

Narsai's *mēm̄rā On the Creation of Angels:*
translation and analysis

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Aim and method

The aim of this study is to give an English translation of the *mēm̄rā On the Creation of Angels* composed by Narsai of Nisibis, starting from Gignoux's edition of 1968. I will refer to Gignoux's French translation only in case of major differences with my own.

I will redact a translation respectful of the original text, trying to replicate the wordplay and the rhetorical devices used in the original text and, when this is not possible, I will offer an explanation in the reference notes. I will arrange the translation according to the macro-sequences identified by the editor; each sequence will be accompanied by a commentary mainly focused on the rhetorical tropes and the purpose of their use.

To conclude, I will discuss the rhetorical devices more often employed and briefly analyse the context in which Narsai composed this work.

Narsai's *mēm̄rā* *On the Creation of Angels*: translation and analysis

A brief introduction

Narsai's life

Narsai was born close to Ma'alta, in northern Mesopotamia, at the beginning of the fifth century C.E. He spent his early life in the monastery of Kfar Mari, where he received his first education, before moving to Edessa¹. In that city, he attended the local school as a student and afterwards, probably around the middle of the century, he became director for about twenty years. His teaching was presumably based on Theodor of Mopsuestia's commentaries and he was probably supported in the interpretation of the Greek father by Hiba, bishop of Edessa, a follower of the Antiochene theology².

At one point, Narsai was forced to flee from that city, most probably because of his Dyophysite Christology. The year of the flight is uncertain: he may have fled in 457³; between the 457 and the 489, the year in which the Roman emperor Zeno closed down the school⁴, most likely 471⁵.

¹ See A. HARRAK, *Edessa* in S. BROCK - A. BUTTS - G. KIRAZ - L. VAN ROMPAY (ed.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, 2011, pp. 139-140.

² See L. VAN ROMPAY, *Quelques remarques sur la tradition syriaque de l'oeuvre exégétique de Théodore de Mopsueste*, in H.J.W. DRIJVERS, R. LAVENANT, C. MOLENBERG, G.J. REININK (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984. Literary Genres in Syriac Literature* (OCA 229), Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, Rome, 1987, pp. 33-43.

³ S. BROCK, *A Guide to Narsai's Homilies*, in 'Hugoye' 12/1, 2009, pp. 21-22.

⁴ See L. VAN ROMPAY, *Narsai*, in S. BROCK - A. BUTTS - G. KIRAZ - L. VAN ROMPAY (ed.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, 2011, pp. 303-304.

⁵ P. GIGNOUX, *Homélie de Narsai sur la Création* (PO 34/3-4) Brepols, Turnhout-Paris, 1968, p. 3 [421].

The journey led Narsai to Nisibis, a city under the jurisdiction of the Persian Empire, where the bishop Barṣawma encouraged him to establish a school. Despite the later frictions with the bishop, Narsai managed to direct the school until his death, which occurred at the very beginning of the sixth century. Mingana⁶ proposes 502 as the year of Narsai's death, based on the conjecture that he had directed the School of Nisibis for 45 years (as it is written in Barḥadbšabba's historiography) after leaving Edessa in 457. Duval⁷, after Bar 'Ebrāyā's chronicle, in which it is said that the author lived another 50 years after fleeing from Edessa in 457, proposes 507.

Narsai's works and thought

As briefly mentioned above, Narsai was one of the major promoter of the Antiochene Christology, which emphasizes Christ's human nature. His works were inspired by the exegesis of Theodor of Mopsuestia, whose Dyophysite Christology was contraposed to the one (Miaphysite) of Cyril of Alexandria⁸. Because of this theological choice, Narsai is often seen as an opponent of Jacob of Serugh, who remained closer to Ephrem's writing and to the Miaphysite tradition⁹. Narsai *mēmre* especially focus on creation, on the salvation of the human kind through the two nature of Christ, on the

⁶ A. MINGANA, *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina*, Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, Mosul, 1905, pp. 7-9 (vol. I)

⁷ R. DUVAL, *Littérature syriaque*, Librairie Victor Lecoffre, Paris, 1900ⁱⁱ, pp. 345-346.

⁸ For further readings: S. BROCK, (2009), pp. 21-40; S. BROCK, *The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Consideration and Material*, in E. FERGUSON, *Recent Studies in Early Christianity. A Collection of Scholarly Essays*, vol. 4 "Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity", Garland Publishing, New York, 1999, pp. 281-298; W. F. MACOMBER, *Some Thoughts about Christology*, in 'JAAS'. 12/1 (1998), pp. 97-100.

⁹ L. VAN ROMPAY, *The East (3): Syria ad Mesopotamia*, in S.A. HARVEY, D. HUNTER (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford, 2008, p. 377.

interpretation of several passages from the Old and New Testament and also on the figure of Mary¹⁰.

According to ‘Abdisho’ Bar Brikha’s *Catalogue* (thirteenth century), Narsai’s *mēm̄rē* would have numbered 360, gathered in twelve volumes¹¹. There are also some other non-homiletic works that have his authorship. Unfortunately, only eighty-one *mēm̄rē* are known nowadays, and some of them have not been edited yet¹².

Most of the homilies were edited around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Forty-seven *mēm̄rē* were edited and published by Mingana¹³; one was edited in 1899 and translated into French, in 1900, by Martin¹⁴; four were edited and translated by Connolly¹⁵, in 1909. Later in the twentieth century, other works by Narsai were edited and translated into various European languages: Guillaumont¹⁶, 1956; Krüger,

¹⁰ L. VAN ROMPAY (2011), pp. 303-304.

¹¹ DUVAL (1900), pp. 345-346.

¹² See W.F. MACOMBER, *The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*, in ‘OCP’ 39 (1973), pp. 275-306.

¹³ MINGANA, (1905), 2 voll.

¹⁴ F. MARTIN, *Homélie de Narsès sur les trois docteurs nestoriens*, in ‘Journal Asiatique’ 14 (1899), pp. 446-483 (edition) & ‘Journal Asiatique’ 15 (1900) pp. 469-515 (French translation).

¹⁵ R.H. CONNOLLY, *The Liturgical homilies of Narsai. Translated into English with an introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1909.

¹⁶ A. GUILLAUMONT, *Poème de Narsai sur le baptême*, in ‘L’Orient Syrien’ 1/2 (1956), pp. 189-207.

1952¹⁷ and 1958¹⁸; Gignoux¹⁹, 1968; McLeod²⁰, 1979; Siman²¹, 1984; Frishman²², 1992; Brock (*soghithā*)²³, 2004.

On the Creation of Angels: the transmission of the mēmṛā

First, the homily *On the Creation of Angels* was edited by Mingana in 1905 in the second volume of his work. This text was catalogued in his list as number 64²⁴, accepted by Macomber in his list of manuscripts²⁵, but then appears in the edition with the number 37²⁶. In 1968, Philippe Gignoux published the results of his doctoral research, entitled *Homélie de Narsai sur la Création*, including a critical edition and a French translation of six homilies

¹⁷ P. KRÜGER, *Das älteste syrisch-nesorianische Dokument über die Engel*, in *Ostkirchliche Studien*, vol. 1, Würzburg 1952, pp. 283-296.

¹⁸ P. KRÜGER, *Ein Missionsdokument aus frühchristlicher Zeit. Deutung und Übersetzung des Sermo de memoria Petri e Pauli des Narsai*, in 'Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft' 42 (1958), pp. 271-291; P. KRÜGER, *Traduction et commentaire de l'homélie de Narsai sur les martyrs. Contribution à l'étude du culte des martyrs dans le nestorianisme primitif*, in 'L'Orient Syrien' 3 (1958), pp. 299-316.

¹⁹ GIGNOUX (1968).

²⁰ F.G. MCLEOD, *Narsai's metrical homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. Critical edition of Syriac text. English translation*, (Patrologia Orientalis XL, 1) Brepols, Turnhout, 1979.

²¹ P. SIMAN (ed.), *Narsai. Cinq homélie sur les paraboles évangéliques*, Cariscript, Paris, 1984.

²² J. FRISHMAN, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy. An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai*, Ph.D. dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, 1992.

²³ S. BROCK, 'Syriac Dialogue' – *An Example from the Past*, in 'JAAS' 18/1 (2004), pp. 57-70

²⁴ MINGANA, (1905), vol. 1, p.30.

²⁵ MACOMBER (1973), pp. 275-306.

²⁶ MINGANA, (1905), vol. 2, pp. 207-222.

about Creation²⁷. As Gignoux notes, this *mēm̄rā* is grouped with other five texts concerning Creation by all the known manuscripts in a specific order – 36, 34, 35, 29, 37 and 38 – respected by the editor in his work²⁸. In 1970, this homily was also published in the Patriarchal Press collection on Narsai²⁹.

According to Macomber's list³⁰, *mēm̄rā* 64 is found in seven very recent manuscripts, all used by Gignoux in his edition³¹.

²⁷ Gignoux's translation is currently the only available translation to these texts.

²⁸ GIGNOUX (1968), p. 12.

²⁹ MAR ESHAI SHIMUN XXIII (ed.), *Homilies of Mar Narsai*, vol. 2, Patriarchal Press, San Francisco, 1970, pp. 77-99.

³⁰ MACOMBER (1973), p. 303.

³¹ GIGNOUX (1968), pp. 99-105.

The mēm̄rā: translation and commentary

The *mēm̄rā* is a type of poetry consisting of isosyllabic couplets which usually employ a small variety of metres³². *On the Creation of Angels* consists of 528 verses of 12 syllables with two *caesurae*³³. This metre was employed by Narsai only occasionally, but was undoubtedly mastered by his major opponent, Jacob of Serugh³⁴.

Creation *ex nihilo*, instant creation (vv. 1-26)

The Creation of He who created all things³⁵ is full of a great wonder
and the power of thought hidden in His work cannot be spoken of.

The hidden power is hidden in the research of His art
and cannot be described, but He described it to those who seek Him.

- 5 High is His research, hidden His investigation and difficult His discovery
and, as far as we seek Him, it is good that we seek Him properly.

The richness of His wisdom is deeper than all depths

³² See S. BROCK, *Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac*, in S.A. HARVEY, D. HUNTER (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford 2008, p. 658. For further readings on metrics, see also S. BROCK *Dramatic Dialogue Poems*, in H.J.W. DRIJVERS, R. LAVENANT, C. MOLENBERG, G.J. REININK (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984. Literary Genres in Syriac Literature* (OCA 229), Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, Rome, 1987, pp. 135-147.

³³ The other homilies belonging to the group about Creation, we see that *mēm̄rē* 61, 63, and 65 share the same type of verse, whereas homilies 49 and 62 employ a verse of 14 syllables.

³⁴ BROCK (2008), p. 664.

³⁵ The word ܠܗܘܘܢ, as the following ܠܗܘܘܢ, means literally “everything, all things” but can also be interpreted as “universe”. See T.S., 1735 (“*universum*”). To mark the difference visible in the Syriac text, I will translate ܠܗܘܘܢ as “all things” and ܠܗܘܘܢ “everything”, where the context allows it.

and limitless is the stable order of His creative might.

His commandment is vaster than His measureless Creation

10 and everything has an end, but there is no end that can limit Him.

Swift is His Sign³⁶, mighty His power, strong His force

and the mouth is too small to repeat the qualities of His magnificence.

The homily seeks the speech about Him and He who speaks,

and how He spoke and His creations just rose from nothing.

15 From nothing He created all things as there was nothing

And, over nothing He placed all the things that [were created] from nothing

One commandment He issued, His commandment over all things

and together with the Word, all things appeared from nothing.

His commandment ran swiftly towards His Creation

20 and, perhaps, the action anticipated the sign of His commandment.

The action did not wait for the sign, nor for [the time] of a sign

and He did not linger to show the power of His majesty.

With a sign, He indicated the Creation to appear

and suddenly it was established, not even knowing how it was established.

25 He suddenly spoke, and the mute and rational beings appeared

and they were astonished and full of wonder because of their own nature, as they appeared all of a sudden.

The homily opens with a praise of Creation and how it was shaped instantaneously and *ex nihilo* by the hidden power of God.

³⁶ The word אַיִן means “sign” but also “(divine) will”. See אַיִן in PAYNE SMITH (1903), p. 543. See also the parallel with the Latin *numen* in T(*hesaurus*) S(*yriacus*), 3929.

Lines 1-6: These lines are strongly tied together by the alliteration of the *lamed* (l. 1, ܠܗܘܐ ... ܠܗܘܐ; l. 2, ܠܗܘܐ ... ܠܗܘܐ; l. 3, ܠܗܘܐ; l. 4, ܠܗܘܐ ... ܠܗܘܐ ... ܠܗܘܐ). In line 1, a *figura etymologica*, ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ, “the creation of Him who created [all]”, immediately determines one of the main topics discussed in the *mēm̄rā*: the concept of the unicity of the Creator, contrary to the theories of Mani and Bar Dayṣan, which will be confuted further on. Two polyptota³⁷ occur in the following lines: the first one concerns ܠܗܘܐ, “to hide, veil” (l. 2, ܠܗܘܐ; l. 3, ܠܗܘܐ; l. 5, ܠܗܘܐ); the second one, which is limited to l. 4, concerns ܠܗܘܐ, “to describe, explain”, (ܠܗܘܐ ... ܠܗܘܐ). The latter conveys the concept of the omnipotence of God, whose “hidden” power cannot be described, but His Will can explain it to those who search. Another pattern gives cohesion to this passage: it is the anaphora with *figura etymologica* of ܠܗܘܐ (l. 3, ܠܗܘܐ; l. 4, ܠܗܘܐ; l. 5, ܠܗܘܐ; l. 6, ܠܗܘܐ ... ܠܗܘܐ).

Lines 7-14: In line 7 a hyperbolic simile with polyptoton occurs. The wisdom of God is said to be “deeper than any depths”; the reference is to *Romans* 11:33³⁸. Verse 8 connects this part to the previous one, through the anaphora of ܠܗܘܐ + *Ethpaʿel* participle. The author lists other qualities of the power of God: in line 2, it is described as a power that “cannot be spoken of”; in line 4, that “cannot be described”, a small variation of the wording of line 2; in line 8, God’s creative power is said to be without limits. This idea of “unlimitedness” occurs, with a variation, also in line 10: after a hyperbolic

³⁷ There is a subtle difference between polyptoton and *figura etymologica*: the first is the repetition of the same word with a different inflection, whereas the latter is the employment of words coming from the same root but belonging to different categories. See B. MORTARA GARAVELLI, *Manuale di Retorica*, Bompiani, Milano, 1997, pp. 208-211. For further readings about the figures of speech and for the rhetoric analysis, see L. HAEFELI, *Stilmittel bei Afrahat: dem persischen Weisen*, Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1932; H. LAUSBERG, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, Brill, Leiden, 1998.

³⁸ ܘܥܘܕ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”. For the Syriac text see: *The New Testament in Syriac*, British and Foreign Bible Society, London, 1905-1920. For the English one see: *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Crossway Bible, Wheaton, 2016.

comparison between His “commandment” and His “measureless creation” in line 9, the author affirms that everything has a **אֶסְרֵי**, “end”, but God cannot be limited by anything.

