates, is less common in the New Testament. The word originally had a sense of "to fear" or "to be in awe of", but then took on the meaning "to honor" or "to venerate." From early on it denoted worship of the divine and respect for other objects of veneration.[53] The root σεβ- is used to represent a number of Hebrew terms in the Septuagint, for example, εὐσεβής for *ṣaddīq* ("righteous") and εὐσέβεια for *ḥesed* ("kindness, piety").[54] The most common usage of the root *seb-* in Christian Greek is in εὐσέβεια (and cognates such as εὐσεβής), which is variously translated as "piety" or even "religion," whereas it is sometimes rendered "respect" when

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[48] Kittel, *Theological Dictionary* 9: 191.
[49] Ibid. 192.
[50] Ibid. 195–7.
[51] Ibid. 208–12.
[52] Ibid. 212–3. For the Pauline corpus, ibid. 213–4.
[53] Kittel, *Theological Dictionary* 7.168–91.
[54] Ibid. 179.

employed in relation to human affairs (for example, family, mores, judges, oaths, and so on, all of which it should be noted can have significant connections to the divine).[55]

A diverse range of terms in the New Testament are rendered by the Syriac root *d-ḥ-l*, thus causing a focalization on one term, as we see in the Peshitta Old Testament. The following chart (Table 1) provides examples of the use of the root *d-ḥ-l* to render a variety of Greek terms and expressions in the New Testament.

The roots σεβ- and φοβ-, when used in relation to God, already are linked in the New Testament because of the Septuagintal background of the two. Furthermore, the use of *d-ḥ-l* to translate these words as well as the various words for "fear" in the Hebrew Bible helps to create and develop semantic links that, if there before, were only inchoate. For example, "fear of God" and fear of mundane, particularly mortal, dangers are more easily set parallel to one another in these new hermeneutical conditions. The fear that is felt before God becomes equivalent to the fear one feels before idols, false gods, and demons (for example, Dt 32:21; Ps 81:9). Due to this conflation of a diversity of terms into this one Syriac root certain verbal clusters form, for example, at the beginning of Paul's speech at the Areopagus (Act 17:22–31), a central passage for thinking about Christian apologetics in later exegesis:

> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious (δεισιδαιμονεστέρους; Syriac, *yattirin . . . b-deḥlat shēdē*; literally, "in the fear of demons") you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship (τὰ σεβάσματα ὑμῶν; Syriac, *deḥlātkon*, literally, "your fears") I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship (εὐσεβεῖτε; Syriac, *dāḥlin* [*at*]*ton*; literally, "you fear") as unknown, this I proclaim to you."[56]

The conciliatory space the original passage opens up in its address to "pagans" is made even wider by the focalization on "fear" (*d-ḥ-l*) in the Syriac, especially in light of the heavy reliance on "fear" elsewhere in the Peshitta. Paul and his interlocutors are made to be engaged in fundamentally the same practice.

The Peshitta translation of IV Maccabees offers us an example of how the translation process created new categories, but also perhaps reflected previous semantic tendencies. Hiebert notes that there are "differences in the Syriac

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[55] Ibid. 176.
[56] Acts 17:22–3 New Revised Standard Version. The translation of δεισιδαίμων as "religious" (here in the sense of "pious") is questionable because the word also has a nuance of "superstitious."

Table 1. Fear Terminology in the Greek and Peshitta New Testament

Heb 12:28	δέος	*deḥltā*
Col 3:5	εἰδωλολατρεία (usually rendered with the root *p-l-ḥ*)	*deḥlat ptakrē*
1 Th 1:9	εἴδωλα	*deḥlat ptakrē*
Act 25:19	δεισιδαιμονία	*deḥltā*
Act 10:7	εὐσεβής	*dāḥel l-alāhā*
1 Tim 2:2, 6:3, 6:5, 6:6, 2 Tim 3:5, Tit 1:1	εὐσέβεια	*deḥlat alāhā*
1 Tim 2:10	θεοσέβεια	*deḥlat alāhā*
2 Tim 3:12, Tit 2:12	εὐσεβῶς	*b-deḥlat alāhā*
Joh 9:31	θεοσεβής	*man d-dḥel meneh*
Rom 1:25	ἐσεβάσθησαν (σεβάζεσθαι)	*dḥel(w)*
2 Th 2:4	σέβασμα	*deḥlā*
Mt 15:9 (see also Mk 7:7; Is 29:13 LXX [Septuagint])	σέβονται (σέβεσθαι)	*dāḥlin*
Act 13:43 (see also variants 13:50, 16:14, 17:4, 17:17, 18:7)	οἱ σεβόμενοι	*d-dāḥlin (h)waw men alāhā*
Act 18:13	σέβεσθαι	*d-nehwon dāḥlin l-alāhā*
Act 10:2, 10:22 (see also variants 10:35, 13:16)	φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν	*dāḥel men alāhā*
Col 3:22	φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον	*b-deḥltā d-māryā*
Rom 3:18 (Ps 36:1 LXX), 2 Cor 7:1	φόβος θεοῦ	*deḥltēh d-alāhā*
2 Cor 5:11	φόβος τοῦ κυρίου	*deḥltēh d-māran*
Heb 10:27	φόβερος	*dḥilā*
Act 2:20 (Joel 3:4 LXX)	ἐπιφανής	*dḥilā*

The Peshitta translates the Hebrew text for LXX passages in the New Testament.

that are also not likely to be text based," but rather "the Syriac translator has exercised certain interpretative liberties in his work."[57] "Fear of God" is often used in the Syriac version of IV Maccabees to render εὐσέβεια and the adjective εὐσεβής.[58] At other times it is simply added. For example, at 1:29 for the Greek "the master cultivator, reason, weeds . . ." we find "the mind that surrenders to the fear of God cultivates and prunes. . . ." Even virtues are transformed: ἀρετή (1:8; "excellence, virtue") and καλοκαγαθία (1.10; "nobleness") become "fear of God." In its original, IV Maccabees may be read as an essay on the capacity of reason to overcome the passions, particularly in instances of the threat and endurance of public execution. But considering the numerous instances where "fear of God" has been translated as well as simply inserted into the first chapter, we can see how the Syriac version is less about sovereign reason and more about the mind's submission to the "fear of God." We are now not far from those later Syriac martyr acts that elevate "fear of God" to the position of the virtue par excellence in the face of real and imagined anti-Christian violence.

Dictionaries fail to grasp the nuances addressed here. For example, Payne Smith's *Thesaurus Syriacus* differentiates between the different meanings of *deḥltā* by correlating its meanings to the meanings of the source texts it is used to translate.[59] This assumes that Syriac Christians thought in the same categories as their Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Patristic textual predecessors and erases what may in fact be a particularity in the Syriac. There is no doubt that the word *deḥltā* had the full range of meaning that Payne Smith suggests and that at times it really meant only one of the possible meanings he provides. The fact that it is the same word used throughout for all the various meanings, however, suggests we should try to think holistically about this word. In other words, the question is: what does this word mean in the sources as it would have been understood by those creating and reading those sources, especially sources such as the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh, which use the word in all its various meanings in close proximity to one another. By simultaneously representing what are good, bad, and neutral terms in Greek (δεισιδαιμονία, εἰδωλολατρεία, θεοσέβεια, and εὐσέβεια, as well as sometimes devotional practice, θρησκεία), "fear" (*deḥltā*) serves as a broader category for religious practice and belief.

