John the Solitary's Epistle to Marcianus: Edition, Translation, and Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an edition, translation, and analysis of the heretofore unpublished *Epistle to Marcianus*, an early fifth-century letter attributed to Mar John the Solitary of Apamea. Mar John has long remained a somewhat shadowy figure in Syriac studies, given the complexities of his writings, confusion about what texts should be attributed to him, and his condemnation as a heretic by later Syriac writers. However, scholars have recently begun suggesting that Mar John was in fact quite influential in the development of Syriac ascetic theology. The *Epistle to Marcianus (EpMar)* considers the passion of lust, which is personified as the biblical figure of “Lady Folly” from Proverbs 7. In the letter, Mar John warns a young monk, Marcianus, about the dangers that lust poses as well as the means by which one can break the passion’s hold on him or her.

The first chapter offers a general introduction to Mar John as well as *EpMar*. In chapter 2, the Syriac edition and English translation of *EpMar* are presented consecutively, preceded by brief notes on the editorial policy and translational method employed. Chapters 3 and 4 offer an initial analysis of *EpMar*. Chapter 3 systematizes and expounds the theology of lust found in *EpMar* and characterizes the epistle as an ad hoc work of pastoral advice. Chapter 4 considers *EpMar* in its Johannine context as well as in the context of late-antique asceticism more generally, with specific reference to the writings of Evagrius of Pontus. Chapter 5 offers a brief reflection on the significance of Mar John and *EpMar* and suggests future avenues of research.
This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Ethan Laster, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Art in Ancient and Oriental Christianity

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. **AN INTRODUCTION TO JOHN THE SOLITARY AND THE *EPISTLE TO MARCIANUS*** ................................................................. 1

Introducing Mar John the Solitary .......................................................... 3

Considering Mar John's Identity ...................................................... 3

Towards a Pre-Chalcedonian Life of Mar John ................................... 8

Paleographic Evidence ...................................................................... 9

Christological Evidence: Post-Second Ecumenical Council 
(381 CE) .................................................................................. 11

Christological Evidence: Pre-Fourth Ecumenical Council
(451 CE) .................................................................................. 16

Reception of Mar John’s Ascetic Theology ....................................... 22

Mar John’s Geographical Context ..................................................... 26

Mar John as ٥٥٥١ ................................................................. 27

Regarding Mar John’s Corpus ......................................................... 29

The Contours of Mar John’s Theology and Its Influence ............... 30

Introducing the *Epistle to Marcianus* .............................................. 33

The Issue of Authorship .................................................................. 34

Concerning the Audience of *EpMar* ........................................... 35

Defining ٥٥٥١ as “Lust” ............................................................... 36
# The Path Ahead

II. **SYRIAC EDITION AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

**Editorial Considerations**

**Translation Policy**

- Balancing Literalness with Dynamism
- Gendered Language
- Footnotes and Section Breaks

**Syriac Edition of *Epistle to Marcianus***

**English Translation**

III. **TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF LUST IN THE *EPISTLE TO MARCIANUS***

**Concerning the Nature of Lust**

- Lust as “Lady Folly”
- Lust as Enemy Combatant
- Enslavement to Lust
- Lust as Epistemic Crisis
  - “The Quality of Complete Reversal”
  - The Denial of Death
  - Lust and the Mis-Ordering of Priorities

**Combating Lust**

- Youthfulness and Vulnerability to Lust
- The Epistemological Function of the Spiritual Guide in *EpMar*
- The Clarification of *Telos*
- Reading Scripture as Ascetic Practice
EpMar as Exposé .................................................................................................. 88

IV. LUST IN ITS JOHANNINE AND EVAGRIAN CONTEXT ....................... 89

EpMar, Lust, and the Johannine Corpus............................................................... 90

   The Use of ﬂ and the Language of “Lust” in Other Johannine Texts......................... 90

   Lust/Desire in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit” ........................................... 90

   Lust/Desire in the “Commentary on Ephesians 6:11” ...................................... 93

   Lust/Desire in the Dialogue on the Soul ......................................................... 94

Summarizing the Language of Sexual Lust in Mar John............................... 95

Thematic Similarities between EpMar and Other Johannine Works........ 96

   The Language of Combat.................................................................................. 96

   Wakefulness, Darkness, and the Mind ........................................................... 96

   Hope as Motivator for Ascetic Progress ....................................................... 97

   Illness and Health as Metaphor ....................................................................... 98

Regarding Johannine Authorship of EpMar .................................................. 98

Considering Evagrian Influence on Johannine Conceptions of Lust.......... 100

   Linguistic Considerations .............................................................................. 101

   The Language of “Lust” in Evagrius Ponticus .............................................. 101

   Comparing Johannine and Evagrian Theologies of Lust ............................ 102

      Lust among the Passions ........................................................................... 103

      The Demonic Nature of Lust ................................................................... 106

      Lust and the Spiritual-Anthropological Schemata ..................................... 109

A Pre-Evagrian John the Solitary? ................................................................. 112
V. ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *THE EPISTLE TO MARCIANUS*................. 114

Mar John as Syriac Father................................................................. 114

Future Avenues for Research on Mar John and the *Epistle to Marcianus* .... 116

Research on the Johannine Corpus ............................................... 116

Research on *EpMar*..................................................................... 117

Final Thoughts .............................................................................. 118

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................. 119
CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION TO JOHN THE SOLITARY AND THE EPISTLE TO MARCIANUS

A considerable lacuna in Western historiography of late-antique Christianity is attention to the so-called “Oriental Orthodox” expressions of the Christian faith. So skewed has been the academic and (perhaps even more so) public attention towards the Latin and Greek Christian traditions that one recent popular account deemed the Oriental Orthodox churches part of a “lost history of Christianity.” However, we in the west would be remiss to attribute the supposed vanishing of this history to anything other than our own self-imposed lack of attention; we have simply not bothered to look far enough east. An important task for contemporary scholarship is to make more widely available the texts, theologies, and histories of these ancient Christian traditions. The present study represents a modest contribution to this broader scholastic project through the study of a seminal author in the early Syriac tradition, John the Solitary.

1. Named after the Greek word for “East,” this tradition includes churches that used (and in many cases continue to use) liturgical languages such as Armenian, Ge’ez, Coptic, Arabic and Syriac.


3. While the present project is responding to historiographical needs, it is more textual, literary, and theological in nature. Such studies are needed in order to allow greater access to the primary sources in the Syriac tradition necessary for writing history proper.
Mar John the Solitary⁴ (also known as Mar John of Apamea) was a fifth-century Syriac Christian who wrote a variety of spiritual, exegetical, and theological texts. Despite the existence of a large corpus of writings attributed to Mar John, he remains a somewhat enigmatic figure in Syriac studies: little is known about his actual life, and his identity—not to mention the nature of his theology—has long been debated. While recent decades have seen a growing awareness among scholars of Mar John’s influence on later Syriac writers and a portrait is beginning to emerge of Mar John as a foundational thinker for the tradition, further study of this elusive figure is still necessary. In particular, the editing and translating of Mar John’s largely understudied corpus is a critical need for the advancement of scholarship.

*The Epistle to Marcianus (EpMar)* is an as yet unpublished text attributed to Mar John and contained in the manuscript London, BL Add. 17170.⁵ The epistle is an extended discussion on the bodily passion of lust addressed to a younger ascetic named Marcianus. It warns about the ways that lust seizes its victims and offers advice for how to overcome the traps of lust. Scholars have been aware of this text for some time, but none have published it or studied it in depth. The primary aim of this thesis, therefore, is to produce an edition of *EpMar* from BL Add. 17170, as well as an English translation. Additionally, the following work analyzes the theology of lust in *EpMar* in an effort to

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⁴ “Mar” is a Syriac term meaning “lord,” commonly used as an honorific term to describe people of particular holiness deserving of respect. John the Solitary is typically described as “Mar” in the manuscript tradition, including the *Epistle to Marcianus*, and I will thus be utilizing it hereinafter.

⁵ The designation “BL Add.” stands for “British Library Additional,” indicating that the manuscript is owned and housed by the British Library in London. Images of BL Add. 17170 were obtained by the Center for the Study of Ancient Religious Texts at Abilene Christian University for the purposes of this study.
bring it into conversation with other works in the Johannine corpus as well as other treatments of sexual passion in Late Antiquity.

**Introducing Mar John the Solitary**

**Considering Mar John’s Identity**

Study of Mar John the Solitary must begin by wrestling with the issue of his identity. Because Mar John is such an enigmatic and under attested figure, there has long been confusion over who he is and whether the texts attributed to him all share the same authorship. Traditional accounts of Mar John’s identity, as Vööbus comments, “have been more confusing than helpful.”

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on Perfection.”  As Dempsey Rosales Acosta observes, this list has formed part of the basis for the theory that the Johannine corpus is actually the work of multiple authors. Authorial attributions in the Johannine manuscript tradition have also complicated matters. In the earliest manuscript, BL Add. 17169, works in the Johannine corpus are ascribed to מָר יוֹסֵף (“Mar John the Solitary”). BL Add. 17170, however, attributes the works simply to מָר יוֹסֵף (“Mar John”). Some texts in these manuscripts also appear without a name. According to Sebastian Brock, furthermore, other manuscripts are variously attributed to John of Apamea and John of Lykopolis (erroneously).

The complexities and inconsistencies of the tradition’s own identification of Mar John account for modern scholarship’s lack of consensus about the identity of the historical Mar John. A significant part of the problem is mere ubiquity; one can only imagine the number of monks named John living in fifth-century Syria and after. Further obfuscating the issue is the lack of textual studies on Mar John’s sizeable corpus; there are simply not enough textual and linguistic data at this point to distinguish what might be called a “Johannine style.” Finally, the various ascriptions of heresy to Mar John have complicated attempts to identify the historical person, especially because recent


12. BL Add. MS. 17169, folio 1v. Cf. W. Wright, Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts II (London: The British Museum, 1871), 453. Images of BL Add. 17169 were obtained by the Center for the Study of Ancient Religious Texts at Abilene Christian University for the purposes of this study.


scholarship on Mar John has called into question these supposed heretical views in light of the extensive use that Isaac of Nineveh makes of his thought.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Mary T. Hansbury, modern scholarship has proposed a variety of solutions to the historical Mar John problem, suggesting up to three authors as accounting for texts attributed to Mar John. Werner Strothmann maintains that there was only one Mar John, though he posited three categories of authenticity, with genuine texts (such as the \textit{Dialogue On the Soul}, and the Thomasian letters) reflecting themes of hope of the new life and the tripartite schema of the body, soul, and spirit.\textsuperscript{16} Irenée Hausherr, however, insists on three individual authors:

1) John of Apamea of Syria, a fifth-century miaphysite monk,
2) John of Apamea, labeled a Gnostic by Theodore Bar Koni,
3) John of Apamea of Mesopotamia, an eighth-century dyophysite monk.\textsuperscript{17}

Brock contends that John of Apamea should be distinguished from “John the Egyptian” opposed by Philoxenos and has proposed a single orthodox author as accounting for the corpus ascribed to Mar John.\textsuperscript{18}

A key issue is whether the authors “John the Solitary” and “John of Apamea” are the same person. It seems likely that they are one and the same for several reasons. First,

\textsuperscript{15} For Isaac’s use of Mar John, see Sebastian Brock, “Discerning the Evagrian in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: A Preliminary Investigation,” \textit{Adamantius} 15 (2009): 60-72. See further discussion of Mar John’s orthodoxy below.


\textsuperscript{18} Sebastian Brock, \textit{A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature}, \textit{Moran Eth’o} 9 (Kottayam: SEERI, 1997), 31-32.
a tenth-century lexicon describes Mar John the Solitary’s monastery as being in the region of Apamea.\(^{19}\) Thus both Johns are linked—albeit one more explicitly than the other—to the same location. Second, Hansbury has suggested, expanding an allusion made by Lavenant, that the richness and complexity of Mar John’s writings might have led to multiple identifications. Mar John’s corpus is diverse, and later interpreters and readers could have found it difficult to believe that it could all be the product of one person.\(^{20}\) Third, despite the diversity of Mar John’s corpus, Brock suggests that all the works published so far under Mar John’s name appear to be genuine, especially in their articulation of the tripartite spiritual schema.\(^{21}\) Fourth, we may draw a final, though admittedly more tenuous, connection from Lucas Van Rompay’s brief discussion of John’s Commentary on Qohelet, which in its oldest manuscripts bears the name “John the Solitary.” Van Rompay describes the exegetical strategy of John as “betray[ing] a proximity to Antiochene exegesis.”\(^{22}\) Apamea, located in western Syria, was less than a hundred miles south of Antioch and undoubtedly was in close contact with it as a place of great spiritual influence.\(^{23}\) The upshot is that the authorial attribution of the Commentary on Qohelet once again links John the Solitary to an approximate region of Apamea.

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19. Ibid.


Nevertheless, despite the strong evidence that John of Apamea and John the Solitary were the same person, much more extensive study of the manuscripts is required. Numerous works are attributed to Mar John, but many have not been edited, much less translated. As new works come to light and currently published works are studied more extensively, the question of Mar John’s identity should be reevaluated. For instance, the possibility of pseudepigraphic or misattributed texts in Mar John’s corpus further complicates the search for the historical Mar John. Those scholars who have argued for a single “John” as accounting for the entirety of the Johannine corpus must still deal with the fact that many Syriac authors in the ensuing centuries regarded Mar John as heretical.

Recently, Acosta has provided a helpful framework for understanding the historical Mar John that accounts for complexities of his corpus, his reception as a spiritual master, and the condemnation of his writings as heretical in later centuries. Rehabilitating the proposals of Hausherr and Lavenant, Acosta essentially advocates for a “multiple persons theory.”24 It is easier, he argues, to conceive of the fifth-century John the Solitary of Apamea as a “proto-John” who was later conflated with a variety of heretical figures and to whom a variety of pseudonymous or misidentified writings were attributed.25 These later accretions should be distinguished from the authentic proto-John. Notably, Acosta’s proposal actually adopts Strothmann’s identification of varying categories of authentically Johannine writings, although Acosta eschews Strothmann’s somewhat dubious suggestion that the so-called “unauthentic” writings were later

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25. Ibid. 20-21.
corruptions of Johannine texts, in favor of a simpler, outright rejection of their authenticity.\textsuperscript{26} Acosta’s framework is commendable for its common sense, attentiveness to the available data, and simplicity. Nevertheless, his proposal does fall short insofar as he fails to provide further criteria for actually categorizing texts as authentic other than, following the suggestions of Strothmann and Lavenant, to treat the Thomasion letters and dialogues and the \textit{Dialogue on the Soul} as constituting the core of the authentic texts attributed to proto-John.\textsuperscript{27}

The present study follows Acosta in considering the fifth-century Mar John the Solitary of Apamea as the proto-John who was evidently respected by Philoxenos and Babai, and of whose writing Isaac of Nineveh made extensive use. As such, when reference is made to “Mar John,” the reader should understand this as referring to proto-John, with whom this thesis is primarily concerned. However, a great deal of research is still necessary to distinguish authentic Johannine writings from unauthentic. Hopefully in the coming years, as more of Mar John’s works come under study, scholars may develop a better sense of the nuances and characteristics of his writings, form a more robust view of the historical Mar John’s style, and be able to identify the author/s of the various works attributed to him.

Towards a Pre-Chalcedonian Life of Mar John

Even if we take John of Apamea and John the Solitary to be the same person—the proto-John of Acosta’s historical framework—scant details about the life of Mar John

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 22-23.

\textsuperscript{27} See Strothmann, 56-61. Cf. Dempsey Rosales Acosta, “John of Apamea: His Identity and His Dualistic Anthropological Schema,” \textit{Teología y Cultura} 11, vol. 16 (Dec. 2014), 1-4. Acosta writes in “Historical John of Apamea,” 11, “These writings have the major theological themes of hope in the resurrection, God’s economy of salvation manifested in Christ, the spiritual path that includes the notions of the superior invisible senses of the soul, and the obstacles of the present corporeal world.”
exist. Most scholars today believe that he lived sometime during the fifth century, likely during its first half. 28 This time frame is suggested due to the dating of the manuscript tradition, Mar John’s theological emphases, and the reception of Mar John’s writings by later authors in the Syriac tradition.

**Paleographic Evidence**

The paleography of our earliest extant manuscript of Mar John’s works limits our discussion of his lifetime to roughly the fifth century. These works—of which there are nine—are contained in the British Library’s Add. MS 17169. Three aspects of the manuscript are worth briefly noting. First, a note on folio 26a near the end of the manuscript states “this book was completed in the month of Khaziran in the year 892,” which would correlate to 581 CE.29 Assuming the accuracy of the colophon, Add. 17169 provides our earliest definitive date for the existence of a corpus of Mar John. Second, the editor of the manuscript refers to John of Apamea as ܐܡܘܢܥܝܪܐܬ, an honorific title literally meaning “My Lord, John the Solitary.”30 The choice of language is important. Payne Smith notes that Mar (ܡܪ) is used “not only in addressing a superior, but as a title of ecclesiastics and saints.”31 Thus in distinguishing John as “Mar,” the editor is describing an author who has achieved a level of considerable saintly repute and importance. Third, the manuscript is a collection of disparate texts, marked by brief

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30. Ibid.

editorial notes. For instance, the word ܳܠܳܐ ("again" or "the same") appears in between individual texts, marking a transition from one to the next while also affirming their common authorship.\(^{32}\) Likewise, all of the works begin with brief descriptions—such as “a letter that John the Solitary sent to Eutrophius and Eusebius”—that do not appear to be original to the texts.\(^{33}\) These editorial notes suggest that BL Add. 17169 is at least a few steps removed from the initial composition of Mar John’s writings. The manuscript is certainly not an autograph, and the attention given to collecting, distinguishing, and titling diverse texts demonstrates an already-established sense of a broader corpus. We are not simply dealing with a haphazard collection of disparate leaflets but rather a presentation of an extensive body of work by a recognized author.

Though the physical evidence is scant, I concur with Arthur Vööbus that the evidence limits our discussion of Mar John’s lifetime to roughly the fifth century.\(^{34}\) While 581 CE is the earliest firm date we have for the existence of Mar John’s corpus, BL Add. 17169’s editorial notes and textual diversity show it to be a later reception of the initial works. By 581 CE, Mar John was well known and read widely enough, to merit the collecting and editing of his texts. Furthermore, if BL Add. 17169 is a copy of a previous collection—not the initial edition—then the date of composition is even earlier. Allowing time for the dissemination, collecting, editing, and copying of Mar John’s texts that must have occurred prior to 581 CE, we can assume the end of the fifth century to be the

\(^{32}\) Wright, *Catalogue II*, 451.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

absolute latest possible date for Mar John’s literary career.\textsuperscript{35} Thus while BL Add. 17169
does not offer a definitive date for the life of Mar John, its colophonic and editorial
evidence does set a useful parameter.

\textit{Christological Evidence: Post-Second Ecumenical Council (381 CE)}

Beyond the manuscript tradition, however, we have only the internal evidence in
Mar John’s writings to suggest a time frame for his life. Because Mar John’s writings do
not provide any substantial chronological information (i.e., mentions of persons or
events), we must rely on significant theological themes, ideas, and vocabulary for dating.
In particular, Mar John’s doxological and christological language is important when
considering a time frame for his life and will therefore be examined here.

Mar John’s doxological writings, first and foremost, demonstrate a synthesis and
acceptance of so-called pro-Nicene theology that suggests he was writing well after the
triumph of Nicene theology at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. Lewis Ayres, in
his seminal work, \textit{Nicaea and Its Legacy}, describes three “theological strategies” that are
indicative of pro-Nicene theology.\textsuperscript{36} The theological strategies are a) speaking of unity
and diversity in the Trinity, b) interweaving Christology and ontological speculation, and
c) having an anthropological perspective that sees Christians as “embedded within a
cosmos that … reveals the omnipresent creating consubstantial word.”\textsuperscript{37} Pro-Nicene
theologians were immensely careful in their speech about God. While they would employ

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} For Ayres, pro-Nicene theologies are those that support the Trinitarian definition of God as
defined at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Furthermore, they are “those [theological accounts] recognized as
orthodox by the Council of Constantinople (381) and by subsequent imperial decrees.” See \textit{Nicaea and Its
239.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 278, 302-21, 325.
numerous metaphors to describe the unity and diversity of the Godhead, they quickly hedge against making any such speech totalizing. Their concern was to guard against the notion that any created thing could know God essentially—God is a mystery that is ultimately beyond comprehension. As Gregory Nazianzen writes,

> To know God is hard, to describe him impossible…. To tell of God is not possible, so my argument runs, but to know him is even less possible. For language may show the known, if not adequately, at least faintly, to a person not totally deaf and dull of mind. But mentally to grasp so great a matter is utterly beyond real possibility even so far as the very elevated and devout are concerned.  

