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THE MYSTICISM OF ABRAHAM BAR DASHANDAD

BY

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Oslo

1. Abraham bar Dashandad, the East Syrian mystic, lived in the first half of the 8th century. The only one of his writings extant¹⁾, is a letter which MINGANA has edited, and which in his edition comprises 16 pages.²⁾ However, a closer study of this writing, in the heading called *'eḡarētā*, makes it clear that it is not a letter in the ordinary sense of the word, but an exhortation or tract of instruction to a monastic Brother who has decided to live as *ihīdāyā*, i.e. a hermit, or, factually more correct, an ascetic 2.14. From Dadisho Katraya, another East Syrian mystic who lived one generation earlier, at the end of the 7th century, we have good knowledge of the ascetic and hermit practice carried on in the Syrian church at that time.³⁾ We can discern between two types of ascetics, namely those who devoted themselves to asceticism and solitary life for a fixed period, and those who did so for life. The first type was usual in the monasteries or in close connection with them. From time to time the monks withdrew from intercourse with the other monks and lived in isolation in a cell for a shorter or longer period, e.g. seven days or seven weeks. During this time they had no intercourse with the Brothers, apart from the fact that they were given food through an aperture and that a senior teacher might come to this aperture and say some exhortations to confirm the hermit to persevere in his resolve. Unlike these temporary ascetics who lived in seclusion in a cell, the anchorites lived far away from other human beings, in barren and inaccessible places without any connection with the monasteries and life there. However, there were also two intermediate types, namely hermits who lived in the desert

1) List of his works in A. BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der Syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn 1922, p. 240.

2) A. MINGANA, *Mystical treatise by Abraham bar Dashandad*, Woodbrooke Studies, Vol. VII, Early Christian Mystics, Cambridge 1934, p. 248 ff.

3) MINGANA, *op. cit.* p. 70 ff.

but occasionally returned to the monasteries and stayed there for a shorter or longer period, according as they felt a demand for intercourse with other Christians, and a special type of itinerant hermits, who wandered from monastery to monastery, and who lived in isolation in a cell during their stay in the monastery. This latter type can thus be considered a variation of the monastic cell ascetics who stayed in one particular monastery.

The question naturally arises: For what type of *ihīdāyē*, hermits, did Abraham bar Dashandad write his letter? The heading gives no immediate explanation: "A letter by Mar Abraham bar Dashandad, which he wrote to his Brother, who had gone out *lēdubbārā dakṣē-nāyūtā*". The term "brother", *ʔahā*, in this instance as in so many others in this form of literature surely means, "monastic brother", i.e. monk and not full brother. When it is said about him that "he went out", *nēfaq*, it seems to mean that he left the monastery. However, the verb may very well be a terminus technicus meaning to give up the usual monastic life, so that the term *nēfaq* only means that he gave up the usual monastic life. As now *dubbārā* means "asceticism", "ascetic life", in the plural "ascetic exercises" and *ʔaksēnāyūtā*, Greek *xenia*, means "exile", "travel" or "hospitality", the question here is whether it means the abandonment of the normal monastic life in favour of an ascetic life in the cell, i.e. a transition from the life of a monk to that of a "guest" in the monastery, or, the abandonment of the mother house in favour of a life as an itinerant ascetic, i.e. a kind of "travelling ascetic." It is possible to interpret the heading in both directions. In his introduction MINGANA seems to have understood it in the first meaning.⁴⁾ If we take the letter in its entirety, however, I believe that only the second interpretation can be defended. For the case is that several of the exhortations can only be fully understood if the addressee lives outside the walls of the monastery. In 4.2 ff it is said: "Be careful never to walk in unwatchfulness or pay tribute to worldly power whether in those who are near you or far from you."⁵⁾ He who lives in a cell, need not pay tribute to the mighty on earth. He, however, who is among ordinary people, is forced to do so. When in another place it is said that the addressee has the opportunity of observing how rich people live 8.16 ff and of inter-

4) MINGANA, *op. cit.* p. 185.