[57] Robert J.V. Hiebert, "Preparing a Critical Edition of IV Maccabees: The Syriac Translation and *Passio Sanctorum Machabaeorum* as Witness to the Original Greek," in F. García Martínez, M. Vervenne, eds., *Interpreting Translation: Studies on the LXX and Ezekiel in Honour of Johan Lust* (Louvain, 2005), 204 (193–216), esp. 208–10.

[58] Ibid. 208 n.35, 209.

[59] R. Payne Smith, ed., *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford, 1879) 1.864–5.

One could further examine how "fear of God" is employed in early Syriac literature aside from the Peshitta. For example, it shows up in early Syriac authors as a moral virtue characteristic of the Christian life, for example, Ephrem's *Memra on the Fear of God and the End (of the World)*.[60] Fear of God is not uncommon in the fourth-century *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat (where, considering his own anxiety about members of his community and their relationship with the local Jewish community, we might see traces of some older concept of God-fearing).[61] "Fear" commonly is used in the fifth-century *Book of Steps*, another early text from Mesopotamia, for pagan practice.[62] Furthermore, the tendency to use "fear of God" as a virtue was reinforced by the translation of Greek patristic literature into Syriac from the turn of the fifth century onwards, where this expression often is used to translate εὐσέβεια and θεοσέβεια, including the *Martyrs of Palestine* and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, two works that significantly influenced the Syriac literary tradition.[63]

Fear and Engagement with Zoroastrianism in the Persian Martyr Acts

Another perspective by which we may better understand the focus on "fear" in the Martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh is offered by looking at the prior Syriac martyrological tradition, especially those texts belonging to the corpus commonly known as the Persian Martyr Acts. These texts, composed from the late fourth century into the early Islamic period, describe events, both real and fictional, of a three hundred year period of Sasanian history. By observing how the awareness of Zoroastrianism in these texts shifts over time and relating this shift to the development of the use of "fear of God" we can see changes in how religious diversity was conceptualized over time. Furthermore, the relationship between knowledge and fear in these texts, or more specifically between religious knowledge and religious affect, may help us think about the ongoing development and maintenance of social boundaries within the Christian community.

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[60] Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones*, vol.3 (Louvain, 1972), 1–12 (Sermo I); Vatican Syriac 117, Ephrem: *On the Fear of God*. Fol. 153bff. For the duality of fear, ibid. 2. (lines 97–100). For the martyrs, ibid. 4–5 (lines 221–37).

[61] E.g., Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 23.1: D.J. Parisot, ed., *Patrologia Syriaca II* (Paris, 1907), 4–5 (4.9, 11, 26; 5.1).

[62] Michael Kmosko, ed., *Liber Graduum*, *Patrologia Syriaca* 3 (Paris, 1926): 200.6 [8.5]; 408.10 [16.9]; 769.11 [27.2]; 780.4 [27.5]; 869.16, 21, 25 [30.4] ; 872.17 [30.4].

[63] Paul Bedjan, ed., *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1890–1897; repr. Hildesheim, 1968) [= AMS] 1.202.06; and W. Wright, N. McLean, eds., *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac* (Cambridge, 1898), 320, 326 (8.1, 4). On these terms in their Jewish and early Christian contexts, see Judith Lieu, "The Race of the God-Fearers," *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1995), 483–501.

The Persian Martyr Acts may be divided generally into three groups. The first, composed from the late fourth into the fifth century, depict the so-called "Great Massacre" under Shapur II (309–379), which began ca. 344 CE.[64] The precise cause of this violence against Christians is still unclear, but a number of scholars have suggested that, although a magian displeasure with Christians is attested even earlier in Sasanian rule, the "Great Massacre" was indirectly due to the conversion of Constantine: marking the Roman Empire as Christian in turn marked Christians within the Sasanian realm as a potential political problem.[65] One source suggests that violence began when Christians refused to pay double in taxes, and that this eventually led to renunciations of Christ.[66]

The longest and most detailed of these texts is the *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Ṣabbāʿē*, which survives in two recensions. Like other texts from this period, it demonstrates that the Mesopotamian Christian community had a social constitution in the fourth and early fifth century distinct from that of later periods. There may have been two communities, an older Aramaic Christian population, and one that derived from Christians taken into captivity from the Antioch region and forcibly settled within the Sasanian realm.[67] The author of the *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Ṣabbāʿē* is concerned to differentiate the Christian community from the Jewish one, with whom its members are apparently still intermingled. Notably, the standard term for the community in this text is *ʿammā* ("the people"), instead of the later standard Syriac *ʿēdtā* ("the church"), *ʿammā* being a term more often used in Syriac literature, even from the fourth century onwards, for the Jews.[68] We find in the *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Ṣabbāʿē* something that has been noted for the

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[64] For periodization, see also Paul Devos, "Les martyrs persans à travers leurs actes syriaques," in *Atti del Convegno sul tema: La Persia e il mondo grecoromano* (Rome, 1966), 214–5. In general, see Josef Rist, "Die Verfolgung der Christen im spätantiken Sasanidenreich: Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen," *Oriens Christianus* 80 (1996), 17–42; and Antonio Panaino, "La Chiesa di Persia e l'Impero Sasanide. Conflitto e Integrazione," in *Cristianità d'Occidente e Cristianità d'Oriente (secoli VI-XI). 24–30 aprile 2003. LI Settimana di Studio della Fondazione CISAM* (Spoleto, 2004), 765–863 = Idem, *Politica Religiosa e Regalità Sacra nell'Iran Preislamico* (Milan, 2007), 815–9 on the *Martyrdom of Gregory*.

[65] Sebastian P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982), 1–19 at 5, 7, repr. in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London, 1984).

[66] AMS 2.136.04, belonging to Wiessner's *Steuerquelle*, see Gernot Wiessner, *Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II* (Göttingen, 1967), 71–2.

[67] For a critique of the standard view, see Michael G. Morony, "Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire," in G. Gnoli, ed., *La Persia e Bisanzio* (Rome, 2004), 161–79.

[68] Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 13; Idem, "A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida," *Analecta Bollandiana* 96 (1978), 167–81 at 171, repr. in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*.

works of Aphrahat, a prose writer of the 340s, much of whose large corpus polemicizes against Judaism: anxieties about Christian communal boundaries in the fourth century had more to do with Jews and Judaizers than with "pagans" and "paganism."[69] For example, the enemies of Tarbo, the consecrated lay sister of Simeon bar Ṣabbāʿē, are the malevolent Jews, who accuse her of witchcraft.[70]

The knowledge of Zoroastrianism in these texts is usually slim and pertains primarily to areas having to do with political authority. As with the fifth-century *Book of Steps* and Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*, the pagans persecuting this community are often nondescript. We would have no idea that they were Zoroastrian if we were ignorant of the texts' provenance. In line with Sasanian practice, Christians commonly are referred to by their enemies as *Nāṣrāyē*, "Nazarenes,"[71] and *ḥarrāšē*, "sorcerers,"[72] whereas the shah is depicted as seeing himself as a descendent of divine seed, even as a god.[73] Zoroastrian worship rarely is addressed nor is there any knowledge of the complexities of Zoroastrian theology.