Mar John betrays very similar theological commitments in his christological doxologies, published by Manel Nin. God, Mar John says, is “ineffable,” “unfathomable,” and a “sea in his secrets.” Even when something can be known about the Godhead, mysteries still abound below the surface of such knowledge: “there, in the concealment of knowledge, is a fount of mysteries.” Mar John also draws on the language of the “veil” in describing God’s hiddenness. He writes,

> An eye [exists] without seeing him, an ear without hearing him, an enlightened mind without gazing upon him…. Whoever draws near to you stands in silent wonder. My Lord, in the sanctuary of your silence hangs a veil. Beyond it, with trembling, the assemblies of light hallow you, who are hidden from the eyes of all created things.

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41. Ibid., 210.

42. Ibid., 209.
This striking passage demonstrates well the \textit{totality} of the mystery of the Godhead. God is beyond words, and silence surrounds him. Creatures, contingent upon their creator, cannot perceive God with any sort of sensory faculty. Even higher beings, those “assemblies of light”—a term Mar John seems to use to describe the heavenly host surrounding the throne of God—are incapable of experiencing directly the glory of the Lord and must be content to tremble on the other side of the veil that conceals him. Elsewhere, Mar John reminds his readers that God is the “person without our needs” to whom the only proper response is silence.\footnote{43. Ibid.} Investigation of the Godhead is itself difficult and problematic, for as Mar John writes, “to meditate is fear, and to speak is trembling.”\footnote{44. Ibid.} Like his Syriac forbearer, Ephrem the Syrian, John is highly aware of the “ontological chasm” that exists between humanity and God, and he does not presume to cross it.\footnote{45. Sebastian Brock, \textit{The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem} (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 26-27.}

God is not completely unknowable, however. For pro-Nicene theologians, recognizing Jesus as fully divine and equal with the Father has crucial implications for the understanding of the cosmos. If, as Col 1:16 suggests, all things were created in and through the Word, then the created order must be uniquely privileged both in its relation to the Godhead and in its ability to reveal God. Pro-Nicene authors expressed this privilege of creation by means of two strategies: “a common use of pro-Nicene Trinitarian principles to articulate an account of God’s immediate presence to, care for, and yet distinction from the created order … [and a] common conviction that the creation
is intended to draw the human soul towards God." 46 For pro-Nicene theologians, then, God—while being mysterious and transcendent—is present to creation, which in turn points back to its creator.

Mar John’s doxologies find remarkable resonance with this aspect of the pro-Nicene tradition as well, in which “the mind [is] constantly concerned to develop awareness of and attention to the mysteriousness of the divine existence, to the graciousness of God’s self-revelation and drawing of humanity into the divine life.” 47 Mar John dares to speak of the Godhead insofar as he is able. Because God is pervasive throughout creation, he is also near to it. In the Johannine doxologies, God feeds, summons, teaches, beckons, protects and holds every created thing. Like a mother bird “hovering over all,” God safeguards the existence and well-being of the created order. 48 This insight springs directly from God’s transcendence in these doxologies: it is because God is constantly near to all things that he can be near to one thing. To put it more succinctly, God is transcendent because of his radical immanence. Furthermore, God is not just immanent because of his pervasiveness. God is also immanent because he is creator and savior and thus directly responsible for what he has made. As Mar John begins in one doxology, “Holy are you Father, Holy are you Son, praise to the Holy

46. Ayres, Nicaea and Its Legacy, 320. Cf. Augustine of Hippo, The Literal Meaning of Genesis, vol. 1, trans. John Hammond Taylor (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 167. “God would not make creatures unless He knew them before He made them; nor would He know them unless He saw them; nor would He see them unless He possessed them; nor would He possess what had not yet been made except as uncreated being, as He is Himself. Although the Divine Being is beyond words and cannot be spoken of in any way with human language without recourse to expressions of time and place, whereas God is before all time and all place, nevertheless He who made us is nearer to us than many things which have been made. For in Him we live and move and have our being.”

47. Ayers, Nicaea and Its Legacy, 342.

Spirit! Power that created the incorporeal worlds.”⁴⁹ Mar John continues by describing the wonder, perfection, and goodness of this creating Godhead,

where the house of light shines, land of just encampments, abode of true powers, habitation of eternal life, meadow of glorious flocks, bridal chamber of spiritual marriage, desire of the Holy Church, fortification of light which cannot be broken through, legions of spirit which are not harmed, palace of the king of all, where iniquity has no power and does not encamp its legions—for this one kingdom is without care.⁵⁰

Life within the Godhead is idyllic. It is where justice resides, eternal life dwells, sin’s power is broken, and no care exists. Nevertheless, despite its contrast with the de facto realities of the cosmos, the life of the Godhead is not withheld from humanity. The desire of the Church is not left insatiate—God has not abandoned his creation to suffer a lesser existence to no end. In the striking conclusion to the second doxology, Mar John writes, “This one knowledge that perfected its handiwork holds the sum of his mysteries, who preached the name of the spiritual place to the corporeal world, so that his name might coax us, and we might be made worthy of his bliss.”⁵¹ Here, John depicts a God who draws humanity to himself, “coaxing” it with his name into a spiritual existence where we might experience the beatific vision (“bliss”).⁵² God’s immanence extends to his desires: he is a God who not only sustains humanity presently but who also leads it upward to a higher state of being, into the very life of the Godhead. Humanity is made to experience the presence of God, with all its joys, and God actively works to bring his

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⁴⁹. Ibid.
⁵⁰. Ibid.
⁵¹. Ibid., 210.
⁵². Cf. Hansbury, John the Solitary, 10, “The one who is concerned about the wisdom hidden in [created things], he is a spiritual person, contemplating the works of the Lord of all with the senses of the soul.”
creation into such a state. Thus immanence and eschatology are closely bound for John, for God— in his intimacy to created things— leads creation to its ultimate end in himself.

I offer one final observation about immanence and doxology: when drawing out the immanence of God in Mar John’s doxological texts, we should remember the nature of doxology. As a mode of praise of God, doxology will naturally focus on the great characteristics and great deeds of God. If there is not something transcendent about God, then is God truly worthy of praise? But doxological speech also entails a human dimension— while speaking of the greatness and transcendence of God, Mar John is also speaking as an individual who makes claims about God. His praise of God entails the immanence of God, for it means that God is not so hidden as to be completely inscrutable or unknown. Thus like other inheritors of the Nicene tradition, Mar John attempts to describe how humanity is caught up in the contemplation of God and brought into participation of the life of the Godhead.

Christological Evidence: Pre-Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 CE)

If the content of Mar John’s doxologies places his thought and work after the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, then his Christology suggests he wrote prior to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, possibly even before the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). As Vööbus comments, John’s “Christology is presented at a point in time which reveals no polemical atmosphere at all. That which is presented … unfolds a time before the christological controversies arose.” 53 Several other contemporary scholars place Mar John in the first half of the fifth century. For example, de Halleux suggests 430-450 CE for Mar John’s career, and Brock likewise cites the second quarter of the fifth century as

53. Ibid.
the likeliest time for Mar John’s activity.\textsuperscript{54} Close examination of Mar John’s Christology in available sources confirms such a dating. As Vööbus has correctly observed, Mar John’s christological language is pre-Chalcedonian in that he does not appear to be familiar with the Chalcedonian definition or the debates surrounding it. Furthermore, his Christology lacks the polemical overtones and semantic nuance that characterized post-Chalcedonian christological terminology; therefore, Mar John likely wrote prior to the council.

The first half of the fifth century was a watershed moment for Syriac Christianity. By the end of the contentious ecumenical councils at Ephesus (431 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE), Syriac Christians had formed three disparate theological streams. The so-called Melkites (“Royalists”) accepted the Council of Chalcedon and remained in communion with the Byzantine church. Two other Syriac groups were dissenters from the Chalcedonian formulation of faith. The miaphysite Syrian Orthodox Church emphasized Christ’s one nature, and the dyophysite Church of the East—which had previously rejected the Council of Ephesus—followed closely the two-nature Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia.\textsuperscript{55}

In response to these theological divisions, Syriac Christians began to express the need to clarify and establish normative theological language. While not unaware of the Greek tradition, in its early phase Syriac Christianity had been characterized more by a “symbolic theology,” seen most explicitly in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373),


which eschewed definition and argument for poetry and reflection upon the symbolism of faith. Christological thought was marked primarily by reflections on scriptural stories, and there was little attempt to standardize theological terms. But in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon, Syriac-speaking Christians began to recognize the need to use more precise and uniform language so as to distinguish orthodox beliefs from heretical and prevent improper readings of Scripture and creeds. Sebastian Brock has labeled this linguistic shift in the fifth and sixth centuries as “the period of transition.” He notes, “the exigencies of the Christological controversies of the time force[d] Syriac writers... to abandon (or at least radically adapt) the native Syriac tradition of symbolic theology in the face of philosophically oriented Greek theology.” In particular, Brock points to the example of Philoxenos as an author who embodied the shifting sensibilities of Syriac Christianity. Serge Ruzer and Arieh Kofsky have demonstrated in *Syriac Idiosyncrasies* how Philoxenos was aware of the potential for multiple theological meanings to emerge from biblical texts—particularly the Peshitta—and went to great lengths in his exegesis of Scripture to affirm miaphysite Christology. Indeed, Philoxenos was so concerned with translation mistakes from the Greek into Syriac (from which questionable theology could emerge) that he sponsored revisions of Syriac translations from the Greek texts of


57. Sebastian Brock, “From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning,” in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984), 20.

58. Ibid.

the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the New Testament.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, Philoxenos even “felt it necessary to apologize for the imprecision of Ephrem’s language.”\textsuperscript{61} Thus there was significant concern in the Syriac world of the fifth century to clarify and make uniform its theological language.

Such concerns are not apparent in the work of Mar John. Rather, his christological discussions resemble something much closer to Ephrem: extensive meditation upon the biblical stories, with little attention given to using precise christological terminology, for instance, the beginning of Mar John’s “Doxology concerning the Blessings”:

Blessed is the one who has seen the Messiah in the mind, and has known him crucified, and participated with his disciples in the time of his ascension and has been blessed by his holy hands and worshipped him, and has seen him in glory with his mind after the resurrection, and has entered with him to that place, and has seen him within his mind in that glory of the new world. And his heart has become a holy tomb and he has been buried with him, and has arisen with him after three days and has delighted in holy contemplation. Blessed be him, and blessed be his soul and praise to his Lord who granted it to him… Blessed is the one who has carried you, our Lord, within his heart, in the fashion that Mary carried you within her womb.\textsuperscript{62}

Here Mar John pronounces blessings on the person who has meditated on the life of Christ and, in doing so, has become a mystical participant in Christ’s life, death, burial, and resurrection. Notably, Mar John spends no time addressing the nature of Christ—indeed the incarnation is only briefly referenced as a parallel to Christ’s indwelling within the disciple. Rather, Mar John limits his meditation to the events of Christ’s life as
found in the scriptures and nothing more. Absent are fifth-century creedal formulations about Christ’s humanity or natures or Mary’s identity as Theotokos.

However, Mar John does not shy away from using technical doctrinal formulations in his other christological doxologies. Mar John writes, “I worship you, unshaken being, self-sustaining substance, undiminished power, strength without weakness, unceasing length, glory that does not depart, unchanging light, height without measure, equal in his person, concealed by silence, ineffable, hidden in his secret.”63 Two phrases merit closer analysis. What is rendered literally as “unshaken being” is actually a Syriac formulation to describe God’s impassibility.64 Furthermore, the phrase “equal in his person” is a technical term that is synonymous with the Greek word *homoousios*, basically equivalent to “consubstantial.” The Syriac word for “person” (*qnoma*) came to be used to render the Greek term *hypostasis* after the triumph of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE.65 And as discussed above, Mar John demonstrates an integration of pro-Nicene theological trends elsewhere in his writings. Thus Mar John demonstrates familiarity with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and a willingness to appeal to its formulations. However, he takes no position on the Chalcedonian Creed, nor does he even demonstrate awareness of its terminology.

Furthermore, Mar John’s Christology is without polemic, an observation that Vööbus has also made.66 His tone is in stark contrast to the tone of the debates after the

63. Ibid., 209.

64. For אכפנא as “God who is uncreated and without beginning or end,” in Ephrem the Syrian, see Possekel, *Evidence*, 55-59.


Council of Chalcedon. Anti-Chalcedonian Syriac Christians (which included all except
the Melkites) expressed dissatisfaction with the way the council formulated the terms.
Robert Kitchen provides a helpful analysis of the Council’s decision and the Syriac
response:

The Definition of Chalcedon rejected both the two-nature interpretation of
Nestorius that seemed to imply two Christs (one human and one divine), and the
one-nature interpretation of Eutyches that essentially denied a human element in
Christ. The Council affirmed that Christ existed in one person in two natures,
fully human and fully divine, without confusion, change, division or separation.
Many Eastern bishops disagreed, believing that Christ had One Nature, out of or
from two natures, and refused to sign the Definition.

Simply put, the Syriac terms qnoma and kyana became highly politicized and required
further nuance in the aftermath of Chalcedon. Mar John, however, utilizes both terms
with no hint of concern for clarifying or addressing their proper use in orthodox
statements of faith.

Mar John’s christological language is decidedly pre-Chalcedonian, if not also pre-
Ephesian. While he is willing to draw on Nicene theological formulations, he is silent
when it comes to Chalcedonian language. Nor does this “silence” appear to be one of
protest; Mar John’s writing lacks the polemic and semantic nuance that came to
characterize later debates about the Chalcedonian Creed.

67. Brock offers a translation of Church of the East Catholicos Isho’yahb II’s comment on the
Chalcedonian formulation of faith as a typical polemical response: [The Synod of Chalcedon] “preserved
the true faith with the confession of the two natures, yet by their formula of one qnoma (hypostasis), it
seems, they tempted weak minds. As an outcome of the affair a contradiction occurred, for with the
formula ‘one qnoma’ they corrupted the confession of ‘two natures,’ while with the ‘two natures’ they
rebuked and refuted the ‘one qnoma.’ Thus … they wavered and turned aside from the blessed ranks of the
orthodox.” See Fire from Heaven, 162.

68. Robert A. Kitchen, Introduction to The Discourses, by Philoxenos of Mabbug, trans. R. A.
Reception of Mar John’s Ascetic Theology

Nevertheless, one notable potential objection to such a conclusion remains. In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, some Syriac authors such as Jacob of Serug and Pseudo-Dionysius wrote christological works that were absent polemic, much like those of Mar John. Is it possible that Mar John might be another post-Chalcedonian author who should be categorized within this “position of silence”? 69

Admittedly, the scarcity of published texts and translations of the Johannine corpus make providing a definitive answer to this objection problematic. However, the available evidence suggests that Mar John was writing prior to those emblematic of the “position of silence.” In particular, the awareness of Mar John by late fifth/early sixth-century writers, as well as the reception of Mar John’s writings by a later, diverse tradition indicate that he was a) living at a time earlier than other “silent” authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius and b) writing at a time period when his language did not betray christological commitments that would be distasteful to the various streams of Syriac Christianity.

Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523) demonstrates awareness of Mar John. For some time, Mar John was thought to be the “John the Egyptian” condemned by Philoxenos of Mabbug as a heretic. 70 However, according to Brock, the manuscript tradition does not support the conflation of Mar John with John the Egyptian, and Hausherr has noted that

69. Brock, Fire from Heaven, 164.

Philoxenos refers to him as “the Egyptian” in order to distinguish him from our Mar John.71 Acosta elaborates:

> The appellative with the geographical determination is crucial because the different usage of the name in this case indicates to the reader that Philoxenos wanted to avoid any confusion of personality where the heretical monk, John the Egyptian, could be erroneously identified with the spiritual master known as John of Apamea (Proto-John), who was certainly well known to Philoxenos.72

Strothmann likewise concurs that Mar John lived prior to both Philoxenos and Severus.73

> Furthermore, it seems that Philoxenos perhaps may have even made use of Mar John’s ascetic thought. Though this observation is speculative and requires further elaboration, several passages of Philoxenos’s Discourses display similarities with Mar John’s ascetic thought put forward in the Dialogue on the Soul. For instance, in Memra 6 “On the Fear of God,” Philoxenos writes,

> The body fears whatever harms it, and the soul, moreover, trembles at him who has authority over its destruction. Because just as the fear of the body is of external injuries, or of beasts or of fire, or of swords or of hot irons, or of drowning... or of painful tortures, or bindings and prisons, so also the fear of the soul is naturally of the hidden judge who is able to punish it along with its body through spiritual afflictions according to its nature... Just as the body naturally fears all these things we have considered, so also the soul naturally fears the memory of the judgment of God and of the punishments reserved for those who provoke [God’s] anger, of Gehenna that is threatening those who do evil things.74

Compare the above passage with Mar John’s discussion of fear:

> The fear of the world is caused by the body that is to say, ... fear and terror of things, fear of adversaries. The body is the cause of these fears because it is subject to them ... but the soul is free ... from violent wars, upheavals in various places, earthquakes in various cities ... [and] the power of the rulers of this world


... As to fear towards God, when the soul and body share one purpose, it is: the fear of judgment; the fright of punishment; quaking from the torture of Gehenna; the fear of provoking God’s wrath.\textsuperscript{75}

There are strong parallels between Philoxenos’s discussion of fear and Mar John’s. Both distinguish between the fear of the body, which is oriented toward physical harms, and the fear of the soul, which is oriented toward the wrath of God. While Mar John’s discussion is longer (and not fully quoted here), Philoxenos almost directly mirrors the distinction that Mar John makes between fear of the body and fear of the soul.

Direct literary dependence can of course be very difficult to prove, and while Philoxenos and Mar John could both be drawing on a similar source, this passage is notable because of the way that Mar John’s well-known schema of life at the level of the body and life at the level of the soul appears in Philoxenos’s language. Moreover, others have similarly identified parallel themes, images, and emphases in the writings of Mar John and Philoxenos. Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, for instance, see resonances between Mar John’s and Philoxenos’s theologies of baptism.\textsuperscript{76} Nevertheless, even if no significant literary connection can be demonstrated between Philoxenos and Mar John, what is certain is that Philoxenos was aware of Mar John and considered him worthy of distinction from other heretical writers.

Thus we can take Mar John to be writing earlier than the “silent” christological authors mentioned above. Pseudo-Dionysius is generally thought to belong to the late fifth century or early sixth century. Likewise, Jacob of Serug lived from 451-521 CE. Both would have been rough contemporaries of Philoxenos, and his awareness of Mar

\textsuperscript{75} Hansbury, \textit{John the Solitary}, 168-72.

John suggests that Mar John was writing prior to both Pseudo-Dionysius and Jacob of Serug, firmly in line with my conclusions based on the consideration of Mar John’s Christology.

The reception of Mar John’s writings by the Church of the East further supports my pre-Chalcedonian dating. A number of scholars have noted that Babai the Great (d. 628) quotes a passage of Mar John’s second letter in his *Commentary on the Six Centuries of Evagrius Ponticus*.77 As Kitchen writes, “Babai gives the opinion that John walks in the same company as Theodore of Mopsuestia and Evagrius.”78 Isaac of Nineveh likewise made great use of Mar John’s writings. Brock has shown in his edition and translation of Isaac’s works that Mar John exerted considerable influence on Isaac.79 Brock writes elsewhere, Isaac’s “spirituality draws on many different sources, notably…, John of Apamea (whose threefold pattern of the spiritual life he sometimes employs).”80 Isaac of Nineveh’s use of Mar John is noteworthy, particularly in light of Philoxenos’s use of Mar John. Isaac and Philoxenos represent two distinct strands of post-Chalcedonian Syriac Christianity: Isaac the dyophysite Church of the East, and Philoxenos the miaphysite Syrian Orthodox Church. Mar John, it seems, was acceptable (and useful) to members of both streams of Syriac Christianity. This mutual reception suggests that Mar John’s writings betray no christological commitments that were distasteful to either the miaphysite or dyophysite position, and he could be looked to as a

78. Ibid., 4.
80. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers,* 244.
common spiritual ancestor. Thus a pre-Chalcedonian dating of Mar John offers the best explanation for his reception by later Syriac authors.