Line 11 recalls the rhythm of line 5: three elements are listed in a polysyndetic way, but whereas in line 5 God was the object of those elements (**אֶסְרֵי, אֶסְרֵי, אֶסְרֵי**), here He is the subject, the agent behind the Sign, the power and the strength. The concept of ineffability already expressed is further illustrated in line 12, through the metaphor of the “feeble mouth”. Line 13 shows an antanaclasis of the word **אֶסְרֵי**, used first as the meaning of “sermon, homily”, referring to the one that Narsai is writing, and then of “speech”. Alternatively, it can also be understood, as an apposition and intended as “the discourse – the discourse about him – seeks he who speaks.” The end of line 14 contains the beginning of the anadiplosis *iterata* of **אֶסְרֵי**, which will continue until line 18.

Lines 14-20: These lines are about the creation proceeding *ex nihilo* and characterised by the *anadiplosis* with variation and the anaphora of **אֶסְרֵי**, “thing” (l. 14-15 **אֶסְרֵי / אֶסְרֵי**; l. 15-16, ... **אֶסְרֵי / אֶסְרֵי**; l. 17-18, **אֶסְרֵי / אֶסְרֵי**). In line 17, **אֶסְרֵי**, “to command”, occurs in a *figura etymologica* (**אֶסְרֵי אֶסְרֵי**) and is repeated in the following lines, as to give them continuity and keep the attention of the listener high (l. 19, **אֶסְרֵי**; l. 20, **אֶסְרֵי**).

Lines 21-26: these lines are about the instantaneous coming into existence of Creation, as specified in line 21, “The action did not wait for the sign, nor for [the time] of a sign”. Therefore, also the creation of the mute and the rational beings was instantaneous. Line 26, which concludes this section, starts with the same root as in line 1, **אֶסְרֵי**, “to wonder, to be fascinated” (**אֶסְרֵי**), providing this sequence with a sort of a frame.

The angels wonder about their origins (vv. 27-62)

The rational beings were greatly fascinated by their nature, how it was framed and how it could dominate the freedom residing in it.

Their assemblies stood in wonder and astonishment, as they were created
30 and insatiably they admired the rationality in themselves.

They were fascinated by their rationality, how rational it was and how swift was the power of discernment, which revolved in it.

They considered with discernment themselves and everything and He who had instituted them and everything, as they did not exist [before].
35 Had they just risen? – they were wondering, by means of the intellect in them – or maybe another power had created them...

“But what is this thing that happened?” – they gestured one to the other.

“Are we entities on our own, or entities from another entity?”

“Have we [always] existed as we are now, or we did not exist [before]?”

40 “Now, we are... or is existence [still] distant from us?”³⁹

The research was great among them, at the beginning of their existence⁴⁰ and they were really astonished by the creation of themselves and everything.

They were seeking the great extension of heights and depths [considering] how great it was the Commandment that made them that great.
45 They were astonished by the darkness of the created world for, although it was dark, to them it was not as dark as it could be.

³⁹ Gignoux does not translate this verse, nor he notes anything about it.

⁴⁰ Literally, “that they existed”.

Their gaze was fixed in that darkness,
as it was like a runner, not held back by the gloom.

They saw a wonderful vision in its gloom

50 and were not satiated with searching the research of His action.

The great wonder⁴¹ in which they were cast was really great
and they were infinitely torn by not knowing the reason of it.

They fought in the wonderful battle of the universal creation
and eagerly desired to learn the reason that tormented them.

55 They stood in the stadium in which the worlds came into existence
and they did not abandon the fight of the research of the Hidden Being.

They eagerly desired to clearly see the Hidden Being who hides away
so that, as it had appeared, it could soothe the fatigue of their minds.

The hope of their intentions adhered to this hope,

60 [*id est*] to hear something that could clarify the research that tormented them.

Their ranks stood one against the other in these excruciating sorrows
and, like a travailing mother, they were terrified of begetting what they sought.

This section features a description of rational beings' reaction to their own creation. They are astonished and, almost as philosophers, ask questions about their existence, by means of the rationality given to them.

Lines 27-40: These lines are connected by the repetition of *ἰσθλ*, "to wonder, to be fascinated", and *ἄσθλ*, "to be astonished". The *figura etymologica iterata* of these roots with synonymic meaning and similar sound contributes to strengthen the content, involving and leading the listeners to feel as the newly created angels felt.

⁴¹ Literally, "greatness of wonder".

In line 30, “reason” is rendered by *ܠܘܘܐ*, literally “word”, as in the case of the Greek *λόγος*⁴², “word; discourse; reason”. The faculty of speech derives from reason; this concept will become clearer further in the homily (also in line 25), when the *ܠܘܘܐ* will be juxtaposed to the *ܫܘܬܘܬܐ*, the “mute beings”. The “reason in them” allows the creatures to reckon and weigh all things *ܕܘܢܘܬܐ*, “with discernment”, and this leads them to ask questions.

Lines 34 to 36 begin with a sort of a syllabic climax, of two, three and four syllables, and the mesophora of *ܘܢܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܬܐ*; *ܘܢܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܬܐ*. This feature makes the composition more rhythmic and rapidly leads listeners’ attention towards the next session, characterised by the use of the first person plural instead of the third person plural. The aim of the author is to introduce a direct speech meant for dramatic vividness, i.e. to give an imaginative perspective on angels’ behaviour. They are stunned and seem not to understand that “thing that happened”, and they question their origin as creatures deriving from another being and their sudden coming into existence in juxtaposition to an eternal existence⁴³. The latter two concepts are associated by the polyptoton of *ܠܘܘܐ* (l. 38, *ܠܘܘܐ ܠܘܘܐ ... ܠܘܘܐ ܠܘܘܐ*; l. 39, *ܠܘܘܐ ܠܘܘܐ ... ܠܘܘܐ ܠܘܘܐ ... ܠܘܘܐ*).

As already mentioned in an accompanying reference note, Gignoux does not translate verse 40. This verse is indeed problematic; in my translation, I expunge the suffix *-ܐ* of *ܘܢܘܬܐ* and read *ܘܢܘܬܐ* as a *Peʿil* related to the noun *ܠܘܘܐ* and interpret *ܘܢܘܬܐ* as a disjunctive conjunction (as in lines 38-39)⁴⁴.

Lines 41-52: Line 41 summarizes the previous section on the investigation and the questions of the angels on their existence. The keyword *ܠܘܘܐ* starts an alliteration of the sound /b/ and /b̄/, which continues in the

⁴² Greek loanwords have been checked on the *Liddel Scott Jones Online* and on the *Brill’s Dictionary of Ancient Greek*. See also A.M. BUTTS, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire. Syriac in Its Greco-Roman Context*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 2016, pp. 212-222 (Appendix 1: Greek Loanwords Inherited in Syriac).

⁴³ L. 37-39.

⁴⁴ This verse would indeed deserve a more accurate philological work, requiring the access to the manuscripts and a dedicated space, but, unfortunately, it goes beyond the scope and the means of this paper.

following lines (ܕܘܥܝܢ ܩܘܡܘܢܝܢ ... ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ; l. 42, ... ܕܥܝܢ; l. 43, ... ܕܥܝܢ), as to underline how important the research is for them. They inquired “heights and depths” to see how extended was God’s ܩܘܡܘܢܝܢ. “Heights and depths” is an idiomatic expression of “totality”, used already in pre-Christian times⁴⁵. We can find the same expression also in Paul’s letters, f.i. *Ephesians* 3:18⁴⁶. In line 44, there is a *figura etymologica* ܕܘܥܝܢ/ܕܘܢܝܢ (adj. + verb C-stem) which introduces another quality of the angels, describing them as “great”, or better, as “made great” by the “great” commandment of God.

In lines 45-48, the *figura etymologica* and the reiteration of ܩܘܡܘܢܝܢ/ܩܘܡܝܢ (l. 45, ܩܘܡܘܢܝܢ; l. 46, ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ - ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ - ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ; l. 47, ܩܘܡܘܢܝܢ) gives and emphatic rhythm to these verses and tell us something about another quality of the angels: they do not perceive darkness as the humans do, namely they can still see through it and they are not scared by it. In that gloom they experience “a wonderful vision”, literally “they saw a sight of wonder”, expressed by the *figura etymologica* ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ, which intensifies angels’ perception. This wonder, to which they also belong, is so majestic, that forces them to inquire about its reason, its origin.

Lines 53-62: this section opens with two metaphors: the first one (l. 53-54) compares the universal creation to a “battle” (ܩܘܡܝܢ, from the Greek ἀγών, “challenge, competition”⁴⁷); the second one (l. 55-56) compares the universe to a “stadium” (ܩܘܡܝܢ, borrowed from the Greek στάδιον, “stadium”) in which the angels stand firm to continue their struggle for knowledge. Line 56-57 are connected by the anadiplosis of ܩܘܡܝܢ (ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ / ܩܘܡܝܢ), which echoes

⁴⁵ See, f.i., the inscription on Shalman’s tomb, which is composed in a quasi-poetic parallelistic style; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, J.F. HEALEY, *The old Syriac inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene: Texts, translations and commentary*, Leiden, Brill, 1999, pp. 53-56.

⁴⁶ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ ܩܘܡܝܢ, “so that you may be able to follow all the saints in any height and depth, width and length”. My translation.

⁴⁷ ܩܘܡܝܢ is a reference to Paul. See 2 *Timotheus* 4:7.

The creation of light, source of learning and peace (vv. 63-90)

They laboured an entire night in the research of this research
until they heard a voice announcing: "Let there be light!"

65 In the morning they heard a Voice⁵⁰ which was not a voice,
for it was spoken to be heard by their minds.

In a spiritual way proclaimed the Sign that created them
and also in a spiritual way they heard the spiritual speech.

The listeners, listening carefully, heard a speech that cannot be heard
70 and, although they listened carefully to it, they could not hear it the way it was.

They heard while He was proclaiming – He who makes everything [able to]
hear – but no, He did not proclaim,

for His voice also did not sound like a corporeal voice.

Those who heard His voice were stupefied by His sublime voice
and how He could make the voice of His will heard and His nature hidden.

75 They were astonished by the manifestation of His voice and the concealment
of His nature

and they were afraid of searching the research about His concealment.

They stood in fear until they did not spectate the advent of light

and, after it was created, they rested in the harbour of His brightness.

They rested in a harbour of peace, in the existence of the beautiful light

80 and they grouped together and glorified its Creator, who made it beautiful.

They proclaimed glory to the word of the Voice, which is word of light

⁵⁰ Literally, "word of the Voice".

and gloriously they recited the hymn of Him who made the voice heard.

“Glory to Him who made heard to our hearing a Voice without words.

and who, through manifest acts, showed us the power of His concealment.”

85 Through the acts, the spiritual beings saw Him who hides from everything
and rested from the fear and from the research of His concealment.

Through the existence of the mute beings, they considered the existence of
their substance⁵¹

since they also appeared nothing, just like them.

From nothing appeared [also] the brightness, like all things

90 and the spiritual beings, in all their ranks, were fascinated by His creation.

Lines 63-74: This section is characterised by the repetition (with polyptota) of *ܥܠܡܐ*, “to hear”, (l. 64, *ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 65, *ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 66, *ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 68, *ܥܠܡܐ ... ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 69, *ܥܠܡܐ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܠܡܐ ... ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 70, *ܥܠܡܐ ... ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 71, *ܥܠܡܐ ... ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 73, *ܥܠܡܐ*; l. 74, *ܥܠܡܐ*) and the periphrasis *ܡܠܐ ܕܝܘܨܐ*, “word of the voice”. The expression *ܡܠܐ ܕܝܘܨܐ* is common in Paul’s letters⁵² and can be simplified into “voice” or “word”.

This passage offers a parallel interpretation of *Genesis* 1:3 seen from angels’ perspective. In the darkness of the early Creation, the “spiritual beings” were striving to find the truth, and now, suddenly, they *ܥܠܡܐ*, “hear a voice”, which announces the light⁵³. Line 63 and 65 stand in antithesis: in line 63, we find *ܠܝܠܐ*, “night” and the lonely labour that led their research, whereas in line 65 the first *ܥܝܢܐ*, “morning”, appears and they finally hear a “sort of a voice” which breaks their loneliness. In the morning, they hear a voice, which actually “is not a voice”; in fact, it spoke not to their ears but to *ܠܗܘܘܢ ܕܝܘܨܐ*, “the

⁵¹ Literally, plural.

⁵² See *Romans* 10:18, *Galatians* 4:20, *Hebrews* 3:15.

⁵³ Narsai uses the biblical quotation from the Peshitta, *ܠܗܘܘܢ ܕܝܘܨܐ*, “the

hearing of their minds”⁵⁴. In lines 67-68, the “voice” – and ܠܘܝܢܐ, “the Sign”, which made them – are defined “spiritual” and to be perceived “spiritually” (l. 67& 68, ܕܢܦܫܘܝܐ). This voice is not “a corporal voice” (l. 72, ܠܘܝܢܐ ܕܠܘܝܢܐ), but is a “sublime voice”, literally “the voice of His voice” (l. 73, ܠܘܝܢܐ ܕܠܘܝܢܐ).

Lines 75-90: After this revelation, angels feel amazed, but also peaceful for discovering that they had been created by the same power that created such a marvellous thing like light.

In line 75, we find an antithesis between the ܕܠܘܝܢܐ of His voice and ܕܢܦܫܘܝܐ of His essence. The term ܠܘܝܢܐ also closes line 76: the angels were not only “astonished” by that secrecy, but, now that the spiritual voice showed itself, they are afraid of pursuing their obsessive research. The root ܠܘܝܢܐ, “to be afraid, scared” opens with a variation both lines 76 and 77 not only in the syntactical form, but also in the semantics: ܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܠܘܝܢܐ, “they were afraid” has a less intense nuance of fear than the following ܠܘܝܢܐ, “in fear”, which denotes a sort of an existential anguish due to lack of knowledge.

Line 78-79 are connected by the anadiplosis of the Greek loanword ܠܘܝܢܐ, λιμὴν, “harbour”, which also constitutes a nautical metaphor⁵⁵: the “harbour of His brightness” is a harbour of rest enlightened by the beautiful brightness of light, seen as source of knowledge and of the manifestation of God. Since His concealment was interrupted by a manifest act⁵⁶, angels can eventually rest. Surrounded by this blissful beauty, angels start to sing a hymn. Lines 80-83 are characterised by the anaphora and *figura etymologica* of ܠܘܝܢܐ, “to glorify” (l. 80, ... ܠܘܝܢܐ; l. 81, ܠܘܝܢܐ ... ; l. 82, ܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܘܝܢܐ ; l.83, ܠܘܝܢܐ).

⁵⁴ This is obviously in contraposition with lines 57-60, where angels relied on their physical senses, sight and hearing, to seek the “Hidden Being”.

⁵⁵ The metaphorical use of “harbour” is quite common in Syriac theology. See, f.i., S.J. BEGGIANI, *Early Syriac Theology. With Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition (Revised Edition)*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 2014, pp. 140-141; E.R. HAMBYE, *The Symbol of the “Coming to the Harbour” in the Syriac Tradition*, in I. ORTIZ DE URBINA (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum 1972* (OCA 197), Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, Rome, 1974, pp. 401-411.