In the *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Ṣabbāʿē*, as well as other texts such as the *Martyrdom of Posi*, a closely related document, there is a persistent emphasis on the existence of two distinct jurisdictions, *šulṭānē*: one, that of the Catholicos Simeon, pertains to people's souls and the invisible world, and the other, the shah's, is *ʿālmānāyā*, "worldly," and concerns visible creation.[74] This distinction appears earlier in Greek apologetic and martyrological texts, and even in Augustine's *City of God*, composed at relatively the same time. Moreover, the *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Ṣabbāʿē* shows an acute awareness of the peace of the church that has occurred in the west, but avoids excessive triumphalism, which would certainly exacerbate the problems of Christians under Persian rule. Martyrdom here is a glorious act performed for both the community and God in imitation of Christ: unlike later texts, it is not a representational critique of Zoroastrianism.[75]

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[69] E.g., Adam H. Becker, "Anti-Judaism and Care of the Poor in Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 20," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10.3 (2002), 305–27.

[70] AMS 2.254.09.

[71] E.g., ibid. 148.09, 169.09.

[72] E.g., ibid. 148.03, 158.14, 171.11.

[73] On the Sasanian divinization of the king, see, e.g., Antonio Panaino, "Astral Characters of Kingship in the Sasanian and Byzantine Worlds," in G. Gnoli, A. Panaino, eds., *Convegno internazionale: La Persia e Bisanzio (Roma, 14–18 Ottobre 2002)* (Rome, 2004), 555–94.

[74] AMS 2.137.07–08, 15, 17; 138.08–09, 11; 141.07ff; 161.03ff; 166.18. For an attempt to date the *Martyrom of Posi*, see Gernot Wiessner, "Zum Problem der zeitlichen und örtlichen Festlegung der erhaltenen Syro-Persischen Märtyrerakten," in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte* (Göttingen, 1968), 231–51.

[75] AMS 2.153.01, 183.13, 193.03–04, 194.02–04, 199.09.

Many of the characteristics of "fear" found in the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh already can be found in the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Ṣabbāʿē*. In justifying the theodicy of the persecution, the text quotes Job 1:9–11, where Satan needles God by suggesting that "Job does not fear you." Simeon is maligned as sharing (literally, "son of") his "fear" with the enemy, the Roman emperor.[76] The text demonstrates a pluralized notion of fear when Simeon warns his flock, "Now keep away from the fears of the vessels of Satan," and then lists various heretical and pagan groups.[77] Gushtāzād, whose tale is included in Simeon's, is deceitfully persuaded to worship the sun and then "afterward remain in your fear."[78] When he seeks Simeon's forgiveness for his lapse, Simeon chastises him, "You feared the sound of oppression and in a moment destroyed your life. You deserve a bad recompense, because your vision was agitated by transitory glory, and you did not fear that glorious and holy one, the hidden existent, the king of all worlds, whom because of the force of his glory the seraphs dare not behold."[79]

When Simeon asks the magi why they are oppressing the church, they explain, "It is because you are not members of (literally, sons of) the fear of the King of Kings, whose nature is from the gods."[80] The events of the persecution are referred to as a "contest (*āgonā*) of the fear of God"[81] and Simeon makes it clear that he does not want people to think he showed any fear in the face of death.[82] Several times in the text the biblically loaded command, "Do not fear!" is used.[83] In his parting words, Simeon explains that the many who were suffering "died a death that is for the sake of the fear of God"[84] and in a list of parallel properties of God and human beings he states, "Ours is fear, his is the gracious gift."[85]

"Fear" terminology is prevalent in a number of other texts also associated with Seleucia-Ctesiphon, such as *The Martyrdom of Posi*,[86] and those related texts concerned with Karka d-Lēdān in Khuzistan, in contrast, for example, to the Adiabene cycle, where it does not occur, perhaps because this latter

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[76] Ibid. 142.16.

[77] Ibid. 150.19–151.01; see also 151.12.

[78] Ibid. 155.14.

[79] Ibid. 157.04–08; see also 168.03.

[80] Ibid. 160.21–161.01.

[81] Ibid. 178.11.

[82] Ibid. 190.02.

[83] Ibid. 193.02, 193.17, 205.01.

[84] Ibid. 201.07.

[85] Ibid. 202.02.

[86] Ibid. 224.05; 213.06, 12, 16; 215.03, 04, 09, 11, 21; 211.01, 06, 11; 216.06, 15; 217.03, 07; 213.21; 219.03; 224.21 (organized in order of usage).

series of texts derives from a different, northern locale.[87] "Fear" in these texts is often something one can have, change, give up, or differ from someone concerning.[88] What we find in these texts is similar to the later martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh but to a lesser extent.

As opposed to these earlier martyrdoms, which usually concern collective punishment of churchmen and devoted laity (*benai qyāmā*), the second group of martyr acts describes a period of sporadic violence against individual Christians, especially converts, during low points in relations between the Sasanians and Rome.[89] A flurry of violence occurred at the end of the irenic rule of Yazdegird I (399–420).[90] Such events continued on and off again through the rest of the fifth century under Vahram V (421–438) and Yazdegird II (439–457). These middle period martyrdoms occurred after the development of a working relationship between the Church of the East and the Sasanian leadership in the early fifth century. Van Rompay has argued that the martyr texts from early in this period reflect a campaign "to win back Christians of high status to the official religion."[91] But these texts also reflect what was a socially and politically destabilizing zeal on the part of some Christians: two of them describe individual Christians assaulting fire temples. This is perhaps not a coincidence: as the Church of the East found a better fit within the Sasanian Empire, more direct conflict with Zoroastrian belief and practice erupted.

Such physical assaults have their intellectual equivalents. These martyr acts depict their heroes as trumping learned elites in argument, and also attempt to negotiate the relationship between ex-Zoroastrians and the piety they have rejected.[92] The longest of these middle period texts is the Pethion-Ādurhormizd-Ānāhīd cycle, which describes events up to the persecution of ca. 446–448 CE.[93] In brief, Yazdīn and Dādgushnasp are the two sons of Mihryār. The former rejects a magian education and becomes a monk.

[87] See also Brock, "A Martyr at the Sasanid Court," chs. 4, 5, 6, 10.

[88] See *Martyrdom of Martha*, AMS 2.233.07; 234.07; 234.21; 235.21–22, which may be a reference to the Middle Persian *wehdēn* (*weh* is "good"; see *dēn* below); 236.10; and *Great Slaughter of Bēt Huzāyē*, AMS 2.246.14–15. For a translation of Martha, see Sebastian Brock, Susan Ashbrook Harvey, eds., *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, 1998), 67–72.

[89] For the former, see, e.g., the titles of the Forty Martyrs (AMS 2.325.01–13).

[90] Luk Van Rompay, "Impetuous Martyrs? The Situation of the Persian Christians in the Last Years of Yazdgard I (419–420)," in M. Lamboigts, P. van Deun, eds., *Martyrium in multidisciplinary Perspective. Memorial Louis Reekmans* (Louvain, 1995), 363–75; and Scott McDonough, "A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgard in Christian History and Historiography," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008).

[91] Van Rompay, "Impetuous Martyrs?", 371.

[92] E.g., ibid. 366, on Ḥashshu debunking the idea of the divine nature of fire.

[93] AMS 2.559–631. Translated portions appear at Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 66–7, 82–9.