Mar John's Geographical Context

Considering the nature of Mar John's life, the two titles given to him—"of Apamea" and "the Solitary"—provide us with some hint at his possible vocation and lifestyle. Apamea was a town in northwestern Syria, less than a hundred miles south of Antioch. Its proximity to Antioch almost certainly guarantees that Mar John was influenced by the theology and culture of Antioch, a fact seemingly confirmed by van Rompay's discernment of Antiochene exegetical strategies in Mar John's writing. The importance of Antioch in John's world can also be seen in the influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia, a representative of the Antiochene approach to theology and exegesis, on Mar John's own thought and work. There is one other noteworthy aspect of Mar John's location in Apamea. The Syriac dialect originated in Edessa, east of the Euphrates; thus "Edessa was the main cradle of Christianity in the whole of the Syriac language area." Nevertheless, in the fourth and early fifth centuries, Edessene Syriac appears to have been only rarely used west of the Euphrates. While used extensively to the east, no extant documents from west of the river appear in Syriac. Mar John is unique for being one of


82. Van Rompay, Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, 631-32. While exegetical proximity does not necessarily equal geographical proximity, it does suggest an influence that would presumably be stronger with geographical proximity.

83. For a description of the parallels between Theodore's thought and John's, see Hansbury, John the Solitary, xviii-xxv.

84. For a brief overview of the importance of Edessa in Syriac thought and culture, see Robert Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition, rev. ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 3-9. Murray considers the competing arguments for the emergence of the Syriac dialect from another city or region, but ultimately settles on Edessa as the most likely choice.
the first Syriac writers, along with Balai of Qenneshrin, active west of the Euphrates.\textsuperscript{85}

Thus in Mar John we see the expansion of the Edessene Syriac dialect throughout the Levant, foreshadowing the eventual pervasiveness of the language throughout the region.

Mar John as \textit{Mar John as \textit{Solitary,}...}

Mar John’s other title, “Solitary,” provides a clue to the nature of John’s life and his spiritual commitments. “Solitary” is a translation of the Syriac term \textit{ihidaya (\textit{่า)}}, meaning literally “sole” or “only.”\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ihidaya}, however, lacking a perfect equivalent in English, is also used to describe individuals consecrated to particular ascetic and monastic lives. Brock provides a helpful overview of the semantic range and uses of the term:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Ihidaya} has a whole variety of different connotations, notably the following: ‘singular, individual, unique, single-minded, undivided in heart; single, celibate; Only-Begotten’. It is very likely that the term \textit{monachos} in the \textit{Gospel of Thomas} (which has a Syrian background) represents this Syriac term \textit{ihidaya}. Only in Syriac texts of the fifth century and later does \textit{ihidaya} come to be used as an equivalent to the Greek \textit{monachos} in the sense of the ‘monk’; more frequently, however... \textit{ihidaya}, in the sense of ‘solitary, hermit’ is reserved for monks who spend longer or shorter periods of solitary life.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{itemize}

Mar John’s title, “the Solitary,” almost certainly implies that he was consecrated to some form of religious life. The question is, what was the nature of this religious life? As Brock’s above quotation demonstrates, Mar John, living in the fifth century, could have been a coenobitic monk described as an \textit{ihidaya}. That linguistic connection was beginning to emerge, and John was connected in later centuries to a monastery near Apamea. Shafiq AbouZayd, however, has suggested that John “was almost certainly a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{85} Brock, “Syriac Culture,” 715.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Payne Smith, \textit{Dictionary}, 191.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Brock, Introduction to \textit{The Syriac Fathers}, xxii.
\end{itemize}
hermit.” In addition to the linguistic support that *ihidaya* most likely refers to a hermit, key evidence for Mar John’s life as a hermit emerges from his dialogue *On the Soul*. As the name implies, Mar John’s discourse about the soul and its nature takes the form of a dialogue between Mar John and a certain Eutropius, accompanied by his colleague Eusebius. In a manner resonant with stories of the Egyptian Desert Fathers or the *Conferences* of John Cassian, Eutropius and Eusebius journey to meet with John in his cell, pray, and seek his wisdom in the spiritual life:

> I, Eutropius, and Eusebius, after we had received [John’s] first letter, we were anxious to come to him. When we entered his cell, we greeted one another with the converse of prayer. Then as we spoke together, many things were said which are not written. Now this was our first question: why, of all bodies, was the nature of the soul placed in a human body?89

Thus, Mar John is portrayed as a spiritual father, and specifically, a hermit who dwells alone in his cell, welcoming and counseling spiritual seekers. Furthermore, even if Mar John is correctly connected to a monastery near Apamea, this does not necessarily imply that he was a cenobite. Indeed, he very likely could have lived a solitary life in close proximity to and limited interaction with the monastery.

Regardless of whether Mar John was a monk or a cenobite, he was undeniably a person of great spiritual insight and a prolific author. The limited works of Mar John that have been closely studied clearly indicate that he was a man of considerable intellect. Brock writes of Mar John’s mental dexterity: “it is clear from the writing under his name—by no means all of which have yet been published—that their author was a man

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of considerable education and culture, and several of his discourses make use of the
dialogue form, essentially a Greek genre.”

Along with his knowledge of rhetoric,
theology, and ascetic theory, Mar John also displays a remarkable knowledge of medical
terminology. Among the works attributed to Mar John are scriptural commentaries,
discourses on prayer, ascetic dialogues, and doxologies—certainly a diverse corpus!

Regarding Mar John’s Corpus

It is worth pausing here to briefly discuss the emerging shape of Mar John’s
varied corpus in present-day scholarship. By my count, there have been nineteen
publications of editions and/or translations of Mar John’s work, only four of which are in
English and a few of which concern the same texts. Among these texts are
christological doxologies, commentaries on Qohelet, Matthew 5, and Ephesians 6,
dialogues on the soul and on passions, and several discourses on practices such as
stillness and prayer. Most recently, Daniel Marolf of Abilene Christian University has
published an edition and translation of Mar John’s “Homily on the Poor in Spirit.”

While this might appear to be a fairly extensive interaction with Mar John’s
corpus, Manuel Nin reminds us that there are at least forty-five manuscripts containing
writings from Mar John, many of which are completely unstudied. Regarding the study


91. See the beginning of dialogue four in Hansbury, John the Solitary, 168-72.

92. See Hansbury’s “Bibliography of Works Cited” in John the Solitary, 201-2. I have added
Hansbury’s edition and translation to my count.

93. Daniel Robert Marolf, “John the Solitary’s Homily on the Poor in Spirit: Edition and

94. Manuel Nin, “La Sintesi Monastica di Giovanni il Solitario,” in Le Chiese sire tra IV e VI
secolo. Dibattito dottrinale e ricerca spirituale, ed. E Vergani and S. Chialo (Milan: Centro Ambrosiano,
2005), 97.
of Mar John, then, the expansion of his available corpus through editing and translating manuscripts is unquestionably necessary. In order for a fuller picture of the historical Mar John to emerge and the nuances of his thought to be illuminated a fuller corpus must be established.

The Contours of Mar John’s Theology and Its Influence

Though significant work remains to access the full scope of the Johannine writings, Mar John’s available corpus (and his modern interpreters) still offer much insight into the nature of his theology. Although some have considered Mar John heretical, there is a growing sense among scholars that Mar John belongs more properly within the bounds of orthodoxy. As Mary Hansbury writes in her introduction to Mar John, “thanks to the critical edition of Isaac Part II … where so many of John the Solitary’s key concepts are seen to be embedded, it is no longer possible not to consider him as within mainstream Syriac tradition.”

Vööbus, less inclined to defend his orthodoxy, claims that Mar John was deemed a heretic at a synod under Catholicos Timotheos I for teaching about visual perception of God. However, Mar John’s christological doxologies display a deep commitment to articulating the hiddenness of God and insisting on the inability for created beings to directly view God. Similarly, Mar John repeatedly insists on the hiddenness of God in


96. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, 109. Vööbus later mentions that a second source views John’s condemnation as a sham because it was handed down out of “envy.”

97. See for instance, this passage from part one of John’s second doxology: “My Lord, in the sanctuary of your silence hangs a veil. Beyond it, with trembling, the assemblies of light hallow you, who are hidden from the eyes of all created things.” See Nin, “Due Dossologie,” 209.
creation throughout *On the Soul*. And indeed, as considered above, Mar John’s varying emphasis on the transcendence and immanence of God is very much in line with Nicene theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian. Thus given the lack of substantial sources describing Mar John’s condemnation as a heretic and close readings of primary sources that make Mar John appear firmly within the mainstream Syriac tradition, the question of why Mar John has come down through tradition as a heretic remains unclear, but is likely attributable to the accretion of later pseudepigrapic writings to the Johannine corpus and the conflation of different personalities writing over a long period of time.

Regardless of Mar John’s relationship to categories of orthodox and heretical (and the historical value of such a question), his influence on later Syriac authors is becoming clear. In particular, Sebastian Brock has drawn attention to the ways that Mar John influenced Isaac of Nineveh. Brock comments, “Isaac clearly also knew and made extensive [use] of the writings of John of Apameia.” In particular, Mar John’s threefold spiritual schema (to be described more fully below) seems to have been very influential on Isaac’s thought as well as his phraseology of the “passions.” Mar John was not just influential on Isaac but “clearly exerted a profound influence on virtually all

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98. See Hansbury, *John the Solitary*, 22. “When a gift is given him [i.e. a person at the level of the soul], he receives this working of signs because these are the things which are extolled among men, and by these they are able to receive faith about the invisibility of God.”


100. Brock, “Discerning the Evagrian,” 60.

later Syriac writers.”  

Indeed, Brock goes so far as to say that John asserted as great an influence on East Syrian monastic tradition as Evagrius. Mar John’s ascetical and spiritual importance to the Christian tradition might even expand beyond the linguistic bounds of Syriac: Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony has recently suggested that Mar John may have been the first Christian writer to advocate for the practice of silent, personal prayer.  

Among the entire Syriac tradition, Mar John’s threefold schema of the spiritual life appears to be his most lasting theological legacy. For Mar John, there are three planes of existence: the bodily, the psychical, and the spiritual. Rather than existing sequentially where one mode of existence supersedes the other, the planes are modal; one may operate at the level of the body while also living at the level of the soul. The bodily life is the lowest level of human life, where passions reign and sin enslaves the individual. Advancement to the second stage of the soul requires ascetic practice and the cultivation of virtue. Attainment of this level results in awareness of the hidden wisdom and mysteries of God. The third level, the spiritual plane, is marked by limpidity of the soul and an indescribable sense of communion with the divine. While some might encounter glimpses of the spiritual life in this world, it is largely an eschatological event.

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103. Ibid. xxx-xxxi.


for Mar John. The upshot is that, for Mar John, the aim of the Christian life is to actualize—as much as possible—eternal life in the present.\footnote{106. Ibid., 38.}

*Mar John’s spiritual schema is succinct, profound, and pedagogically useful,* undoubtedly explaining the influence it held among later Syriac writers. Beggiani writes,

> With John the Solitary we see a systematic spirituality. While his tripartite division of corporeal, psychic, and pneumatic has some analogy to spiritual masters of other traditions, his synthesis developed from biblical roots and from the Syriac worldview. The life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Christ are the model par excellence for all those seeking the spiritual life…. Reflecting Syriac liturgy, he proclaims the constant theme of hope and its eschatological ramifications…. In John the Solitary we see a master of the spiritual life who has fully integrated all his indigenous resources.\footnote{107. Ibid., 42.}

Thus Mar John articulated a theological view of the human person that resonated deeply with others in the Syriac tradition. And by systematizing his schema clearly, he provided an important resource for other spiritual writers to use.

Mar John was clearly a foundational thinker within the Syriac tradition even though this fact is only just now coming to light among scholars. If Brock’s bold assertions about Mar John are correct, then future scholarship should begin finding additional traces of Mar John’s thought—particularly his spiritual schema—in other Syriac writers. Thorough analysis of Mar John’s spiritual theology is therefore warranted. Unpublished texts must be edited, translated, and studied to give a more robust understanding of the nuances of Mar John’s thought.

**Introducing the Epistle to Marcianus**

The *Epistle to Marcianus (EpMar)* is known only from BL Add. 17170. Dated to 774/75 (roughly 350 years after Mar John’s life), this manuscript is our second oldest
witness to the Johannine corpus and contains a variety of other spiritual and theological
texts attributed to Mar John. The codex contains 88 vellum leaves and is approximately
9 1/2 inches by 6 5/8 inches. Two columns of Estrangela script fill both sides of each
folio. Black ink is used throughout the manuscript although red ink is occasionally
employed for lemmata and ornamentation. EpMar is found on folios 54r-59r. Further
comments on the editorial policy adopted in this thesis may be found in chapter 2.

The Issue of Authorship

Questions of authorship in the Johannine corpus are always complex, and EpMar
is no exception. The text is attributed to Mar John by the editor of BL Add. 17170 and is
included among other seemingly authentic works, including the “Homily on the Poor in
Spirit” and the “Letter to Hesychius.” Nevertheless, there is some reason to be
skeptical about the letter’s authenticity, especially due to the lack of authorial
identification in the text, the relatively late dating of its only manuscript, and the fact that
it is not found in any other collection of Johannine texts. As previously mentioned, the
sheer ubiquity of Johannine writings in Late Antiquity should give us pause before
following a scribal or editorial attribution blindly. Determining the authenticity of the
letter will depend largely upon its internal evidence; we will therefore bracket this
question until after the theological and linguistic content of EpMar has been considered
more thoroughly. In the meantime, the study adopts a sympathetic posture towards the
scribal attribution of the text to Mar John. Thus the reader should not take statements

108. See Wright, Catalogue II, 454-55.

(Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2002), 3-44.

110. See Brock, The Syriac Fathers, 78-100.
such as “Mar John writes …” in the following text as constituting a definitive statement on the authorship of EpMar but rather as a mode of speech that takes seriously the attribution of Johannine authorship by the manuscript tradition in the absence of damning evidence.

Concerning the Audience of EpMar

To whom was EpMar written? We have no means of knowing who the Marcianus addressed in EpMar was, though internal evidence suggests that he was a younger ascetic. EpMar repeatedly focuses on lust’s assault on young people and emphasizes the value of older exemplars who have more experience combatting lust. Marcianus, it seems, regarded Mar John as a spiritual guide and elder and sought out his advice on the passion of lust. As Mar John writes in EpMar 2, “it is fitting for you to ask about these things.” Additionally, Marcianus appears to have been consecrated to the single life. Mar John refers to Marcianus as “my brother” and counsels him on how to avoid falling prey to sexual temptation. No mention of marriage is made; the sexual renunciation that Mar John counsels appears to be total, not just temporary or occasional.

While the letter is addressed to Marcianus, aspects of EpMar hint at the fact that it may have been intended for a wider audience. In EpMar 26, Mar John addresses his “brothers,” advising them to stay watchful in order to avoid the effects of lust. It is, of course, possible that the plural “brothers” is a corruption or that the entire final paragraph was a later edition, but there is no evidence to suggest this was the case. Furthermore, the very fact that the letter persists in a manuscript that passed through various ecclesial and monastic hands suggests that its initial Sitz im Leben was communal—others clearly

111. See EpMar 2.
found *EpMar* beneficial, and it is easy to imagine that Mar John intended a wider audience.

**Defining **rå†ı as “Lust”

Regarding content, the *Epistle to Marcianus* is an extended discussion of the passion **rå†ı**, a term that is rendered in the following translation as “lust” of a specifically sexual nature. Because **rå†ı** can have a wider semantic range than “lust,” a few comments on the specificity of the translation are warranted prior to the presentation of the text. In a generic sense, **rå†ı** means “desire” or “longing” for any sort of object or outcome, drawn from the verbal root **ґ†ı**. Indeed, as Ruzer and Kofsky have observed for the author of the *Book of Steps*, “earthly concerns are a general category of thought of what he terms ‘transitory’ things—such things as labor and anxiety regarding food, property, beauty, honor, clothes and sex—namely, concerns alien to the ascetic ideal, all branded as lust (**rå†ı**).” However, *EpMar* seems to use **rå†ı** as a technical term describing explicitly sexual passion. Two aspects of the text commend the more technical translation. First, *EpMar* personifies **rå†ı** as a woman, drawing on the description of “Lady Folly” in Proverbs 7. Later, describing the moment that **rå†ı** captures her victim, he writes,

> But when she sees that nothing opposes her, and she has an opportunity to exercise authority in the body and in the soul, then she goes out fully from the doorway of her house to meet him. Without modesty all of herself appears to him. By that manner beforehand she blinded the eyes of the mind of his judgment. Then she makes him her slave, who is subjected to her service alone (*EpMar* 6).

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112. See *EpMar* 2: “Who am I, our beloved Marcianus, to have the boldness to write to you, and those like you, about lust?”


However, the personification of ἤλια as a woman does not alone justify translating it as “lust.” That ἤλια is a feminine noun could simply warrant personifying it as a woman without any sexual overtones. But when the context of the epistle is considered, a more specific translation of lust seems justified. EpMar is presented as a letter from one male monastic to another: “Who am I, our beloved Marcianus, to have the boldness to write to you, and those who are like you, about lust (ἡλία)? For, indeed, it is fitting for you to ask about these things, as you are one standing in their struggle, and furthermore, [it is fitting] for us to support you in such matters” (EpMar 2). The audience for EpMar is a male ascetic (Marcianus) who has apparently requested the advice of a more experienced ascetic (John) on the nature of lust. We may therefore reasonably assume that the “Lady Folly” typology of ἤλία in EpMar is not simply a metaphor or linguistic convenience for John. Rather, he is writing to a fellow ascetic who is struggling to forsake sexual relations with a woman. This reading of ἤλία as lust is further confirmed by the following passage: “When he has been enticed by all of these things, then in darkness as at night, in that bed of negligence, she binds him until morning” (EpMar 6). Here, Mar John describes lust as binding the young man “in a bed of negligence,” a rather explicitly sexual scenario. As such, it seems that ἤλία is meant to describe specifically sexual desire in EpMar.

The Path Ahead

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the rest of the study by introducing Mar John and the Epistle to Marcianus in general. In what follows, I will focus on EpMar, with particular attention to its ascetic theology of lust and its place in both the Johannine corpus and late-antique Christian asceticism more broadly. Chapter 2 presents the edition
and translation of *EpMar*. Prior to the presentation of both texts, the reader will find comments on the editorial policies and translation methods adopted. Chapters 3 and 4 function as a two-part commentary on *EpMar*. Chapter 3 seeks to systematize and expound *EpMar’s* theology of lust, interpreting the text as a pastoral and ad-hoc work of ascetic spiritual guidance, and paying particular attention to the motifs and images used to describe lust. Chapter 4 situates *EpMar* and its theology of lust in its Johannine and late antique context. Here readers will find a consideration of Johannine authorship of the epistle, discussion of how *EpMar’s* particular description of lust perhaps fits more generally in Mar John’s famous spiritual schema, and comparisons with the theology of lust of his near contemporary, Evagrius Ponticus. Finally, in closing, chapter 5 will discuss the significance of *EpMar* and Mar John to modern Syriac studies and will suggest future avenues of research prompted by the results of this thesis.
CHAPTER II
SYRIAC EDITION AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION

In pursuit of the goal of this thesis to make the Johannine corpus more widely available, I present in this chapter the Syriac edition and English translation of the Epistle to Marcianus. Given the relative brevity of EpMar, both the edition and translation are presented sequentially. A brief introduction to the editorial considerations and translation policies used in producing the edition and translation precedes the presentation of the respective Syriac and English texts.