5) All quotations refer to page and line in Mingana's text.

course, ^c*enyānā*, with people who are evidently not monks 1.17 f 1.20 f 2.22 f 3.3 f 3.20 f 5.21 f, people who do not love Christ 9.15 f, it can, in my opinion not be doubted that the addressee, at any rate occasionally, lives outside the cell. However, a permanent life outside the monastery is out of the question, for it is said about him that he was engaged in studies, *yulfānā* 1.9 f 14.20 and *qeryānā* 2.17 3.2 f 10.6 f a characteristic feature of monastic life, and his ambition was to become a true hermit, *ihīdāyā* 2.13 f, which makes a normal life in society impossible. The conclusion must therefore be that we have to do with an itinerant *ihīdāyā*, a man wandering from monastery to monastery, where he devotes himself to ascetic exercises and his study. Just because he wanders about and meets all kinds of people, he needs admonitions about the dangers which life outside the monastery involves.

Now when the “place in life” of this writing is clear, that it was written to a monk who had renounced monastic life for itinerant ascetic life, light is thrown on several problems, e.g. that it is no ordinary letter, but an edifying exhortation. Apart from the heading and the first part of the introductory passage 1.4-11, which may well give the impression of having been spoken to an absent person, there is little or nothing of the character of a letter about the writing. Naturally it may be asked why the author retains the term ^o*eḡarētā*. The nearest explanation is that the author sees his letter in the light of the New Testament tradition: This is a letter in the same meaning as, for instance, the Epistle of the Hebrews. It was probably not sent. Most probably the author gave his writing to the departing Brother for him to bring with him on the way and take it out and meditate over it when on his wanderings he came to a quiet monastery 9.8 f. As it is an edifying writing, it is natural that it is dominated by exhortation, encouragement and warning and that these succeed each other all through the text: “My Beloved, detach your soul from the detrimental ties of this temporary dwelling filled as it is with unchastity and disaster. Attach yourself with all your soul and force and understanding to the love of Christ, for all that is here, will perish, and man shall meet God’s judgement. Take care of your soul, my Brother, let death be pictured before your eyes, and do not neglect the salvation of your soul” 5.10 ff. This exhortation and sermon style belongs to the monasteries both during the divine service gatherings and in con-

nection with the care of souls among the monks, especially towards those who for a time had chosen to live as *ihīdāyē*. Naturally the contents are somewhat different from, for example, those of the sermons of Afrem, which were intended for a broader public, ordinary people who from natural causes were prevented from adopting the severe life of *ihīdāyē*.

2. The cosmologic and anthropologic ideas are very simple. As collective term for existence as a whole he uses the word *kōl*, "the whole" 13.21. This is a creation of God's, *bēritā*: "Through his wise tokens He created all creation, the one up there and the one down there" 10.2 f cp. 4.11. There is no indication of a relinquishment of this idea in favour of emanation ideas, such as we know from other mystic systems. However, the most frequent term he uses about the world, is *°almā* 1.12 4.4 f 4.11 5.6 f 5.11 5.23 6.13 6.17 7.4 11.4 11.9 f. With this he thinks particularly of the earth or earthly existence, on one occasion more particularly of the god-hostile men 9.9. He has the usual trichotomy of existence into heaven, earth and hell. "Heaven", *šēmayyā*, is not used, but he speaks about heavenly things, *šēmaynyātā* 12.3, and heavenly dwellings, *kenšē šēmayyānē* 15.6. Heaven then is thought to be "up there", *lē°el*, while the earth is "down there", *lētaht* 10.3. Whenever he wants to emphasise especially the perishableness of the earth, he calls it *°ar°ā*. Human limbs are, he says, *haddāmē dēbhar°ā*, "limbs we have on earth" 4.20 f cp. 8.20 f 12.2. In similar connections he uses the biblical "dust", *°afarā* 11.23 cp. 12.1 etc. His term for hell is *gēhannā* 9.14 14.23 or "torturing fire", *nūrā dētaš-nīqā*, further: "the eternal fire", *nūrā dal°ālam* 13.20 or "fire flames", *gallēlē dēnūrā* 7.20. Gehenna and its fire is "on the other side", *tammān* 7.20. There is nothing to show clearly that he has thought this place of punishment to be under the earth. He evidently represents the tradition that has its origin in the late-Jewish writings, for example the Henoch book, where the place of punishment is somewhere on the way to heaven.