Years later he converts the latter, and his nephew Pethion becomes his disciple. Eventually Pethion heals Ānāhīd, and she and her father, Ādurhormizd, convert to Christianity and are martyred. The cycle ends with the martyrdom of Pethion. It is important to note that everyone in this multi-generation story was originally a Zoroastrian.

Elsewhere, it has been argued that this text "offers an excellent example of the pedagogical understanding of Christianity in the Syriac milieu, particularly the idea of conversion to Christianity as a rejection of one form of learning and the acceptance of another."[94] Syriac Christians often imagined Christianity as a form of pedagogy, a practice of learning and teaching, deriving from the true teacher, Jesus, and from God, the father who created the world as a classroom in and by which humans can learn about him while they are in it. The instances where fear of God is tied to the language of pedagogy help to demonstrate that "fear" is not a simple affective response, but a cultivated habit.[95] Whereas such a tendency can be found even in the earlier Shapur II martyr acts, the characters in the Pethion-Ādurhormizd-Ānāhīd cycle explicitly reject Zoroastrian religious schooling and engage in learned rebuttal of Zoroastrian dogma. Furthermore, the language of "fear" even is occasionally linked to that of pedagogy.[96]

One instance of intellectual confrontation occurred, we are told, when "the king sent a man known within the kingdom, whose name was Ādurfrazgard, who was lofty in their learning and renowned in their piety (literally, fear), in order to come and teach, warn, and turn him (Ādurhormizd) back to their worship."[97] If Ādurfrazgard is not successful he is to have Ādurhormizd executed in order to frighten others into conformity. He asks Ādurhormizd if he does not receive many benefits and honors from his relationship with the king and what, in contrast, is the benefit he derives from the "Nazarenes" that he would reject "our own *dēn* (piety)."[98] He explains that according to the Avesta, the Zoroastrian sacred texts, there is a correspondence between the good things of this world and the good things of the next one, the king of this world corresponding to Hormizd in paradise.

In response, after making a clear distinction between the goods of this world and those of the next, Ādurhormizd engages in an extended refutation

[94] Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, 2006), 31.

[95] E.g., *Martyrdom of Barbaʿshmin*, AMS 2.296.03–04; 298.07–08, 14–15; *Martyrdom of Posi*, AMS 2.212.14–15; 216.03, 06; 222.02, 11, 14, 15; *Martyrdom of Ṭāṭāq*, AMS 4.181.08, 11; *Martyrdom of Mihrshabur*, AMS 2.535.11–12.

[96] E.g., AMS 2.575.14.

[97] Ibid. 575.12–15.

[98] Ibid. 576.05–06; see below for discussion of *dēn*.

of the god Hormizd. Ādurfrazgard beats him, and, pointing to the dangers of loss in an orally based system of learning, yells, "I suffer very much for you and I am saddened about that Avesta that you have learned, which you now destroy."[99] Ādurhormizd responds, "I wonder at you that you adhere to the teaching of Satan and yet boldly name the straight faith of the fear of God as the teaching of Satan."[100] Ādurfrazgard implores him, "Say a *nask* (portion) from the Avesta and immediately you will be part of Hormizd and Satan will leave you." Ādurhormizd continues his resistant reversal, "Do not call God Satan. Because it says in our book, woe to the one who calls evil good and good evil."[101] Payne has recently argued that this text, whose heroine even is named after one of the major figures of the Sasanian pantheon, Ānāhīd, engages in a not-so-subtle displacement of the Zoroastrian cult, tying Christian elites to the land of the Iranians, Ērānshahr, in a subversive yet ultimately conventional manner.[102]

The term "fear" as it was used in the earlier period ("fear of God," "fear of death," plural "fears") is not uncommon in the texts from the middle period.[103] Christians, however, are no longer the persecuted "people of God" of the fourth century. They now convert others and are apprehended for it, but nonetheless continue to resist Zoroastrian dominance. Knowledge is more commonly at center stage in these texts and a greater awareness of actual Zoroastrian practice and belief is evident. In some of the earlier texts, Judaism is not treated as a distinct system of learning and community. Rather, the Jewish community appears imbricated in the Christian one and the texts seem to be trying to make a clearer social differentiation. In contrast, in some later texts we find aggressive physical assaults on Zoroastrianism, whereas in the Pethion-Ādurhormizd-Ānāhīd cycle there is a focus on learning and knowledge as places that represent porous boundaries, places to engage with Zoroastrianism and, out of this engagement, to draw a triumphal difference.

The third and final group of martyr acts, which includes those of Gregory and Yazdpaneh, describes the occasional harassment and execution of usually highly-placed elite Christians of Zoroastrian background during the reigns of Khusro I (531–579) and Khusro II (590–628). As Walker has noted, family

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[99] Ibid. 579.19–20.

[100] Ibid. 580.01–03.

[101] Ibid. 580.06–07 and 08–10 respectively. See Is 5:20.

[102] Payne, "Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity."

[103] E.g., *Martyrdom of Ṭāṭāq*: AMS 4.181.07–08; 183.05; 183.12–13; *Martyrdom of Jacob the Cut-Up* (Intercisus): AMS 2.540.18; 543.1, 2; 546. 13, 17; *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*: AMS 4.195.16; 196.04, 12; 198.03, 14; *Martyrdom of Mihrshabur*: AMS 2.536.7–8; 538.3–4; *Martyrdom of Peroz*: AMS 4.254.10; 255.04, 09, 14; 259.01, 06.

bonds are absent from these later texts, as opposed to those of the earlier periods.[104] The stories are not intergenerational like the Pethion-Ādurhormizd-Ānāhīd cycle. Furthermore, these texts often are explicitly tied to cultic sites, and in fact one of them is a martyr text without a martyr: the *History of Mār Abā*, the Catholicos who died in 552, is similar to these other texts in many ways, but the hero, after years of imprisonment and zealous refutation of his adversaries, dies a natural death. These texts are also the most literarily complex of the three periods. They contain ornate language with a fuller Syriac periodic prose style, prefaces more clearly imitative of Greek literary forms, fuller reliance on scriptural quotation and allusion, similes and other literary motifs, and more developed temporal schemes. In general, these often long texts show how the earlier literary form evolved from being texts about the meaningful death of martyrdom to texts about meaningful lives that end in meaningful death. Occasionally, the authors are themselves well-known persons within the Church of the East.[105]

These accounts, which address singular and sometimes even wholly fictional martyrological events, such as the *History of Mar Qardagh*, often engage closely with Zoroastrianism and the Sasanian political apparatus. In the *History of Mār Abā*, for example, the hero is accused by the magi of converting Zoroastrians, especially magi, rejecting Persian marriage practices, restricting Christians from eating ritual meat, and settling legal disputes outside of his jurisdiction.[106] At one point, when asked why he is unable to keep to himself, he responds, stating:

> Regarding this faith in God which everyone ought to acknowledge, a person does not have the authority to say, "It is mine alone," as the rest of the empty religions (*deḥlātā*) (allow). As this air that we breathe is common to all human beings and as, in turn, the light of the sun, moon, and stars, so by a myriad myriad and more than this Christianity is not mine alone, but rather belongs to all rational beings who have passed on, who are present, and who are going to be, and whose will it is to believe.[107]

Such an expansive statement points to a new, ideologically aggressive stance, and is appropriate to one accused of treading into the territory of the politically dominant religious class. We know that Mār Abā was a reformer whose

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[104] Joel T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley, 2006), 208–9.