Editorial Considerations

The Syriac edition of EpMar is taken from BL Add. 17170, the only extant manuscript of this text. Digital images of the text were supplied by the Center for the Study of Ancient Religious Texts (CSART) at Abilene Christian University. With the support of CSART, I was also able to study BL Add. 17170 in person at the British Library during the summer of 2018. As EpMar attested only in this manuscript, the Syriac edition presented here is a diplomatic edition that seeks to render as faithfully as possible BL Add. 17170’s text of the epistle, including its diacritical markers and punctuation.¹ The Syriac text is also underlined in the edition where the scribe of BL Add. 17170 has used red ink.²

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¹. For the utilization of a similar editorial method on BL Add. 17170, see Marolf, “Homily,” 11-15.

². This occurs only in §1.
BL Add. 17170 contains eighty-eight vellum leaves with two columns of Estrangela text on each page. Notation in this work follows the folio numbering of the British Library, providing the number of the leaf as well as “r” (recto) or “v” (verso) to indicate on which side of the folio the text is located. Additionally, an “a” or a “b” has been included in each notation to indicate the text’s column. Thus for a text located in the second column of the verso side of the fifty-seventh folio, the notation will be preceded by “(57vb).” Footnotes in the Syriac edition are used to indicate where a later hand has made corrections to the text.

In order to aid the readability of the text and provide easier cross-reference between the Syriac edition and English translation, I have divided EpMar into numbered sections. While the scribe of BL Add. 17170 includes occasional ornamentations within the text, these do not indicate substantial or natural divisions (e.g., into paragraphs). As such, the section divisions do not appear in the original manuscript and reflect my own judgment concerning units of content, meaning, and argumentation.

Translation Policy

An English translation of EpMar follows immediately after the Syriac edition. Inclusion of the translation is intended to provide those who do not read Syriac access to the content of EpMar and Syriacists a guide to facilitate future study of the text. In order to negotiate between the desire for readability and scholarly usefulness, I adopted the following translation policies:


4. For instance, some words are followed by two pāsōqē, rather than one. This scribal habit seems to be ornamental rather than functional, so the edition normalizes this feature to a single dot.

Balancing Literalness with Dynamism

Given the occasion of *EpMar*—an informal, ad hoc letter—the Syriac grammar is complex and ambiguous, not always reflecting a formal style easily deciphered by non-native speakers. In light of these intricacies, the English translation of *EpMar* generally adopts a translation policy skewed towards literalness so as to act as a guide to the text, though it does occasionally render terms and concepts more dynamically when the Syriac meaning would be too impenetrable for those without facility in the language. Insofar as possible, the translation signals the syntax and grammar of the Syriac in order to facilitate recourse to the Syriac text. However, where rigorous adherence to the Syriac syntax would render the English convoluted or awkward, the sense of the Syriac has been adapted to reflect the norms of English syntax. In practice, this means that the translation occasionally reorders clauses in order to render the English more readable. Furthermore, subjects, objects, and verbs are occasionally supplied in order to make the meaning in English clearer. The translation also supplies nouns in place of pronouns when an antecedent needs clarification. Whenever such a translation decision is made, the reader will find the supplied word or phrase bracketed.

The following translation likewise eschews literal renderings of Syriac idioms for dynamic renderings of their sense in English. Thus, for instance, when Mar John employs an idiomatic phrase such as **ฤ السنوات** (literally, “compunction of the soul”), the

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translation renders the idiom “repentance” to indicate its widely understood meaning.\(^8\)

Another example of a more dynamic rendering is the translation of \(\text{ナルウサル ナルウサル} \). While this phrase literally means “the change of/to the opposite,” it is translated “complete reversal” to capture the contextual sense of the phrase in which lust reverses course to leave its victim empty-handed.\(^9\) Because proper Syriac style allows for lengthy sentences of multiple independent clauses as English does not, the translation also breaks such sentences into smaller units to avoid awkward run-ons in the English.

**Gendered Language**

In Syriac, words are typically inflected according to either masculine or feminine gender and the language thus lacks the neutered sense that adheres to most inanimate objects and concepts in English. The upshot of this linguistic idiosyncrasy is that a translator must decide whether or not to “gender” the English (i.e., “she/he,” “her/his”) as a reflection of the Syriac or to render the terms neutrally. Generally, this translation seeks to render concepts in a gender-neutral way. For example, where Mar John uses the word \(\text{ナバク} \) (lit. “man”), the translation reads “person.”\(^10\)

A notable exception to gender neutrality in the translation is the use of the feminine pronoun “she” in reference to “lust.” The Syriac term for lust, \(\text{スタルナ} \), is feminine and naturally presupposes the feminine pronoun \(\text{ナスタル} \). While a translator could reasonably render \(\text{スタルナ} \) as “it,” the present translation retains the gendered sense of the pronoun. Such a translation is, of course, problematic to modern ears. The equating of a

\(^{8}\) Payne Smith, *Dictionary*, 609.

\(^{9}\) See §11, 22.

\(^{10}\) See §2 (54va).
harmful passion with the female gender asymmetrically imputes a host of undesirable qualities on women and seemingly suggests that women are to blame for the sexual desires of the ascetics to whom Mar John writes. Would it not, one may reasonably ask, be wiser to utilize the (linguistically plausible) gender-neutral pronoun “it” in the translation?

Despite such concerns, the use of the gender-neutral pronoun for lust in fact obscures several key features of the text that are apparent only when the gendered nature of the language is evident. First, EpMar employs a complex figural reading of the so-called “Lady Folly” motif in Prov 7 in order to elucidate the traps and effects of lust. Mar John directly equates lust with the figure of Lady Folly and, given how much biblical commentary and allusion pervade the epistle, it is difficult to determine when he is describing lust (“it”) or Lady Folly (“she”). Indeed, Mar John never even distinguishes between the two. Employing the feminine pronoun maintains the integrity of the intricate figuration of lust and prevents the translator from making unnecessary inferences about a disjunction between the scriptural figure of Lady Folly and lust in Mar John’s mind.

Second, the gendering of lust retains Mar John’s characterization of lust’s personal agency. Lust, according to Mar John, is a personal being that tricks, deceives, and seduces. In EpMar 26 he writes, “therefore, my brothers, let us not grow weary nor become drowsy or fall asleep so that we will not be seduced by this crafty woman.” While this passage could be translated as a warning not to be seduced “by this crafty thing,” the explicitly sexual nature of the seduction makes the translation “woman” more contextually appropriate and captures the personal agency of lust in seducing the young.

11. For a fuller discussion of Mar John’s figural reading Lady Folly, see chapter 3.
ascetic. The reader must keep in mind that Mar John is writing to male ascetics (i.e., “my brothers”). It therefore seems suitable that Mar John would intentionally characterize lust as a woman in order to emphasize for Marcianus and the other brothers the nature of their struggle against lust, namely, avoiding women. The English translation seeks to capture this aspect of Mar John’s argumentation.

Third and finally, the use of gendered language to describe lust invites the reader to consider the complex interplay of gender, textuality, and theology in EpMar. New Testament scholar Lone Fatum has helpfully draw attention to the ways that modern efforts to offer gender-neutral translations actually run the risk of obscuring the idiosyncrasies of a text. And while modern sensibilities may certainly be troubled by EpMar’s description of lust as a woman, we must be open to the fact that the text articulates a worldview far different, but not inherently inferior, to our own. Indeed, potential discomfort caused by such a translation should invite deeper engagement with text. For instance, whether Mar John’s gendering of lust is ontological or rhetorical is certainly debatable, and future studies might well take up such questions. By retaining the gendered language of lust, the translation opens the door for critical theorists, feminist theologians, and other scholars particularly attuned to issues of gender in late-antiquity to wrestle with EpMar’s ascetic theology. In conclusion, I hope that this one concession to

12. And other objects of lust more generally.

13. See Lone Fatum, “Brotherhood in Christ: A Gender Hermeneutical Reading of 1 Thessalonians,” in Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor, ed. Halvor Moxnes (New York: Routledge, 1997), 183-97. Fatum has suggested that 1 Thessalonians is addressed only to men in the Thessalonian church, and translates the plural vocative ἀδελφοί not as the gender-neutral “siblings,” but more literally as “brothers.” My purpose in appealing to his example is not necessarily to endorse his reading of the particular passage, but rather to illustrate how gender-neutral translations obscure potentialities in the text that might otherwise be left unconsidered. Indeed, the personification of lust as a woman in EpMar is so pervasive that the retention of gendered language in the translation has an even greater basis than Fatum’s reading of 1 Thess.
gendered language in the translation will enhance, rather than detract from, the richness of the text.

Footnotes and Section Breaks

Footnotes are employed in the English translation in order to explain alternative translation possibilities, indicate the more literal meaning of the Syriac when a particularly idiomatic English phrase is used, and draw the reader’s attention to key themes and allusions, particularly biblical quotations. While the footnotes are not intended to be comprehensive, they are intended to provide the reader unfamiliar with Syriac greater access to the idiosyncrasies of the text. Paragraphs in the translation are numbered in conjunction with the Syriac edition in order to aid ease of reference for those working in both Syriac and English. Because the English translation does not precisely mirror the word order of the Syriac, it is difficult to signal in the translation where the Syriac begins on a new column or folio. As such, I have refrained from including the folio notations in the English text in favor of allowing the paragraph markers to aid cross-reference.
Syriac Edition of *Epistle to Marcianus*

(54rb)

1. Original text reads ܕܠܡܐ. Later corrector added -ܐ to word.

2. Later corrector added -ܐ to word.

3. Original text reads ܐܡܐ. Later corrector added -ܐ to word.

4. Original text reads ܐܡܐ. Later corrector added -ܐ to word.
لا يمكنني قراءة النص العربي من الصورة. يرجى إعادة إرسال النص بصيغة natual text إذا كنت بحاجة إلى مساعدة في شيء آخر.
15. Word is un-pointed in the manuscript and reads מִשְׁכָּב.
لا يوجد نص يمكن قراءته بشكل طبيعي من الصورة المقدمة.
لا يوجد نص يمكن قراءته بشكل طبيعي من الصورة المقدمة.
لا يوجد نص يمكن قراءته بشكل طبيعي من الصورة المقدمة.
سلم الله على خليفة مسندة: لب مصطفى (58ra) بن مطعم عرض حسابه في غرفة.

ما مصطفى، تعذب صينية صلالة إنها سلفا، وصفعه قل تلبس، وصفعه هكذا له صلالة ما تلبس.

لسلالة لسبق صنعة على صلالة، صلالة بالصداق فهي قل شديدة.

чивه صلالة صنعة صنعة لا لأبد، سلم الله على خليفة مسندة في غرفة.

صرفع بعضه 58rb على صنعة مسندة صنفة لا لأبد، سلم الله على خليفة مسندة في غرفة.

16. Deleted by later corrector.
لم تعمل الآلة للقراءة الفورية للنصوص العربية في اللغة العربية. يرجى حذف النص وتوفير نسخة باللغة الإنجليزية أو أي لغة أخرى يمكنني قراءتها بشكل طبيعي.
The same Mar John, to his dear Marcianus, who asked Mar John to write to him about lust, and about those things [that are] its traps for those who are caught by its seductions.

Who am I, our dear Marcianus, to have the boldness to write to you, and those who are like you, about lust? For, indeed, it is fitting for you to ask about these things, as you are presently struggling against them and, furthermore, for us to support you in such matters. I praise you in this: that you are learning the methods of such combat from those in whose bodies its scars are visible. [Such people] are a trustworthy object lesson to those who have been seized by her snares [but] who have not yet received the experience of the evil of lust. Indeed, how often do those assiduous [people] ascend at once from her deceits and ambushes (by means of the repetition and the indictment of her evils), and—again with much gladness—work for those who are listening to them? As a person [among] those learning her deceits and ambushes that she prepares, you will struggle against them.

For indeed, the shame of the scars of those who have been wounded by her is an image full of benefits for those who have still not fallen in her attacks. For it is customary that a demonstration of catastrophe [be made] for the successful in order to make them cautious about the occasions that cause falling in battle. Therefore, it is

17. I.e., those in whom the scars of lust are visible.
18. Lit., “example for a lesson.”
19. Precise meaning of this sentence is unclear.
easy to speak about her only for those who have risen up from her falling, [who] have ceased from the battle against her, and [who] are at rest.

4 The righteous accusation of lust can come from those who have not been seized by her, but those who are still held by her are not able. For she does not even allow the one who has been seized by her to speak about her because her foulness is concealed from the eyes of his mind by means of the pleasure of his body since beforehand she confirmed the accusation against her from his youth by the fact that she had enticed him for her service by means of her pleasurable seductions. For because she was not forestalled by instruction and knowledge and her power destroyed, so also her seductions spread—those that appear [as] pleasure but give distress. Beforehand she seized the senses of youth, receptacles of instruction, and she made them opponents of instruction. She did not omit a trick or a deceit or an ambush unprepared for [the senses] to enact on her behalf, and she quietly made [the senses] wild beasts with the violence of her desire. She established a stronghold in youth as though in a fortress that is unguarded and vulnerable for battle. She captured weakness and childishness for the subsistence of her evils and the obedience of her seductions.

5 Because of this, the very wise Solomon portrays what lust said in the likeness of a fornicator when he writes, “She adorned herself and painted her eyes with paint. [She] looked out from the window of her house and from the upper rooms. And she saw children and observed youths and the deficient of mind who were passing by in the street.” 20 I certainly think that the designation that those who are held by her received from the wise Solomon is enough to restrain from [lust] those who until now

have been seized by her. For because Solomon perceives [this] about all the hated human names such as these—stupid and “deficient of mind”—for this reason, he labels the attendants of lust with them: by [using] their names he will restrain those who toil with desires.

6 [When it says] “she adorned herself,” the name “she adorned” is enough to show her foulness, for her adornment is fancy but she is detestable. [When it says] “she peered out from the window of her house,” [it is] like a smooth operator\(^2\) showing a little of herself to a youth in a window. So with the growth of the body she also adds growth of her pleasurable seductions. Like one who is in an upper room, very little of her whole self is visible. But when she sees that nothing opposes her, and she has an opportunity to exercise authority in the body and in the soul, then she goes out fully from the doorway of her house to meet him. Without modesty all of herself appears to him. By that manner beforehand she blinded the eyes of the mind of his judgment. Then she makes him her slave, who is subjected to her service alone.

7 When she has coaxed him from the threshold of her house and brought him inside, she promises pleasure and relaxation. She restrains him with the [idea of] old age’s distant future,\(^2\) so that by means of these things she might take youth captive after her seductions. She seized him by the hand, kissed him, and shamelessly said to him, “The sacrifices worked! Today I fulfilled my vows and found you. I have made my bed with purple linens and I have covered it with Egyptian sheets. I sprinkled myrrh, saffron, and cinnamon upon my bed. Come, let us take pleasure in one another, and

\(^2\) Lit., “artisan.”

\(^2\) Lit., “with the length of time of old age.”
embrace each other with love until the morning. For my husband is not in the house; he departed on a long journey. He took a purse of money with him and [it will be] many days before he returns to his house.”

She says, “Look, a time without fear of the lord of the house! Look, we have a time with freedom from hindrances!” That smooth operator stirs up these things in youth: “The judge is distant, death is not at hand, and old age is also far off. Delight is present; let us enjoy ourselves while these enemies are distant from us.” She captures with beauty, inflames with adornment, excites with her fragrances, and kills with her promises.

8 Look at how the wise Solomon offers a demonstration of her ramparts and showed that she seizes all of the senses. First, he says, “she seized him by his hand.” He is “travelling in her streets” by means of a cessation from work. But her streets are detestable thoughts that are not overcome by meditation on honorable things. Afterwards, with empty speech from her mouth, she kissed him. Next, she spoke to him with sweet nothings and afterwards seized his sight with the empty appearance of adornment. And when she has seized the senses by means of all of these things, then she also enters and rules over minds.

9 At once the active mind is also attracted to these [thoughts]: “Pleasures abound; delights are present. Desire and excess—it is not always like this. Nor when they are always present will I always be able to use them. Death, or old age, or time that

25. Cf. Prov 7:8
26. Lit., “empty sounds.”
27. Lit., “the power of thoughts.”
transforms will snatch these things from me. Why do I prematurely deprive myself from the benefit of time that I have? I will enjoy what I have before it is snatched from me, or [before] I am snatched from it. I will not destroy the present advantage or desire that is full of pleasures. I cannot be rescued from death. Why should I be deprived of an abundant life?"

10 [In response she says,] “My husband is not in the house, because—look!—he departed on a long journey.” “Death,” she says, “is distant and old age is far off.” She drove away the neighbor. She sent him who was with them away. She sent away that one who hour by hour steals their lives on a long journey. Because she was unable to assault the mind that knows that death is near with such evils, she promises youth that [death] has gone away. And by doing so she gives evils the power to assault without fear, while putting forward the notion of a long journey. Likewise, she is able to plant in the mind, without fear, the germ of her lusts. For out of concern for, and fear of, death, she grows very quickly,28 like a withering fire, casting death behind her, by means of [the idea] of [it] setting out on a long journey.29

11 When he has been enticed by all of these things, then in darkness as at night she binds him in that bed of negligence until morning. And she who promised [to remain with] him a long time remains with him for a short time like the watch of the night. Taking his wealth, she left him; plundering his possessions, she abandoned him. All of these pleasures, which were supposed to remain for a long time, dissolved like a dream in a short time. And instead of delights, to the contrary, it so happened that he was being

28. Lit., “her growth is exceedingly quick.”

29. In Mar John’s figural reading of Prov 7, “death” is the “husband” who the woman promises is on a distant journey.
seized by them. But he was quickly alarmed by the complete reversal, marveling at what was seizing him. He was amazed by the pleasures that while being spoken of, vanished away, and being uttered [about] ended.

12 [He then says,] “I thought mistakenly about these things, for these [were] things that I thought were with me, and I wanted to take pleasure in sorts of things that were present, placing their change at a distance. But in truth, as it happened, they headed off on a long journey. These things that I thought were remote were nearer than these [pleasures] and had not departed. I was robbed by such a consideration, wandering in thoughts that depicted pleasure, but in which there was no truth. I saw delights: while I was yearning to draw near and to enjoy them, they dissolved and were no more; while held in the hand, they flew away like a bird. All that was promised about their [being] true enjoyments was false.” Amazement with amazement, they left him and departed. While [he was] coming to seize and firmly hold them, they flew away from his hands and were no more.

13 I think that these things are sufficient to restrain [a person] from the lusts that are seizing them, but I see the souls of many that were drawn and shut its senses like doors before the teaching that arouses it, so that she does not allow anything contrary to the things that it holds to enter. While hoping in vain that it is established in luxuries, it is awakened shortly—as from a dream—from all that it holds.

14 So then, oh dear one, just as I have said above, it is fitting to speak to you about such matters, as someone who has driven from the fortress of your soul the raging lust that

30. Lit., “change to the opposite.” Cf. § 22.

31. Singular in the Syriac.
was growing to destroy the beauty of your mind. And you were awakened—like at
daybreak in the night of the world—so that you might walk, therefore, by the light of
your knowledge and not fear the terror of night.

15 You know that all those who begin to do something are looking to establish an end
for it, in order that without confusion, and with purpose, they may make haste to the
goal. Likewise, a merchant does not travel on the sea unless first setting a
destination for his travel. Nor does a farmer sow unless first reckoning the profit
that [will come] from his yield. And when, in many such things, people look ahead
and gaze at these things that are still distant, I do not know how, with regard to the
evil desires with them, they do not establish a purpose and an end as to when and
where they attain them. For when they have turned towards this [end], they would
leave lust. And because of this, she does not permit them to turn away so that she
does not have to leave them. For if they have discerned, they would be seeing her
when she was not obedient to the end, apart from the compulsion of death, illness, or
old age.

16 As I have said about these things, the compulsion of their change ought to make them
detestable in the eyes of their friends. But for us, we ought not abstain from the
necessities of their transgression because of the swiftness of their change, but because
it is not right for our free soul to be enslaved to them, but [rather] to enslave them.

32. Lit., “end.”
33. Lit., “end.”
34. The precise meaning of the text here is unclear.
And, moreover, we ought not abandon the labor of virtue but toil in the work that has its ultimate end in repentance.