God, *°allāhā*, has his dwelling in heaven, "on high", *rawmā* 14.17. Also the Spirit, *rūhā*, has its home there, for "all that is of Spirit, will be lifted up again" 12.1. In the heavenly dwellings is Christ, *mēšihā*, *māran* 15.6, and heaven is the home of angels, the seraphs and the cherubs 14.23 ff. On the earth live, besides human beings,

also demons, *šēdē* 2.9 13.9, and *Gehenna* is governed by a punishing angel, *ʿattirā* 9.14 cp. Mandaic Uthra.

Abraham bar Dashandad's view of the world is dualistic. Everything in the material world of man is perishable, false and contemptible: "This world shall disappear like a shadow" 5.6 f. The world has an "end", *ḥarēṭā* 5.23. It is a "dwelling of time", *ʿumrā dēzabnā* 5.11 cp. 4.4 7.4 11.4, it is a "road", *ʿurḥā*, from which man must escape 11.9 f. The world is treacherous, *daggālā*, and leads men astray 12.7 f 1.12. Therefore everything we can see, is worth only contempt 11.22 12.14. He speaks with deep contempt of *ʿālmā hānā*, "this world" 6.13 6.17 7.4. Opposed to this is the "world beyond", *ḥaw ʿālmā* 9.10 f or as is also said: "the new world", *ʿālmā ḥadditā* 13.10. This latter term certainly also comprises the idea of a newly created finality world, although this idea does not seem to play a part elsewhere in the letter. In his mind is on the whole the contrast between the imperishable world of God and the perishable world of man, and the latter is, as mentioned above, not only perishable, but downright evil, and leads men into disaster and destruction.

Corresponding to this cosmic dualism, is the dualism in each separate human being, that between body and soul. Man has a body, *gušmā* 7.22, *paḡrā* 2.19 3.12 9.2. This body has a strong natural desire 6.10 f, bodily needs, which have a hampering influence, are even downright detrimental to a godly life 3.9 ff 14.11 ff. This body "goes to its own destruction", *labdānā šāreḥ* 9.2. It becomes dust 8.23 f. Noteworthy is what he says in 3.11 ff: "Reject dealings with man, as they lead your soul to destruction, stain your heart, lead astray your body, impair all your senses in the service of God, and engender and beget error." He speaks of "beguilers of the body", *maṭʿēyānē dēpaḡrā*. In his opinion not only the soul but also the body can be led astray. Thus the body is not evil on principle, but has only the immanent possibility of becoming evil. In other words the author has no principle of dualism. The world, creation, is not evil in itself, but evil because it prevents the soul from its life in God. This is noteworthy because the author evidently also knew the absolute dualism between light and dark. Naturally he had ample opportunity of hearing about it in Parsee circles. He betrays knowledge of the Persian light: darkness idea by warning against "those who are slaving for darkness", *ʿabdē dēḥeššōkā* 15.7 f. Abraham bar Dashandad cannot be said

to be a mystic with an especially intellectual orientation. He makes no attempt at any profound study of dualism. He lives entirely in the ecclesiastical tradition. The Gospel of St. John for instance, does not know of any principle of dualism. The world becomes evil through its attitude to Christ. The division occurs with the entrance of Logos into the world and man's choice.

Where the spiritual side of man is concerned, the author uses several terms, thus: "heart", *lebbā* 2.20 3.2 3.12 4.22 and "mind" or "inner life", *tarḥitā* 2.16 2.19 3.20 4.22 8.12, but the main word is *naḥšā*, "soul". The soul is the body's contrast 13.11 and has a heavenly origin: "Blessed is the Brother who despises everything that can be seen, but cares for his soul. All that is of earth, again becomes earth, but all that is of Spirit, is again lifted up" 11.22ff. The aim of the soul is redemption from the ties that keep it back on earth 5.10 f. While down here, it suffers from being separated from God 13.1 ff. It is a "force", *ḥaylā* 5.12 f, life proper in man 7.7. It is independent. Man can make it the object of a closer examination and consideration 8.14. It has its own eyes and looks on the world with them 8.18. It is the most precious treasure of man 11.3, "more worth than the whole world and everything that is in it" 11.17 ff. It alone shall remain when the earth perishes 13.6 f.