[105] See G.J. Reinink, "Babai the Great's Life of George and the Propagation of Doctrine in the Late Sasanian Empire," in J. W. Drijvers, J. W. Watt, eds., *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium & the Christian Orient* (Leiden, 1999), 171–93.

[106] Bedjan, *Histoire*, 238.10–11, 254.01–07.

[107] Ibid. 231.05–13.

policies reflect the very process of creating religious community.[108] The *History* seems to have been composed within a few decades of the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh and perhaps in the same region of Bēt Ārāmāyē. Although fear terminology is far less prevalent in this text, similar concerns about communal boundaries appear throughout.[109] With regard to the formulation of religious community vis-à-vis Zoroastrianism, what is far more striking about the *History* is its use five times of the Persian word *dēn*, which is a disputed source for the Arabic word *dīn*.[110] *Dēn* is a complex term with a history stretching back into Avestan times; by the Sasanian period it could represent the whole system of worship of Hormizd.[111] In the *History*, we find it juxtaposed to "fear" when the magi complain to the king:

> The *dēn* of magianism, which was given by the god Hormizd, by which your kingdom is guided, he accuses as something to be rejected and he dismisses and annuls it, and many magi he converts to Christianity, diminishing our fear and increasing his own.[112]

In opposing the magi's *fear*, Abā "turned many magi away from the *dēn* of Hormizd and made them Christians."[113] W.C. Smith has suggested that the Arabic *dīn* may prove an exception to the general rule that there is no equivalent in the premodern period to the western European category "religion."[114] Although the *History* does not refer to Christianity itself as a *dēn*, its use of the term to describe what Christians reject, especially in such proximity to the term "fear," points to the all-encompassing transformation of life entailed by Christianity and the "religionizing" process, to use an anachronism, addressed in this study.

Scholars, perhaps rightly, tend to believe the Christian characterization of the Sasanian system as one in which the shah restrained and even went

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[108] Payne, "Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity," and Manfred Hutter, "Mār Abā and the Impact of Zoroastrianism on Christianity in the 6th Century," in Carlo G. Cereti, Mauro Maggi, Elio Provasi, eds., *Religious Themes and Texts of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia: Studies in Honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday on 6th December 2002* (Wiesbaden, 2003), 167–73.

[109] For instances of "fear," see Bedjan, *Histoire*, 212.11–12; 213.13; 214.07–08 (on this passage in general, see Becker, *Fear of God*, 36–8); 261.01–02 and 262.12; 263.04.

[110] L. Gardet, "Dīn," in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Henrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 2007).

[111] Firouz-Thomas Lankarany, *Daēnā im Avesta: eine semantische Untersuchung* (Reinbeck, 1985).

[112] Bedjan, *Histoire*, 227.01–06.

[113] Ibid. 228.17–229.01, also 230.10, 254.03, 255.03.

[114] Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York, 1963), 80–118, esp. 81–2.

against the more zealous magi.[115] The Zoroastrian priesthood had the most to lose from the Christianization of elite society. But we also may read such a depiction of the political and religious dynamic as a textual move to secularize the state, to bifurcate ancient political theology in the same way Christian martyrs did under Rome. As mentioned above, in the west, Christianity, in particular Christian martyrdom, forced a split in ancient political theology, thus constituting religion and politics as potentially autonomous spheres. With very few exceptions (for example, the Apocalypse of John), Christians did not question the fundamental structure of ancient politics or political authority. For example, kingship remained intact, and in fact may have received even further support from this new political theological formation at the same time that it was distinguished from religious institutions (that is, Caesaropapism was not the norm).[116]

A similar rhetorical maneuver, corresponding with the movement of Christianity into the upper classes, can be seen in the second and third periods of the Persian Martyr Acts. The texts often challenge the link Zoroastrians drew between the state and the religion of Ahuramazda (Hormizd) and attempt to negotiate the theological challenge posed by a religiously plural society where conversion to Christianity by elites was restricted. The discourse of "fear," so prominent in a number of the Persian Martyr Acts, is part of this broader negotiation.

Engagement with Zoroastrianism in the Martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh

"Fear," as it appears in the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh, has a background in Syriac biblical translation, but also develops in the Persian Martyr Acts simultaneously with certain political theological, pedagogical, and social ideas, all of which come together in the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh. The elevation of "fear of God" to a central place in these two texts corresponds to the close engagement with Zoroastrian practice and belief we find, in particular, in the *Martyrdom of Gregory*.

As seen above, the *Martyrdom of Gregory* begins with an idyllic description of the peace of the church in the early sixth century. All were free to convert to Christianity, church buildings multiplied, and Christians even were given documents allowing them to go about freely as Christians. This nostalgia legitimates the conversion of the text's hero. Pīrāngušnasp (Gregory's

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[115] E.g., Brock, "Christians in the Sasanid Empire," 6.

[116] See, e.g., Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Monotheistic Kingship," in Aziz al-Azmeh, János M. Bak, eds., *Monotheistic Kingship: The Medieval Variants* (Budapest, 2004), 9–29.

original name), we are told, was from Ray (near modern Tehran) and belonged to the noble Mihrān family, which other sources tell us was important in Khusro I's military administration.[117] He was among the elite close to the king and had the security of certain regions under his jurisdiction.

The story begins in March of 518 just before the festival of Frawardīgān (Hamaspathmaēdaya), referred to by one scholar as the "Zoroastrian All Souls Day."[118] This festival of the frawards, or fravashis, which are both beneficent supernatural beings like angels as well as souls of the departed, extends through the last days of the twelfth month and precedes Nō Rūz, the new year holiday and the most important of the seven major festivals.[119] At night during Frawardīgān the fravashis return to their places on earth. Food is left out for them and they feast on offerings made to them just as the living themselves feast during the celebration. During this time of largesse "created man remembers and honours those just men who have lived on earth before him, and thinks . . . on judgment, heaven, and hell."[120]

On this festival, Gregory converts to Christianity: "When the festival (ʿēdā) that the magi perform for Satan arrived, which they call Frawardīgān, before the day itself arrived for Pīrāngušnasp to perform that festival for Satan, on that very night a divine revelation came upon him and an angel in glorious light appeared to him, which stood before him and said to him, 'Pīrāngušnasp, arise, and go and make yourself a disciple and become a Christian'" (351.05–11). This angelic visitation occurs again the next day, and Pīrāngušnasp becomes afraid and confused. The next morning, his underlings notice something changed in their master. By divine instigation a certain magus asks him if he has become a Christian, and from this Pīrāngušnasp understands the source of these visions, although he denies that he has converted, calling the magus a liar. This would have been a special insult to a Zoroastrian, because *druj*, the lie or deception, is a primary characteristic of Ahriman, the adversary of the cosmic order.

In the middle of the third night Pīrāngušnasp awoke from his sleep and saw "a joyous and pleasing light, which was illuminating the whole house and encircling it (or, him) on all sides, and a man who was dressed in white and

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[117] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 101–4.

[118] Mary Boyce, "Iranian Festivals," Ehsan Yarshster, ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, 3: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods,* vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1983), 797.

