

Nestor Kavvadas, ed.: *Joseph Hazzaya, On Providence: Text, Translation and Introduction*, Text and Studies in Eastern Christianity 8, Leiden (Brill) 2016, 212 pp., ISBN 978-9004329997, € 114,-.

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East Syrian ascetic-mystical literature of the 7th–8th centuries has constantly enjoyed a wide scholarly interest in the last decades. A specific bibliography saw the light in 2011¹ and is to this day the only one devoted to a particular field of Syriac literature; new monographs on and editions of texts of the major authors, especially Isaac of Nineveh (7th century), do not cease to appear. The list of ongoing editions and translations of Syriac texts, constantly updated by Grigory Kessel (*Syriac Editions and Translations in Progress* [<http://syri.ac/editions> (accessed 15 February 2018)]), records various projects on Syriac ascetic literature.

Despite all this interest, however, Joseph Ḥazzāyā (8th century), one of the most prominent figures in this field, has been rather neglected until very recently. His three major works have long remained unpublished: these are the *Book of Questions and Answers*, the treatise *On the Nature of the Essence*, and the *Chapters of Knowledge*. All three works are now being or have been edited: I am currently preparing an edition and English translation of the *Book of Questions and Answers*; the *Chapters of Knowledge* are being edited at the same time by Paolo Raffaele Pugliese and by Maksim Kalinin and Alexander Preobrazhenskij. Nestor Kavvadas has now published and translated into English the second of these important treatises, the *Discourse on the Nature of the Essence*. This publication had already been prepared by two articles devoted to the apocalyptic section of the treatise (on which see here below).²

The most important works on Joseph of the last thirty-five years, namely Robert Beulay’s ground-breaking book *La lumière sans forme* (not specifically devoted to Joseph, but rich in precious insights),³ the edition of Joseph’s *Letter*

¹ Grigory Kessel and Karl Pinggéra, *A Bibliography of Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature* (Eastern Christian Studies 11; Leuven: Peeters, 2011).

² Nestor Kavvadas, “The Apocalyptic Section of Joseph Hazzaya’s On Divine Providence: A Reaction to Islamization,” *Parole de l’Orient* 40 (2015): 243–249; idem, “We Do Not Turn Aside from the Way of the Interpreter’: Joseph Hazzaya’s *Discourse on Divine Providence* and its Apologetic Intention,” in *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26–29 June 2011* (ed. Maria E. Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano, and Kyle R. Smith; Eastern Christian Studies 20; Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 163–178.

³ Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme: Introduction à l’étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale* (Collection L’esprit et le feu; Chevetogne: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1987).

on the *Three Degrees of the Monastic Life*,⁴ and the German anthology of Gabriel Bunge,⁵ have portrayed the profile of a systematic writer, mainly interested in organizing the results of previous ascetic literature in a coherent whole, albeit with his own thematic focuses. This is largely confirmed by a text like the *Book of Questions and Answers*, which is very scholastic in nature and tackles whole thematic areas of Syriac (and Greek) monastic speculation in a highly detailed and systematic way. A substantial confirmation is also provided by the treatise edited and translated by Nestor Kavvadas, who has decided to call it *On Providence*, even though it is transmitted by the only manuscript to have preserved the work with the already mentioned, different and much longer title *Discourse on the nature of the Essence, on the distinction between the hypostases of the Trinity and on their properties, on the genesis of creation, on judgment, on the care and mercy of our Lord, on the love He showed towards rational beings in the last times, and on what He has done and does for them, from the beginning of their creation until consummation, together with other topics*. This title, abridged in *On the Nature of the Essence*, as we shall see, was also the title under which the treatise was known to later East Syrian authors. Unlike Joseph's other works, this treatise is not immediately concerned with ascetic topics, although it is addressed to monks since its subjects and the way they are treated were intended to be of interest to monks. Although its contents are manifold, *On Providence* can be defined as an exegetical work on Gen 1–19, whose main aim is to outline the progress of God's providential education of humanity, or, better put, of God's providence as education of humanity ("Just like children who start to go to school are first taught how to read, then the alphabet, subsequently the Psalms, and then they write and read entire books, and only after that they also make zealous efforts to interpret ... in exactly this same way God instructed the world," *On Providence* 67, pp. 92–93). The history of humankind, of which the first part of *Genesis* is a representative specimen, is one of human transgressions and divine punishments; but no punishment is intended as an act of vengeance, otherwise God would have simply abolished the world altogether (see e. g. *On Providence* 200, pp. 200–201: "if He had wanted to pay them back their deeds, He, in His omnipotence, could have made these godless and iniquitous ones as [if] they had [never] existed"). Punishment is a paternal pedagogical correction, both for human beings who receive it

⁴ Paul Harb and François Graffin, eds., *Joseph Ḥazzāyā, Lettre sur les trois étapes de la vie monastique: Édition critique du texte syriaque, traduction et introduction* (Patrologia Orientalis 45,2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1992).