3. It is clear that the author retains the essence of the Christian eschatology. He, too, takes for granted a kingdom to come. For he speaks of "the children of the kingdom", *bēnay malkūtā*, in contrast to "the children of the world", *bēnay ʿālmā* 9.10, of the "new world", *ʿālmā ḥaddūtā* 13.10, and the "heavenly things", *šəmaynyātā* 12.3, to which man has been called. On one occasion he speaks of "the reward of good deeds", *purʿānā daʿəḥbādē* 14.21 f and describes life's aim as "the dwelling of the Spirit", *ʿawwānā d'ērūḥ* 3.15. He also retains the picture of the future kingdom as a feast together with those who have passed away, or as a wedding between Christ and his flock: "Remember that you are the Son of God, a brother of Him whom the Father loves, one who shares the lot of the disciples, a joint-heir with the martyrs, a table companion with those who profess, one who shares the lot of the holy men, with a seat at the table of the prophets, sharing the joy of the just and the glory of the angels, a companion of the seraphs, a table companion of the cherubs, sharing the life of Christ our Lord a guest at the wedding feast of the Only Begotten,

one with a place in the dwellings of the heavenly flock, an inhabitant of Jerusalem” 14.23 ff. To this positive characterization corresponds the description of the negative lot, the day of judgement and the torments of Gehenna. Men are mentioned who have not God’s judgement, *dīneh dallāhā* in mind 5.22 f, furthermore is mentioned “the mighty judgement”, *dīnā ʿazzizā*, man in its time will have to face 10.19 f, a judgement as inevitable as death 11.11 f. In connection with Gehenna he mentions the torment, *šūnāqā* 9.14, eternal fire 13.20 and weeping 14.23. Salvation means rescue, *purqānā*, from all this 5.16 f 7.14 f.

Like the classical Christian sources Abraham bar Dashandad also uses the more spiritualized term “life” or “eternal life” to characterize salvation. He speaks of inheriting or gaining “eternal life”, *ḥayyē dalʿālam* 7.11 5.6 and of this eternal life as man’s final destination 2.3 14.2. Eternal life is above all characterized through its contrast with “time-bound life”, *ḥayyē dēzabnā*: “He who wants eternal life must renounce timebound life” 14.2. The eschatology is clear enough, and we ask ourselves if there really is anything in the description of the eschatologic salvation betraying a mystic. The terms “rapture” and “bliss” alone may be said to indicate this: “If you please Christ by what you do, you shall live in rapture, *něyāḥā*, here and bliss, *bussāmā*, in the hereafter” 11.12 f. Both these words taste of mysticism and seem to express the very essence of the salvation experience of the author.

These mystic-ringing formulas lead us into his description of salvation as something present, something already in one’s possession. The author does not emphasise particularly any description of the gloomy background against which life in God is portrayed. There are certainly two forms of life, life in God and life in “complete separation from God”, *puršānā gēmīrā dēmen ʿallāhā* 2.9 f, but it is life in God that wholly occupies his mind. This is natural because the author addresses a confirmed Christian. To a Christian this world does not mean a real temptation, but it means a hindrance for the expansion of a true life with God, no temptation. In contrast with life separated from God, life in God is “the true one”, “real life”, *ḥayyē šarrīrē* 6.2 f. It is in this description of life in God that the truly mystic character of the salvation teaching in our author is distinct. Let us take as our starting-point the following highly characteristic phrase:

“Remember that you are the Son of God, and a brother of Him whom the Father loves” 14.23 f. The frase *bērā dallāhā*, the Son of God, can of course, be interpreted in somewhat different ways. This may only mean that man’s relation to God is that of a son, but such an interpretation is hardly appropriate here in our place owing to the parallel with Christ: “You are the brother, *ʾaḥā*, of Him whom the Father loves.” Thus the person addressed, is equalled with Christ himself. He is son in the same meaning as Christ is. Only a mystic can say so. Behind this address we discern the peculiar, strong experience of the unity with Christ, which is so characteristic of the mystic. These are words which can only be used by one who has lived through rapture and, at the time of rapture, has reached beyond man’s limitation. Several places in the author’s work make it clear that he has been familiar with this phenomenon, and thus may have had his choice of words determined by personal experience of this kind: “If you flee from intercourse with men, Christ will remain in you and your mind rejoice in God,” *rawzā tarʿitāk ballāhā* 2.16. The rejoicing in God is the promise resulting from life with Christ. It is the climax of Christian life, the moment which spreads a veil of happiness over earthly existence. The author also speaks of “sweet love”, *ḥalyūtā dēhubbā*, which occurs when natural desire has been silenced 6.9 ff. When he mentions “eternal happiness”, *bussāmā dalʿālam* 3.10 f, he certainly thinks of the condition belonging to endtime, but this, he says, is already anticipated during life on earth: “Also in this world you shall live in great rapture”, *waf hārkā banʿyāḥā rabbā hāwē ʾat* 7.11 f. Rapture during life on earth is thus a foretaste of eternal happiness in the kingdom of God.

The possession of salvation is also characterized as the living in man by God, Christ or the Spirit: “I pray to God who dwells in you”, *ʿāmar bāk* 1.5 f cp. 2.6 2.18. “May Christ our Lord dwell in you” 1.7 cp. 2.16. “Dear Brother, be reticent in your conversation and intercourse with men, so that you do not destroy the peace of your hearth, and weaken and tire the Spirit, that dwells in you” 1.17 ff. However, in none of the above quotations is there a terminological usage of terms for a mystic experience. The terms which are used, are relatively wide and, above all, of varying values, but there can be no doubt that the author uses them to give expression to an experience in God of a mystic nature, and then to both the special experience which

carries the life of the mystic and gives colour to his stile on the whole, and the general, daily feeling of living in a sphere of joy and delight, a feeling which usually accompanies a life in strict asceticism.

Thus, after what we have seen, the present salvation becomes first and foremost a salvation to something, to a society with God and Christ. But at the same time it is also a salvation from something, from the world and every thing that binds man's soul to earthly existence. Christ redeems man from the world and destroys his earthly limbs 4.19 ff. "But you, Beloved, extricate your soul from the detrimental ties to this temporary dwelling" 5.10 f. This is a typically mystic idea: the soul being bound to matter, but shall be redeemed so that it can return to its true home. Salvation is the redemption of the soul, a redemption that begins now and here, but can be accomplished only after the death of the body, a death which also commences while man is alive. In our author this work of redemption is partly accomplished by man himself, partly by Christ. Christ is the "destroyer", ³*amīṭ*, of man's limbs 4.20, as, at the same time, man himself "detaches", *šērā*, the soul from the ties 5.10 f. The purely mystic self-salvation is connected with the Christian idea of salvation through Christ.

4. In Abraham bar Dashandad as in all mystically orientated persons, the idea of the "road" dominates the mind. It can be said that to him the "road" to redemption and salvation falls into four stages, namely: flight from the world, asceticism, concentration and meditation. The flight from the world plays a great part in the letter. This corresponds to the fact that it is determined for a *ihīdāyā*. There is particularly one term which recurs again and again in this connection namely ⁶*enyānā*, "intercourse", "going together". It is used particularly in warnings against intercourse with men. "Beware of idleness and intercourse with men", ⁶*enyānā dē'am nāšā* 2.22 f. "Do not have intercourse with men," *wē⁶enyānā ⁶am nāšā lā te⁶beḏ* 3.6 f. "Beware of intercourse with men who are in body", ²*ezdahar men ⁶enyānā dē'am bēnaynāšā pagrānāyē* 12.23 f cp. 1.17 f 2.15 3.4 6.3 6.14 8.7 ff. As already mentioned, these warnings have only a meaning when the person addressed can be together with other men. The idea is then that he shall separate deliberately from fellow men, have as little as possible to do with them. The word ⁶*enyānā* may also mean "conversation", thus ⁶*enyānā dēmellē* 1.17 f and ⁶*enyānīn* in 8.7. For inter-