[119] See, e.g., William W. Malandara, tr., *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions* (Minneapolis, 1983), 102–17, for a translation of Yasht 13 on the fravashis. For a later description of the festival's meaning, see Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième live du Dēnkard* (Paris, 2000), 101 (26a).

[120] Boyce, "Iranian Festivals," 2.797. On the social function of the holiday and in regard to this text, see Payne, "Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity."

radiant apparel and standing in the middle of that light" (352.15–353.01). White is the normal dress for angels in the East Syrian tradition, but white is also worn by Zoroastrian priests, and is especially common on Nō Rūz, the holiday immediately following Frawardīgān. This was also the case in antiquity. Angels and light commonly accompany Gregory in his later travails, from his stay in the pit (358.01), where he is served by angels, as was Christ (Mk 1:13 and parallels), to his imprisonment (380.03–04). But light, a characteristic of Hormizd and all that is good (cf. Middle Persian *rōšn*), and the presence of beings similar to angels fit a Zoroastrian context as well. In contrast to this divine light, at Gregory's death the created light of the sun goes out, as occurred at the crucifixion. According to the text, this serves as a lesson that the sun is created and not to be worshipped (389.08–15), perhaps a subtle criticism of Mihr (Mithras), the source of his clan name, Mihrān, and the divine being associated with the sun and celebrated on Frawardīgān.[121]

The divine being says to Pīrāngušnasp, "For how long will you linger in your ancestral piety (literally, fear of your fathers) of magianism? Arise, and go and become a Christian, as I said to you. Be confirmed and have no doubt about my words: behold, you have seen the light of the Messiah" (353.02–05). Pīrāngušnasp immediately seeks baptism, but he must do it away from home and in secret, for the Christians who live in his vicinity are afraid of baptizing such a powerful Zoroastrian. The text then states, "The day arrived for him to perform a *yasht* (ritual offering) of sin" (354.06–07). The other magi are thrilled. They dress up in their finest, expecting to gorge themselves on various foods and to be treated by their leader to all sorts of honors. The cohort of magi gathered together for the feast become impatient, waiting for the formal invitation to enter the "polluted meal" (354.15). "Arise and perform the *yasht*," they say, "make us rejoice today with food and drink, and honor us with many honors, from this great wealth which Hormizd gave you" (355.01–03). In response, Pīrāngušnasp openly rejects Hormizd and his supposed gifts and announces that he is a Christian, and no longer will serve demons (*šēʾdē*).[122] His expectant guests are amazed and ask if perhaps a *dēv* (Syriac *dayvā*, demon) has taken control of him. He responds, "Truly heretofore I served the *dēvs* and I fulfilled their will in all despicable deeds because Hormizd is a *dēv* and not a god. But now I am a Christian and I fear the lord God of heaven, that one who made heaven and earth and everything within them" (355.14–356.02; cf. 369.04–05). The magi go away disappointed, especially because their stomachs are empty.

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[121] On Mihr worship, see Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 350–68.

[122] E.g., D.N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London, 1971), 26: dēw; the Middle Persian heterogram used for *dēv* is based on the Aramaic word *šēʾdā*.

We find in this text a subversive play on Zoroastrian ritual and knowledge. Pīrāngušnasp's frawashi turns out to be his guardian angel, the divine light is that of the Messiah, and like a good Zoroastrian he continues to curse the *dēvs*, only now Hormizd is included among them (cf. 399.11–12). Moreover, this text suggests that converts could continue to employ a subtle knowledge of the piety they left behind: this is similar to what we find in the *Life of Īšōʿsabran*, by Catholicos Īšōʿyahb III (647/50–657/8 CE), where the hero, when he studies the psalms, must be corrected for continuing to bob his neck like a Zoroastrian engaged in oral learning.[123]

In the earlier period, when Christians were more distant from the Zoroastrian authorities, there was a diversity of "fears." Now, there are various fears, but only one true fear, one that anyone, even Zoroastrian elites, could and should know and feel, the fear of the God of the Christians. Much of this is more readily apparent in martyr texts: what better place to consider the power of fear than in a genre that describes public mutilation and execution? Furthermore, what better place to develop categories of affective, epistemological, and social difference than in a genre where such differences serve as an engine for the narrative? The martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh push forward the trend we find in the earlier martyr acts to such a degree that it seems that "fear" is being promoted as a category for understanding how Christianity fits into an ethnically and religiously diverse society and where the boundaries were to be drawn.

Internal Boundaries: Christology and Fear

The martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh respond to a Zoroastrian nemesis, and differentiation of true from false "fear" is one of the goals of the two texts. But just as the primary cause of fear in this world is death, which in turn is overcome through Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection, we also can discern in the texts a link between fear and Christology. Fear of death is an affective response to our own mortality and, as the opposite of the fear of God, it must be overcome.

We can see such a link between Christology and fear in the East Syrian exegetical tradition, for example, when Ishoʿdad of Merv comments on Luke 22:44 from the passage known as the Agony in the Garden. In its description of Jesus in prayer on the Mount of Olives, Luke 22:44 states, "In his anguish (Gr. ἀγωνία) he prayed more earnestly" (New Revised Standard Version).

[123] J.B. Chabot, ed., "Histoire de Jésus-Sabran, écrite par Jésus-yab d'Adiabène," *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires* 7 (1897), 525. See comments at Becker, *Fear of God*, 205–6.

The Peshitta translates the Greek ἀγωνία as *deḥltā*, preserving the problematic Christology of the passage for those later Christians who wanted to maintain Christ's unaffected nature. Commenting on this passage, Isho'dad of Merv states, "And because he was bearing the fear (*deḥltā*) of the whole world and fulfilled all the fear that had come upon human nature; on account of this his fear went beyond the measure of human nature."[124]

Similar concerns about Christology and fear in the martyr acts may reflect actual internal disputes within the community in the sixth century, a time when miaphysitism (monophysitism) began to spread in Mesopotamia. If the external enemies of the martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh are Zoroastrian, the internal ones, the proximate other, are those Christians who do not maintain an "orthodox" (i.e. dyophysite) Christology. The one explicit controversial statement about Christology is where the author states that Gregory decided to return from the Roman Empire, "because of the blasphemy of the Romans against the divine nature and the untruth of their belief about the incarnation of our lord Jesus Christ" (361.03–06). More common than this overt Christological concern is the motif of Christomimetic performance that we find in both texts. The author(s), being dyophysite(s) (that is, the theological tendency inaccurately known as Nestorian), would have considered the transformative suffering of mortal flesh to be one of the points lacking in miaphysite theology. In response to this, their heroes' suffering is at center stage and the show is a reiteration of the East Syrian theology of death and how it can be overcome.

One of the major sources of fear is death, both the death threatened by persecutors, which is an inappropriate object of fear (for example, 406.02, "temporary death"), and the permanent death of those who will not receive immortality through Christ. "Death," we are told, "is set in the nature of human beings" (408.12). The texts linger on the mortality of human nature and the wondrous capacity to overcome it through endurance: "The fear of God within him, which was transcending the nature of human beings" (370.08–09), or "This frightening sea of death the crossing of which is difficult for the nature of human beings" (377.12–14; cf. 379.08). As a result of Gregory's wondrous deeds, at the place of his martyrdom many "who saw manifestly its power in the mortal human being" gathered to praise "the divine nature" (392.02–03).