17 What is greater than all of these things? That when in the light of our knowledge we are walking like it is daytime, we ought not stumble on the snares of desires that are being concealed by false pleasure as in the dark. Also especially helpful to us is that hope of victory over them that, whenever they are destroyed by us through the body, we do not have grief about them as others [do], but we greatly rejoice that we have not slipped due to their empty appearance. I think that this is deserving of great punishment: that these things—whose time is short and whose obstacles are also many—should draw us away from these things that have stable time, few obstacles, and lasting joy. What is more foolish than when a person desiring health [seeks it] by using foods that are the causes of disease?

18 But you know, my brother, that every one of the objects that are loved, we love them either for their own sake\(^{35}\) or because they are the cause of other things. But I am not persuaded about the reasons for why evil desires are loved. For if [it is] because of themselves, you see, it is fitting that they be hated because they are hindrances of the soul from all virtue and are an adversary of joy by their swift change. They ought not be loved for their own sake—indeed because they are opposed to us, they ought to be hated.

19 But we choose as friends those who, while not switching always from good to evil things, bring us from joy to grief. And if it happens that they change from good things with respect to us, so also we change that love with respect to them. While desires are

\(^{35}\) Lit., “because of themselves.”
always changing against us into evil things, adversaries, and stumbling blocks, we have true love toward them! And while they are often vexatious to us, we are careful that we do not abandon our love for them. But with a friend who has offended us in only one thing, even if he has done good to us in many things, on account of a small cause [by which] he harmed us, we abandon all reasons for love, and we make accusation and also frequently flee from encountering him.

We gladly cling to unchanging love for these things that are always tearing up ourselves along with our property. And, see, we reckon it justified when we do evil to someone who does evil to us, and pay back evil compensations to those who have attacked us. Now, we have no anger about the evil things we bear from lust. But however much concern we have to be wary of beasts or reptiles that harm us, we have left a fierce beast in our rebellious soul and our corrupt body, the fortress of our soul, without fear. Moreover, we try many strategies if we perceive that our body has fallen ill by certain causes, and we accept the difficult rules that are placed on us by the doctor without burden due to the hope that they will bring health. But we have left our soul without care, like something that is less than the body, when it is the master of the body. We are careful with what is not able to live without illnesses, but we cause the soul—which possesses health by its nature—to become sick. Furthermore, we heal the wounds of our enemies with care, but we have lost hold of the friends of lust that are [apparent] in the soul to make a mockery of us and to strengthen our sickness.

36. Lit., “fall from love towards them.”

37. Singular in the Syriac.
See, we consider without chastisement that one who wipes away dirt from bodily garments [but whose] same body is defiled with mud. For we have left our soul carelessly with all sorts of hateful things [while] guarding against bodily sickness. We are not foolish if we say that this is equal to what I have [just] said: that concern for the body is vanity among people, like those who are building something that is constantly being destroyed. For they have abandoned building something that would not be corrupted and turned towards something that is not established and near corruption. We complain about a farmer whenever he leaves good trees that bear fruit for his use and shows his concern for those [sick trees] that do not bear fruit. But I myself think that there is not any difference between the one who is careful with the use of the body but disregards the soul and the one who enriches his enemies with weapons of war but deprives his forces of weapons. This one falls readily beneath his enemies.

Therefore, I have many things to recount, things about which many people are vainly anxious, but we have sufficiently shown that there is no advantage in them for one among the people, and it is especially proper that they be rejected. First, it is fitting that they be rejected because they possess the [quality of] complete reversal, and furthermore, because there is no satisfaction in their nature. Moreover, [they ought to be rejected] because of the remorse that is brought after them, because of the boldness of the soul that they snatch, because of the constant contempt that is with

38. The precise meaning of this phrase is unclear.
39. Lit., “change to the opposite.” Cf. §11.
40. Lit., “by their footsteps.”
them, because of the heavy fatigue of their service. For what service of lords is harsher than the service of lust? For [the service] presses heavily upon difficult things, and she makes those who are serving her run after distant things. But as to how she snares us, [using] evil causes on all sides, and with all sorts of snares she entices us and throws [us] down: that trial of evil which captures every person is a sufficient demonstration. For she emulates the word of the prophet towards Babylon that says, “your wickedness has continuously transgressed against all people.”

23 I think that none who listen to me will consider my words strange [about] these [things] which happen to them in [either] thoughts or deeds. For first, when we have a reason to fall from the consideration of God, she makes for us a night in the midst of the day with fantasies that she conceives in the mind. [The fantasy] burns in the thoughts so that it might be stirred up to the soul by her pleasure, transforming and changing into many images in the mind. She rushes to seize excuses for herself, before we see or hear [her], and she comes in, recounting an image for him in the mind—something he had removed from [his] sight at one time—and she makes return again. First, she depicts beautiful colors. Then [she depicts] the one who is concealed by them, an adornment of limbs. Then [she depicts] the one whom it adorns.

24 When the soul’s thoughts have been seized by such things, then she nakedly shows a picture of her unseemliness in a place far from observers, not leaving anything

41. The precise meaning of this phrase is unclear.

42. Unidentified quotation, presumably meant to paraphrase the gist of a biblical text.

43. The precise meaning of this clause is unclear.

44. Lit., “the soul has been cast to these things in its thoughts.”
contrary to holiness unpictured in the thoughts of the soul.\textsuperscript{45} Let no person find fault with these things I am saying, for you know, my brother, that fantasies of slaughter and war are constructed by anger in mind of the one in whom anger rules. Furthermore, similitudes of wild beasts are constructed in the minds of those who are enslaved to fear due to the harboring of fear, and fear about it reigns in a place where there is no cause for fear. But just as those who love do not lack from the mind the stirrings of the images of their loved ones, you know well—as one who especially suffers with love for his friends—that likewise the passion of lust has the ability to depict images in the soul and to bring thoughts after its unseemliness.

25 But concerning the amount and types of traps she possesses and these allurements, it is difficult to speak about each and every one of them with which she battles us lest our discourse become too lengthy.\textsuperscript{46} For her techniques are so numerous that she does not present one and the same battle plan\textsuperscript{47} to everyone, but first [presents] a multitude of variations of ideas. Her battle plans are many. She entices this one with bodily pleasures, but she draws another to herself with luxuries and seduces his friend as a “wise person” with his very knowledge. That is, fear is not useful, namely in the matter of the utility of nature,\textsuperscript{48} because she will seize the wise in his wisdom and the fool in his folly. Therefore, her net is stretched over the whole of the body—that is, the body is her net, and various snares for the soul are hidden in it. If something befalls [him] by the sense of sight, he has been captured by lust. And if it comes by

\textsuperscript{45} Lit., “leaving nothing contrary to holiness not pictured.”

\textsuperscript{46} Lit., “extend beyond [its] order.”

\textsuperscript{47} Lit., “technique of battle.”

\textsuperscript{48} Meaning of this clause is unclear.
the sense of hearing, he has been caught by her snare. [If] he breathed, she seized him with the sense of smell, and she set fire in order to burn [him]. What shall I say about these things that she brings as a provocation through the thoughts, even when these causes are distant?

26 Therefore, my brothers, let us not grow weary or become drowsy or fall asleep so that we will not be seduced by this crafty woman who is aided by your season of life, the body with which you are clothed, and the world in which you live. Only the power of the Messiah is able to deliver us from her seductions—to him be power, advantage, glory, and honor, world without end. Amen.
CHAPTER III

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF LUST IN THE EPISTLE TO MARCIANUS

The Epistle to Marcianus is hardly a systematic treatise. It drifts between biblical exegesis, earthy didacticism, pastoral encouragement, and theological reflection. Such diversity is undoubtedly due to the fact that the text is epistolary, written ad hoc in response to the particular needs of a young, celibate ascetic. The interpreter of EpMar must therefore wade through the complexities of this extemporaneous text with an eye towards the unifying motifs and beliefs that run throughout the letter, particularly if—as is the case with the present chapter—we are to extrapolate and define EpMar’s particular theology of lust.

EpMar implicitly raises two questions about the passion of lust, namely a) how does lust capture and affect a person? and b) how does one combat and defeat the influence of lust? Notably, the text takes the existence of lust for granted—there is no question whether ascetics are affected by lust, and the passion’s place in any ascetic schema is left unconsidered. Furthermore, lust is presumed to be detrimental to the spiritual life. A prima facie assumption of the text is that lust is meant to be battled and rejected in spite of the pleasures it offers. EpMar is therefore a decidedly pastoral letter in its scope and concerns; Mar John is less concerned with articulating an ambitious

1. The first question—the occasion of the letter—is explicitly referenced in both EpMar 1 (“The same Mar John, to his dear Marcianus, who asked Mar John to write to him about lust, and about those things [that are] its traps for those who are caught by its seductions”) and in §2 (“As person [among] those learning her deceits and ambushes that she prepares, you will struggle against them”). In §15ff, Mar John begins to discuss the means by which lust is combatted, thus revealing a further aim of his letter.
ascetic theology, and more with aiding a young man in spiritual warfare with a dangerous opponent.

In keeping with the immediacy of EpMar’s pastoral concerns, but in an effort to make clear the epistle’s particular ascetic project, the goal of this chapter is to systematize and expound EpMar’s theology of lust primarily with reference to the text itself. Questions of EpMar’s theology of lust in the context of the Johannine corpus and late-antique Christian ascetic theology more generally will be taken up in chapter 4. This chapter and the next, therefore, constitute a two-part commentary on, and analysis of, EpMar, with chapter 3 presenting the claims of the text that will be considered in relation to the broader Johannine and Evagrian ascetic traditions in chapter 4. It should be noted, however, that neither chapter is intended to be a comprehensive survey of every theological, biblical, linguistic, and historical issue in EpMar. Rather, these chapters represent an initial attempt to wrestle with the theology of the epistle and to make inroads into understanding its significance within the history of ascetic thought.

Concerning the Nature of Lust

Lust as “Lady Folly”

Perhaps the most notable feature of Mar John’s description of lust in EpMar is its feminine personification. This personification emerges from a complex figural reading of Prov 7:6-23 and the so-called “Lady Folly” motif. In this text, the sage portrays Wisdom’s counterpart—Folly—as a prostitute who lures the young man into her embrace with promises of pleasure, pleasant perfumes, and soothing words. Throughout EpMar, but especially in the first half of the letter, Mar John explicates his theology of lust with reference to this biblical text wherein Lady Folly is regarded as a type for the passion of
lust. His exegetical strategy is best described as figural, in which a character or image in the biblical text is understood as signifying some object or reality—physical or spiritual—that is not explicitly mentioned in the text.

As Frances M. Young has observed, for late-antique Christian writers, exegesis of the biblical text entailed a complex discernment of the appropriate referent of a passage. She writes,

> language was symbolic, and its meaning lay in that to which it referred. The difference between “literal” and “allegorical” references was not absolute but lay on a spectrum…. Often to interpret something allegorically was simply to recognize metaphor rather than taking something very woodenly according to the letter. All language signified, and as sign was symbolic. The crucial question was what it symbolized or referred to.²

In *EpMar*, we see Mar John discerning lust as the appropriate referent for Lady Folly, and his understanding and analysis of the nature of lust follows from close attention to the actions and behaviors of this scriptural figure.

Ephraim Radner, in his work *Time and the Word: Figural Readings of the Christian Scriptures*, articulates the theological framework that makes such an exegetical move possible:

> If God is indeed the creator of all things … and among these things are the Scriptures in a way that is somehow unique vis-à-vis other created artifacts—then Scripture’s relation to such artifacts (that is, to all other things) will follow the ordering that God establishes. The specifically figural ordering of Scripture’s meaning is a way of expressing that established scriptural relationship to all things; and “figural reading” is the way that relationship is apprehended in its true ordering. It is not a set of meanings, but the encounter with such meanings as God presents them.³

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For those who assume that God is the creator of all reality and who affirm that the Scriptures are unique insofar as they reveal the divine will, realities of the created order may be rightly observed as being present in the biblical text. Whereas modern historical-critical understandings of textuality and reference might view historical (or literary) referents as the only viable ones, Radner’s theological framework allows the biblical text to refer to spiritual realities that may not seem explicitly present in the text.⁴ Although Radner’s specific project is modern and constructive, his understanding of scriptural figuration is drawn from close readings of Patristic sources and thus provides us with a useful lens for envisioning how Mar John may have viewed the relationship between the biblical text and the passion of lust.

Following the traditional ascription of the authorship of Proverbs to Solomon, Mar John comments, “the very wise Solomon portrays what lust said in the likeness of a fornicator” (EpMar 5). For Mar John, Prov 7 is a text about lust; the nature of lust is concealed in the “likeness” (/umd) of the figural Lady Folly, and it is the exegete’s task to uncover and explicate the ways that this “likeness” refers to the passion. Mar John’s explication of lust therefore closely follows the narrative of Prov 7.⁵ His use of biblical text occurs in roughly two parts. First, he comments on vv. 6-10 in order to describe how

⁴ For a succinct overview of the aims and assumptions of historical-critical methodological approaches to the biblical text, see Michael J. Gorman, Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 15-17.

⁵ For the beginning of Mar John’s exegesis of Prov 7, see EpMar 6. It should be noted that Mar John’s use of the text is not necessarily systematic. While he does quote from substantial portions of Prov 7 (see EpMar 5-7), Mar John also skips ahead in the narrative to quote from more pertinent pericopes. Furthermore, he often places words in the mouths of biblical characters, not in an effort to rewrite the text, but in order to imaginatively inhabit the narrative and explain the motives and thoughts of the figures. The reader will also note that Mar John’s text at times seems to differ from the received Peshitta text, notably in EpMar 5 when the clause “She adorned herself and painted her eyes with paint” precedes v. 6. It is unclear whether this reading is an addition on Mar John’s part, or whether he knew a biblical manuscript that contains this clause. For the Peshitta version of Prov 7, see Alexander A. Di Lella, ed., The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version, 2/5 Proverbs (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 10-11.
the passion initially captures its victim. Lust, like the woman in the proverb, surveys its potential targets: “[When it says] ‘she peered out from the window of her house,’ [it is] like a smooth operator showing a little of herself to a youth in a window.”6 Initially, lust exposes only a glimpse of itself to its victim, seemingly to set him or her at ease.7 Furthermore, lust takes on pleasant adornments ( gạoכנו) so as to gain the trust and interest of its victim (§6). Soon, however, just as the woman in Prov 7 emerges from her home to embrace the young man, lust nakedly and unabashedly reveals all of itself. Mar John writes, “But when [lust] sees that nothing opposes her, and she has an opportunity to exercise authority in the body and in the soul, then she goes out fully from the doorway of her house to meet him. Without modesty all of herself appears to him” (§6). This phase of lust’s attacks occurs when the ascetic is young, capturing the mind through sensible pleasures in order to, as Mar John comments in EpMar 4, “establish a stronghold in youth.” Lust is therefore like a crafty prostitute, who carefully (and thoughtfully) seduces her youthful victims. Lust is not initially aggressive, but rather is enticing and interesting, setting the young ascetic at ease in order to spring its devastating trap.

Mar John’s second use of Prov 7 draws on vv. 13-22, quoting at length from Lady Folly’s speech that begins in v. 14.8 With the help of this pericope, Mar John details the means by which lust convinces its victim to stay in its clutch and to satisfy his or her urges. Taking on the voice of Lady Folly, Mar John explains the promises that lust makes

6. See EpMar 6. Mar John’s quotation of this passage follows the Peshitta. Whereas in the MT the narrator is the one observing from the window of the house, the Peshitta follows the LXX in identifying Lady Folly as the observer. See Michael V. Fox, Proverbs 1-9, AB 18 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 404; and George M. Lamsa, Old Testament Light: A Scriptural Commentary Based on the Aramaic of the Ancient Peshitta Text (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 554.
7. See EpMar 6, “Like one who is in an upper room, very little of her whole self is visible.”
8. See EpMar 7, 8.
to its victims: “She says, ‘Look, a time without fear of the lord of the house! Look, we have a time with freedom from hindrances!’ That smooth operator stirs up these things in youth: ‘the judge is distant, death is not at hand, and old age is also far off. Delight is present; let us enjoy ourselves while these enemies are distant from us’” (EpMar 7). Just as Lady Folly attempts to assuage the young man in Prov 7:16-20 with pleasant sights, smells, and promises of her husband’s distance, lust seeks to draw its victim’s attention to present pleasures, minimizing the ascetic’s fear of death and judgement that might otherwise hinder his sinful indulgence. Here we see the ways that Mar John’s figural reading of lust opens up further meanings in the text. The figuration extends beyond the character of Lady Folly to her words, where the “husband,” who is on a distant journey, becomes, for Mar John, “death.”

Continuing, Mar John describes the thoughts of the ascetic who gives in to lust’s temptations:

At once the active mind is also attracted to these [thoughts]: “Pleasures abound; delights are present. Desire and excess—it is not always like this. Nor when they are always present will I always be able to use them. Death, or old age, or time that transforms will snatch these things from me. Why do I prematurely deprive myself from the benefit of time that I have? I will enjoy what I have before it is snatched from me, or [before] I am snatched from it. I will not destroy the present advantage or desire that is full of pleasures. I cannot be rescued from death. Why should I be deprived of an abundant life?” (EpMar 9)

Faced with the immediacy of pleasures—and the absence of consequences—the ascetic gives himself over to lust, justifying his actions by embracing the momentary gratifications of lust as an opportunity to experience “an abundant life.” Unfortunately for the young ascetic, he has only succeeded in playing into lust’s hands. All along, the

9. See EpMar 10, “My husband is not in the house, because—look!—he departed on a long journey. Death … is distant and old age is far off.”
passion has sought to convince its victim that it will provide lasting pleasures—indeed, pleasures that the ascetic would be wrong to neglect!—while concealing its sinister motives. For, as Mar John writes in *EpMar* 7, “she [lust] captures with beauty, inflames with adornment, excites with her fragrances, and kills with her promises.”

It is not difficult to imagine the effects that such a figural reading of scripture might have had on the young (male) ascetic to which *EpMar* was seemingly addressed. Assuming that teenagers in late-antique Syria were not entirely different from modern iterations, abstaining from sexual relations with (and clandestine ruminations about) desirous members of the opposite sex was almost certainly a difficult struggle for the young celibates.10 Through his figural reading of Lady Folly, Mar John drives home the immediacy of these struggles and vividly demonstrates how lust works through unguarded senses and primal urges to lure in, and tighten its grip on, the unsuspecting victim.

The figuration furthermore supplies Mar John with concrete language for discussing a rather abstract subject. Notably, *EpMar* offers little in the way of a formal definition of lust. Rather, the figure of Lady Folly provides the reader with a rich image of lust. It is, if we keep the broader context of Proverbs in mind, the opposite of divine wisdom (Prov 8), an attractive but malicious tempter, and a prostitute willing to offer anything to enflame one’s passion. More crudely, and perhaps more proximately, it is embodied in the person with whom one is most tempted to break one’s vows.11

10. Modern readers might also rightly include same-sex attraction. However, the stark feminine imagery used by Mar John, and the general Christian rejection of homosexual intercourse in Late Antiquity seem to exclude that possible meaning here.

11. That is, for a young, male ascetic, a beautiful woman.
In short, then, the figural reading of lust as Lady Folly fits exceptionally well with the ad hoc, pastoral aims of EpMar. The figuration is rhetorical, persuasive, and vivid; it is meant to be read and meditated upon but also to serve as a guiding image to help the ascetic recognize when he is being tempted by lust and to remind him of the passion’s dangers. Indeed, the exegetical strategy underscores the personal agency of lust: it is like a woman with the ability to tempt, seduce, ensnare, and betray the young monk. Lust is therefore not a simple, passive, or abstract opponent but rather a menacing presence against which one must be ever on guard.

Of course, Mar John’s feminine personification of lust admittedly seems problematic to modern ears for reasons already raised. But the feminine figuration is hardly original to Mar John. A central theme in Proverbs, as Richard J. Clifford notes, “is its use of character types” to illumine and describe the consequences of certain behaviors. Furthermore, scholars of Proverbs and biblical wisdom literature more generally have long observed that much of the wisdom corpus is written from an essentially masculine perspective. As Mark R. Sneed comments, “though there were a few female scribes in Mesopotamia, the reality is that biblical wisdom literature was written by males and for males.” Consequently, wisdom literature is inevitably chauvinistic and heterocentric to contemporary readers whose understandings of gender, equity, and politics are worlds away from those of the ancient Near East. Again, Sneed writes, “in the ancient Near East, women were often viewed as the weaker sex, not able

12. See pp. 42-44.


to control their passions and emotions, especially their sexual desires .... [W]omen were often referred to as traps or snares who were constantly seeking a man to seduce and to destroy his career and the reputation of his household.”