course and conversation with men are highly dangerous. They darken the mind 3.4 and are “empty”, *səfīqē* 6.3. However, the flight from the world does not mean that he shall abstain from all kinds of work and devote himself to complete inactivity, on the contrary: “Love all kinds of work”, *rəḥam ʿamlē* 3.14. Inactivity implies danger too. Active work with men should be avoided: “O Beloved, if you seek the whole truth, do not work with men”, *lā neḥwē lāḳ ʿəbādā ʿam nāšā* 1.20 f. It is probable that the author thinks of a very special form of work, namely teaching. This seems evident from the fact that he considers all learning as something rejectable and dangerous 15.13 ff. The flight from the world naturally involves repudiation of all the good things of life. Gluttony, *sabʿūtā dēḳarsā* 1.16 is just as unthinkable to a *ihādāyā* as purity of life is a matter of course: “I beseech you in the name of Christ to keep your body in chastity and your mind in purity, so that your heart may rejoice in God” 2.18 ff.

If the flight from the world is to have any importance, it must be followed by asceticism, *dubbārā*. It is a decisive step on the way: “See to it, my most Beloved, that you perform your ascetic exercises, *dubbārāyk*, are severe and careful in the execution of them, so that you attain eternal life” 5.4 ff. Asceticism must not be casual, but systematic and accompanied by fixed habits: “For without good ascetic exercises, *dubbārē šappīrē*, and fixed habits, *ʿyāḏē taqnē*, it is not possible for anyone to be regarded as virtuous and worthy of becoming a dwelling for God” 2.4 ff. The ascetic exercises requires an intense fulfilment: “Grant me to be active in love to you, so that I do not tire you with laxity in my asceticism”, *bərafyūt dubbāray* 8.5 f. Asceticism redeems the soul: “Let us help our soul with spiritual asceticism”, *nawtar nafšan bēdubbārē rūḥānāyē* 14.4. A life without asceticism ends in dismay: “Woe to him who neglects his asceticism, for when he must depart, grave sorrow will fall upon him” 4.11 ff. An ascetic life, on the other hand, opens the road to God’s kingdom: “Adorn yourself with good ascetic exercises, and enter into the joy of thy Lord” 7.15 f. One aspect of the author’s view of ascetic life is particularly interesting, namely his characterization of it as the asceticism of the angels: “It is a great disaster and such a dreadful thing that it cannot be mentioned, that we practise this asceticism of the angels, *dubbārē dēmalāḳē*, carelessly and as may seem suitable to

us for the moment” 10.22 ff. Thus ascetic life is a foretaste of life in God’s kingdom.

A detailed account of all the separate exercises which asceticism comprised, would have been of great interest. The author, however, confines himself to some few, thus fasts, weeping and vigils. About the first one he says: “Love fast, *ṣawmā*, and refrain from intercourse with men” 3.20 f. But it is important that fasts, like vigils, are practised sensibly: “Be moderate in vigil and sensible in fast”, *nehwē šahrāk bamēšūhētā wēṣawmā bēnakpūtā* 2.20 f. Too much sleep, however, is a dangerous enemy of life with God. Life ought to be lived awake: “Blessed is he who has not been sleeping, *nām*, during his voyage to the harbour where he must disembark” 10.17 f. Here we may say that the author touches upon Plotin’s idea that man sleeps through life and is awake only during his meeting with God, IV. Ennead, 8. book.

Weeping is obviously also one of the fixed habits: “Do not let the tears, *demē*, from your eyes cease” 3.5. Weeping removes stains on the soul 7.19, therefore supplication must be done with a sorrowful mind, *hēnīgāʔit* 15.17.

Also prayer, penance and recital of psalms must be mentioned in this connection. “Do not cease from worship, *segdētā*, prostration, *gurgāhā*, sighs, *tenhātā*, mournings, *nehmātā*, supplications, *taḥšē-fātā*, wishes, *bāʿwātā*, prayers, *ṣalwātā*, and hymns, *tešbēhātā*, as long as there is power in you, and you are living in this mortal, perishable and changeable life” 6.20 ff. Spontaneous prayer and supplication cannot very well be characterized as asceticism. It is different when the life of prayer is organized, regulated so that we can speak of regular exercises and prayers, and fixed prayer hours, with which the author seems to be familiar and refer to with the term: *ʿēyādē taqnē*, “fixed habits” 2.5. Penance, *tēyāhūtā*, is naturally connected with prayer 7.22.