⁵⁶ Lines 84 and 86 end with the word ܠܘܝܢܐ again, as verse 76

Besides ending their research, light allows the rational, spiritual beings to assist in the creation of the “mute” beings⁵⁷: since the mute beings appeared *ex nihilo*, and light as well (to note the anadiplosis at lines 87-88: ...
...
...), also their own existence should have been a creation *ex nihilo*. The fight among their ranks is over; the angels are still astonished, but finally peaceful.

⁵⁷ Lines 87-90.

Angels' glorification of the Creator (vv. 91-112)

They stood in order before the Order, which ordered them,

and to His glory they yoked their voices, to glorify Him:

“So glorious is He, the Creator!” - their assemblies proclaimed with love -

“He who, through His creations, has revealed Himself as the One who created everything!

95 Adored by everything must He be, He who created everything from nothing
since through [these] things He taught us the power of His divinity!”

Divinely they sang the *Tersanctus* before the God of everything

and they returned to Him the tribute that He deserved, proportional to His glory.

Like debtors, they gave Him the thanks which they owed Him

100 and they lauded and magnified His creative might that had created well.

The Creation which appeared was very beautiful to their minds

and they were truly astonished by the One who created it and guarded over it.

Those wise beings wisely understood the wisdom of the Hidden Being

because He was able to create and to guard.

105 Through His wisdom⁵⁸ the wise beings learnt about spiritual realities

and through His discernment they gained discernment to seek hidden realities.

He sent them to school, like children,

so that they would meditate on the name of the Creator and on His creative might.

On the name of the Creator and on His creative might they meditated

⁵⁸ Literally, plural.

110 and they were stupefied by the changes [made] by His words.

They were stupefied by the Word that made light appear

and they thought that they might also have appeared because of the Voice.

Lines 91-102: after realizing how their existence began, angels praise the power which created them. In line 91, “order” is rendered by the word *ḥesbā* (see the Greek τάξις) and is used in a polyptoton (*ḥesbā, ḥesbā ... ḥesbā ḥesbā*), as to show that disposing themselves in the order intended for them by the Creator is itself a way to glorify Him. In line 92, the submission of the choir of angels is described through the metaphor of the “yoke” of the glory of God. This submission is spontaneous and performed by the love they feel (see *ḥesbā* at the end of verse 93) and not by the fear which characterised the previous actions.

Lines 93-96 contain the hymn that the angels sing at one voice to the *ḥesbā ḥesbā*, “the God of everything”⁵⁹. They celebrate His creative might and Creation itself, because it allowed them to perceive His power and His presence. Line 97 recalls the end of line 96 (and of the song), with a *figura etymologica* (96, ... *ḥesbā ḥesbā*; 97, *ḥesbā ḥesbā ... ḥesbā ḥesbā*).

In lines 98-102, we see angels’ astonishment is moved from Creation itself to the creative might, which shaped it. Again, the verb *ḥesbā* occurs, as previously seen, and they feel thankful and give thanks to the Lord, for constituting and guarding it (102, *ḥesbā ḥesbā*).

Lines 103-112: In lines 103-105, the focus of the praise moves from God’s creative might to His wisdom. The root *ḥesbā* connects the two couplets (103, *ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā*; 105, *ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā*), whereas line 102 and 104 are connected by a polyptoton of *ḥesbā* and *ḥesbā* (102, *ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā*; 104, *ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā ḥesbā*). Besides the wisdom of God, that determined also the wisdom in the spiritual beings, another feature is taken

⁵⁹ L. 97.

into consideration: at line 106 the noun **לָמַד** – from **לָמַד/לָמַד**, “to discern” – appears, and will be employed again at line 117.

In line 107, a simile describes angels’ meditation: God sent them to a school (**בֵּית הַלְמִידָה**, literally “house of learning”) as if they were children, feeling astonishment and wonder before the world. The anadiplosis between lines 109 and 110 (... **מִלְמַדֵּי הַלְמִידָה לָמַדוּ / מִלְמַדֵּי הַלְמִידָה לָמַדוּ** ...) ⁶⁰ shows indirectly another feature of these beings, obedience, which will be explicated further in the text. The Creator sends them to school to meditate about Himself, and they do. Despite the meditation, the angels are still “full of wonder” (l. 111, **מִלְמַדֵּי**), especially for **אֱלֹהֵי הַלְמִידָה** that created light. **אֱלֹהֵי הַלְמִידָה** is repeated with a small variation at lines 110-113 (110, **מִלְמַדֵּי הַלְמִידָה**; 111, **אֱלֹהֵי הַלְמִידָה**; 112, **אֱלֹהֵי הַלְמִידָה**; 113, **אֱלֹהֵי הַלְמִידָה**), recalling the previous sequence of verses.

After this “learning” process, angels realize that they are just creatures shaped by the might of this creative, spiritual, voice.

⁶⁰ See also the use of synonymic verbs, **לָמַד** and **לָמַד/לָמַד**. See **לָמַד** in SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 352; see **לָמַד** in T.S., pp. 966-967.

The creation of light reveals the One Creator of all things
(113-140)

The Voice made the research be searched in their minds
and they sought well and learnt well about Its splendour.

115 So, let's seek with the spiritual beings the research that they sought
and let's learn with them the reason of the Voice and the power of thought!
So, let's discern the power of discernment that they have discerned:
how and why He instructed them by means of the word of the Voice.

Why is there a voice, the one of His nature, which is a voice with no words,
120 so that, as it is occulted, it is occulted from the voice that can be perceived?
He, whose nature is uncompounded, does not have the word of the Voice
and, if thus is not, the reason is hidden in that sublime Voice.

Through the Voice, He taught that He created everything from nothing
and that to Him belong heaven and earth, and everything that they contain⁶¹.

125 He confined all things in two visible vessels
so that nobody could think that there is the creation of another [entity] in His
creation.

First, He created heaven and earth, the waters and the air
and together with their creation came the creation of the spiritual beings.

He created heaven in the form of a fortress, and spread out earth
130 and inside them placed all the beings, rational and mute.

He built a great city to let the work of His hands dwell

⁶¹ See *Deuteronomy* 10:14.

and piled up [and] placed in it everything that His labour may have needed.

Among the goods, He especially dispensed rationality

and revealed and showed the power of His essence and His creative might.

135 He revealed it to the rational being through Creation itself, little by little

and, for their learning, they extended His labour over six days.

In six days He taught them the order of His power

and made them skilful scribes of the work of His hands.

They learned a book of multiple skills⁶², through the Creation before their eyes

140 and, according to their skills, they started to order the beings without discernment.

Lines 113-124: At the beginning of this sequence, the Voice urges the angels to continue their research. This nuance is conveyed by the verb⁶³ *אָפֿהַל*, and it is reinforced by a *figura etymologica* (l. 113, ... *אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל*; l. 114, ... *אָפֿהַל*; l. 115, *אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל* ...). They were successful in their learning, so Narsai encourages his audience, including himself, to follow the angels' steps. He employs an apostrophe (lines 115-118), which shows a skilful weaving of phonetic and semantic figures: the already discussed *figura etymologica* of line 115; the alliteration of the labials /b/-/b/ and /p/-/ph/; the polyptoton/*figura etymologica* of *אָפֿהַל*, "to discern" (l. 117, ... *אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל*...); the anaphora with lexical variation in lines 116-117 *אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל אָפֿהַל*, "power of thought/discernment"; the anaphora of *אָפֿהַל* (lines 113, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122 - *אָפֿהַל*, 123), which stitches this apostrophe to previous and the following ones. At lines 119-122, Narsai uses a sort of a free indirect speech, which presents the possible questions that angels asked and the answers they found. The

⁶² Literally, "a skilful book".

⁶³ The third person singular *Aph'el*, from *אָפֿהַל*

distinction between the material and the spiritual voice⁶⁴ occurs again. These verses seem to echo the theology of Gregory of Nyssa's, expressed in his *Contra Eunomium*⁶⁵, in which the Cappadocian father describes the divine nature as "simple (ἀπλοῦς) and uncompounded (ἀσύνθετος)"⁶⁶.

Lines 123-134: Whereas in lines 95-96, the knowledge of the Lord's power was possible through the visible beings, in lines 123-124 it is the Voice that teaches how the Universe appeared. The voice teaches that God is the One who created everything, and that everything "belongs" to Him. God created everything *ex nihilo* and confined His creation ܠܘܨܬܐ ܠܘܨܬܐ ܩܝܬܐ, "in two visible vessels" (l. 125), not to let anybody think that there might be something from a different Creator. This verse⁶⁷ and the following ones rise a polemic against the Manicheans, but also against other so-called Gnostic sects, who declared that a creative power different from God had formed the physical world⁶⁸. Verse 127 is a reference to *Genesis* 1: 1-2, whereas in verse 128 Narsai remarks that the creation of ܠܘܨܬܐ, "the spiritual beings", took place at the very beginning of Creation. He does that by using a polyptoton in a brachylogy (ܡܫܘܚ ܠܘܨܬܐܝܢ ܠܘܨܬܐ ܐܪ ܠܘܨܬܐܝܢ, "with their creation also the creation of the spiritual beings").

In line 129, the creation of Heaven and the Earth is compared to ܠܘܨܬܐ, "a fortress", or, more literally, "a wall". He placed the rational and the mute beings

⁶⁴ Literally, "a voice with no words".

⁶⁵ W. JAEGER (ed.), *Gregorius Nyssenus. Contra Eunomium libri I et II. Pars prior: Libri I et II (vulgo I et XII B)*, Brill, Leiden, 1960.

⁶⁶ See B.D. SMITH, *The oneness and simplicity of God*, Pickwick publications, Eugene, 2014, p. 38.

⁶⁷ See GIGNOUX (1968), p. 226. Narsai will deal with this confutation again later in the text, at lines 381-408.

⁶⁸ See A. PIRAS, *Manicheismo*, Editrice la Scuola, Brescia, 2015.

in a “fortified city”⁶⁹ together, with all things that they may need for their lives⁷⁰.

Gignoux translates lines 133-134 as “Il pourvut surtout les (êtres) raisonnables de ses biens / et il leur révelà et leur manifesta la puissance de son Essence et de son pouvoir créateur”⁷¹. I honestly prefer another translation. **ገላገላ ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው**: the preposition -ለ can be interpreted as the object marker of **ገላገላ**, a singular noun which means “rationality, faculty of speech”. **የሰጠው** is recognized by Sokoloff⁷² to be a denominal verb from **ገላገላ**, root **ገላ***. **ከ** can also introduce a partitive complement. Hence: “Among the goods, he especially dispensed rationality”. **እና ገላገላውን ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው ገላገላ ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው**: **ሰጠው** is a third person masculine singular Pa‘el with an anticipatory suffix pronoun, **-ው**, referred to **ሰጠው**. Hence: “and He revealed and showed (it) the power of His essence and His creative might”.

Lines 135-140: Line 135 focuses on the recipients of this “knowledge”, by means of another anticipatory pronoun: **እነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው**, “to them, to the rational ones”. The object of **ሰጠው**, here omitted, is **ሰጠው** in the previous line. Narsai explains the reason why Creation took place in seven days, even if God could have accomplished it instantaneously: through a creation **ገላገላ ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው**, “little by little”, the Lord teaches the predetermined **ገላገላ** to angels. In lines 136-137, we find an anadiplosis (... **ገላገላ ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው** / **ገላገላ ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው** ...) as to underline the preparatory aspect of the time dedicated to Creation. The “school”-metaphor⁷³ continues until line 140. An interesting word play occurs, realized through an antanaclysis combined with a polyptoton: in line 138, **ገላገላ ለእነዚህ ጥቅም ላይ የዋለው**

⁶⁹ L. 131.

⁷⁰ L. 132; to note the asyndeton that connects the verbs at the beginning of the line: **ሰጠው ሰጠው**.

⁷¹ See GIGNOUX (1968), p. 228.

⁷² See **የሰጠው** SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 1669; See also the explanation as a *Tafel*, from the comparison with Ethiopic in T.S., pp. 4501-4502. However, the meaning is always “to feed, to supply”.

⁷³ See lines 107-109.

conveys the meaning of “skilful scribes” whereas at line 139, the singular form **كُتُبٌ كُفَى** means “a book of multiple skills”. This semantic (and phonetic) device and the *figura etymologica* **كُتُبٌ كُفَى / كُفَى / كُفَى** in lines 138-140 confer to this passage a rhythmic pattern, which keeps the attention of the audience lively.

The hierarchy of the mute and the rational beings (vv. 141-160)

Through their discernment, the beings without discernment gained insight and peacefully accepted to submit to their authority⁷⁴.

The mute beings peacefully accepted this authority that dominated over them
And, even if they were not sensible, they sensed and knew that there was a Creator.

145 The mute beings learnt to observe the Order through the rational ones
and the rational beings were fascinated by the Creator's power, because of the mute ones.

Their two ranks gained [knowledge] of the one Lord, one from the other
and they gave thanks to the Lordship one by means of the other.

The rational beings and the mute ones were a good opportunity for each other
150 and they grew well in the fear of the Lord who created them.

They learnt that there is only one Creation belonging to one Authority
and did not doubt that there might be the power of another authority⁷⁵.

Their creation fortified themselves, through the Creator's power
and through acts, they accomplished their sublime acts.

155 As now the rational and the mute beings peacefully accepted one Authority,
let's search the Authority who instructed them!

Let's understand the wonderful variety of His creative might!

Because, even if His essence is one, it is not [only] one in the visible things.

⁷⁴ Literally, plural. "Their" refers to the rational beings of the previous part.

⁷⁵ Literally, "another power of authority"

Let's listen through the intellect to what is described in the Scriptures,
 160 and let's look contemplatively⁷⁶ at the Scripture and its texts!

Lines 141-154: Line 141 connects this section to the previous one, through the polyptoton of *ܠܥܝܢܐ*, “discernment” (l. 140: *ܠܥܝܢܐ ܠܠ ...*; l. 141: *ܠܥܝܢܐ ܠ ... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*), whereas the alliteration of /š/ gives rhythm to these lines (l. 140: *ܠܥܝܢܐ ... ܥܝܢܐ*; l. 141: *ܠܥܝܢܐ ... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*; l.142: *... ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*; l. 143, *ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* ; l.144, *ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* ; l. 145, *... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* ; l. 146, *... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*). In lines 142-143, we also find an anadiplosis with variation and *figura etymologica* (*ܥܝܢܐ / ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ... ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*)

The following part (lines 143-154) is structured on the juxtaposition of *ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* and *ܠܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*, the mute and rational beings. These beings are the two sides of a same Creation and they need and use each other to perceive and praise the Creator and the order that He settled. It is interesting to see, at the end of lines 147-149, the repetition with variation of the reciprocal pronoun⁷⁷ *ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* (“one from the other of the one Lord”), *ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* (“one by means of the other”) and *ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*, “one for the other”. *ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ* is used again at the beginning of line 151 as a numeral adjective: *ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*, literally “one creation of one authority”. This intertwining repetition of etymologically connected words carrying different meanings⁷⁸ plays a role in emphasizing the concept of “mutual necessity”. Through their phonetic pattern, they maintain the audience focused.

Lines 155-160: In line 155, Narsai apostrophe his audience, inviting them to ponder the Scripture. The verbs, expressed in the first person plural imperfect, convey an exhortative nuance. Lines 157-158 are a veiled polemic

⁷⁶ Literally, “with thought”.

⁷⁷ T. NÖLDEKE, *Compendious Syriac Grammar: With a Table of Characters by Julius Eutling. Translated from the second and improved German*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1904 (ed. by James A. Crichton), p. 187 - §242.