⁵ Gabriel Bunge, trans., *Rabban Jausep Hazzaya, Briefe über das geistliche Leben und verwandte Schriften: Ostsyrische Mystik des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Sophia: Quellen östlicher Theologie 21; Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1982).

and for the angels, who see and learn how God's providence is displayed in the world. Indeed, God's deepest mystery is what Joseph with a powerful expression calls "the Gehenna of love" (ܟܘܠܗܢ ܩܘܪܝܢܐ, *On Providence* 57, pp. 86–87), an idea that originates with Isaac of Nineveh, who expresses it most clearly in Discourse 27 of the *First Part*, which, strangely enough, is not recalled by Kavvadas:⁶ the sinner is not tormented by the deprivation of God's love, but by its direct action ("Even the sinners, and the wicked," God says in *On Providence* 57, "it is with love that I torment them: the fire of love burns the brushwood of the sin of their thoughts. And this love is their food and drink in the Gehenna of love."). Divine justice is "swallowed by grace and mercy" (*On Providence* 42, pp. 72–73); despite transgression being constantly repeated throughout history, God's final goal is salvation for the whole of the rational creation, and this is Joseph's final message: "all sinners and righteous ones are justified freely by grace" (*On Providence* 151, pp. 164–165). The doctrine of *apokatastasis* receives here an overt formulation. This is the reason why Kavvadas has decided to call the treatise *On Providence* even though the term "providence" itself does not appear in the title given by the manuscript. This choice can be disputed, as it obliterates the real title of the treatise, but it certainly matches the core subject of the text. By giving education such a prominent role in the history of salvation with this treatise, Joseph marks the full ripeness of an old theological tradition, which can be traced back to Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. According to this tradition, the Old Testament is not a "type," nor does it have sense only as a type of the New Testament, but has its own autonomous historical sense. Its connection to the new epoch of the history of salvation inaugurated by Christ is educational: the self-sufficient history of Israel is part of the preparation of humankind to the advent of Christ and to the divine gifts he reveals. This idea enjoyed a long *Fortleben* in the East Syrian tradition, both in monasteries and in schools, where it specifically crystallized in the motif of history as a succession of divine schools, culminating in the Syriac theological school of Nisibis. This motif of the *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, as it were, finds in *On Providence* a masterly overarching treatment and a plain, beautiful synthesis, which especially resonates with remembrances of the treatment of this motif by Isaac of Nineveh, a point that is not tackled in Kavvadas' book and would deserve to be further investigated. The history of this idea and of its implications in East Syrian culture had already and

⁶ Edited in Paul Bedjan, ed., *Mar Isaacus Ninivita, De perfectione religiosa* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1909), 201–202; trans. Arent J. Westerinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh, Translated from Bedjan's Syriac text, with an Introduction and Registers* (Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam. Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks 23,1; Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), 136.

exemplarily been outlined in the seminal work by Robert Macina, “L’homme à l’école de Dieu,”⁷ and further developed by Adam Becker in his monograph *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*;⁸ reference to the crucial work of Macina, so relevant to the core theme of *On Providence*, is unfortunately missing from Kavvadas’ bibliography.

Two further features of the treatise deserve to be highlighted. One quarter of the whole work is devoted to a most painstaking exegetical digression on Enoch and Elijah. The text makes clear that such a sustained interest in the two figures is due to their representing of a celestial form of human (though not yet angelic) life, thus constituting an ideal model for the ascetic life, as Joseph clearly suggests: e. g. *On Providence* 105 (pp. 120–121) on the manna and *On Providence* 108 (pp. 124–125) on the garments, where a parallel between Enoch/Elijah (and John the Baptist) and the “hermits” (ܐܪܘܡܝܢ, literally “mourners”) is explicitly drawn. This large section leads Joseph to a further excursus in which Elijah’s figure is central, a narrative of marked apocalyptic character albeit not an apocalypse in the proper sense (there is no direct revelation to the author from God or through the mediation of an angelic figure):⁹ it stages the reign of the Antichrist and its final uprooting through Elijah, who will come back to earth and defeat the enemy, preparing the way for Christ’s final advent. This apocalyptic section can thus be seen as a highly interesting attestation of a continued interest in historical apocalypses in Syriac literature beyond their abundant blossoming in the 7th century.