The immortality of the saint, and of us all, through imitation of Christ is anticipated in Gregory's lifetime. He is described as transformed. After being

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[124] M.D. Gibson, ed., *The Commentaries of Isho'dad, Bishop of Ḥadatha (c. 850 AD)*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1911), 85–6.

sealed in a house for a week, those who find Gregory see that his face is "like the face of an angel" (372.01). The more punishment he receives, the more his power is made manifest. After being beaten the whole night through, his body was mutilated, and with a Christological touch, "all of his wounds were running with blood and water" (372.12–13; cf. John 19:34). The spectacle observed by "angels and human beings" demonstrates victory over death. "On that night the prison became a theater (literally, place of visions, *bēt ḥezwānē*) for angels and human beings, gathered there and standing in great wonder, seeing a mortal human being contending with death and conquering it" (372.14–18; cf. 1 Cor 4:9). Again, after this he has a "face of an angel" (373.07). Gregory's acts cause others to praise the "divine nature" (373.10), and he is described before his death as "laughing, rejoicing, exulting, and skipping, and his face like the face of an angel" (386.11–12). Those who observe him claim, "Perhaps this man is not a mortal human being, but is one of the spiritual powers and appears in the likeness of a human being" (386.18–387.02). Again, his transformation is one characterized by light and he is described as being "in the likeness of the light of the sun" (386.14–15).

Both texts, but especially the former, repeatedly emphasize the cosmic theatricality of the events they describe. Gregory's endurance and martyrdom are described as a performance "before (*l'ēn*) angels and human beings" (349.15, 350.07–08), "causing angels and human beings to wonder" (359.04; cf. 363.06–07), so that he can receive glory "from both holy angels and human beings" (382.17; cf. 383.05). The emphasis on Gregory's endurance (for example, 363.04; 394.09; Syriac *mḥamsnānutā* = Gr. ὑπομονή) seems to derive in part from IV Maccabees, where the same virtue serves as a central focus of spectacle (for example, 15:28, 17:17, 23).

Like Christ's, Gregory's death occurs at the sixth hour of Good Friday and by this "Christ made known manifestly before all creation his secret love for him" (383.11–14; cf. 387.15–16; cf. Mt 27:45 and parallels). Notably, Gregory's prayer before dying, which describes death as "fearful and hard for the nature of mortals" (385.06–07), references the Agony in the Garden, for example, when he asks God, "give me power so I may drink this cup of death" (385.05–06; cf. Luke 22:42). Finally, the sun goes dark at Gregory's death, recalling again the crucifixion (389.08–15). False fear has been vanquished by the saints, not only in their intellectual disputes with Zoroastrians, as seen above, but also through their endurance and Christomimetic suffering.

Intimate Boundaries: The Monastic Comparanda

"Fear of God" also appears in a number of Syriac monastic texts as a virtue to be cultivated by Christians, especially in literature influenced by the Syriac reception of Evagrius of Pontus and the tradition of the Egyptian desert

fathers. That these two very different genres, monastic literature and martyr acts, should share this feature makes sense. Both function to define Christianity, although the former focuses on the Christian self and the latter on that self within a community. Furthermore, based upon actual connections made in some ancient sources, scholars long have seen a link between asceticism and martyrdom, inasmuch as both often involve, for example, an emphasis on self-control, strong concerns for performance, and the staring down of pain and suffering. Both also often are centered on the body and its ultimate problem, mortality.[125]

The seventh-century monastic writer Isaac of Nineveh begins his large collection of ascetical discourses by paraphrasing a statement by Evagrius of Pontus about the fear of God.[126] In a discussion of zeal (*ṭnānā*) Isaac later makes an explicit distinction between the two different forms of fear (*deḥltā*).[127] The positive form, related to zeal, derives from the "irascible" faculty of the soul (Plato's τὸ θυμοειδής) and serves as a guard for virtue, working for the sake of the soul.[128] In contrast, another form of fear "is for the sake of the body." The person with this fear "has doubted in his faith concerning God's providential care; he has forgotten how God is concerned for those who care for virtue, taking care of their affairs at every moment."[129] "Fear for the body" is one of a number of "passions."[130] In contrast, "fear for the soul" causes "fear for the body" to melt "before it like wax by the force of the flame."[131] Despite its importance, fear of God for Isaac is an inferior motivation when set next to love of God and joy.[132] The martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh offer several instances of this same love and joy, superior to fear, particularly in their repeated use of the image of the bridal chamber (377.16–17; 385.9–10; cf. 392.12 and 401.06).

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[125] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Edessan Martyrs and Ascetic Tradition," *The Harp* 6.2 (1993), 99–110 = René Lavenant, ed., *Symposium Syriacum V 1988* (Rome, 1990), 195–206, notes an ascetic interest in the earlier western, Edessene martyr texts.

[126] Isaac of Nineveh, *De perfectione religiosa*, Paul Bedjan, ed. (Paris/Leipzig, 1909) 1.1.1; Mary Hansbury, tr., *St Isaac of Nineveh on Ascetical Life* (Crestwood, NY, 1989), 25; also *Praktikos* ch. 81, Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford, 2003), 110.

[127] Isaac of Nineveh, *"The Second Part," Chapters IV-XLI*, Sebastian Brock, ed., tr. (Louvain, 1995), ch. 17 (= ch. 55 in Isaac of Nineveh, *de Perfectione Religiosa*).

[128] Ibid. 17.6; versio 91, see n.1.2.

[129] Ibid. 17.6; versio 93.

[130] Isaac of Nineveh, *De perfectione religiosa* 2.30 (pp.18–9); Hansbury, *St Isaac of Nineveh*, 40.

[131] Isaac of Nineveh, *De perfectione religiosa* 2.35 (p. 20); Hansbury, *St Isaac of Nineveh*, 41; see also Ps 68:2.

[132] Note the explicit comparison to martyrdom at Isaac of Nineveh, *De perfectione religiosa* 348, and the reference to misguided fear at ibid. 352.

The significance of this monastic usage is that it reveals the same dichotomy between true and false, good and bad, fear that we find in the martyr acts, as well as the same joy as the higher goal of the rightly guided fear. But whereas the martyr texts are often explicitly about communal difference, and the two fears are mapped onto those inside and outside the community, the monastic literature engages in more intimate ethical exhortation and employs this dichotomy to distinguish between the true Christian self and its wrongly guided other. Both usages, however, are about a certain ethical quality Christians are to cultivate. When they are placed side by side, we can draw a direct line from monastic ethical discourse to communal boundaries: boundaries of the self correlate to the boundaries of the community.

Conclusion

This study has a number of implications. For example, Pines has argued that the Middle Persian designation for Christians, *tarsāk*, pl. *tarsākān*, from the root *tars-*, "fear," derives ultimately from the famed "God-fearers," the still-contested group commonly mentioned in discussions of the audience of the early Jesus movement.[133] He acknowledges an absence of such an equivalent term from Syriac, but suggests that the Mandaean evidence supports his claim and that the term was likely used by non-Christians. In contrast, this study demonstrates that there is ample evidence in East Syrian texts of the use of "fear" terminology in Syriac. This seems, however, more often to derive from Peshitta usage and developments internal to the Syriac reception of Greek and Hebrew texts than from an earlier usage of such terminology. Perhaps there were God-fearers among the earliest converts to Christianity in Mesopotamia. Pines, for example, points to the conversion to Judaism of the kingdom of Adiabene as evidence for "God-fearing" in the region. But the evidence for the early community remains sparse, and even if "God-fearing" lies at the root of the earliest spread of Christianity in the region, it is clear that "fear" is more common because of the later reasons addressed above.