⁷⁸ See f.i. *ܥܝܢܐܘܢܐ*, the root *ܥܝܢܐ*, the alliteration of the sound /m/ and /š/.

against the Manicheans: although His essence is unique, it can generate **ⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉ** **ⲛⲓⲧⲉ**, “a variation of wonder”.

Lines 159-160 are another invitation to the audience to **ⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲓⲧⲉ**, “hear with the mind”, and to **ⲓⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉ**, “look with the thought/discernment”, at the Scripture. To note also the polyptoton of **ⲛⲉⲃⲉ** (l. 159, **ⲛⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉ**; l. 160, **ⲛⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉ** **ⲛⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉ**; l. 161, **ⲛⲉⲃⲉ**).

The Scriptures omitted the creation of angels (vv. 161-188)

The Scripture has revealed to us the creation of ourselves and of everything but it did not mean to reveal to us the creation of the spiritual beings. Moses did not write a thing about their creation in the book he wrote; until he arrived at Abraham, he did not mention them.

165 He did not describe their manifestation at the beginning of his narration until he described their visit to Hagar.

He did not let us know that they received things to govern until they showed their attention to the Egyptian.

He did not tell us that they are as allies and companions to us,
170 until they taught the order to Sarah's servant.

In silence, he passed over the great history of their acts and he disregarded and omitted their creation, as if they did not exist.

He raised silence over the action of those who visit our lives and hid them under an unintelligible veil.

175 Why did he, who mentioned everything, omit to mention them, since he mentioned all the existing things in his texts?

Why did he omit the manifest history in which they exist and did not reveal it before us, as he revealed to us our own creation?

Why did he not say that they appeared with everything or after everything,
180 as he said about the Man, that he appeared at the end?

Why did He, who revealed to Moses⁷⁹ all things, not reveal this to him
that there is, in His creation, a creature⁸⁰ too sublime to feel pain?

Too sublime is their nature for corporeal pains

even if it was said of the man that he is the most sublime of all.

185 Why did He not show to him the powerful discernment of rationality in them
and did not show to him the freedom of their will⁸¹?

Why did He not teach him that they are spiritual and uncompounded,

so that we could have – maybe – learnt that their nature is one, [the same as]
the nature of our soul?

Lines 161-174: The topic of this section is the omission of the creation of the “spiritual beings” from *Genesis*. Narsai states that the first time that the Scripture mentions angels is in *Genesis* 16 and concerns the story of Abraham and Hagar. Lines 161-162 are a sort of word play based on “(not) revealing” the “creation”; the words of the first line appear shuffled in the second:

ܘܚܘܠ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ, but ܘܚܘܠ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ.

Lines 163-170 are characterised by the anaphora of ⁸² ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ and ⁸³ ܘܚܘܠ, combined with the descending climax⁸⁴ of appositions referring to Hagar: at l. 166 she is mentioned through her personal name, ܘܚܘܠ, at l. 168 through her origins, ܘܚܘܠ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ, at l. 170 through her humble occupation, ܘܚܘܠ ܕܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ. Moses intentionally omitted to talk too often about the existence of angels, in his writings. The author uses a metaphor to describe the omission of these sublime and powerful creatures who interacted with the history and the

⁷⁹ Literally, “him”.

⁸⁰ Literally, “creation”.

⁸¹ Literally, plural.

⁸² Lines 163, 165, 167, 169.

⁸³ Lines 164, 166, 168, 170.

⁸⁴ End of lines 166, 168, 170.

human lives, i.e. he “hid them under an unintelligible veil” (l. 174, *صايبه صايبه* *صايبه صايبه*).

Lines 175-188: Narsai introduces six questions (intended to attract the audience’s attention) in these lines, which start with the conjunction *لما*, “why?” (l. 175, *لما*; 177, *لما*; 179, *لما*; 181, *لما*; 185, *لما*; 187, *لما*) creating a long, regular anaphora, interrupted only at lines 183. The first three questions investigate more the omission itself: why, if all the other creatures were revealed to us, were the angels not? The root *لما* occurs several times in a polyptoton (l. 177, *لما*; l. 178, *لما ... لما*; l.181, *لما ... لما*). The following three questions include also a description of some of angels’ qualities. The angels are described as *عالي*, “sublime”⁸⁵. They are said to have a nature which is “too sublime” (*عالي*) to suffer from “corporal pains” (*ألمة*)⁸⁶, to have “power of discernment (*قوة*)” and “rationality (*عقل*)”⁸⁷ and “freedom of will (*حرية*)”⁸⁸. They are said to be “spiritual (*روحاني*)” and “uncompounded (*أبدي*)”⁸⁹ and that their nature is the same as the human soul⁹⁰.

Through the use of these questions, the author disguises his teaching about the nature of angels as a research that he wants to undertake together with the audience. These questions also are used to introduce the following sequence; in which he will explain the reasons for this omission.

⁸⁵ L. 182. Literally, “high”. See *عالي* in SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 1470.

⁸⁶ L. 183.

⁸⁷ L. 185.

⁸⁸ L. 186.

⁸⁹ L. 187.

⁹⁰ L. 188.

The reason for this omission (189-210)

Regarding their nature... one is the Artificer who formed them
190 and He saw that they were beautiful, so He hid them from the spectators.
He saw that their glory was more glorious than everything [else] He created
and, if it were revealed, because of [that] glory men might err.
He considered Error in them, before they appeared
and, in advance, He silenced it, through the silence that He raised over their
creation.
195 He saw that the man's inclination is dragged towards what is desirable
and, because of it, He hid that desirable history under silence.
He raised silence over the desire of Adam's sons
so that an evil desire could not be buried in their minds.
In their minds, He raised the bridles of ignorance
200 so that those who knew could not disturb the course of His creative might.
The confused flow of their intentions appeared to His sign
and He preceded them before they could go astray onto a way of rebellion.
He placed a fence of silence before the cruel beings
so that they could not trample the work of His hands with their blasphemies.
205 He had always heard the voice of their blasphemy, even before they appeared
and, since they were created, He made it cease through the silence on the
celestial beings.
As [with] the mute beings, He silenced them because of Error
not to give to Error the space to reign on Earth.
He shut the tumultuousness of Error with the silence in them

210 so that it could not grow fierce and trouble the man with its disturbance.

Lines 190-198: This section is opened by the statement that angels' Creator (called here *ṣāḥib*, literally "craftsman, workman"⁹¹) is one, unique, as already mentioned in verses 151-152. In these lines, the author explains the omission of this episode as a way to preserve men from erring. It is interesting to see how the polyptota in lines 189 (*ḥabibun ... ḥabibun*) and 190 (*... ḥabibun ... ḥabibun*; l. 191: *... ḥabibun ... ḥabibun*) give a circular structure to the verses. A *figura etymologica* of *ḥabibun*, "to glorify", gives a similar structure, enclosing both of the following verses in a sort of a circle (l. 191: *... ḥabibun ... ḥabibun*; l. 192: *ḥabibun ... ḥabibun*).

The fact that something desirable must have been hidden to protect the human kind constitutes a paradox that Narsai will try to solve in the following lines. God's prescience – which will be more deeply analysed in other sections of this *mēmṛā* – could foresee the "error" in the human beings *ḥabibun*, "before they appeared". Since Error could have twisted the human "inclination"⁹² to what is desirable (see the *figura etymologica* of *ḥabibun* in the verses 195-198: l. 195, *ḥabibun ... ḥabibun ... ḥabibun*; l. 196, *ḥabibun*; l. 197, *ḥabibun*; l. 198, *ḥabibun*) to push them to sin, God stemmed the dangers that Error might have caused to men by means of *ḥabibun*, "silence"⁹³. Finally, the reason of this silence is explicated: silence is the only defence that can impede to *ḥabibun*, "an evil desire" to disturb *ḥabibun*, "the sons of Adam", a periphrasis for "men".

Lines 199-210: The anaphora of *ḥabibun* introducing the second line of the couplet, which started at verse 198 and lasting until verse 216, is protracted throughout these verses, with the exception of line 202 and 206. Lines 198-

⁹¹ See *ṣāḥib* in T.S., p. 237 ("artifex", "opifex").

⁹² Here rendered with *ḥabibun*. It is presumably a Biblicism, corresponding to Hebrew *ḥabibun*. See T.S., pp. 1619-1620 ("voluntas", "indoles", "cupiditas"); See L. KOEHLER, W. BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT, vol. 1), Brill, Leiden, 2001, p. 429.

⁹³ The word *ḥabibun* appears in line 194, and then in an anadiplosis between lines 196-197.

199 are connected by an anadiplosis (...*ḥ* / *ḥ*...) and another anadiplosis appears at lines 199-200, combined with a *figura etymologica* of *ḥ*, “to know” (*ḥ* / *ḥ*); these lines show also an alliteration of /d/ and /d/ (l. 199: *ḥ*; l. 200: *ḥ* ... *ḥ*) and, extended, of /r/ (l. 199: ... *r*; l. 200: *ḥ* ... *r* ... ; l. 201: ... *r*...; l. 202: ... *r*...).

Line 204 shows a *figura etymologica* of *ḥ*, “to fence” (*ḥ* ... *ḥ*). God put a fence not to let the *ḥ*, “cruel beings”, namely the demons, push men to sin. Thus, whereas in line 202 it seems that men are choosing the wrong path by themselves, in line 204 “cruel beings” are the reason for that mistake. Lines 204-205 are connected by the anadiplosis with variation of the root *ḥ*, “to blaspheme” (...*ḥ* / *ḥ*...). In line 205, there is another reference to God’s prescience: even if the “cruel beings” had not appeared yet, God could already hear their sacrilegious voices. This verse could lead the audience to question the Lord’s omnipotence: why, if He knew, did he not impede the “cruel beings” to come into existence? However, this is not the place to look into this theological issue, nor Narsai himself faces it – he merely describes how God countered evil beings through an omission.

Lines 206-207 present the alliteration of the sound /š/ (l. 206: *ḥ*... *ḥ*; l. 207: ...*ḥ*...). God made the error as silent as the mute beings, not to let it the opportunity to mislead the human beings. The word *ḥ* is repeated in lines 207, 208, 209 as to remark the danger and the challenge that it presents. Lines 209-210 show another alliteration of /š/ (l. 209: ... *ḥ*...; l. 210: *ḥ* ...).

In the following sequence, Narsai will describe further Error’s terrible misdeeds.

Error's misdeeds (211-230)

He knew that it was fierce and would have killed men;
because of this He bounded it with the silence, as with armour.
He made it enter a prison of oblivion and chained it [there]
so that its evil name was not remembered among the terrestrials.
215 Its evil name He wiped out of his Scripture through the hand of Moses
so that men could not meditate on the subjects of its obscenity.
It⁹⁴ made an effort to attribute the name of Essence to itself,
and He erased the hated name from His law.
It entered Creation by stealth, deceitfully,
220 and predicted the existence of unreal beings.
The feeble power was fortified by the power of the angels
and in their bright beauty it hid its obscenity.
It called them “beings which made Creation appear”
and [said] that by their help Creation is held and the world guarded.
225 It raised them to the high rank of divinities
and called them “creators of everything and guardians of everything”.
It is not the angels who exalted themselves to this height
but Error, which took refuge in their names.
And moreover it is not Error, it is not its substance which was troubled
230 because it has no substance that exists through acts.

⁹⁴ I.e. Error. Literally, feminine.

Lines 229-230 offered a veiled attack against the Manicheans: Error cannot affect the ܘܚܘܠܐ,⁹⁵ “substance, the actual existence” of the Creation, because it is not endowed with substance.

Error is thus an entity that does not exist on its own, but which exists as a consequence of celestial beings, who are victims of its evil plot by virtue of their splendour.

⁹⁵ It is interesting to note the use of ܘܚܘܠܐ in this context. The word is used in the Syriac Christology as a parallel of the Greek ὑπόστασις, “hypostasis, substance”. See ܘܚܘܠܐ in PAYNE SMITH (1903), pp. 509-510.

The angels: a bulwark against the Error (vv. 231-244)

The will of demons and the inclination of men desired it,
and He who withholds their wickedness withheld it by means of angels.

The Good one, who is entirely good, saw the wickedness of the wicked ones
and He hid the good in the spiritual beings, so that it was not outraged.

235 He protected from outrage the creation of those who have a splendid soul⁹⁶
And, like a treasure, He placed it under silence, so that it would not grow fierce.
Through a seal of silence He sealed the treasure that consists of His creatures⁹⁷
so that the evil servants who foment the rebellion could not destroy it.

The host of demons fomented the rebellion against His essence
240 and He really fortified the fortress that He built against their desire.
He built a fortress raised with the silence from the spiritual beings
and He splendidly placed their creation inside it.

The Sign who instructed everything wisely took care of it
and He hid the good from the evil wickedness of the evil ones.

Lines 231-244: In these lines, Error appears personified as **𐤀𐤓𐤏𐤃**, “the demons”⁹⁸; God employs angels to preserve men’s inclination from being victim of the wickedness of these evil beings. An interesting *figura etymologica* of **𐤀𐤓𐤏𐤃**, “to be evil” (l. 232: **𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃𐤏𐤃𐤏𐤃**; l. 233: **𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃 𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃**; l. 238: **𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃**; l. 244: **𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃 𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃 𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃**) encloses this section as by a frame. In line 233 God is described through the periphrasis **𐤏𐤓 𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃 𐤏𐤓𐤏𐤃**, “the Good one, who is

⁹⁶ Literally, “the ones splendid of soul”.

⁹⁷ Literally, “family members”.

⁹⁸ See **𐤀𐤓𐤏𐤃** in T.S., pp. 4001-4002, (“daemon”).

entirely good”: this phrase is plausibly again an additional polemic against Manichaean dualism.

In line 236, the creation of the celestial beings is described through the simile *כְּאִשְׁרֵי טֶרֶם*, “as with a treasure”, something precious that must be kept secret from most of people not to be “outraged”, here rendered by *לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲזַק*. A *figura etymologica* of this root connects line 234-235 (... *לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲזַק / אֵלֶיךָ אֵלֶיךָ* ...). The following verb is an active participle *Pe‘al* from *חָלַל*, “to withhold, restrain”, the same used in verse 232. However, in line 232 the object of this verb was the demonic “wickedness”, whereas in line 235 the object is the “creation” of the celestial beings. The verb may acquire a “protective” nuance in this case, whereas it was previously used with a “hostile” nuance⁹⁹.

In line 237, the metaphor of the “seal of silence” occurs with a *figura etymologica*: *לְדָבָר אֵלֶיךָ אֵלֶיךָ*, “through a seal of silence He sealed (it) the treasure”. Through this seal, God intends to protect His creatures or, more literally, *בְּתַרְסָנָא*, “His family”. An anadiplosis with a small variation occurs in verses 238-239 (... *בְּתַרְסָנָא / מַלְאָכֵי אֵלֶיךָ* ...): in the first line the subject is plural, *בְּתַרְסָנָא*, “the evil servants”, whereas in the second line the subject is collective, *מַלְאָכֵי אֵלֶיךָ*, “the host of demons”. The word *מַלְאָכֵי* is a loanword from the Greek *τάγμα*. In lines 240-244 a new metaphor is introduced: God wisely raised silence around the spiritual beings as a *בְּצִירָא*, “castle, fortress”¹⁰⁰, to protect them from the wickedness of the evil ones. In line 243 a *figura etymologica* of *יָדַע*, “to know, to be wise”, occurs (*יָדַעְתְּ אֵלֶיךָ ... יָדַעְתְּ אֵלֶיךָ*). This passage ends with the *figura etymologica* of *אֵלֶיךָ*, as discussed above.