Mar John’s depiction of lust as Lady Folly is thus by no means some form of misogynistic eisegesis. Seeing the biblical description of folly as an apt descriptor of his particular understanding of lust, Mar John merely adopts the biblical language of the temptress and maps it onto his own theology of the passions. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that a consecrated religious whose life was undoubtedly steeped in the language and imagery of Scripture would follow its figuration closely. The upshot of such an observation is not to deny or excuse whatever problematic assumptions might be latent in Mar John’s exegetical move. Rather, it is to show that Mar John’s idiomatic exegetical strategy is not itself the source of the feminine language for lust, but rather the means by which he recognizes and expounds a motif original to the source.

Lust as Enemy Combatant

While lust as Lady Folly is the driving metaphor for much of EpMar, the epistle is rich in imagery further describing the nature and effects of the passion. Especially prominent is the use of martial imagery, in which the ascetic is described as being engaged in warfare with lust. In EpMar 2, Mar John praises Marcianus for “learning the methods of … combat from those in whose bodies [combat’s] scars are visible.” He continues in §3:

the shame of the scars of those who have been wounded by her is an image full of benefits for those who have still not fallen in her attacks. For it is customary that a demonstration of catastrophe [be made] for the successful in order to make them cautious about the occasions that cause falling in battle. Therefore, it is only easy

15. Ibid., 291.
to speak about her for those who have risen up from her falling, [who] have ceased from the battle against her, and [who] are at rest.

The stakes of the struggle against lust are high, says Mar John. It is a form of combat that has wounded countless ascetics before Marcianus (including, it seems, Mar John), and it is only by observing the scars—that is, the failures—of those who have engaged in battle with lust that Marcianus will be able to skirmish effectively with the passion.

In this spiritual battle, the human body is the “fortress of the soul” (§20) that lust ceaselessly attacks (§4) and out of which the passion must be driven (§14). Lust is furthermore a formidable opponent. As Mar John writes in EpMar 25:

But concerning the amount and types of traps [lust] possesses, and these allurements, it is difficult to speak about each and every one of them with which she battles us lest our discourse become too lengthy. For her techniques are so numerous that she does not present one and the same battle plan to everyone but first [presents] a multitude of variations of ideas. Her battle plans are many. Lust is a creative and variable enemy. It does not necessarily attack with overwhelming frontal assaults, but rather employs unique traps perfectly attuned to the weaknesses of its opponent, whether it be bodily pleasures, luxuries, or pride in one’s own wisdom (§25).

The military imagery that pervades EpMar provides a unique counterpoint to the Lady Folly figuration. Because the language of combat is interspersed throughout the commentary on Prov 7, the reader is reminded that the seductions and pleasures that lust offers are in fact traps and attacks meant to ensnare. The woman’s enticements are rhetorically undermined; the idyllic (though insidious) speech of Lady Folly is coupled with the brutality of the language of combat. Thus the two motifs work in conjunction, articulating the ways that lust’s promises will appear to Marcianus (pleasurable, joyful, etc.) while reminding him that what is actually occurring is a clever assault on his defenses.
Enslavement to Lust

According to Mar John, the final aim of lust’s attacks is the enslavement of its victim. Lust does not seek to merely wound but also to capture the ascetic for its service entirely. Thus, Mar John’s exposition of Prov 7 reaches its climax when “in darkness as at night, [lust] binds [the young man] in that bed of negligence until morning” (§11). Lust does not want to simply tempt the young man but to consummate its hold entirely. As such, lust will employ any means to accomplish its purpose. Mar John writes, “Afterwards, with sweet nothings from her mouth, [lust] kissed him. Next, she spoke to him with empty sounds and afterwards seized his sight with the empty appearance of adornment. And when she has seized the senses by means of all of these things, then she also enters and rules over minds” (§8). Lust’s true nature as slave-driver reveals the hollowness of its promises, which are, in truth, lies meant to tighten the passion’s hold over its victim.

Such enslavement to lust is morally problematic because it is unbecoming of the freedom that ensouled creatures naturally possess. Mar John notes, “it is not right for our free soul to be enslaved to [evil desires], but [rather] to enslave them” (§16). When the ascetic is dominated by lust, he is disordered in the sense that he has subjugated what is naturally free (the soul) to the passions over which it should properly be mastered. Lust therefore represents a somber threat to the ascetic attempting to live a holy life.

Lust as Epistemic Crisis

Mar John’s imagery of lust in EpMar emphasizes the danger of the passion. A key tension in the text, however, is revealed by the occasion of its composition. If lust is so truly and manifestly dangerous, one may reasonably ask Mar John, why is it not easily
rejected? Put differently, should not the apparent vileness of lust render it undesirable?

While Mar John may indeed wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment of such a question,\textsuperscript{16} he is clearly aware of the fact that people do not easily reject lust. As such, \textit{EpMar} regards the problem of lust as an epistemic crisis; lust’s \textit{modus operandi} is essentially one of deception, concealing its true nature from its victim before injuring him or her.

“The Quality of Complete Reversal”

A key facet of Mar John’s characterization of lust as an epistemic crisis is that it possesses \textit{δεκαοντα δεκαωε}, what I have rendered as “the quality of complete reversal.” By the quality of complete reversal, Mar John means that lust presents itself as something positive, pleasurable, and substantive, but quickly changes to reveal that it is, in fact, the opposite of these qualities. He writes,

\begin{quote}
All of these pleasures which were supposed to remain for a long time, dissolved like a dream in a short time. And instead of delights, to the contrary, it so happened that he was being seized by them. But he was quickly alarmed by the complete reversal, marveling at what was seizing him. He was amazed by the pleasures, which, while being spoken of, vanished away, and being uttered [about] ended (§11).
\end{quote}

In short, lust provides pleasures that seem substantial and lasting, but in reality, are fleeting and serve only to further ensnare the one partaking in them.

The upshot of this quality is that lust proves ultimately dissatisfying, offering no benefit whatsoever to the ascetic:

\begin{quote}
It is fitting that [desires] be rejected because they possess the [quality of] complete reversal, and, furthermore, because there is no satisfaction in their nature. Moreover, [they ought to be rejected] because of the remorse that is brought after them; because of the boldness of the soul that they snatch; because
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} See \textit{EpMar} 13.
of the constant contempt that is with them; because of the heavy fatigue of their service (§22).

Not only is lust fleeting in the pleasures it offers—“I saw delights: while I was yearning to draw near and to enjoy them, they dissolved and were no more; while held in the hand, they flew away like a bird” (§12)—it also leads to great remorse and toilsome service. In this way, lust is truly a “trap” (§1). It exploits the supposed knowledge of the ascetic, who sees only delights and pleasures, and deviously springs its snare on its victim, who is suddenly left to see just how mistaken he or she was.

The Denial of Death

EpMar further regards lust as constituting an epistemic crisis insofar as it convinces the ascetic to deny the nearness of death. Lust recognizes that the remembrance of death is an impediment to its designs: “She [lust] was unable to assault the mind that knows that death is near with such evils” (§10). Although Mar John does not make this connection explicit, death seems to be an enemy to lust because it is closely connected to the judgement at which the young monk will be held responsible for his sinfulness. Therefore, the passion seeks to undermine the young ascetic by suggesting that death is a distant reality, one for which he or she will have adequate time to prepare: “she promises youth that [death] has gone away” (§10). In the same paragraph, Mar John continues, “out of concern for, and fear of, death, she grows very quickly, like a withering fire, casting death behind her by means of [the idea] of [its] setting out on a

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17. See the discussion of EpMar 7 above: “That smooth operator stirs up these things in youth: ‘the judge is distant, death is not at hand, and old age is also far off.’”
long journey.” Lust is fearful of death, recognizing it as a force with enough power to break lust’s spell over a victim.

Ironically, the fear of death displayed by lust is exactly the sort of fear that the ascetic should cultivate, for, as the young man in the epistle recognizes,

I thought mistakenly about these things, for these [were] things that I thought were with me, and I wanted to take pleasure in the sorts of things that were present, placing their change at a distance. But in truth, as it happened, they headed off on a long journey. These things that I thought were remote [i.e., death] were nearer than these [pleasures] and had not departed” (§12).

Here, the denial of the nearness of death works in conjunction with lust’s quality of complete reversal, for, as the ascetic soon recognizes, death and judgment are what is near, while pleasures and satisfactions are actually what have gone on a distant journey. Lust therefore deepens the epistemic crisis by convincing its victim so thoroughly of the distance of death, that he or she is unable to adequately recognize the ephemerality of the pleasures being offered.

Lust and the Mis-Ordering of Priorities

Third and finally, lust represents an epistemic crisis in EpMar insofar as it causes people to mis-Order their spiritual priorities. Because lust persuades its victim of the substantiality of its pleasures, the one caught by lust tends to a) view its seductions as something positive, b) prioritize the pleasures of lust over more stable, substantial goods, and thus c) deprioritize overcoming lust. Mar John writes, “I think that this is deserving of great punishment: that these [pleasures of lust]—whose time is short and whose obstacles are also many—should draw us away from … things that have stable time, few

18. As noted above, in Mar John’s figural reading, Lady Folly’s husband—set out on a distant journey—signifies death.
obstacles, and lasting joy” (§17). When a person chooses to embrace lust, he or she is prioritizing what is by nature unstable, fleeting, and unsatisfying over virtues that are stable, lasting, and sources of true joy. As Mar John rhetorically asks at the end of *EpMar* 17, “What is more foolish than when a person desiring health [seeks it] by using foods that are the causes of disease?”

Even those who would perhaps grant the undesirability of lust struggle to rightly prioritize its expulsion from their souls. To explain this mis-ordering, Mar John invokes the universal human concern for physical well-being:

> However much concern we have to be wary of beasts or reptiles that harm us, we have left a fierce beast in our rebellious soul and our corrupt body, the fortress of our soul, without fear. Moreover, we try many strategies if we perceive that our body has fallen ill by certain causes, and we accept the difficult rules that are placed on us by the doctor without burden due to the hope that they will bring health. But we have left our soul without care, like something that is less than the body, when it is the master of the body. We are careful with what is not able to live without illnesses, but we cause the soul—which possesses health by its nature—to become sick (§20).

People are naturally aware of the need to care for the body; they will go to great lengths to ensure that they are physically healthy and protected. However, it is foolish, Mar John says, to assume that the healing of a soul ensnared by lust is any less of a priority. Indeed, sickness of the body is inevitable, but sickness of the soul is needlessly self-inflicted. Mar John comments further,

19. Cf. *EpMar* 19: “But we choose as friends those who, while not switching always from good to evil things, bring us from joy to grief. And if it happens that they change from good things with respect to us, so also we change that love with respect to them. While desires are always changing against us into evil things, adversaries, and stumbling blocks, we have true love toward them! And while they are often vexatious to us, we are careful that we do not abandon our love for them. But with a friend who has offended us in only one thing, even if he has done good to us in many things, on account of a small cause [by which] he harmed us, we abandon all reasons for love, and we make accusation and also frequently flee from encountering him.”

20. See *EpMar* 18: “It is fitting that [lust’s pleasures] be hated because they are hindrances of the soul from all virtue and are an adversary of joy.”
we consider without chastisement that one who wipes away dirt from bodily garments, [but whose] same body is defiled with mud. For we have left our soul carelessly with all sorts of hateful things [while] guarding against bodily sickness … concern for the body is vanity among people, like those who are building something that is constantly being destroyed (§21).

The modern reader may once again squirm at such a (seemingly) body-denying statement from Mar John, and it is once again worth acknowledging that we are reading an author and a text that are worlds away from contemporary sensibilities. Nevertheless, his rhetorical point is certainly not missed: what typically seems most pressing (bodily wellness) is nothing if one’s soul is imperiled by sexual passion. A healthy soul freed from lust is always to be preferred, even at the cost of bodily health. However, the epistemic crisis marshalled by lust and its pleasures conceals this truth, causing the person to treat the health of the soul as a secondary concern.

**Combating Lust**

**Youthfulness and Vulnerability to Lust**

If the struggle with lust is primarily epistemic for Mar John, then the ascetic person needs epistemic resources for combating the passion. Youthfulness only heightens the need for such resources. Young people, according to Mar John, are particularly susceptible to lust because it is concealed by pleasures. He writes,

[Lust] does not even allow the one who has been seized by her to speak about her because her foulness is concealed from the eyes of his mind by means of the pleasure of his body, since beforehand she confirmed the accusation against her from his youth by the fact that she had enticed him for her service by means of her pleasurable seductions. For, because she was not forestalled by instruction and knowledge, and her power destroyed, so also her seductions spread—those that appear [as] pleasure but give distress (EpMar 4).

21. Dr. Kelli Gibson helpfully observed during the defense of this thesis that Mar John seems to be more “pro-soul,” than “anti-body.”
The Epistemological Function of the Spiritual Guide in *EpMar*

The solution that John prescribes for such youthful vulnerability is the presence of a spiritual guide. The spiritual guide in *EpMar* fulfills an essentially epistemological role, providing true knowledge of lust that is required to defeat it. As already mentioned, the *Sitz im Leben* of *EpMar* seems to be that of a more advanced ascetic (Mar John) writing to a youthful pupil (Marcianus). Guides such as Mar John are necessary for Marcianus in order to provide both knowledge about the effects and traps of lust and evidence that lust can be overcome: “[Those who have been wounded by lust] are a trustworthy object lesson to those who have been seized by her snares [but] who have not yet received the experience of the evil of lust” (§2). He continues later:

> The shame of the scars of those who have been wounded by her is an image full of benefits for those who have still not fallen in her attacks. For it is customary that a demonstration of catastrophe [be made] for the successful in order to make them cautious about the occasions that cause falling in battle. Therefore, it is only easy to speak about her for those who have risen up from her falling, [who] have ceased from the battle against her, and [who] are at rest (§3).

Young ascetics such as Marcianus, writes Mar John, require the guidance of ascetics who have been seized by, and indeed wounded by, lust. Only those who have experienced its full effects and who have come out on the other side can truly prepare the youth for lust’s attacks.

Imitation is thus key in the battle against lust. On their own, young people lack the resources and knowledge to effectively combat the passion, so Mar John points Marcianus towards the example of others who have lost battles with lust but have ultimately won the war. Such figures instill the ascetic with the encouragement, pattern of life, and vigilance needed to overcome lust. Furthermore, these exemplars point the

22. See pp. 35-36.
ascetic to the one in whom the power ultimately resides to defeat the passion of lust, the Messiah. Mar John comments: “Therefore, my brothers, let us not grow weary or become drowsy or fall asleep so that we will not be seduced by this crafty woman who is helped by your season of life, the body with which you are clothed, and the world in which you live. Only the power of the Messiah is able to deliver us from her seductions” (§26). Mar John here returns full circle to the beginning of his letter. Whereas he began the epistle affirming the need of Marcianus and those like him to look to guides and exemplars for combating lust, Mar John reminds Marcianus that watchfulness and willing submission to the power of Jesus are ultimately what will deliver him from lust’s snares.

The Clarification of Telos

In addition to the spiritual guide, cultivating attention to the telos of human existence is an epistemic practice that Mar John suggests for combating lust. It is instructive here to quote at length from Mar John’s discussion of this practice:

You know that all those who begin to do something are looking to establish an end for it in order that without confusion, and with purpose, they may make haste to the goal. Likewise, a merchant does not travel on the sea unless first setting a destination for his travel. Nor does a farmer sow unless first reckoning the profit that [will come] from his yield. And when … people look ahead and gaze at these things that are still distant, I do not know how, with regard to the evil desires with them, they do not establish a purpose and an end as to when and where they attain them. For when they have turned towards this [end], they would leave lust (§15).

Mar John’s language here is somewhat opaque: it is not clear what, precisely, the “distant things” are for which Mar John insists an end (τελες) must be established.23 However, what Mar John does seem to be suggesting is that the one who is enslaved by lust has

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23. Perhaps this is a reference to judgment and death that seem far off to the one whom lust ensnares. See above.
failed to attend properly to his or her telos and is instead caught up in the moment of sexual pleasure.

Furthermore, lust has no substantial telos of its own and will ultimately cease at the hands of death, illness, or old age (§15). When preoccupied with lust in the present moment, the ascetic is easily convinced that the passion is in fact “not obedient to the end,” as Mar John writes (§15). This, of course, is not so; thus Marcianus must remind himself that investment in the temporary pleasures of lust will ultimately fail because it lacks a substantial telos.

Reading Scripture as Ascetic Practice

A final and notable means of resisting lust is the reading of scripture. Admittedly, this strategy is implicitly demonstrated in EpMar rather than explicitly stated, but nevertheless seems pertinent to Mar John’s project in the epistle. As already noted above, the figural reading of Scripture shapes Mar John’s understanding of the character and actions of lust. In this way, figural interpretation provides him with knowledge of lust, knowledge that he extrapolates and shares with Marcianus. Furthermore, Mar John suggests, Scripture has the ability to rebuke and restrain those who are tempted to give themselves over to desires. He writes in EpMar 5, “because Solomon perceives [this] about all the hated human names such as these—stupid and “deficient of mind”—for this reason, he labels the attendants of lust with them: by [using] their names he will restrain those who toil with desires.” The biblical text thus serves an epistemic role, making plain realities about lust that otherwise would be concealed, and effecting a change within those

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24. What Mar John presumably means here is that the ascetic believes lust will lead to something permanent, substantial, and pleasurable when in fact lust ultimately terminates and leaves the ascetic empty-handed.
who are able to “read” themselves in the text. Reading scripture is therefore an ascetic practice of the highest importance in combating lust.

*EpMar as Exposé*

The variety of methods Mar John recommends for combating lust helps the ascetic clearly and truly see the nature of the passion. Indeed, *EpMar* functions as something of an exposé, seeking to reveal lust as tricky, violent, and cruel. In order to describe the state of the person who has broken free of lust’s epistemic darkening, Mar John employs imagery of light, dawn, and daytime. Praising Marcianus for breaking free from the snares of lust, Mar John writes, “you were awakened—like at daybreak in the night of the world—so that you might walk, therefore, by the light of your knowledge and not fear the terror of night” (§14). Lust attempts to undercut the ascetic’s enlightenment, “mak[ing] for us a night in the midst of the day with fantasies that she conceives in the mind” (§23). However, Mar John reminds his reader that these darkening fantasies should be easily avoided, for “when in the light of our knowledge we are walking like it is daytime, we ought not stumble on the snares of desires that are being concealed by false pleasure as in the dark” (§17).

To be free of lust is thus to be enlightened, able to see clearly not only the harmful nature of lust but also the tricks lust utilizes to conceal this harmful nature and snare its victims. As an ascetical exposé, *EpMar* itself contributes to this process of cultivating greater awareness, equipping the reader with the epistemic tools necessary to see lust in the all-exposing light of true spiritual knowledge.
CHAPTER IV
LUST IN ITS JOHANNINE AND EVAGRIAN CONTEXT

However rich an exposition of lust the Epistle to Marcianus offers, its specificity of concerns and limited scope of audience do little to locate the epistle’s theological articulation of lust in a broader historical context. Put another way, the text alone does not consciously refer to the ongoing cultural discourse of Christian asceticism in Late Antiquity.1 The reader of EpMar therefore encounters the discussion of lust in media res; he or she is merely an observer to one small chapter of the broader Christian discourse about the passions in Late Antiquity. As such, this chapter seeks to situate EpMar’s understanding of lust within a broader historical and literary context. Specifically, I will consider EpMar’s language and theology of lust in relation to the Johannine corpus as well as to the writings of Evagrius of Pontus. Given the limited availability of Johannine texts, the richness and complexities of the Evagrian corpus, and the confines of the present study, what follows is an admittedly cursory and exploratory attempt to consider EpMar’s place among the ascetic literature and theology of late-antique Christianity. My hope is that this initial investigation will till the soil for more robust and fruitful comparative and analytical work on the Johannine corpus in the future.