Let it be clear from the outset that by making the text available and translating it Kavvadas has contributed a major step forward (and the first significant one in the last thirty years) in our knowledge of Joseph Ḥazzāyā and in the study of Syriac ascetic literature in general. On account of all its aforementioned features, Joseph’s treatise emerges as a work of great importance whose contents, unlike those of his other major unpublished works (the *Questions and Answers* and the *Chapters of Knowledge*) has remained almost completely unknown until now. Thus, the sheer fact of being given the opportunity to read this treatise deserves gratitude. All the more regrettable, then, are a number of awkward issues in this edition. They are especially peculiar if we consider the scholarly quality Nestor

7 Robert Macina, “L’homme à l’école de Dieu: D’Antioche à Nisibe: Profil herméneutique, théologique et kérygmatic du mouvement scoliaste nestorien,” *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 32 (1982): 86–124, 263–301; 33 (1983): 39–103.

8 Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

9 According to the famous definition of John Collins, in idem, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1–19.

Kavvadas usually displays in his works. These matters will be discussed in the following pages.

I shall start with some formal issues. Firstly, the book unfortunately contains only an essential index of remarkable subjects, which makes orientation within the text relatively difficult. The lack of a biblical index, which one would expect to find as a standard feature in any edition or translation of an ancient Christian text, is surprising. The perplexity of the reader in this regard is further increased by the puzzling randomness of biblical references in the annotation to the translation. I shall provide only two examples out of many: on p. 81, Kavvadas rightly refers (note 31) to Gen 4:8 in commenting upon the following clause in Joseph's text: "when Cain told his brother to march out to the plain"; but on the same page he does not give any reference to Isa 53:7 when, in the same paragraph, Joseph writes: "Jesus was like a lamb led to slaughter, and Abel like a sheep before the shearer." Even more surprising is the absence of explicit references to Gen 1 on pp. 47 and 49 where God's words in the act of creation are directly quoted by Joseph: "Let there be light"; "Let the waters be gathered, and let the dry land appear," etc. To be sure, the provenance of these quotations would be obvious to anyone, but formal care and coherence would recommend complete explicitness in the footnotes. Another such example is *On Providence* 51 (pp. 78–81), where Joseph explicitly quotes Luke 20:36 ("... according to the word of the Lord who said that they are God's children inasmuch as they are children of the resurrection"), but once again no footnote is provided.

Another major formal problem is the presentation of the text. Both the Syriac transcription and the translation are subdivided into 204 successively numbered units/paragraphs, without any further indication. Neither is the meaning of these 204 numbers explained anywhere (though it seems reasonable to suppose that they are meant indeed to indicate paragraphs), nor are editorial titles and subtitles provided. Thus the reader is confronted with a fascinating yet somewhat impenetrable magma, whose thematic articulation she has to find out by herself. Indeed, even the general introduction, which as we shall see touches upon the major themes of the treatise, does not hint at where in the text one can find them! More generally, and oddly enough, the introduction never refers to precise passages in the text. It will not be pointless here, therefore, to propose a tentative structure according to Kavvadas' paragraph numbers.

- Opening prayer: 1–3 (pp. 36–39)
- Theological outlines: God's names, the Trinity, God's ineffability: 4–10 (pp. 40–45)
- On the creation of the world, fall of the demons: 11–24 (pp. 44–59)
- On Adam: 25–39 (pp. 58–69)
- [Excursus on demonic knowledge: 29–35 (pp. 60–65)]

- God's justice and loving providence: 40–49 (pp. 68–77)
- On Cain and Abel: 50–59 (pp. 76–87)
- On the meaning of “image of God” and on God as educator: 60–68 (pp. 86–95)
- On Enoch and Elijah. Especially on their assumption to heaven; on whether they have received the sacraments; on their bodies; on how they are nourished and clothed: 69–117 (pp. 94–133)
- Apocalyptic section: 118–152 (pp. 132–167)
- Transition: 153 (pp. 166–167)
- On Noah and the ark: 154–174 (pp. 166–183)
- On the Tower of Babel: 175–180 (pp. 182–185)
- On Melchizedek: 181–185 (pp. 186–189)
- On Abraham: 185–200 (pp. 188–201; Burning of Sodom: 194–200, pp. 196–201)
- Conclusions: 201–204 (pp. 202–207).

Bibliography is another issue of the book. The absence of some basic literature, especially on Joseph himself, is striking. Nestor Kavvadas certainly knows the literature he does not mention; regrettably enough, however, he does not make any use of it in his introduction and footnotes (hence its absence in the bibliography), which would have been recommendable even in a short and basic introduction as he had certainly conceived it. To give just one example, when mentioning the condemnation of Joseph by the Catholicos Timothy I, why not recall that important articles on the subject have recently been written?¹⁰ Even the latest relevant critical edition of a text by Joseph, the *Letter on the Three Degrees of Monastic Life*, is omitted.¹¹ This lack of basic bibliography leads me to discuss a more substantial problem of the book.