⁹⁹ See GIGNOUX (1968), p. 235.

¹⁰⁰ See *בְּצִירָא* in T.S., pp. 1337-1338, (“*arx, castellum*”).

Human attitude before Error (vv. 245-266)

245 Oh you evil, how wicked is your audacious inclination
that even the Creator hid from you the good of His beatitude!
Oh you Error, existing in the misled ones, how obscene you are
that the One who created all preserves all His work from your calumny!
Oh hateful, that seeing you¹⁰¹ makes hateful he who stares,
250 that the good One hid the grace of His deeds from your pupils.
Oh abominable¹⁰², that hearing you makes abominable those who listen
you that rejected He who created the Creation from the beginning!
From the beginning, He saw how abominable it was at sight
and he turned His face away to not look towards it during the creation of
watchers.
255 And if the Creator did not want to see its foulness
who would ever dare to search it with a visage of love?
We should not look at it with a glance of love
so that we do not grow abominable by its appearance.
Its appearance hid the appearance of watchers from our minds
260 otherwise it would have been revealed to us since the beginning.
And if it is evil, its appearance is as evil as it is...
who would not turn away the sight of their heart from its acquaintance?
Shy away, oh men, from the acquaintance with the evil wickedness,

¹⁰¹ In this first part, the third person singular is translated with a second person singular, to improve the readability of the text.

¹⁰² "Hateful" and "abominable" refer both to Error.

so that you shall not be deprived of the acquaintance with the real Good!

265 Look at what it did since the very beginning of times,
to not let us see the creation of the celestial beings!

Lines 245-252: This section opens with an anaphora of the exclamation particle ܐܘ in the first verse of each couplet, which is also characterised each by a *figura etymologica* of a different root (see lines 245, 247, 249, 251); ܐܘ with a consecutive nuance introduces the second verse. The choice to translate the third person singular pronoun with a second person singular extends the apostrophe, employed by the author in verses 245-248, to the following two couplets. As mentioned above, the first verse of each couplet is characterised by *figurae etymologicae* (l. 245, ܘܥܘܢܐ ... ܘܥܘܢܐ; l. 247, ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ; l. 249, ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ and ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ; l. 251, ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ and ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ). The combination of *figurae etymologicae* and anaphora makes this passage insistently rhythmic and means to surprise the audience and keep their attention focused.

Lines 253-262: Lines 252-253 are connected by an anadiplosis (ܘܥܘܢܐ... ܘܥܘܢܐ / ܘܥܘܢܐ) and the same happens in lines 256-257 (/ ܘܥܘܢܐ... ܘܥܘܢܐ)¹⁰³. The sight of Error is so appalling that God chased it away during Creation and even He turned away His face while creating angels, here mentioned through the word ܘܥܘܢܐ, “watchers”. In lines 255-258, Narsai argues that, if the Lord looks away, men should never even try to glance at it; otherwise, they would substitute the resemblance to God with the resemblance to Error (ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ)¹⁰⁴. Another anadiplosis, this time with variation, connects lines 258-259 (...ܘܥܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܢܐ / ܘܥܘܢܐ...). At the

¹⁰³ ܘܥܘܢܐ (from Greek “πρόσωπον”) is also the term used in Syriac theology to indicate the Person of Jesus. See also ܘܥܘܢܐ in PAYNE SMITH (1903), p. 464.

¹⁰⁴ Here “ܘܥܘܢܐ” refers to Error. The word comes from the same root as the one in *Genesis* 1:26, ‘ܘܥܘܢܐ’, which is instead referred to God; Narsai uses again the stratagem of the “reversal of values”. See ܘܥܘܢܐ in PAYNE SMITH (1903), pp. 93-94.

end of verse 259, an alliteration of the sounds /ʕ/, /r/ and /n/ occurs (*رَحْمَةُ...
رَحْمَةُ رَحْمَةٍ*).

Narsai blames Error again as the reason for which the “watchers” were kept secret to humanity. Its wickedness is reaffirmed in line 261, through the polyptoton *صَعَرَ ... صَعَرَ ... صَعَرَ*, which continues the repetition of the root throughout this section. This line is the protasis of a conditional sentence that will end in line 262 in a rhetorical question: who would not turn away from all this evil? The only plausible answer is, obviously, “No one”.

Lines 263-266: Line 263 opens with an apostrophe directed to humankind, to exhort them to avoid Error. Lines 263-264 end in a strongly antithetic way (l. 263: *رَبِّهِمْ رَحْمَةً رَحْمَةً...;* l. 264, *رَحْمَةً رَحْمَةً رَحْمَةً...)* as to show which kind of acquaintance Narsai would suggest to his audience. In line 265-266, he invites again his listeners to see (expressed by a second person plural imperative, *رَبِّهِمْ*) which dreadful things Error committed.

This final apostrophe shows Narsai’s intent more clearly. In fact, he induced his audience to feel disgusted about Error’s misdeeds to make sure that they would receive the next passage, containing a praise to angels’ qualities by keeping the due detachment from the content.

The mission of angels is to govern the universe (vv. 267-284)

Their creation is splendid, more so than the creations that appeared with them
and the order of their action witnesses how splendid it is.

Their sight is desirable, and the course of their actions is swift,

270 and who is capable of truly seeing their orders?

He who created everything disposed them in a splendid order,
so that He could order the fierce universe through their orders.

To order the universe, He ordered them by reason,

so that the Creation was not in confusion and disorder.

275 He entrusted them with ordering not because he could not order everything
but to make known that also His creation is ordered by an order.

He created them together with the mute creatures

so that they¹⁰⁵ could not exalt themselves and forget the order of His creation.

He let them go to school together with the irrational beings

280 so that they could not arrogantly say that they did not need any learning.

He made them hear the power of His hidden nature through a clear voice

so that they knew that there is an essence which is hidden from them.

As children, He instructed them on His creative might as children,

so that they were not troubled by the splendour and the glory of their natures.

Lines 267-284: These lines are characterised by the repetition of the third person masculine plural independent and suffix pronouns, which appear

¹⁰⁵ I.e., "the angels".

almost in every line and create an assonance with the ending of the imperfect third person masculine plural verbs in lines 278, 280, 282, 284. Lines 268-278 present a repetition with *figurae etymologicae* and polyptota of **ܘܠܗ**, “to order”¹⁰⁶ (l. 268: **ܠܘܠܗ**; l. 270: **ܘܠܘܠܗܘܢ**; l. 271: **ܘܠܗ** ... **ܠܘܠܗܘܢ**; l. 272: **ܘܠܗ** **ܘܠܘܠܗܘܢ**; l. 273: **ܘܠܗ** ... **ܘܠܗܘܢ**; l. 274: **ܠܘܠܗ**; l. 275: **ܘܠܗ** ... **ܘܠܗܘܢ**; l. 276: **ܘܠܗܘܢ** **ܠܘܠܗܘܢ**; l. 278: **ܠܘܠܗ**), which creates a “sound-play”, a *jeu de mots*, intended to maintain the audience focused. The repetition of **ܘܠܗ** creates consonances with **ܠܘܠܗܘܢ**, which appears in lines 281 (**ܠܘܠܗܘܢ**) and 282 (**ܠܘܠܗܘܢ**). These lines enlist some of the angelic qualities. As the author has already mentioned¹⁰⁷, angels are the most sublime creatures shaped by God. In line 271, Narsai explains that **ܘܠܗ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܗܘܐ**, “He who created all things” (a periphrasis for God), employs them as the most important *media* to keep the universe balanced and ordered, by means of their rationality. In line 275, the author explains that this empowerment does not question God’s omnipotence, but proves that every part of His creation undergoes to the same ordering. Angels were created at the same time as the “mute beings”¹⁰⁸ and they were “sent to school”¹⁰⁹ together. In this way, they could not elevate themselves over the other creatures. The metaphor of the “school” was already employed in line 107 and, less openly, in lines 135-140. With a manifested Voice (as already mentioned in lines 63-74), God instructed them about His Essence¹¹⁰ and about His creative power¹¹¹, and he paradoxically “comforts” them because of their splendour¹¹². This paradox ends the section and introduces the following, which will describe the tasks of the celestial beings.

¹⁰⁶ See **ܘܠܗ** in PAYNE SMITH (1903), p. 173 (de-nominal from **ܘܠܗ**, loanword from the Greek **τάξις**).

¹⁰⁷ L. 183-184.

¹⁰⁸ See l. 25.

¹⁰⁹ L. 279.

¹¹⁰ See l. 134.

¹¹¹ See l. 108.

¹¹² L. 284.

Angels' various skills (vv. 285-314)

285 Through a small sign, He spoke and they appeared as everything that exists:

He made them equal to all things in their action.

They are servants, although it is said that they are "wind"

and from the One Power they received the ability to fly through the air.

The Creator's power enabled them to perform powerful deeds

290 and made them the good servants of His action.

He provided them with the vitality of immortal lives

and enriched them immediately with the freedom of soul.

In their nature He placed the elixir of vitality and freedom of the soul

and made them naturally live and set them free.

295 He honoured them with a life that is too sublime for suffering

and enriched them with a freedom that cannot be defeated.

The great richness of discernment He gave to their hands

so that they did not need to borrow anything from the mute beings.

He made them dwell without necessities in a world of need

300 and, without weariness, made them take care of the necessities of our lives.

He called them "fire and wind" through the mouth of the son of Jesse

and the vision of their minds is swifter than them.

They fly in the air like fire and wind

but they are not stopped by the fire or the wind.

305 They are in the middle of the adverse elements and they stand

and they are not injured by cold, nor by warmth.

Like everything, they are included in the reckoning of the days
but they do not need a season to be better than another.

In their eyes, this world is counted as one day

310 because also one is the day that changes every day.

It is only one day that continues in the world since the beginning
and with its course they run without weariness.

Their minds are not affected by the distension of time
since the Lord of Time enabled them to watch time.

The section is again characterised by the repetition of the third person masculine plural pronoun (independent and suffix) referred to angels.

Lines 285-300: Narsai states that angels are creatures once again. He does that by citing the **ܣܘܿܬܐ**, “Sign”, through which God has created all. This “Sign” has appeared previously in the *mēm̄rā*, in lines 20-ff. In line 287, the author says that **ܣܘܿܬܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ**, “they are servants¹¹³”, although they are **ܥܘܢܐ**, “wind”. This statement refers to Paul’s letter to *Hebrews* 1:7, **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ** ❖ **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ**, **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ**, **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ** “About the angels yet he said thus, that He made the winds his messengers and the burning flames¹¹⁴ His ministers”, and consequently to *Psalms* 104:4, **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ**, **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ** **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ** “He made the winds his messengers and the burning flames¹¹⁵ his ministers”. Even if they are servants, they received by God – here mentioned with the periphrasis **ܥܠ ܡܠܬܝܗ**, “the One Power”¹¹⁶ – the privilege of flying¹¹⁷. **ܥܘܢܐ** occurs again in line 289 in a *figura etymologica*, alternated with a

¹¹³ The author creates a wordplay with **ܥܘܢܐ**, which is homograph for “servants” and “work”. This pun will occur more extensively further on. See lines 415-436.

¹¹⁴ Literally singular, “wind”, “fire”.

¹¹⁵ Literally singular.

¹¹⁶ To note also the alliteration of the initial /*h*/.

¹¹⁷ L. 288.

polyptoton (l. 288: *سلك*; l. 289: *سلك ... سلك ... سلك*). God enabled angels to perform miracles in order to make them better servants. Apart from this incredible power, the Lord enriched them with other gifts: He gave them *سلك* *الحياة* *الخالدة*, “the vitality of immortal lives”, namely immortality¹¹⁸, and *سلك* *الحرية*, “freedom of soul”, a periphrasis for “free will”. These features are summarised in verse 293, where the immortal life is called *سلك*, “remedy”¹¹⁹, homograph to the verb *سلك*, “to place”, occurring in the same line. These *سلك* *الجليل*, “sublime lives” which cannot be affected by the suffering combined with a freedom that is here said to be *سلك* *الغلبة*, “invincible” are the two ways in which God honoured angels. Other invaluable gifts that the Lord gave to them are discernment and the absence of needs. *سلك* *التمييز*, “discernment”, first mentioned in line 34¹²⁰, when angels were astonished by their own rationality. God created them *سلك* *الغنى*, “without needs” and *سلك* *الراحة*, “fatigueless”, to let them take care of the needs of the world.

God granted all these sublime features to angels not to raise them over the other creatures, but to make them better servants. Narsai insists particularly on this point to prevent the audience from worshipping the creatures instead of the Creator.

Lines 301-308: Line 301 contains another reference to *Psalms* 104:4. The “son of Jesse” is a periphrasis to indicate Solomon, traditionally considered the composers of the Psalms. *سلك* and *سلك* appear again in line 303 and 304 in a polyptoton (l. 303: *سلك* *ابن* *سلك*; l. 304: *سلك* *ابن* *سلك* *سلك*). Lines 303-308 are characterised by the anaphora of *سلك* in the second verse of each couplet and are organized according to an ascending climax. This adversative conjunction introduces a statement, which is antithetic compared with the previous one: they are wind and fire, but they are not stopped by wind and fire;

¹¹⁸ L. 291.

¹¹⁹ L. 292.

¹²⁰ *سلك* *التمييز*, “with discernment”.

they stand among the adverse elements but cannot be touched by them; they assist to the passing of time and yet they do not need the seasons to change.

Lines 309-314: These lines present recurring words belonging to the semantics of “time” (ܘܒܝܢܐ, ܘܒܝܢܐ, ܘܒܝܢܐ). In fact, another distinguishing feature is that angels are capable of feeling time, but they exist outside it. Narsai expresses this concept through a simile in line 309: to the angels, this world is counted ܘܒܝܢܐ ܘܢ ܘܒܝܢܐ, “as one day”. However, they ܘܒܝܢܐ ܘܒܝܢܐ, “run with its course”¹²¹, ܘܒܝܢܐ ܘܒܝܢܐ, without feeling tired¹²². Moreover, time cannot affect the angels, because ܘܒܝܢܐ ܘܒܝܢܐ, “the Lord of Time” – another periphrasis for God – allowed them to perceive it, but He made their spirits eternal. In lines 313-314 is interesting to know the anadiplosis with variation of ܘܒܝܢܐ (ܘܒܝܢܐ... ܘܒܝܢܐ ܘܒܝܢܐ / ܘܒܝܢܐ).

¹²¹ Another *figura etymologica*.

¹²² The meaning of Syriac ܘܒܝܢܐ is similar to Latin *taedium*. See T.S., pp. 3583-3584.