1. Averil Cameron notes that asceticism constituted a key portion of the “totalizing discourse” that Christianity developed in its nascent centuries and that “the ascetic model … provided the guidelines for the construction of a specifically Christian self.” See Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 57.
EpMar, Lust, and the Johannine Corpus

In the introductory chapter I bracketed questions of EpMar’s authorship and provisionally followed the manuscript’s attribution of the epistle to Mar John, noting that judgments of authorship must be based on internal evidence. Now that the content of EpMar has been considered in depth, I will examine the epistle in the context of Johannine literature more generally, including its authorship. Given the constraints of time and space, the following focuses primarily on the language and theology of lust in the Johannine corpus, examining whether EpMar employs a similar language and theology of lust as other authentically Johannine texts. The texts used in comparison with EpMar are the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit,” the Dialogue on the Soul, the “Commentary on Ephesians 6:11,” and the “Letter to Hesychius.” These four texts have all been recently published and appear to be authentic to the “proto-John” of the early fifth century CE and therefore provide an accessible and literarily diverse starting point for assessing Johannine style and theology.

The Use of ꞌ and the Language of “Lust” in Other Johannine Texts

Given the use of ꞌ for sexual lust in EpMar, consideration of the use of ꞌ (and ꞌ root words) in other Johannine texts as well as the language they employ to describe sexual lust is warranted. I will specifically consider this language in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit,” the “Commentary on Ephesians 6:11,” and the Dialogue on the Soul.

Lust/Desire in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit”

By my analysis, Mar John never uses ꞌ in his “Homily on the Poor in Spirit.” Mar John does, however, frequently make use of the passive participle form of
to describe the act of desiring. For example, describing those who wish to obtain the likeness of God, Mar John writes, “For we are not forced to resign from the world of the living, but he showed the heirs an example in himself, so that those who desire (ܪܓ) his likeness are made worthy of his glory as well; and those in whom his image is not found are lacking in his glory.”²

Notably, in contrast to EpMar, in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit,” the use of words formed from the ܪܓ root are largely positive. For example:

And to those who have eagerly pursued your glorious love, by [your] word you proclaimed that they take up the crucifixion all day, and then follow you. When they heeded your perfect instruction and earnestly desired (ܪܓܬܘܪ) it, even the statements of hindrance that they spoke, you cut off [and] cast away.³

Likewise, Mar John writes elsewhere, “for those who desire (ܪܓ) a vision of you will not even see themselves alongside you.”⁴ As with the earlier example, both uses of the ܪܟ root here describe desires oriented towards good goals, that is, for perfect instruction and the vision of God. Furthermore, the ܪܟ root does not have an established object in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit.” That is, the desire is directed towards a variety of things as opposed to a single entity (e.g., sex, perfection, material goods, etc.).

Elsewhere in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit,” Mar John uses a term other than ܪܟ root words to describe desire. “Desire” is, of course, an English translation of a concept that could also be captured by “wish,” “want,” “will,” and “inclination,” to name

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³. Ibid., 48.
⁴. Ibid., 32.
a few, and Mar John most typically captures this semantic range with \( \text{\textdeg} \) and its cognates in the homily. For instance, he writes, “Though [the divisive person] wanted (\( \text{\textdeg} \)) to rise to the height of perfection, yet because the encumbrance had not dropped away from him, he returned to the depths of the earth through the fall that happened to him in his temptation” On the one occasion in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit” that the act of desiring, wanting, wishing, is used as a noun, Mar John likewise employs \( \text{\textdeg} \).

In a characteristic interjectional prayer, Mar John writes, “Lord, it is not according to their labor alone [that] your friends are rewarded, but according to the perfection of their desire (\( \text{\textdeg} \)). For in accordance with [one’s] desire (\( \text{\textdeg} \)) for your love, so is a person acceptable to you.” Mar John here does not employ \( \text{\textdeg} \)—which could easily cover the semantic range suggested by the content of the passage—and instead uses \( \text{\textdeg} \). Marolf, furthermore, has correctly translated \( \text{\textdeg} \) as “desire” in a general sense that should not be taken as describing sexual lust.

The use of the \( \text{\textdeg} \) root in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit” thus diverges from its use in EpMar insofar as it a) describes the desiring of something positive and b) is used to designate desire in a more general, less-technical sense. However, when Mar John describes desire as a noun, he foregoes words based on the \( \text{\textdeg} \) root in favor of entirely different terminology, suggesting (tentatively) that he could be reserving \( \text{\textdeg} \) for a specific description of sexual desire, much like what we see in EpMar.

\[ \text{\textdeg} \]

5. Or more colorfully as “longing,” “itch,” “thirst,” “desperation,” etc.


7. Ibid., 35.
Lust/Desire in the “Commentary on Ephesians 6:11”

Mar John’s “Commentary on Ephesians 6:11” contains a more ambiguous use of the root. Commenting on the Pauline exhortation to “put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (NRSV), Mar John cautions his readers about the nature of the battle they are undertaking: “Indeed, do not suppose that your only battle is against these, which are being stirred up in your flesh, if you do not also [suppose that] you have from the outside many enemies [that are] the armies of Satan.” Here, Mar John uses the substantive passive participial form of , functionally much closer to EpMar’s employment of . However, whether means “desires” more generally or the more specific “lusts” in this context is uncertain. The plural form of the noun raises questions about why Mar John would describe a multiplicity of “lusts” rather than one, and indeed, Manel Nin renders with the Spanish “los deseos,” that is, “the desires.” But from the limited context alone it is difficult to definitively exclude the more technical meaning of “lusts.” For instance, one could read Mar John as distinguishing sexual lusts from other passions wrought by the Satanic hordes. A similar use of the singular form, in EpMar is likewise ambiguous. The text reads,

For because she was not forestalled by instruction and knowledge, and her power destroyed, so also her seductions spread—those that appear [as] pleasure but give distress. Beforehand she seized the senses of youth, receptacles of instruction, and she made them opponents of instruction. She did not omit a trick, or a deceit, or an ambush unprepared for [the senses] to enact on her behalf, and she quietly made [the senses] wild beasts with the violence of her desire (. )

EpMar 4

Once again, it is difficult to determine if this form of \( \text{รก} \) is meant to connote desire more generally or desire of a sexual nature. Therefore, barring further evidence, I suggest that Mar John’s use of \( \text{รก} \) in the “Commentary on Ephesians 6:11” and EpMar should be considered as a usage somewhere between the technical language of \( \text{รก} \) as found in EpMar and the more general language of desire in the “Homily on the Poor in Spirit.”

*Lust/Desire in the Dialogue on the Soul*

A final text worthy of consideration is the *Dialogue on the Soul*. As Hansbury has noted, “the subtext of the Dialogue is a study of the passions.” In the *Dialogue*, \( \text{รก} \) is frequently used to describe sexual lust in a manner much closer to EpMar. For instance, in the second dialogue, Mar John and his conversation partner, Eusebius, have the following exchange:

“Eusebius: Of [the passions] of the body, namely there are: sleep, hunger, thirst, lust (\( \text{รก} \)) and intemperance…

The Solitary: For those of the body, they are as you say.”

In this instructive passage, \( \text{รก} \) is listed among several other bodily passions, each of which is a particular bodily appetite. Hansbury has almost certainly translated \( \text{รก} \) correctly as “lust” as it is distinguished from other specific desires (i.e., for food, rest, etc.). An even more noteworthy use of \( \text{รก} \) in *Dialogue* comes in a discussion of the passions that are located in the body and therefore are also found in animals. Mar John

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writes, [bodily] “nature is moved by six passions: by anger, by malice, by desire (ละเอ) by lust (ละเอ), by discernment, by pride.”\(^{11}\) In this list of passions, Mar John explicitly distinguishesIZER from ละเอ. While the exact nature of the distinction betweenIZER and ละเอ is not obvious from this passage, we may reasonably conclude from the use ofIZER elsewhere in the Dialogue that Mar John is distinguishing it as sexual lust from more general desire (ละเอ), a finding that coheres with my consideration of “Homily on the Poor in Spirit.”

Summarizing the Language of Sexual Lust in Mar John

Following the linguistic survey of these Johannine writings, we may summarize a few cursory aspects of Johannine language for sexual lust. First,IZER seems to function as technical terminology for desire of a sexual nature and is to be distinguished from desire of a more general nature (ละเอ, ละเอ). Second, although linguistically related toIZER, the use of forms of the verb 使者 typically denotes desire in a more general sense. Third, substantive forms of the passive participle of使者 seem ambiguous, with the potential to refer to either sexual desire, or more general desire.

These observations are, of course, provisional and will require further fleshing out in the future. For instance, it remains to be determined whether these texts are simply reflecting linguistic norms of classical Syriac generally. Nevertheless, in the interim the above analysis does suggest a linguistic similarity between EpMar and other Johannine texts that one would expect if EpMar is indeed authentic to proto-John.

\(^{11}\) Ibid. 100.
Thematic Similarities between *EpMar* and Other Johannine Works

In addition to its linguistic resonances with other Johannine texts concerning lust, *EpMar* also displays a number of other thematic and theological similarities with the Johannine corpus worth noting here briefly.

**The Language of Combat**

Much like *EpMar*, the “Letter to Hesychius,” translated by Brock, uses the language of combat to describe the ascetic struggle. Mar John writes in the letter,

> Fix in your mind the thought of your Lord’s Passion, for he is the spiritual fortress of our souls, the place of refuge for righteousness wherein the labour of good works is kept safe. Beware, my brother, of cunning snares, of hidden traps and secret nets: do not grow weary of asking our Lord by night and by day to guard your steps, lest you be caught in Satan’s cunning traps.12

Though slightly different from the text above, the reader will note striking linguistic similarities with *EpMar*, which likewise invoke the notion of a fortress coming under siege (§4, §14, §20), and the need to avoid snares, traps, and nets (§17, §22, §25). Notably, in both “Hesychius” and *EpMar* Jesus Christ is presented as the one who is ultimately able to protect and deliver from the temptations that assault.13

**Wakefulness, Darkness, and the Mind**

In chapter 3, I noted that an essential theme of *EpMar* is illumination and freedom from the “darkening of the mind” caused by lust.14 Similar themes can be found in both the “Letter to Hesychius” and the *Dialogue*. For instance, in “Hesychius,” Mar John writes, “It is essential that our mind should be awake at all times—like a wakeful pilot in

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13. See *EpMar* 26, “Only the power of the Messiah is able to deliver us from her [lust’s] seduction.”

charge of a ship.” So also in *Dialogue*, he writes, “These passions, my beloved, blind the mind; limpidity of soul, however, enlightens its understanding.”

**Hope as Motivator for Ascetic Progress**

The notion of hope plays a significant role as a motivator for ascetic action in the Johannine corpus. Commenting on those who embrace voluntary poverty, Mar John writes in “Homily on the Poor in Spirit,”

For the sake of the hope of God that they beheld, they became needy concerning everything [else], being naked and barefoot, their bodies emaciated from [their] afflictions. Like feeble, frail, and poor people, they went about in the world. It is fitting for us to imitate these blessed ones who attached themselves to God in all sorts of sufferings, emulating their manner of living, picturing their truth in our minds, and diligently acquiring their endurance concerning our own persons.

The hope of God in this passage acts as an impetus for self-denial, making seemingly crazy (by worldly standards) ascetic acts “blessed.” Additionally, Mar John comments in the *Dialogue*, “If you are aware of the hope prepared for you, you will be freed from all harmful passions.”

Although more muted in *EpMar*, hope likewise plays a motivating factor for ascetic progress. The hope of improved health, Mar John notes in *EpMar* 20, persuades people to undergo the sometimes uncomfortable medical treatments prescribed by doctors. Likewise, hope in a future free from lust’s attacks encourages the ascetic to continue: “especially helpful to us is that hope of victory over them, that whenever they are destroyed by us through the body, we do not have grief about them as others [do], but we greatly rejoice that we have not slipped due to their empty appearance” (*EpMar* 17).

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**Illness and Health as Metaphor**

Finally, the imagery of illness and health features prominently in Johannine texts. In the beginning of the fourth dialogue on the soul, Mar John describes at length the bodily afflictions that do not affect the soul:

The nature of the soul is free from times and changes of seasons, from the lack of sustenance, from the abundance of crops, from the harm of hail … from exhaustion of hunger, from being mute, from blindness of the eyes … The soul is also free from illnesses of the inner parts of the body: enlargement of the spleen, constriction of the liver, an outpouring of bile, dysentery, the torment of asthma, renal distress.

Illness of the body—though painful and difficult—is, for Mar John, nothing compared to the fear of “judgement” and the “torture of Gehenna,” for bodily illnesses do not afflict the soul as eternal consequences do.

*EpMar* displays similar themes and convictions in §17, critiquing those who would seek to improve their health by using foods that are the cause of illness, and in §20 (quoted above), arguing that it is foolish to allow what is naturally healthy (the soul) to become ill while preventing the naturally sickly body from succumbing to diseases. That the distinctive healthcare imagery recognized as a key feature of Johannine texts is present in *EpMar* intimates that the epistle is authentically Johannine.

**Regarding the Johannine Authorship of *EpMar***

Based on this preliminary analysis, *EpMar* seems to demonstrate linguistic similarity with other texts from the Johannine corpus when describing sexual lust. In particular, the use of **ςη** in *EpMar* coheres with its use in other Johannine texts,

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20. Ibid. 172.
especially the *Dialogue*, where Mar John distinguishes ܕܘܡܐ, sexual lust, from ܝܡܐ, desire more generally. Furthermore, *EpMar* exhibits distinctive motifs and tropes found in other Johannine works. Collectively, this body of evidence intimates that *EpMar* was very likely written by the “proto-John” of the early fifth century or (perhaps) by a pseudepigrapher intimately familiar with Mar John and his writings.

Once again, these remain provisional conclusions at best. I have here only focused on a small piece of Johannine vocabulary and theology, and much more comparative linguistic work remains to offer a definitive statement on its authenticity. Furthermore, comparison of the themes identified above with ascetic literature more generally is needed to confirm that the thematic confluences are distinctive. Indeed, potential defeaters to the claim of authenticity admittedly still remain. For instance, *EpMar* lacks the digressive, extended doxologies present in other Johannine writings.\(^2\) Likewise, although the epistle might allude to it, *EpMar* does not articulate in depth the tripartite schema of the body, soul, and spirit that is so pronounced in the *Dialogue*. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the relative brevity, ad hoc nature, and pastoral concern of *EpMar* all suggest that we should not expect the letter to function as a full-fledged Johannine ascetic treaty or homily. It is rather specific to an occasion and attuned to the needs of a particular audience (i.e., Marcianus and the “brothers”).\(^2\) Therefore, based on the preliminary evidence presented here, and barring evidence to the contrary, I


\(^{22}\) For instance, Mar John may have discerned that a complex analysis of the relationship between the body, soul, and spirit would have been counterproductive to meeting the needs of Marcianus and other monks.
suggest that *EpMar* should be tentatively counted among the authentic texts of so-called “proto-John.”

**Considering Evagrian Influence on Johannine Conceptions of Lust**

Beyond its place in the Johannine corpus, *EpMar*’s place among ascetic literature in Late Antiquity is worth contextualizing more generally. As the ascetic theorist *par excellence* of the fourth century, Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) offers a natural point of comparison for Mar John. Indeed, a salient question in the burgeoning scholarship on Mar John is the extent of his familiarity with the corpus of Evagrius. Given the historical proximity of both authors and the linguistic gap between the two, it is possible that Mar John represents a form of Semitic Christian spirituality wholly distinct from Evagrian influence. Mary T. Hansbury has argued that Mar John’s approach to the passions bears little similarity to Evagrius’s and sees Theodore of Mopsuestia as a far more relevant influence.23 Likewise, Sebastian Brock suggested in a 1979 article that Mar John “shows no trace at all of the influence of Evagrius,” though Brock more recently tempered this claim to allow for the possibility that Mar John may have known some of Evagrius by way of Greek.24 The “Evagrian question” is far from settled, however. For instance, contra both Hansbury and Brock, P. Bettiolo thinks it possible that Mar John did know the earliest Syriac versions of Evagrius.25 The present study of *EpMar* provides us with


the opportunity to examine the possibility of Evagrian influence on Mar John with regard to the language of lust.

Linguistic Considerations

Although Evagrius originally wrote in Greek, his texts were soon translated into Syriac. However, due to their close historical proximity, it is uncertain whether Mar John would have had access to Syriac versions of Evagrius’s corpus. Indeed, Robin Darling Young considers Philoxenos—who very likely wrote several decades after Mar John—the “medium for the introduction of Evagrian thought into Syria and the Syriac language.”27 This historical inconvenience, along with the relative scarcity of Syriac editions of Evagrius’s writings, necessitates primary consideration of Evagrius’s Greek corpus. Therefore, before comparing Johannine and Evagrian conceptions of lust, a consideration of each’s particular idiom for sexual desire is necessary. Given the linguistic gap between the two authors (Mar John in Syriac and Evagrius in Greek), I will take care to delineate when Mar John and Evagrius are describing similar ascetic phenomena.

The Language of “Lust” in Evagrius Ponticus

I have established above that Mar John tends to use ܐܼܒܐܼ as a technical term for lust of a particularly sexual nature. While study of the language of general desire in Evagrius and Mar John would no doubt be a fruitful endeavor, I am here concerned only with sexual lust and therefore wish to distinguish Evagrian terminology for sexual lust


from the language of desire. A brief word about Evagrius’s language for this sort of lust is sufficient.

The typical Evagrian terminology for lust is the Greek word πορνεία, denoting lust but also sexual immorality more generally. Evagrius writes in Praktikos 6, “there are eight general and basic categories of thoughts in which are included every thought. First is that of gluttony, then impurity (πορνεία), avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and last of all, pride.”28 In the Evagrian idiom, πορνεία is to be distinguished from ἐπιθυμία, a word with semantic overlap that typically means desire in a more general sense: “Whatever a man loves he will desire with all his might. What he desires he strives to lay hold of. Now desire (ἐπιθυμία) precedes every pleasure, and it is feeling which gives birth to desire. For that which is not subject to feeling is also free of passion.”29 Here ἐπιθυμία is described as being the result of love, with the possibility that one could desire a variety of things, not simply things related to sexuality. So while there is some potential overlap between ἐπιθυμία and πορνεία, ἐπιθυμία is deployed in a much more general sense. Thus we may take the Evagrian πορνεία as a closer equivalent to the Johannine use of ἀλληλούβα as lust/sexual desire.

Comparing Evagrian and Johannine Theologies of Lust

With a linguistic foundation established, I will now consider whether Johannine characterizations of lust display Evagrian influence. Despite their temporal proximity and the significance of Evagrian thought on the Syriac tradition from the mid-fifth century on, Mar John’s theology of lust does not seem to be dependent on Evagrius’s. Specifically,


Evagrian and Johannine dissimilarities regarding lust’s place in passion lists, lust’s connection to demonic entities and its location in the spiritual-anthropological schema support the apparent lack of Evagrian influence. It must be acknowledge before preceding, however, that Evagrian thought is rich, complex, and difficult to adequately characterize, especially in the scope of the present study. As such, the comparison of Evagrian and Johannine conceptions of lust—an admittedly minor theme in the broader range of their respective writings—represents a very preliminary foray into analyzing the “Evagrian question.”

**Lust among the Passions**

For both Mar John and Evagrius, lust is one of several passions capable of afflicting the human person; a striking similarity of the authors’ respective characterizations is the inclusion of lust among lists of passions. Evagrius famously includes πορνεία among his deadly “thoughts,” which inspired the later development of the deadly sins tradition.30 Mar John displays a similar impulse to Evagrius and, as Hansbury notes, “often makes lists of virtues and vices.”31 But to what extent do Mar John’s lists of the passions display Evagrian influence?