Indeed, both the introduction and the annotation of the text are surprisingly brief if compared with the rich variety of important motifs in the text. The introduction starts with a few lines explaining who Joseph was (p. 1), then quickly moves on to discussing the date and place of composition (pp. 2–4). Except for this short preface, there is no further attempt at contextualizing *On Providence* within its author's work and ideas, hence the absence of mentions of one of Joseph's central works like the *Letter on the Three Degrees*; in fact, the introduc-

10 Vittorio Berti, “Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée Ier: la perspective du patriarche,” in *Les mystiques syriaques* (ed. Alain Desreumaux; Études syriaques 8; Paris: Geuthner, 2011), 151–176; Alexander Treiger, “Could Christ's Humanity See His Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009): 3–21.

11 See above, note 4.

tion lacks references to almost any other of his works (but see e. g. notes 37–38 on the *Book of Questions and Answers*). This inattention to Joseph's oeuvre in a book devoted to Joseph (!) leads Kavvadas to neglect some intriguing references Joseph makes to his own (still unpublished) *Chapters of Knowledge* throughout *On Providence* (see *On Providence* 30, pp. 60–61, and 49, pp. 76–77). The following section of the introduction deals with the central theme of God's providence, Joseph's exegesis as an attempt to demonstrate God's care for humankind, and *apokatastasis* (pp. 4–11). Kavvadas then goes on to tackle the apocalyptic section (pp. 12–17), and, as he explicitly declares, some first soundings of the presence of traditional exegetical motifs in the treatise (pp. 17–27). His analysis of the “apocalypse” is a convincing contextualization of Joseph's inspiration in the first proper wave of Islamization in the Middle East, which the author had the venture to witness in the late 8th century. In that period the number of conversions to Islam started to increase significantly for the first time. On p. 14 Kavvadas makes a particularly interesting case for the reason why Joseph may have been more sensitive to this phenomenon than other Syriac writers of his time who had kept silent on the subject: “Joseph was seized at the age of seven by marauding Arab troops of the Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz II (reg. 717–720) to become slave of a Muslim Arab who made him a Muslim too ... having first-hand experience of Islamisation himself, Joseph was understandably attentive.” Kavvadas duly reminds the reader of the abundant Syriac apocalyptic literature of the previous century, especially of the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*, and perceives stimulating analogies between Joseph's apocalypse and contemporary Greek, Arabic, and Georgian Acts of Martyrs; unfortunately, however, he does not develop these hints enough. It is also regrettable that in mentioning the Elijah-Antichrist tradition as “not unusual” (p. 12), he does not quote any relevant, even old,¹² literature, or give any information about this tradition and its evolution. In the “first soundings” (p. 17) on Joseph's exegesis, we are shown how *On Providence* combines in a fluent discursive line a large number of typically Syriac exegetical traditions on the first chapters of *Genesis*, while conjugating them with the exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia which was also standard reading in Syriac schools, especially at Nisibis. This is the finest part of Kavvadas' introduction, as it probes into the fascinating stratification of a number of exegetical motifs: e. g. the cry of Abel's

12 Starting from Wilhelm Bousset, *Der Antichrist in der Überlieferung des Judentums, des neuen Testaments und der alten Kirche: Ein Beitrag zur Auslegung der Apokalypse* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895). Not to mention, as far as Elijah as an eschatological hero is concerned, the *Apocalypse of Elijah* and David Frankfurter's much more recent monograph on it: David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

blood, Enoch's translation, and various topics touched on in the long excursus on Enoch and Elijah. In this section Kavvadas finally gives a satisfying amount of references, and discloses a wide variety of sources. Yet, although Kavvadas does not aim to offer more than a preliminary exploration of the work's densely woven exegesis, it would have been useful to provide the reader with some further insight into Joseph's long exegesis of 2 Thess 1:6–2:14, where Paul writes about the Antichrist (*On Providence* 135–137, pp. 150–153). This text is a crucial exegetical key to the whole apocalyptic section. Joseph quotes at length from Paul, and intersperses the quotations with exegetical interventions. Even from a cursory reading it is evident that Joseph's wording here takes up the typical tones of the scholastic exegesis of his time, which in its turn was heavily influenced by Theodore of Mopsuestia. In the case of 2 Thess 1:6–2:14, Theodore's interpretation itself is available, as his *Commentary on 2 Thessalonians* is integrally preserved in Latin.¹³ Indeed, Joseph clearly draws on Theodore (other scholastic interpretations, recorded in contemporary or later sources like Theodore bar Koni or Isho'dad of Merw, are rather different). This is especially evident in his commentary on the famous verses mentioning the enigmatic *katechon*, 2 Thess 2:7–8: in Kavvadas' translation of the Syriac version, "he who now restrains will be out of the way, and then the Lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord shall destroy with the breath of his mouth and annihilate by the revelation of his coming." Joseph rejects an understanding of the "restraining force" as the Spirit of God:

By him "who now restrains," the apostle means God's providential care that had been holding back his evilness from humans, in order that he cannot fulfill all his will among them. From the Lawless one God's providential care was removed, not from humans, as some people think. Indeed, there would not be a single person [left] not enslaved to the Apostate's will; but behold, we see thousands and myriads that did not believe in him (*On Providence* 137, pp. 150–153).

The idea is that God did not abandon humankind altogether, but that he selectively removed his providence in order that the Lawless one be revealed. Compare this with Theodore of Mopsuestia's (quite prolix, as is his custom) explanation:

There are some who said that it was the Spirit of gifts of which the Apostle spoke here by saying *and now what is restraining*, on the grounds that "then (he says) Antichrist will appear when the gifts of the Spirit have completely failed ..." But this does not seem to me to have been said appropriately, because the workings of the Spirit have already ceased for

¹³ Henry Barclay Swete, ed., *Theodori episcopi Mopsuesteni in epistolas B. Pauli commentarii: The Latin Version with the Greek Fragments* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1880–1882).

a long time. But perhaps someone would want to say that they have not ceased because some things are still done by some people by prayer. In that case neither do I assert they have ceased in this way, because saints can never completely fail. For even then there will be those who will not accept the teaching of Antichrist.¹⁴

The conceptual parallel is evident. A detailed comparison of Theodore's and Joseph's commentaries would reveal further analogies, which by reasons of space cannot be displayed in full here, but would have been much appreciated in Kavvadas' annotation. Indeed, on the one hand the scarce footnotes to the translation reflect the patchy nature of the Introduction: not only do they miss many biblical references, but they rarely point out references or parallels to other Greek or Syriac texts. On the other hand, however, much exciting work remains to be done for future scholars.

A further observation must be made on the text and the translation. As Kavvadas notes (p. 33), the only manuscript that has transmitted the text in the form published in the book under review is the 13th-century "Alqosh 237 (today Baghdad, Chaldean Monastery, Syr. 680)," copied in 1288/89, of which two other manuscripts, Mingana Syr. 601 and Vatican Syr. 509, are later copies (20th century). Although it is not of great importance, Kavvadas omits here a further modern copy, the MS Baghdad, Chaldean Monastery Syr. 681. In addition, while it is clear to Syriacists where in Alqosh the original manuscript had been kept (namely, at the monastery of Notre-Dame des Sémences)¹⁵ before passing to Baghdad, it would have been correct to indicate it explicitly. Yet the really important omission is that of the folia of the manuscript on which the treatise is found: this information is to be found neither in the introductory note (p. 33), nor anywhere else in the text. Indeed, one would expect to find them indicated in the margins, or within the body, of the Syriac text. At first sight, the text offered by Kavvadas may appear as a diplomatic edition, since it has been transcribed as

14 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *In Secundam Epistolam ad Thessalonicenses* (ed. Henry Barclay Swete, *Theodori episcopi Mopsuesteni in epistolas B. Pauli commentarii: The Latin Version with the Greek Fragments 2* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882], 52,8–53,9; trans. Rowan A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on the Minor Pauline Epistles* [SBL Writings from the Greco-Roman World 26; Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010], 507–509): *Quidam dixerunt Spiritum gratiarum hoc in loco dixisse apostolum et nunc quod detinet; et quod "tunc (inquit) ille uidebitur, atubi Spiritus gratiae ad plenum destiterit ..."* Sed hoc mihi non uidetur esse apte dictum, eo quod et cessauerunt ex multo iam tempore inoperationes Spiritus. Si uero quis uoluerit dicere non cessasse, eo quod et ab aliquibus adhuc per orationem fiant aliqua, licet si et rare; secundum igitur hunc modum neque cessare adsero, eo quod neque deficere ad plenum sancti unquam potuerunt. Erunt enim et tunc qui non susipient eius doctrinam.

15 The manuscript is described by Jacques Marie Vosté, "Recueil d'auteurs ascétiques nestoriens du VII^e et VIII^e siècle," *Angelicum* 6 (1929): 143–206.