The nature of angels deserves to be admired (vv. 315-346)

315 Oh mind, endowed with constant force
which is not weakened by the adversities that beset it!
Oh supreme Divine Power of the spiritual beings
which sustains the world and governs it for the sons of His house!
Oh created [beings], which He who made everything made,
320 [beings] who do a thing that overcomes the power of their substances!
Oh nature that, even if it were not existing, appeared
and that, since it was created, started to imitate He who created it!
Oh gift, endless in those who received it,
which has given itself to limited beings so that they contained it!
325 Oh majesty, which comes from the Divine Majesty
which reveals its splendour in something swifter than its creatures!
The nature of the Celestial beings is a swift essence
and it is a wonder how it governs everything with its smallness.
Their nature is small compared to the greatness of corporeal bodies
330 and they cannot be compared to valleys and high mountains.
He shaped them from the sphere of the Sun and the Moon
and, despite this, [the two luminaries] would not be able to run without them.
Oh nature, which sends forth the light with its brightness
and brings something that is greater than its immense power!
335 Oh luminaries, who fly in the air with the luminaries
and whose brightness is not obstructed by darkness!

Oh birds, endowed with uncompounded wings,
who fly and hover, never wearied by their actions!

Oh creation from an immortal Creator

340 which is endowed with immortal life¹²³ like its Creator!

Oh Creator who lives by His nature and [who is] sublime by His essence
who allowed His servants to take part to the glories of His divinity!

Oh sublime, perpetual constancy

of Him who gave to His creation an unbreakable eternity!

345 Oh, how great is the profusion of Your love which has created all,
that even Your servant You made acquainted with the greatness of Your glory!

These lines are characterised by a long series of apostrophes introduced by the anaphora of the exclamation particle *oh*, only interrupted at lines 327-332 by a descriptive part.

Lines 315-326: All the couplets in this first part contain apostrophes to various attributes of the angelic nature. The second verse of each couplet¹²⁴ is introduced by a relative *who*. The first two couplets concern the divine power dwelling in angels' nature: in line 315, it is called *the constancy of force*¹²⁵, and in line 317 *the power of Divine power*¹²⁶. Through this might, the angels are capable of facing adversities and ruling the universe, with the benefit of all the other creatures. This immense sensation of power could mislead the audience towards adoring

¹²³ Literally, plural.

¹²⁴ Except line 322.

¹²⁵ The word *constantia* comes from the root *to be strong prevail*. See T.S., p. 1336 (*constantia, perseverantia*).

¹²⁶ This phrase underlines that this power is not intrinsic in angels' nature, but it is granted by the Will of God.

the angels; that is why, in line 319, the author decides to repeat that the angels themselves are creatures, even if very powerful. Line 319-320 contains a polyptoton of *ܠܚܒܘܬܐ* (l. 319: ܠܚܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܒܘܬܐ; l. 320, ... ܘܚܒܘܬܐ), which creates a sort of a word play, giving rhythm to the composition. It is interesting the switch from the passive participle *ܠܚܒܘܬܐ* at the beginning of line 319, to the active *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ* in line 320, as to stress the labour that they devote to serve the universe. In lines 321-326 the concept of angels being creatures occurs again: lines 321-322 mention angels by calling them *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “nature”, which came into existence; in lines 323-324, the *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “gift” that the angels were given is infinite, although they are just “finite”; in lines 325-326, angels’ *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “majesty”, is described as a mere echo of the divine majesty. To summarize, all the angelic qualities that the audience could worship for are mere gifts dispensed by a higher Power.

Lines 327-332: These verses are synonymic to the previous couplet and partly complete it: line 327 connects the two parts through an imperfect anadiplosis (...ܘܚܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܒܘܬܐ / ܘܚܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܒܘܬܐ...). Angels govern the universe, although their nature, as said above, is *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “swift”, and tinier than some elements that they manage. In lines 328-329 there is a polyptoton of *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “small, tiny, little” (l. 328, ܘܚܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܒܘܬܐ; l. 329, ܘܚܒܘܬܐ): to remark their tininess, Narsai makes a “negative comparison”, stating that they cannot be compared to landscape elements such as *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “valleys”, and *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, “mountains”. After that, he gives information about the point of origin of the angels, created from the “sphere”¹²⁷ of the Sun and the Moon¹²⁸.

Lines 332-346: This passage is characterised by apostrophes regarding several attributes of the angelic nature. The semantics related to “light” characterises verses 333-336, by means of the *figura etymologica* of the root *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, (l. 333,

¹²⁷ *ܘܚܒܘܬܐ*, from the Greek σφαιρα. See SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 76.

¹²⁸ Unfortunately, the brevity of this paper does not allow debate about angelology. For further readings: W. CRAMER, *Die Engelvorstellungen bei Ephräem dem Syrer*, Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, Roma, 1965.

תְּהִי־לָהֶם כְּעֹפֶת; l. 335, כְּעֹפֶת ... כְּעֹפֶת; l.336, אֲתִּירָם). In lines 337-338, angels are presented as “birds with incorporeal wings” that are not wearied by their tasks¹²⁹. Lines 339-346 remark once more the status of angels as creatures, despite their celestial attributes, like immortality and glory. The first verse of each couplets contains a description of one of God’s features, which is then used to define angels’ nature. In line 339 the Lord is called “immortal”, and so the angels in line 340. In line 341 God is said to have a sublime essence, and in line 342 He shares His glory with His “servants”. In line 343 He is addressed as תְּהִי־לָהֶם כְּעֹפֶת כְּעֹפֶת, literally “perseverant perseverance of His perseverance” (an interesting *figura etymologica*), and in line 344 He granted the same quality to Creation. The author also creates a sort of a semantic game between “creatures/Creator” played by means of the *figura etymologica* of כָּרַע, “to create” (l. 339, כָּרַעַתְּ אֶת־אֲנָשִׁים; l. 340, מְכַרְעִים; l. 341, כָּרַעַתְּ; l. 344, מְכַרְעִים). Lines 345-346 identify God’s creative power is identified with His love.

¹²⁹ Angel’s flying skills have already been mentioned in line 288 and 303.

To glorify the Creator is difficult and superfluous (vv. 347-380)

Your creation is glorious! But not as You are – absolutely it is not¹³⁰! –

for You are the Creator and You performed the deed of Your hands by virtue of good.

Your creatures are filled with the splendour of Your magnificence

350 and they exist in You, but do not participate in Your essence.

You are, and You are both out and within Your [deeds]

and Your constancy is not comprehended by the seekers.

You cannot be comprehended by the rational beings, who are rational thanks to You

because there is no word which can describe how You are.

355 Who can chant the praise of Your glory

as for You, if possible, the praise (coming) from us is superfluous?

In vain glorifies he who glorifies You

for Your glory is more sublime than any praise or blame.

Glorious praise or ignominious outrage are even to Your Essence

360 and a voice of praise or of blame are as one to You.

You require praise from Your creation through pretexts

since through glorification it grows glorious.

Nobody praised You before You made Creation appear;

therefore, it is obvious that You have not been glorified until then.

¹³⁰ Literally, **על** is an interjection, which means “God forbid!” (Latin, *absit!*), See SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 474 & **על** in T.S., p. 1222. I prefer to translate it as an intensifier.

365 The watchers could not chant any hymn to You, before existing
and even if they had existed, they would not have rejoiced at Your glory.
Existence preceded those who glorify You, not glorification
because [Your] glory is the reason of the glory of those who glorify.
Oh, how glorious is the Essence, which glorifies its own servants¹³¹,

370 that made them gain glory by means of its own glory!

The creation of the celestial beings is as glorious [as He is] glorious
and this is a wonder, that one moment they did not exist and the moment after
they appeared and were glorious.

It is a wonder how these beautiful beings appeared from nothing
and, how their beauty was beautiful without any thing¹³².

375 The matter of a thing is the cause for it to exist
and who would not be astonished that the watchers were beautiful without
any thing?

They existed [by] the commandment that He spoke and it substituted anything
[else]

and He fills with them the place of the ingenious order.

It is the Sign that played as matter, labour and artist.

380 and started and finished without asking for other help.

In this passage, Narsai enacts an antiphrasis. The real intent is clearly in contraposition with the words employed: by listing the reasons that make God's glorification unnecessary, Narsai actually aims at praising him.

¹³¹ It is unfortunately impossible to render in English the subtle wordplay "deeds/servants" that Narsai composes in these verses; see GIGNOUX (1968), p. 243.

¹³² I.e., "matter".

Lines 347-372: In this first part, the author moves the focus from the audience to God. He addresses directly to Him by means of apostrophes, using the second person masculine independent pronoun **ሕሩ** and the second person masculine suffix pronoun **ህ**-¹³³. The regular repetition of the latter creates a persistent alliteration that gives a strong, repetitive pattern to this passage. Moreover, another feature contributes to this pattern, i.e. the etymological “game” that Narsai plays with **ሕሩ**, “to glorify”. This root occurs in several *figurae etymologicae* throughout the entire section (l. 349, **ሕሩሕሩሕሩ** **ህሕሕሕሕሕ**; l. 355, **ህሕሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 356, **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 357, **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 358, **ሕሕሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 359, **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 361, **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 362, **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 363, **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 364, **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 365, **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 366, **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 367, **ሕሕሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l.368, **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 369, **ሕሕሕሕ** ... **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 370, **ሕሕሕሕ** **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 371, **ሕሕሕሕ** ... **ሕሕሕሕ**; l. 372, **ሕሕሕሕ**). In addition to these features, a constant alliteration of the sounds /m/ and /l/ occurs in lines 349-357.

Regarding the content, Narsai displays a description of several divine attributes in these lines. In verses 347-348, the author presents Creation as glorious, but then he immediately corrects himself by saying that Creation is just the result of God’s will, and intensifies his amendment through the use of the interjection **ሕ**. Moreover, God exists **ሕሕ**, “out and within” Creation¹³⁴, therefore He exists beyond any praise. His creatures, even the rational ones¹³⁵, do not participate of His **ሕሕሕሕ**, “essence”, and they cannot achieve a complete comprehension of His **ሕሕሕሕ**, “consistency”¹³⁶. Lines 352-353 are connected through an anadiplosis with variation (**ሕሕሕሕ** ... **ሕሕሕሕ** / **ሕሕሕሕ**). In line 354 occurs the concept of the ineffability

¹³³ **ሕሩ**: lines 348, 361. **ህ**- : lines 346, 347, 349 to 361, 363 to 366.

¹³⁴ L. 351.

¹³⁵ L. 353

¹³⁶ L 352. See **ሕሕሕሕ** in SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 55 & also in T.S., p. 236 (“*perpetuitas, perseverantia*”).

of God¹³⁷. In lines 355-362, Narsai explicitly says that the glory of the Lord is beyond any praise or blame ܘܡܢ ܘܨܝܗ, “coming from us”. In lines 363-368, Narsai further discuss this point: before Creation, no lauds could be tribute to Him, because even angels did not exist¹³⁸ and there was nothing. In addition to this, Narsai specifies that even if they existed, they would not have seen the glory of God¹³⁹, since – as he says at the beginning of the *mēmṛā* – they were astonished at first and could fully admire the Divine glory only after the creation of light¹⁴⁰.

This entire statement raises an issue: since God’s nature is so other and He has no necessity to be adored, why should the people glorify Him? Narsai solves the problem in lines 361-362: God’s request of adoration is actually a ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ, “stratagem, pretext”, to let Creation be glorified by the act itself of glorifying. In lines 369-370, the focus shifts to the Essence of God, ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ, already mentioned in line 350. These lines echoes lines 345-346. In lines 371-372 Narsai remarks once more that the celestial beings are creatures growing glorious through God’s glory and he define their creation as a ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ, “wonder”, the first word of the first verse of this *mēmṛā*. These verses introduce the following discussion about matter, which will further evolve in a confutation of the dualistic doctrines.

Lines 373-380: The author tries to involve the audience emotionally through the reiteration of ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ. He repeats again that angels are creatures created ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ, “from nothing”, as all the others¹⁴¹. The difference lies in the fact that they were also created ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ, “without anything”, namely they were not shaped from matter. It is interesting to note the *antanaclasis* of ܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܝܗܐ, which

¹³⁷ This concept occurs already in Clemens of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, *Stromata*, V, 81, 1-4; GREGORIUS NYSSENUS, *Contra Eunomium*, I, 1, 683 & II, 1, 586-587.

¹³⁸ L. 365.

¹³⁹ L. 366.

¹⁴⁰ See lines 64-ff.

¹⁴¹ L. 37. See also lines 13-18.

occurs in lines 373-377, and the *figura etymologica* of ܘܢܝܢܐ (l. 373, ܠܘܢܝܢܐ; l. 374, ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܝܢܐ; l. 376, ܘܢܝܢܐ). Only the ܠܘܢܝܢܐ, “commandment”, and nothing or nobody else was necessary to the ܠܘܢܝܢܐ of God, to shape their beauty. Narsai expresses this argument through an “art metaphor” in line 379-380: ܠܘܢܝܢܐ, “matter, material”, ܠܘܢܝܢܐ, “labour, work”, and ܠܘܢܝܢܐ, “craftsman, artist”, all refer to the semantics of “arts and crafts”. In verse 379 the alliteration of /m/, which characterises all these verses¹⁴², reaches its peak (ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܠܘܢܝܢܐ ܠܘܢܝܢܐ). It is also highly alliterative the “formulaic” antithesis at the beginning of line 380, ܠܘܢܝܢܐ, ܠܘܢܝܢܐ, “and (He) begin and finished”.

With this reflection about matter, Narsai introduces the following part, which contains a refutation of two “heretics” who had a large amount of disciples: Mani and Bar Dayṣan.

¹⁴² See also lines 349-357.

Confutation of Mani and Bar Dayṣan's doctrines (vv. 381-414)

143

By His side, there was no help from Matter– folly of Mani,
and no Archon who gave form [to creation], lie of Bar Dayṣan.

The Evil, which he who is full of evil things has generated, did not assist Him
nor the gods – [undoubtedly] not the gods! – whom the charlatan named.

385 The Charlatan presumptuously named the demons as “Essences”
and the deceiver falsely said that Matter created all.

The Manicheans' folly of the two powers is false
and the meditation of Bar Dayṣan's disciples about the Seven Entities is
presumptuous.

There are not two [powers] that initially shaped the creation, Oh Manicheans!
390 nor it was the Seven who created the elements, oh Bar Dayṣan disciples!

Evil does not exist, oh evil Mani – why do you talk so idly?

Nor the Archons, endowed with might, that your fellow invented!

You presumptuous [liars], stop challenging the Creator!

Do not use foul language against His Truth in the name of false beings!

395 You are false and your hearts are full of lies
and the beings that your minds generated are not real!

He is one, the Being who is, and He is similar [only] to Himself,

and He is the one who shaped Creation from nothing, at the beginning.

¹⁴³ Ephraim's *Sermones contra Haereses* plausibly inspired Narsai's confutation. See H.J.W. DRIJVERS, *Bardaiṣan of Edessa*, van Gorcum, Assen, 1966, pp. 130-152.

The Being does not need to ask His Creation for help
 400 and the Creation cannot elevate itself to the level of His Essence.
 This beginningless Essence stays beyond everything
 and Heaven and Earth and the things [contained] in them are on this side of
 Him.
 He is, and He is out of everything and within everything
 and the force of His power is not contained by the work of His hands.
 405 Manicheans' Matter is included within His Creation
 and the Beings [invented] by Bar Dayṣan's disciples obey to His order.
 Everything is contained in Him, because His nature is adequate to everything.
 and there is no limit that can contain His constancy.
 He perpetually is, and He is by His own Essence
 410 and there is no other Power different from His name, beside His Power.
 He shaped Creation, which is full of kinds that cannot be counted
 and when they spread, they had been already counted by His knowledge
 before they appeared.
 He made the spiritual beings spiritual
 and He placed them in service before His will.