Evagrius’s most prominent list of passions is the eight *logismoi* found in the Praktikos 6.32 The Evagrian passions are gluttony, impurity (πορνεία), avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride. While the Praktikos perhaps gives the impression that the *logismoi* are a fixed entity in Evagrius’s ascetic doctrine, it should be mentioned

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30. Ibid.
that Evagrius is not always consistent in his classifications of the passions. Corrigan notes

although these eight are mentioned frequently in Evagrius’ writings, they appear
as a structure in only a few works (the Praktikos, Antirrhetikos, and Eight Spirits),
and in one text, Vices, there are nine, with envy (phthonos) between vainglory and
pride. Elsewhere, Evagrius introduces a demon called planos, wanderer, who
‘drives the mind little by little to death.’ (TH 9, 20–21)33

Nevertheless, even if we allow for some inconsistencies, a clear Evagrian project is the
listing of passions and ordering them in a particular way. Jeremy Driscoll observes,
“there is a certain logic to the order of the thoughts as Evagrius lists them and analyzes
them, an order derived from experience … for example, fornication follows rather
naturally from someone who gratifies his desires for food and comfort … Thus, in a
general way the order of the eight thoughts follows the order of spiritual progress.”34 The
logismoi therefore represent the passionate thought patterns to which people are
susceptible in various stages of the spiritual life. In this Evagrian schema—with gluttony
as the most “carnal” and pride the most “spiritual,”—πορνεία is second between gluttony
and avarice.35

The passion of lust in Evagrius relates to the other passions in a number of
complex ways. Apart from being representative of one step in the spiritual process, it is
also “paired” with other passions based on their locus in the soul. As Driscoll writes,
“certain evil thoughts are especially related to one or other part of the passionate part of
the soul (i.e., to the concupiscible or to the irascible), though Evagrius does not express


35. See Corrigan, Evagrius and Gregory, 75.
himself with precision in this regard. Thus, gluttony and fornication can be considered to be in the concupiscible part, as also probably love of money.”

Similarly, Corrigan has observed that Evagrius divides the eight logismoi into four pairs, each of which contains a passion that is “much-mattered” (i.e., carnal) and “little-mattered” (i.e., immaterial).

Other combinations of passions appear throughout the Evagrian corpus. Praktikos 22 demonstrates well the Evagrian pairing tendency:

When under some provocation or other the irascible part of our soul is stirred up, it is just at that moment that the demons suggest to us the advantages of solitude so as to deliver ourselves from the disturbance rather than clear up the basic causes of the sadness. When it is our lust that flames up they cause us to seek out once again the friendly company of men and call us callous and uncivil in the hope that while we feel the desire for bodies we might happen upon them.

In this passage, Evagrius pairs lust—a more carnal, concupiscible passion—with the irascible passion of sadness. Although these two passions are dissimilar, Evagrius demonstrates how demons exploit the two passions similarly by placing before the provoked person a temptation that will exacerbate his/her inclinations.

Johannine lists display far less cohesion and interactivity between the passions. Compare, for instance, two previously mentioned lists from Dialogue:

Eusebius: Of [the passions] of the body, namely there are: sleep, hunger, thirst, lust (µαλακία) and intemperance.

The Solitary: For those of the body, they are as you say.

We see that it is not only in human beings that these passions show signs of life, but also in other bodies which are without a soul. Indeed, we find that in the nature of animals, of birds, of snakes and of the fish of the sea—their nature is

38. Evagrius, The Praktikos, 22.
moved by six passions: by anger, by malice, by desire, by lust ( unregisterable), by discernment, by pride.\(^{40}\)

In both texts, the bodily passions are listed. However, while there is some overlap between the two, there are notable differences, such as the inclusion of anger and pride as bodily passions in the second quotation but not in the first. There also does not appear to be any sort of hierarchy among the passions for Mar John, as he is content to merely make distinctions between the different passions: “For pride is different from vain glory. Boasting follows pride and haughtiness, vain glory. Then again, the passion which engenders haughtiness is different from that which engenders boasting.”\(^{41}\) Thus Mar John does not seem to be reflecting any sort of Evagrian proclivity for ordering and explicating the relationships between each of the passions.

**The Demonic Nature of Lust**

Another noticeable divergence between Evagrian and Johannine depictions of lust relates to the demonic. More specifically, Mar John does not display as robust a demonology in connection with lust as Evagrius. For Evagrius, demons and *logismoi* are closely related, with particular, distinctive demons attached to each of the *logismoi*. Thus Evagrius writes in the *Praktikos* 8,

The demon of impurity (πορνεία) impels one to lust after bodies. It attacks more strenuously those who practice continence, in the hope that they will give up their practice of this virtue, feeling that they gain nothing by it. This demon has a way of bowing the soul down to practices of an impure kind, defiling it, and causing it to speak and hear certain words almost as if the reality were actually present to be seen.\(^{42}\)

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40. Ibid., 100.
41. Ibid., 68.
Corrigan provides a helpful description of how demons relate to the *logismoi*:

The demons stir up *logismoi* indirectly, for they do not know the heart; only God knows this. They watch our behavior for signs. By contrast, God “has no need of a sign to discover the secrets in our hearts.” When the demons achieve nothing, they withdraw, see what is neglected and attack from that standpoint. So demons work from outside structures, like hard behaviorists, unable to sense the heart or whole and constrained to judge the movements and weaknesses of soul from their own (ungenerous) guesses about our behavior. Only the hermit experiences their attacks directly. In community, demons attack through the weaknesses of our brothers or sisters, just as they “struggle against people of the world more through things,” but if one lives alone they “wrestle” with you “naked,” without intermediary, body to body!43

The demon of lust is a distinctive spiritual provocateur, testing the ascetic defenses of the person and conjuring in the mind images and dreams of enticing sexual pleasures.44 “All the demonic thoughts import concepts of perceptible things into the soul. The mind, being imprinted on by them, bears about in itself the shapes of these things and from the thing recognizes at length the demon that has drawn near.”45

While Mar John does have concern for the demonic, he does not characterize lust as a demon in the same way that Evagrius does.46 Instead, lust is more directly personified, itself an active agent and not simply a disposition or thought stirred by an outside force. For instance, Mar John describes the way that lust, like a woman inviting in a young man to have sex, actively seizes its victim:

“My husband is not in the house, because—look!—he departed on a long journey.” “Death,” she says, “is distant and old age is far off.” She drove away the neighbor. She sent him, who was with them, away. She sent away that one who hour by hour steals their lives on a long journey. Because she is not able to assault


44. Ibid., 93, “Passion and logismos, then, are not demons themselves, but only the medium through which the demon works.”


46. For Johannine discussion of demons, see Hansbury, *John the Solitary*, 94-98.
the mind that knows that death is near with such evils, she promises the youth that [death] has gone away. And by doing so she gives evils the power to assault without fear, while putting forward the notion of a long journey. Likewise, she is able to plant in the mind, without fear, the germ of her lusts. (EpMar 10)

In this passage, lust itself is both the agent and the result; lust attacks the person directly in order to gain a foothold, in contrast to Evagrius, where the demon impels the person towards lust. Although it could be argued that Mar John’s personification of lust as an active agent suggests a demonic connection, it is notable that EpMar does not contain a single reference to demons. Indeed, I would suggest that the personification of lust is more likely the result of biblical typology (i.e., the woman of Proverbs 7) than demonology.47

Another instructive illustration of the difference in the demon-lust connection for our respective authors is the use of images. Mar John, like Evagrius, believes that the conjuring of sexualized images in the mind is a standard form of attack, writing in EpMar, “the passion of lust has the ability to depict images in the soul, and to bring thoughts after its unseemliness” (§24). However, once again, it is the passion itself—not a demon—that is the active agent, conjuring the image in the mind of its victim. While subtle, the difference between Evagrius’s conception of the demonic provocation of lust, Mar John’s personification of lust as an active, independent agent is important. This indicates that Mar John’s understanding of lust is not dependent on Evagrian demonology and represents a distinctive form of ascetic theorizing.

Lust and the Spiritual-Anthropological Schemata

A final point of comparison for Johannine and Evagrian conceptions of lust is the locus of the passion in their respective spiritual-anthropological schemata. Both authors operate with the assumption of a distinction between the body and the soul—a form of what we might call substance dualism, in which the categories of body and soul are ontologically independent, even if intimately intertwined. As such, Mar John and Evagrius are each concerned with “locating” the passion of lust, considering whether it is natural to the substance of the body or to the substance of the soul.

At first glance, Mar John and Evagrius seem to be in close agreement in answering that lust is a passion natural to the body. Mar John writes in the Dialogue On the Soul, “Now if you wanted to distinguish the passions, we find three divisions in humans: one of the nature of the soul; another of its activity by means of the body; another of the body itself.”48 For Mar John, lust is a passion natural to the body itself, found in animals and humans alike.49 Because lust is native to the physical nature, the passion uses the body as its medium to capture its victim:

[Lust’s] net is stretched over the whole of the body—that is, the body is her net, and various snares for the soul are hidden in it. If something befalls [him] by the sense of sight, he has been captured by lust. And if it comes by the sense of hearing, he has been caught by her snare. [If] he breathed, she seized him with the sense of smell, and she set fire in order to burn [him]. (EpMar 25)

Similarly, Evagrius distinguishes between passions located in the soul and those located in the body: “the passions of the soul are occasioned by men. Those of the body come from the body. Now the passions of the body are cut off by continence and those of soul


by spiritual love.” Evagrius’s spiritual-anthropological schema undergirds his articulation of the path to *theologia*, the beatific vision, during which *praktike* purify the passions. Like Mar John, Evagrius classifies lust as a passion of the body. However, for Evagrius, there is a sense in which the bodily passions can also be considered passions of the soul. Kevin Corrigan explains:

Evagrius also regards the eight thoughts as passions of the soul, for example in *TH [On Thoughts]*, where gluttony is attached to *epithymia*, avarice to *thymos*, and *kenodoxia* to the *logistikos* … The body unfolds into its own dimension from within the multiperspectival dimension of soul. What belongs to soul from one perspective may readily be viewed as bodily from another. The blurring or obliteration of the distinction is nonetheless informative, for it tells us implicitly (as in Plato) that body is not something extra to be added on after the soul stops, so to speak, but a dimension properly to be viewed from within that of soul.

Such a “blurring or obliteration of distinction” is markedly absent in Mar John’s understanding of the location of lust in the spiritual person. For Mar John, to suggest that a passion such as lust would be natural to the soul too readily dispenses with the soul-body distinction and implies that the soul functions carnally. Thus he writes,

Know this, indeed, that if the inclination to these evil passions is in the nature of the soul, then the passions are of its nature and if so they will not therefore cease from their disturbance, not even after the soul goes out from the body. Just as the body sleeps because sleep is of its nature, and eats because it is by nature hungry, and drinks because it is thirsty by nature, and these things are always found in it, so also the soul would be inclined to these passions at all times if they were of its nature … Indeed, one is not blamed for sleeping because sleeping is of his nature … But since these passions are condemned by God and he always prescribes against them, punishing the one who is enslaved to them, together with the other things which I mentioned above, this shows that the nature of the soul is free from the passions. Nevertheless, they prevail over the mind through causes which are outside of the body and through the body itself.

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At stake for Mar John is the eternality of the soul. If lust is natural to the soul, then lust could presumably afflict its victim even on the other side of death when “the soul goes out from the body.” The soul is furthermore naturally healthy, and it is only the body that is able to contract the disease of lust that will eventually afflict even the soul: “We are careful with what is not able to live without illnesses, but we cause the soul—which possesses health by its nature—to become sick” (EpMar 20).

To summarize, then, the Evagrian slippage of the body-soul passion distinction is far less evident in Mar John’s spiritual-anthropological schema. Mar John, deeming what is natural to the soul as essential to the human person, rejects the inclusion of sexual desire as a “soul-passion” on the grounds that lust can (and should!) be foregone by people. And while Evagrius may very well agree with Mar John’s ascetic ideal of chastity, Mar John’s placement of lust in his schemata excludes Evagrius’s. Indeed, what I have labeled the “Evagrian slippage” may very well underscore a significant divergence between Johannine and Evagrian conceptions of the soul-body connection. In many ways, Mar John’s dualism seems much starker than Evagrius’s, such as in the Dialogue when he comments:

> Everything which has power for motion and color in its aspect, consists of two mysteries: its outward appearance and the creative workmanship of God which is within it. Because of this, someone whom God is ready to create … must be made with two powers of a double substance: that at the manifest sight of these amazing beauties which shine from all the natures, this manifest substance of the body and the concealed substance of the soul might take delight in the wisdom which is hidden in them.54

Whereas, for Mar John, the soul is “concealed” within the body, for Evagrius—as already noted—the body “is not something extra to be added on after the soul stops, so to speak,

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54. Ibid. 4.
but a dimension properly to be viewed from within that of soul."\textsuperscript{55} Stated crudely, it seems that Mar John’s conception of the body-soul relation is inverted from the Evagrian, viewing the soul as substance contained within the body as opposed to a substance that itself is constitutive of the body.

\textbf{A Pre-Evagrian John the Solitary?}

In closing, there is little evidence to suggest a direct Evagrian influence on conceptions of lust in Mar John’s writings. There are certainly general similarities: both authors linguistically distinguish sexual desires from more general desires, both include lust regularly in lists of other passions, and both describe lust as a “bodily” passion. However, I find no compelling evidence to suggest that these similarities are due to more than the reception of a general ascetic tradition or even just basic human tendencies. Furthermore, Johannine characterizations of lust at times diverge significantly from Evagrian characterizations, particularly with regard to demonic influence and inclusion of “body-passions” as also being passions of the soul. In short, my analysis suggests that Mar John could indeed represent a non-Evagrian strand of early Christian asceticism that might have at one time challenged, and eventually merged with, the Evagrian synthesis of later centuries. Such a “pre-Evagrian” Mar John would also further cement the argument advanced in chapter 1 (and intuited by others) that Mar John was indeed writing quite early in the fifth century before the Evagrian idiom had come to permeate Syriac asceticism.

Nevertheless, my findings do not entirely preclude the potential for Evagrian influence on Mar John in other respects. It is certainly possible that Evagrius exerted

\textsuperscript{55} Corrigan, \textit{Evagrius and Gregory}, 93.
influence on Johannine language and spirituality in some other areas, and a significant amount of work is still necessary before sweeping statements can be made about the sources of Mar John’s thought. In particular, further production of the Syriac versions of Evagrius’s works is necessary before more extensive and precise comparative linguistic analysis may occur. Additionally, other aspects of Mar John’s theology must be examined for Evagrian influence, such as his body-soul-spirit schema, or his exegetical methods.
CHAPTER V

ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EPISTLE TO MARCIANUS

**Mar John as Syriac Father**

I began this study by noting the gap in Western historiography with regard to the Oriental Orthodox expressions of late-antique Christianity, lamenting the lack of attention these traditions’ respective texts, histories, and theologies have received. The edition, translation, and analysis of Mar John’s *Epistle to Marcianus* were thus framed as a response to this *desideratum*, providing access to a text previously unstudied. Close attention to Johannine texts such as *EpMar*, however, do more than just provide missing historical data; they invite us to consider the importance of Mar John to the development of Syriac Christianity in our attempts to give the tradition its due attention in our recounting of history.

Mar John has largely remained in the shadows of Syriac studies. The lack of accessible texts and confusion about his identity have undoubtedly impeded scholarly attention. Nevertheless, this study has meagerly exposed threads in Johannine studies that hint at a rich and significant tapestry of history and theology. In short, the emerging picture of Mar John to which this thesis contributes is one of a universal Syriac Father.

The early fifth-century dating of Mar John advanced in chapter I places him in rarified territory of what we might call the “universal stream” of Syriac Christianity, that is, the Syriac tradition prior to the schisms in 431 and 451 CE. Included in this shared tradition are Church Fathers such as Ephrem and Aphrahat, the Peshitta Old and New
Testaments, the *Book of Steps*, and other apocryphal works that constitute the common heritage of the monophysite Syrian Orthodox Church, the dyophysite Church of the East, and the pro-Chalcedonian Melkites. Mar John undoubtedly deserves consideration for inclusion among these venerable authors and writings.

Historically, Mar John also fills an evidential gap between late fourth-century and mid-to-late fifth-century Syriac Christianity. Writing at a slightly later date than other universal Syriac writers, but prior to the diversification of Syriac tradition, he represents an important link in the Syriac tradition, particularly between prolific writers of the fourth century, such as Ephrem (d. 373), and writers of the early sixth century, such as Philoxenos (d. 523). He is thus an important author for helping scholarship understand the development of Syriac Christianity in the first half of the fifth century.

Furthermore, Mar John’s spiritual and theological writings as attested in *EpMar* and elsewhere are remarkably rich and varied, ranging from speculative and technical (*Dialogue on the Soul*) to warm and pastoral (*EpMar*, “Letter to Hesychius”). As Sebastian Brock has remarked, Mar John was “a man of considerable education and culture,” an observation that Mar John’s knowledge of the spiritual life, insightful theology, employment of medical terms, and complex prose certainly confirm.¹ It has been well-noted by scholars that Evagrius became the ascetic *par excellence* for many later Syriac authors.² However, if my analysis of (the lack of) Evagrian influence on Mar John’s language and theology in chapter 4 is correct, Mar John could represent an

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¹ Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 78.
² See Young, “The Influence of Evagrius Ponticus,”158.
alternative thread of ascetic theology whose influence may be more widespread than we have previously realized.³

_EpMar_ also confirms Mar John as a creative exegete who is able to vividly and concretely articulate the effects of a spiritual passion. In the epistle we see Mar John not only as ascetic theoretician but also as pastor and spiritual guide. The Johannine corpus contains writings of expansive scope in which the full schema of Mar John’s spiritual worldview is articulated and intimate portraits of pastoral theology in which we see the theologian put his grandest ideas into specific action. Mar John therefore appears to be not only of great significance for the Syriacist or historian of Christianity but also for the theologian or minister who draws on the Christian tradition as a source for contemporary theology and practice.

**Future Avenues for Research on Mar John and the Epistle to Marcianus**

Research on the Johannine Corpus

If Mar John should indeed be included among the earliest (and most significant) Syriac fathers, then more sustained attention to his corpus is warranted. On the one hand, the production of further editions and translations of Johannine texts is imperative. My hope is that this thesis has made a contribution towards this goal and has provided a template by which others might proceed in making the Johannine corpus more available.

The systematizing of Mar John’s thought, and closer scrutiny of its particulars, would also represent a significant step forward in Johannine studies. A host of secondary sources exist on the writings of figures such as Origen, Evagrius, Ephrem, and the Cappadocian fathers who all had a hand in shaping early Christian ascetic theology. For

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³. As suggested by Sebastian Brock’s recognition of Johannine influence on Isaac of Nineveh.
more in-depth comparative work to be done, similar studies need to be conducted on Mar John’s own writings.

Research on EpMar

More specifically, EpMar’s historical place in the articulation of a theology of lust in Late Antiquity deserves further attention. One line of inquiry that might be fruitfully pursued is a cross-linguistic analysis of figural readings of Prov 7. It seems possible that in EpMar Mar John may be reflecting a broader exegetical tradition related to Prov 7 and the passions. For instance, Ambrose (writing in Latin) comments on Lady Folly,

Here in the words of Solomon we behold the very picture of a wanton [woman]. What other than worldly pleasure is more characteristic of a prostitute who makes her entrance stealthily into the house, first making tentative explorations with her eyes and then entering quickly, while you concentrate the gaze of your soul outward on the public square, that is, on the streets frequented by passersby and not inward on the mysteries of the law?4

Although Lady Folly becomes “worldly pleasure” for Ambrose, rather than lust, such a reading of the text adheres closely to Mar John’s own. Mar John also makes an exegetical move strikingly similar to that of Origen, who also regards the “husband” figure of Prov 7 as “death.”5 It is possible that Mar John may be reflecting a tradition that ranged across the linguistic boundaries and that future studies would do well to examine. Furthermore, much more work remains to contextualize EpMar’s articulation of the passion of lust. In particular, attention to characterizations of the passion in Mar John’s near-contemporaries, such as Ephrem, Gregory of Nyssa, Philoxenos, and Augustine, might


5. PG 17:181.
offer insight into the ways that Christians in Late Antiquity were negotiating the proper usage of the body, sexual desire, and intercourse.

Final Thoughts

In closing, Mar John’s *Epistle to Marcianus* represents a significant witness to both the Johannine corpus and early Syriac Christianity more generally. My hope is that this study has provided a useful edition and translation for those Syriacists, historians, and non-academics concerned with the history of the Syriac tradition, and a helpful, albeit brief, analysis of the text that makes its content readily accessible. The study of this seminal author and his works is a fruitful endeavor that will be of great importance if we are to better understand the role Syriac Christians have played in the history of Christianity.
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