This material also has significance for our thinking about early Islamic sources. In ethical discourse, *deḥltā* is similar to the Arabic *taqwā*, which also means "fear" and is "a positive ethical quality which Muslims are entreated to cultivate."[134]

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[133] Shlomo Pines, "The Iranian Name for Christians and the 'God-Fearers'," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968), 143–52.

[134] Erik S. Ohlander, "Fear of God (Taqwā) in the Qur'ān: Some Notes on Semantic Shift and Thematic Context," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 50 (2005), 140.

> Here, the "fear of God" begins to take on a particular colouring, namely as a positive moral quality that characterizes the paradigmatic believer (*mu'min*) and which, conversely, is totally lacking in the unbeliever (*kāfir*). . . . Fear is no longer simply a psychological state brought on by eschatological warnings but is rather cast as a moral virtue to be cultivated by believers. . . . an ethical quality by and through which the challenges of daily life can be navigated. This is where it begins to approach the notion of "religious conscience."[135]

The Arabic *taqwā* seems to have shifted from eschatological fear to being a virtue typical of one who was the opposite of the *kāfir* ("infidel, renegade") and the *ẓālim* ("oppressor").[136] This shift corresponds to the Syriac martyrological usage of "fear," and *ẓālim* and *kāfir* are both cognate with Syriac terms: oppressors (*ṭālōmē*) try to compel Christians to "deny" (*k-p-r*) their God.

In the Qur'an, in *Surat al-Kāfirūn* (109), we find *dīn*, a word of contested origin, used to express what for lack of a better term we may call religious differentiation: "O you disbelievers. I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. . . . To you is your *dīn*, and to me is my *dīn*." The Arabic sources and the word *dīn* are introduced here not only for purposes of comparison, but also because the Syriac material may have a more direct bearing on the development of early Islamic ideas and practice than it might seem. For example, long ago Wensinck suggested a Syriac origin (Syriac *sāhdā*) for the Arabic word for "martyr," *shahīd*.[137] The Persian Martyr Acts bolster this claim: for example, a possible Syriac predecessor of the *shahāda*, the Muslim confession of faith, appears in a number of these pre-Islamic texts, including the *Martyrdom of Gregory*: His co-prisoners whom he converts, when tortured, cry out, "We are Christians and we will not deny (*kāphrin*; cf. Arabic *kāfirūn*) Christ, he who is the true God, and again there is no other God but he" (370.14–15; cf. 366.04).[138] To cast the net more widely, we could also compare the Syriac and Arabic sources to the usage of the idiom *kōphēr b-* in Rabbinic sources and the notion of the "fear of heaven."[139]

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[135] Ibid. 149–50.

[136] Ibid. 148.

[137] A.J. Wensinck, "The Oriental Doctrine of the Martyrs," *Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Afdeeling Letterkunde* 53 (1921), ser. A, no. 6, 147–74 = *Semietische studiën uit de nalatenschap van Prof. Dr. A. J. Wensinck* (Leiden, 1941), 90–113; also P. Peeters, "Les traductions orientales du mot Martyr," *Analecta Bollandiana* 39 (1921), 50–64; and E. Kohlberg, "Shahīd" in C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, G. Lecomte, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol.9, fascs.149–150, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1995), 203–7.

[138] See also *Martyrdom of George*: Bedjan, *Histoire*, 538.04; *Martyrdom of Shabur*: AMS 2.53.1; *Martyrdom of Peroz*: AMS 4.260.06–07.

[139] E.g., Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages*, Israel Abrahams, tr. (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 26–30 and 402–4 respectively.

Leaving behind these historical-philological questions, we also might note how fear is Janus-faced in the martyr acts we have examined: it is both a rightly aligned affective knowledge leading to immortality and joy and a misguided confusion about spiritual priorities and the meaning of death. It is easy for us to forget the shuttering, trembling sense of fear implied throughout, especially because the texts' pathos can all too easily be treated as overly sentimental and their macabre depictions of public mutilation and execution as gruesome but ultimately cartoonish violence. Furthermore, fear is not simply an irreducible emotional response, but, as we saw during the so-called "War on Terror," it is something that motivates people and, as any other emotion, can cathect onto a variety of objects. In the material addressed in this study, it is an embodied form of knowledge that is evoked, while at the same time it serves in the textual process of coercion that creates religious subjects.

Religious affect, even when it comes in the form of fear, is now more widely recognized by scholars as a force to be reckoned with, whether it be in the ancient Near East[140] or among contemporary American Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who organize Christian "Hell Houses" in order to scare people into accepting Jesus on Halloween.[141] In the paradigm of "fear" presented by these martyr texts, we do not find simply an attempt to justify the occasional suffering of Christians under Sasanian rule, a narrative "opiate" which would function to alleviate the stress of an oppressed religious community. Rather, as with martyr texts in general, fear, suffering, and pain are evoked, even cultivated, in order to be controlled both through a rechanneling of their affect toward their correct object, God, and through their transcendence in joy. The coercion of the text, its capacity to redirect affect, is not unlike the actual social tensions that evoked the public violence it describes: both function to create subjects within communities.

Moreover, we should not forget the practical context of such texts: ritual and celebration at the saint's tomb, performative events that contribute, in Durkheim's famous phrase, to "collective effervescence" and the renewal of community. This, however, was not just renewal, but assertion: in what is clearly a jab at Zoroastrian concerns for purity, a sweet odor, we are told, wafts out of Gregory's tomb, drawing in all passersby and reaching the king's camp (392.09–10). Similarly, perhaps the sound of celebration at the martyr's tomb could be heard at the same camp, a sound that would only further irritate the magi.

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[140] Amy Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around: Horror, Monsters, and Theology in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York, 2008).

[141] Ann Pellegrini, "'Signaling Through the Flames': Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling," *American Quarterly* 59.3 (2007), 911–35.

Finally, if religion in the modern world is the result of specific historical processes, we as historians need to engage in an historical anthropological interrogation of the diversity of formations that come about in antiquity before "religion."[142] Unfortunately the study of religion (for lack of a better term) in antiquity often remains in an Enlightenment framework. For example, it is common to find the anachronisms "persecution," "tolerance," and "church-state relations" in scholarship on the Sasanian Empire as well as elsewhere. Furthermore, scholars have begun to argue that the political theology of certain Zoroastrian sources was "perhaps more a reflection of the uncertainty of the times and the Sasanian struggle with religiopolitical issues than a genuine reflection of the actual state of affairs."[143] Rather, "Zoroastrianism never succeeded in imposing a spiritual supremacy that was not almost always challenged and in some periods turned out to be downright feeble."[144] As the Martyrdoms of Gregory and Yazdpaneh suggest, "religion,"—or, rather, "fear" or "dēn" and their relationship to the political sphere—were variously constructed and consistently contested.

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[142] See concluding comments in Adam H. Becker, "The Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism' in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians," *AJS Review* (forthcoming).

[143] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 328.

[144] Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin* (Leiden, 1989), 172, quoted at Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 337.