Lines 381-396: Narsai starts his confutation, which is characterised by the anaphora of the negation **لأصله** (verses 381-384, 389-396) addressing alternatively to Mani and Bar Dayṣan¹⁴⁴. In addition, words belonging to the

¹⁴⁴ The name **محرر** and **محررين**, the term referring to his disciples, occur in lines 381,387,389,391. **صلا** (صلا) **صلا** occurs at lines 382, 388, 406.

semantics of “deceit”¹⁴⁵ and “evil”¹⁴⁶ contribute to give a negative connotation to the two addressees.

In line 381, Narsai argues that 𐭥𐭌𐭎, “matter”¹⁴⁷, did not concur in the Creation and that no evil creative power¹⁴⁸ took part to it. The Creation is the accomplishment of God alone¹⁴⁹, and all the Manichean references to 𐭬𐭏𐭎𐭏, “two powers”, are to consider as 𐭬𐭏, “folly”. The author recrimination culminates with the apostrophe of line 389 directed against 𐭮𐭏𐭎𐭎, “Manicheans”, and of line 391, in which the addressee is “evil Mani” himself. The same procedure takes place against Bar Dayṣan’s disciples: first, in line 382, Narsai denies the existence of the 𐭥𐭏𐭎𐭏𐭎, “Archons”¹⁵⁰, the rulers of the universe corresponding to the planets¹⁵¹. In line 384, he refers to the Archons as 𐭬𐭏𐭎, “gods”; the repetition of the first segment (𐭬𐭏𐭎 𐭬𐭏𐭎 𐭬𐭏𐭎 𐭬𐭏𐭎, “not the gods – undoubtedly not the gods!”) remarks how heretic Narsai considered this statement. In line 385, the argument regards Bar Dayṣan’s misuse of 𐭮𐭏𐭎. In fact, this term is meant to be used for God alone, whereas he employs that word to designate the five primordial elements that compose the world¹⁵², which Narsai derogatorily calls 𐭬𐭏𐭎𐭎, “demons”¹⁵³. Afterwards, he refers again to the Archons, naming them 𐭬𐭏𐭎, “the Seven”,

¹⁴⁵ Like 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏, 𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏𐭎, 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏𐭎.

¹⁴⁶ Like 𐭬𐭏𐭎/𐭬𐭏𐭎,

¹⁴⁷ The same word (Greek ὕλη) is spelled 𐭬𐭌𐭎 in line 405. See 𐭬𐭌𐭎 in SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 335.

¹⁴⁸ L. 383.

¹⁴⁹ L. 387.

¹⁵⁰ See 𐭥𐭏𐭎𐭏𐭎 in SOKOLOFF (2009), p.100. Borrowed from the Greek ἄρχων (accusative).

¹⁵¹ They were believed to have influence on specific parts of the human body. See H.J.W. DRIJVERS (1966), pp. 192-193.

¹⁵² See H.J.W. DRIJVERS (1966), pp. 78-79; 130-139. See GIGNOUX (1968), p. 243 (ref. 24).

¹⁵³ See lines 231, 239.

in line 390¹⁵⁴, and. ܠܩܘܪܝܢܐ ܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐܝܢܐ , “Archons empowered with might”, in line 392.

In lines 391-396, the apostrophe addresses directly Mani and Bar Dayṣan, calling the latter ܕܥܘܒܝܢܐ, “your companion”: this shows how confused was the knowledge that the Syriac writers had about the relation between Mani and Bar Dayṣan¹⁵⁵.

Lines 397-414: Lines 397-404 echo the hymn of lines 347-372. The formula ,ܡܘܕܝܢܐ ܡܘܕܝܢܐ, “He is and He is” – which appears in lines 397, 403, and 409 – resonates with the second person masculine singular one of line 351. ܡܘܕܝܢܐ thus appears many times throughout the lines, also in a *figura etimologica* (lines 394, 395, 399, 400, 401, 403,409). God is,ܡܘܕܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܒܝܢܐ, “(only) similar to how he is”, namely unique and incomparable with anything else¹⁵⁶, and He shaped Creation *ex nihilo*¹⁵⁷. He did not need any ܕܥܘܒܝܢܐ, “help”, from Creation, which, as Narsai has stated already in line 347, cannot raise itself to the level of His Essence.

Lines 401-402 show the contraposition ܕܡܘܠ / ܕܥܘܒܝܢܐ, “on this side of / beyond”: God is beyond everything, whereas Creation is on “our” side¹⁵⁸. Line 403 repeats quite exactly line 351, except for the use of ܡܘܕܝܢܐ instead of ܕܥܘܒܝܢܐ and of the third person masculine singular instead of the second person masculine singular. God’s power is unlimited, whereas the forces “invented” by Manicheans¹⁵⁹ and Bar Dayṣan’s disciples¹⁶⁰ are included in His Creation and obey to His Commandment. Moreover, God’s power is also absolute: in line

¹⁵⁴ In line 390, we find another word for “elements”, ܠܩܘܪܝܢܐܝܢܐ, from the Greek στοιχεῖον. See SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 68.

¹⁵⁵ See DRIJVERS (1966), pp. 225-227.

¹⁵⁶ L. 396.

¹⁵⁷ L. 397. See also lines 14-18

¹⁵⁸ Line 402. Instead of “Creation”, Narsai uses a list of elements belonging to it (Heaven, Earth and the things in them) in a sort of a synecdoche.

¹⁵⁹ I.e. ܠܩܘܪܝܢܐ.

¹⁶⁰ I.e. ܕܥܘܒܝܢܐ.

410 Narsai repeats that no other powers took part in the Creation process¹⁶¹ – it is interesting the polyptoton with the alliteration of /h/ + a liquid consonant (հարհ հարհ հարհ). In lines 407-408, a *figura etymologica* of հարհ, “to contain, to limit”, occurs (l. 404, հարհ; l. 407, հարհ; l. 408, հարհ հարհ): Narsai uses this stratagem to describe God’s limitless հարհարհ, “perseverance, consistency, eternity”. Lines 411-412 deal with God’s prescience, a concept which Narsai will explain more extensively further in his *mēm̄rā* and which has mentioned previously in the text¹⁶². At the end of this section, Narsai reaffirms¹⁶³ that angels are spiritual, immaterial creatures, created as such to be servants of the Will of God: this will be the main topic of the following passage.

¹⁶¹ See line 381.

¹⁶² See lines 190-198 and 205, concerning the disruptive action of Error over human beings.

¹⁶³ See lines 373-376.

Angels are as servants (vv. 415-436)

415 Paul testifies about their service that they are steady,
therefore, he called them all by the name of *ministers*.

“Are they all not spirits and ministers?”

And did He not subjugate them under the expectation of the salvation of our lives?”

In their own existence, they have received the one of the Artificer

420 and Artificer himself ordered this and put them in charge.

He made them labour the order of His work through tasks

so that they were wearied out and conscious that they are creatures.

The work, in which they labour, proclaims that they were made¹⁶⁴

and, as with a finger, it indicates to mankind that they are not [absolute] entities.

425 The course of their actions sounds [loud] like a trumpet:

“Oh terrestrials, look how wearied is the rank of the celestial beings!”

Besides themselves, their labour testifies their deeds

and they prove that its testimony is really true.

The watchers’ labours are a true proof – and the watchers are too –

430 that they exist as all things to govern everything that exists.

They are beings that appeared, not creators of created things.

and they are made by the Artificer as servants for the [other] creatures¹⁶⁵.

¹⁶⁴ Literally, “their making”.

¹⁶⁵ Literally, “works”.

Oh service, full of the wonder of the one Creator
 who shows Himself, but does not appear as He really is!

435 Oh how great His Creation is in comparison with our mind
 but how small it is in comparison with His measureless majesty!

Lines 414-436: Lines 415-418 are connected to the previous section by the figura *etymologica* of *ܥܒܕ*, “to serve, to minister” (l. 414, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*; l. 415, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*; 416, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*; 417, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*). As a last proof to demonstrate that angels are servants, Narsai draws on a quotation from Paul’s letter to *Hebrews* 1:14¹⁶⁶, *ܐܝܢ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ* ❖ *ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ* “Are they all not spirits of service, who are sent to serve for those who will be heirs of the (eternal) life?” In this way, Narsai makes his audience aware that, beside him, also the authority of Paul supported this point.

In line 419, Narsai states that angels’ and God’s existences are similar¹⁶⁷; by stating this, the author probably refers to their eternity and the incredible power that they are endowed with. Nonetheless, to avoid any possible misunderstandings, in line 420 he says that God organised and designate them to govern the universe. This point is further explained in the following lines: through daily tasks, He humbles and makes them aware that they were created as all the other things – so they had better not raise themselves to God’s level¹⁶⁸. Moreover, this reveals the nature of created beings also to humanity – who had thus better not adore them¹⁶⁹. There are two interesting figures of speech: first the *figurae etymologicae* of *ܥܒܕ* (l. 419&420, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*; l. 422, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*; l. 423, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*), of *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ* (l. 420, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*; l. 421, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*), of *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ* (l. 421, *ܥܒܕܘܢܐ*), secondly the similes *ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ ܕܥܒܕܘܢܐ*, “like

¹⁶⁶ Lines 415-416.

¹⁶⁷ God is here mentioned as “artificer”.

¹⁶⁸ Lines 421-422.

¹⁶⁹ Lines 423-424.

with a (pointing) finger”¹⁷⁰, and *כְּצִלְעֵי שָׁפָר*, “like a trumpet”¹⁷¹. The trumpet of the latter simile also undergoes a personification, in fact verse 426, introduced by the declarative conjunction *וְ*, is to intend as a direct speech, and it includes an apostrophe to *אֲדָמָה*, “the terrestrials”, who are invited to see the labour of the *צִבְיֵי שָׁמַיִם*, “celestials’ rank”¹⁷². Lines 427-432 explain how angels’ labours are a truthful signal of their submission to God’s Will. Narsai here proposes again *figurae etymologicae* as above, but in a chiasmatic way: first *חַבְדָּה* (l. 427, *חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה*; l. 429, *חַבְדָּה*) and secondly of *חַבְדָּה* (l. 431, *חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה*; l. 432, *חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה*; l. 433, *חַבְדָּה ... חַבְדָּה*; l. 435, *חַבְדָּה חַבְדָּה*).

Lines 435-436 introduce the following section, a sort of a hymn to the Creator, in which Narsai will explain God’s Prescience.

¹⁷⁰ L. 424.

¹⁷¹ L. 425.

¹⁷² *צִבְיֵי שָׁמַיִם* comes from the Greek *τάγμα*. See SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 1623.

The entire creation is imbued with the Divine prescience (vv.
437-476)

[Creation] is measurelessly greater than us, but inferior to Him
because it was measured by Him, even before He cast measures on it.

It was measured by Him [to see] how it would be before it appeared

440 and its enormous weight¹⁷³ was estimated by Him in the palm of His Sign.

The existence of spiritual assemblies was revealed by His Sign

and they were counted by Him – how many they would be and for what
purpose.

The Creation – all of it – was created by Him according to His Will

and He created it through acts, again, when He wanted.

445 He has had this Will, like His Essence, since everlasting

and He revealed, when He wished, the wisdom of His love.

By a great love, He accomplished the Will He wished

and wisely He set the order that was engraved in it.

Heaven and Earth were engraved by it, in the hollow of His hand...

450 oh, what did I say? It is not in the hand, but in the Sign!

The worlds were described by Him in the scroll of His constancy,

as I have well said, they were perpetual in His constancy.

Earth and its dust were measured by Him in in His palm,

but He has no palm, even if the prophet said that He does.

455 The high mountains and the rocks in them were weighed by Him

¹⁷³ Literally, “the weight of its weight”.

they were weighed by Him on this scale with no arms.

The wind and the breezes were held by Him in the palms of His power
and the basin of waters was bound up by Him, in the veil of His sign.

The evident limit between the elements was set by Him

460 and they were commanded by Him about how to move along without excess.

The path of the orbits of the Sun and the Moon was set by Him
and the course of the hours of light and darkness was appointed by Him.

The stars were counted and disposed before His knowledge
and they were parted, so that each of them could move along.

465 The acts of the watchers and men were observed by Him as well

and the good and bad of their acts were considered by Him

The ranks of demons were divided from the angels by Him

and he made them be well separated from their fellows.

All these things and others, which would have been similar if they had
appeared,

470 were hidden in Him, seen by Him and counted by Him.

It is not fair for us to call them by low names

since His creatures show the might of His strength.

Let us not boast and think that a boundary holds His limit!

Because His creation cannot be limited by our minds.

475 Let us not be silly and introduce another power beside Him

given that even the watchers, who are spiritual beings, are His deed.

Lines 437-442: This section begins with an anadiplosis *iterata* (lines 436-439: ... *كُلُّهُنَّ* / *أَسْمَاءُ* ... / ... *أَسْمَاءُ* *أَلِهَاتٍ* / *أَسْمَاءُ* *أَلِهَاتٍ* ...), which anticipates the topic, i.e. the “measures” of Creation. The entire passage is

characterised by a strong presence of passive verbs and a redundant repetition of the particle Δ - introducing the agent (i.e. God). The author plausibly made this compositional choice to remark the passivity of all created things, helplessly submitted to God’s might. In lines 440-442, other words belonging to the semantics of “measure” occur: Δ Δ , “to ponder, weigh”, Δ Δ , “weight”, Δ , “to count, number”, Δ , “how many”. In lines 441-442, Narsai reports about the celestial beings, to say once more that they are creatures, revealed and ordered by God’s Sign.

Lines 443-448: After mentioning Δ Δ , “the spiritual assemblies”, Narsai introduces the rest of Creation. He states that, before their existence *in acto*, all creatures were existing *in potentia* in God’s “volition”. If so, what triggered Him to shape Creation from this vision intrinsic in His Essence? Narsai answer lies in lines 446-448: it was Δ Δ , “the Wisdom of His love”, repeated in a “chiastic” anadiplosis in the following lines (l. 446, Δ Δ ; l. 447 Δ Δ Δ , “a great love”; l. 448, Δ Δ , “and wisely”). Beside this peculiar anadiplosis, it is interesting to note how Narsai employs *figurae etymologicae* to highlight the immense Divine Power (l. 447, Δ Δ , “the Will he wanted”; l. 448, Δ Δ , “He ordered the order”).

Lines 449-468: An anadiplosis with variation (Δ Δ / Δ Δ ...) connects this part to the previous one. Heaven and Earth were Δ , “engraved, inscribed”, Δ Δ , “in the palm of His hand”. This expression, which would easily lead the audience to think of an anthropomorphic divinity, is actually a device of the author to reject anthropomorphism. In fact, in the following verse Narsai amends this voluntary *lapsus*, by admitting his mistake and by quoting, in line 454, the source of this error, Δ , “the prophet”, namely *Isaiah* 40:12, in which occurs the word Δ , used by Narsai in verse 453. In the next verses, the author describes how God controls all things, and he moves his gaze from the perceptible earthly elements (such as dust, mountains and

rocks, winds and water¹⁷⁴), to the celestial ones (like the Sun, the Moon, the alternation of day and night, the stars and their course¹⁷⁵). All this part looks clearly inspired by *Isaiah* 40:12-16¹⁷⁶. Eventually he alludes to the actions of the rational beings (men, angels and demons).

Lines 469-476: Besides the things that He has created, Narsai postulates that other things, which did not appear in the actual Creation, might exist *in potentia*. With this stunning statement, Narsai may be referring to the inscrutable Will of God. Lines 471, 473, 475 show the initial anaphora of Δ followed by verbs in the imperfect. These are exhortations to the audience to be respectful, humble, and, most of all, not to trivially believe that there might be another entity besides God. To do this, Narsai recurs to the fact that even angels, who are pure spirit and the most powerful entities of Creation, are nothing but submitted creatures.

¹⁷⁴ Lines 453-458.

¹⁷⁵ Lines 461-464.

¹⁷⁶ We can safely say that *Isaiah* 40:12-26, *Psalms* 89:11, 104, 136:1-9, and, indirectly, *Genesis* 1:1-20 are the main sources of this passage.

A summary of angels' tasks and skills. Epilogue (vv. 477- end)

They are His deed, and He created them like all things
and David testifies that "*He made His messengers out of wind*".
then he called them "*His messengers*" and not [only] "messengers"
480 so that everybody could learn that they belong to Him, because they were
created by Him.
They are His creation and always submit to His sign
and His creative might and His action are not forgotten by them.
The deceivers erred by calling them "occult beings"
but, perhaps, this injustice has afflicted the honest [men].
485 It is a great injustice that we give the name of "creator" to creatures
and, perhaps, the good servants are furious because of this dreadfulness.
The demons alone may rejoice, although they should not rejoice,
because, even if they rejoice, they rejoice for a short while and then they turn
sad.
For a short time, demons rejoice and men err
490 but, after some time, an ineffable repentance breaks in.
Repentance beats the unrepentant audacity
and He shows with love the angels that are hence saddened.
They are truly saddened when the men err about their name,
but they truly rejoice when the Creator's name is sanctified.
495 The Creator's name is delightful to the faculties of their minds
and they really desire that everybody sanctifies His saint name.
Saintly they sanctify him with one accord

and they do not leave the accord in which they perpetually are.

The good servants remember all the time their creation

500 and they are never weary of rendering glory to Him who shaped them.

Their vigilant intellect contemplates their [own] creation

and does not let them cease nor rest from their praise.

They are endowed with a vigilant intellect by the nature according to which they were shaped

and this is why Scripture calls them “watchers”.

505 They are watchers, for they have never slept and they never will

and through their watch they awaken men with a teaching purpose.

They are early at school as teachers

and they instruct the childhood of men through their teachings.

They obtained wise notions from the Teacher who instructed them

510 and they tend towards the intention of His teaching all the time.

They are occupied meditating His word, and they labour nights and days

and they run with the times, seeking the research of His acquaintance.

The acquaintance with the Divine Love is delightful to the watchers:

let us be companions to them, in their perpetual meditation!

515 They minister every day the hidden Will without despair:

let us stay constant in the constancy with our Artificer!

They are vexed and wearied out for the salvation of our lives since they appeared:

let us help them – even if only a little – with the labour of our lives!

They move the air in all seasons because of us:

520 let us move our consideration to know the order of their changes!

For our sake, they run in a spiritual stadium:

let us support them, so that we will be worthy of the reward of their crowns!

For the sake of our souls, they cast themselves into a fight against their fellows:

let us encourage them, so that we will also succeed in our victory!

525 They draw the war against the demons away from us, through their fights:

let us be thankful to the good Lord who armed them!

They chase demons away from our camp so that they cannot harm us:

let us glorify the Name that binds them to the benevolence of our souls!

Lines 477-486: This passage is characterised by the presence of words related to the semantics of “creation”: *ܘܚܒܘ*, *ܘܥܠܘ* and *ܘܒܘ*, (l. 476, *ܘܚܒܘ*; l. 477, *ܘܥܠܘ* ... *ܘܚܒܘ*; l. 478, *ܘܚܒܘ*; l. 480, *ܘܒܘ*; l. 481, *ܘܥܠܘ*; l. 482, *ܘܚܒܘ*; l. 485, *ܘܥܠܘ*; l. 486¹⁷⁷, *ܘܚܒܘ*). An *anadiplosis* connects this section to the previous one (... *ܘܚܒܘ* / *ܘܚܒܘ*...). In line 478, the reference is again to *Psalms* 104:4¹⁷⁸. The reason for this quotation is found in the following two lines: according to Narsai, David wrote *ܘܚܒܘ*, “His messengers”, instead of simply *ܘܥܠܘ*, to inform men that angels are God’s creatures and aware of that. In lines 482-483 the *figura etymologica* of *ܘܥܠܘ* occurs, combined with an antanaclasis (l. 481, *ܘܥܠܘ*, “not forgotten”; l.482, *ܘܥܠܘ*, “the errant ones erred”). In line 483, *ܘܥܠܘ* is a reference to Bar Dayṣan’s confusing doctrine, which is rejected by *ܘܥܠܘ*, “the righteous ones”, who notice *ܘܥܠܘ*, “the injustice”.

ܘܥܠܘ is repeated in an anadiplosis at the beginning of line 485. Here, Narsai introduces a new element to urge his audience not to worship angels: he attributes human feelings to them; in particular, he invokes the fury that the celestial beings may feel for mistakes. Narsai enacts again the “reversal of

¹⁷⁷ Here again Narsai creates a wordplay on *ܘܚܒܘ*, “creatures/servants”.

¹⁷⁸ See lines 285-300.

values”: the negative emotions (i.e., sadness, fury) define here the positive beings, whereas the positive emotions (i.e., joy) characterise the negative ones.

Lines 487-501: The positive root **שמ**, “to rejoice”¹⁷⁹, takes here a negative nuance, due to the combination with **דמונים**, “demons”. However, this joy does not last long: after sin, **תשובה**, “repentance”, breaks in. In lines 490-491 – connected by the repetition of **תשובה** – a *figura etymologica* of **תשובה** occurs: Narsai describes the sinful sensation that leads men astray as **אזרחות** **תשובה** **אזרחות**, “audacity that does not repent”. However, the ineffable power of the Divine Love wins against this “audacity”, by showing to men how angels **מלאכים**, “are saddened” by men’s error¹⁸⁰. This employment of the “reversal of values” culminates in lines 493-494, in which Narsai finally gives a solution to his longing audience:

וְהַמְּלָאכִים הַשְּׂמֵחִים בְּעַלְמֵי הַיְיָ
 וְהַמְּלָאכִים הַשְּׂמֵחִים בְּעַלְמֵי הַיְיָ

These two verses, composed in a parallelism, restore the right order of things: angels – who are “really saddened” by men’s sin, which is something against the natural order – are “really rejoicing” when the True Creator is blessed. Lines 494-497 show a *figura etymologica* of **קדש**, “to sanctify” (l. 494, **קדש**; l. 496, **קדש** **קדש**; l. 497, **קדש** **קדש** **קדש**). Lines 495-500 are again a reminder that angels are creatures and, as good servants, they never stop glorifying the Lord. Through this statement, perhaps, Narsai wants to encourage his audience to follow their example.

Lines 501-512: In lines 501-506, Narsai explains why angels are called **מגלים**, “watchers”¹⁸¹. The root **גל** is repeated in a polyptoton throughout these verses (l. 501, **מגלים**; l. 503, **מגלים**; l. 504, **מגלים**; l. 505, **מגלים**) and as *figura etymologica* in line 506 (**מגלים** **מגלים**). Angels were given a vigilant

¹⁷⁹ Repeated five times in the third masculine plural participle *pe‘al* in lines 487-489.

¹⁸⁰ L. 492. The same root occurs in a polyptoton (**מגלים**) in the following line.

¹⁸¹ This might be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, in *Daniel* 4 (10, 14, 20). See also GIGNOUX (1968), p. 251.

intellect to allow them to awaken men: in lines 506-508, a simile compares them to teachers in charge of educating ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ, “the childhood” of humankind, where ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ is used metaphorically to indicate the ignorance of men before angelic knowledge – a knowledge that they were granted by a higher ܠܗܝܘܬܐ, “teacher”, viz. God¹⁸². It is also interesting to see the *anadiplosis* + polyptoton of ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ (l. 506-507, ... ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ / ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ ...; l. 508, ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ) and the *figurae etymologicae* of ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ (l. 508, ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ; l. 509, ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ ... ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ) and of ܠܗܝܘܬܐ (l. 507, ܠܗܝܘܬܐ; l. 509, ܠܗܝܘܬܐ; l. 510, ܠܗܝܘܬܐ) all related to the semantics of “education”. The search¹⁸³ for acquaintance with the Divine Master, the meditation of His word, the constant labour are an indirect invitation to the audience to emulate the celestial beings’ behaviour.

Lines 513-525: In these lines, Narsai makes the invitation to emulate more explicit, using direct exhortations to the assembly. The first verse of each couplet describes an action performed by the angels, whereas the second is introduced by a verb in the first person plural imperfect that addresses directly to the audience, in which the author includes himself. The *anadiplosis* + polyptoton of ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ connects this part to the previous one.

Lines 513-516 concern angel’s relation with God: they look for acquaintance with Him and are minister of His Will. The root that characterises these verses is ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ, first applied to angels and then to men, and appears in a *figura etymologica* (l. 514, ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ; l. 516, ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ).

Lines 517-522 regard the service that they grant to the humankind: they labour for our salvation and govern the universe. The author encourages thus the audience to collaborate with them and to understand their order. Lines 521-522 contain a visual metaphor: angels are compared to spiritual athletes, “runners”, who compete in a stadium¹⁸⁴ for the sake of humankind, which

¹⁸² L. 509.

¹⁸³ In line 512 occurs a *figura etymologica* of ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ.

¹⁸⁴ ܠܗܘܝܘܬܐ, Greek στάδιον. See SOKOLOFF (2009), p. 68.

should make sure to be worthy of their victory (here symbolically represented by چلنگه, “crowns”).

Lines 523-528 represent a different type of competition, the most serious one: angels’ fight against demons, led in favour of humankind. Words belonging to the semantics of “war” recur, creating a sort of allegory: جنگه, “fight”; جنگه, “victory”; جنگه, “war”; جنگه, “to arm”; جنگه, “camp”. Narsai calls the demons جنگه, “their fellows”, probably to compare the forces of the two ranks. If the forces are equal, the battle is fiercer: that is why Narsai exhort the assembly to support them in a war that is fought for the salvation of human souls. Despite their effort, though, the celestial beings are not the one that humans must glorify. Narsai explicates this point in lines 526 and 528, in conclusion of this *mēm̄rā*: the humankind must thank and glorify God, who is the One who provided such powerful allies.

Thus, this homily ends, with a powerful *in crescendo* that exalts angels and their actions, but that also remarks, for the last time, that they are nothing but God’s creatures, whom He engaged as servants for humankind’s salvation.

Conclusions

Narsai's sources and references points

For this text, Narsai clearly took his main inspiration from the *Peshitta*, especially from *Genesis*¹⁸⁵, *Deuteronomy*¹⁸⁶, *Psalms*¹⁸⁷, *Isaiah*¹⁸⁸ and Paul's *Letters*¹⁸⁹. The "reprimand" against Manicheans and Bar Dayṣan is plausibly inspired by Ephrem's works¹⁹⁰.

Rhetorical tropes and devices

As J.W. Watt notes in his article about Syriac panegyric, there is no proof of Greek rhetoric handbooks translated into Syriac¹⁹¹, nor is the teaching of rhetoric in Syriac schools evident¹⁹². Therefore, using classical rhetoric in the description of a Syriac text can be problematic, although the results can be surprisingly precise and far-reaching, since many rhetorical devices may be considered universal.

The figures of speech that recur more often in Narsai's *mēmṛā* are undoubtedly the *figura etymologica* and polyptoton, alliteration (sometimes combined with assonant clusters), the apostrophe, the anadiplosis (sometimes *iterata*, sometimes combined with a *variatio*), the parallelism and the anaphora. Some other devices occur less often: antanaclasis, rhetoric questions and direct speech, brachylogy, similes and metaphors. In some cases,

¹⁸⁵ *Genesis* 1:1-20; 16; 26.

¹⁸⁶ *Deuteronomy* 10:14.

¹⁸⁷ *Psalms* 89:11; 104; 136:1-9.

¹⁸⁸ *Isaiah* 40:12-26.

¹⁸⁹ *Ephesians* 3:18. *Hebrews* 1:7, 14; 3:15. *2Timotheus* 4:7. *Romans* 10:18. *Galatians* 4:20.

¹⁹⁰ In his *Sermones Polemici adversus Haereses*. See VAN ROMPAY (2008), p. 373.

¹⁹¹ J.W. WATT, *Syriac panegyric in theory and practice*, in 'Le Muséon' 102 (1989), p. 273.

¹⁹² A. VÖÖBUS, *History of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO 266), Peeters, Leuven, 1965, p. 105.

especially towards the end of the text, Narsai extends the metaphors by combining words belonging to the same semantic field. In this case, metaphors expand and originate a sort of allegory. The author sensibly uses all these figures of speech in order to hold the attention of his audience and, occasionally, to surprise them with (more or less) unexpected images and words.

Alongside rhetoric devices, the author regularly cites the Scripture, directly and indirectly, to provide his words with indisputable authority. The repetitiveness of the topics and the constant use of synonymic sentences show that Narsai's goal is clearly didactic: he wants to educate the assembly to reject the "false" (heretic) beliefs and to keep professing the "true" (orthodox) religion.

Creatures and Creator

The reason why Narsai is so eager to depict angels as mere "creatures/servants" lies in the cultural background of the Persian Empire, in which the school of Nisibis was set.

In the Late Antiquity, we assist to the birth of many Christian branches and creeds alongside the presence of ancient, well-established religions. The Sassanid Empire of the fifth century was a melting pot of different faiths and backgrounds, in which the Christian identity could fluidly intermingle with other beliefs and rituals. One of the most spread creeds of the Persian Empire was Zoroastrianism, a strongly dualistic state-religion, which connected the harmony of the universe to the presence of a virtuous monarch, and salvation to the accomplishment of righteous thoughts, words, and deeds¹⁹³. Beside Zoroastrianism, other faiths were spreading, such as Manichaeism, Mithraism

¹⁹³ See S.W. SUNQUIST, *Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact and Conflict*, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, 1990 (PhD dissertation), pp.30-98.

and many sects that were later ascribed to the vast and transversal group of Gnosticism¹⁹⁴.

Narsai was well aware of the appealing multitude of these creeds¹⁹⁵ and the danger that the similarities between these confessions and “orthodox” Christianity could bring to his church. This awareness explains the insistence devoted by the author to deconstructing any potential worships of intermediate beings. Hence, he constantly repeats to his audience that angels are “functions” of God, i.e. beings that He appointed to govern the universe. They are nothing but creatures, like men are, just more powerful and purely spiritual, totally submitted to God’s authority, who made them as “servants” for the humankind.

¹⁹⁴ On the variety of religion in the Sasanian Empire, see S. SHEKED, *Dualism in Transition. Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*, School of Oriental and African Studies – University of London, London, 1994, p. 5.

¹⁹⁵ See, f.i., the ‘catalogue of heresies’ in F. MARTIN (1899), pp. 446-483.

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