The division of the “road” into four stages: flight from the world, asceticism, concentration and meditation, does naturally not mean that the different “stages” are distinctly separated from each other. Here, as always in the mystics, these conditions overlap. Viewed from one angle prayer is concentration, from another it is meditation. Yet such a schematic division into stages is useful, this so much the more as it corresponds to the author’s personal opinion. For, in addition to flight from the world and asceticism, he speaks also of concentration

and meditation. Concentration is first and foremost a collection of the mind, a deliberate rejection of certain thoughts and a deliberate attempt at gathering the mind on a clearly defined idea: "When you stand before God in prayer, collect your thought, *kēnoš re^cyānāk*, away from the empty distraction of this restless world" 6.6 f. During this condition the world must be renounced and a direct hostile attitude towards it and one's own self adopted: "He who wishes to possess eternal life, must renounce temporal life" 14.2. "I beseech Thee, O Lord, to make me hate my life for the sake of love to you" 8.2 f. Concentration involves the disappearance from consciousness of everything in this world: "Thou my Lord, grant me to obliterate all intercourse, all memories, all thoughts and all ideas which do not conform with the love to Thee, O Christ of all" 8.7 ff.

One part of the concentration exercises is the study of the Holy Writ and the recitation of psalms. "Persevere in the study of the Holy Writ", *bēqeryānā dakētābē qaddišē* 10.6 f, cp. 2.17 11.15 f 14.19 f 1.9. As the author flatly warns against teaching, the study of the Bible is wholly in the service of the concentration: "Read in silence by yourself so that Christ may impart wisdom to you, and not in the company of men so that your mind is obscured by intercourse" 3.2 ff. About the recitation of psalms he says: "O Beloved of my soul, never cease to recite psalms, *mazmūrā*, or let prayers arise from your heart" 8.10. "Be diligent in the recitation of psalms and prayer" 11.16. According to Dadisho Katraya the recitation of psalms was a widespread practice among Syrian monks to produce ecstasy.⁶ The author has obviously inculcated the same practice.

The last stage on the "road" is meditation, *renyā* 15.10, *hergā* 13.14. "Let your heart dwell, *nehroḡ*, in God, and your mind in Christ" 4.22 f. "Meditate on these things, and dwell on them in your thought" *bēhēn rēnī waḥhēn hērōḡ* 8.9 f. Meditation is a submersion in God or Christ or in salvation itself: "Meditate, *ṣethaggā*, always upon the new world" 13.10. It is an elevation of the eye of thought towards God 14.3 f, a circulation about Him: "Do not neglect the meditation about God, *renyēh dallāhā*, in your heart" 14.18. Characteristic of this meditative condition is a complete self-abandonnement, accompanied by a total isolation from the world. It ends in the love-meeting with

6) MINGANA, *op. cit.* p. 101.

God. "Indeed there is nothing more valuable than the love of God which is acquired when the soul disappears in the denying of the world and all that is in it" 11.18 ff. "The disappearance of the soul", *ʿabdānā dēnafšā*, hardly refers to any disappearance in God, a dissolution in God, but to the renunciation of all egocentricity. When in one place there is talk of finding "pearls", *marganyātā*, and "precious stones", *kēfē tāḫātā*, on the road of life, as fruits of good meditation, *herqā šēḫā*, it is natural to think that the author alludes to the rich glimpses of the experience which from time to time meditation gives to him who devotes himself to it. Here, as often elsewhere, the author is reticent in his description. But he speaks to a man who knows the mystic phenomenon from personal experience. Such a man understands his allusions and easily interprets his obscure words. Every mystic knows, so also Abraham bar Dashandad, that the meditative concentration ends in the stillness of contemplation, although he is rather silent about it. However, a brief remark about silence betrays his familiarity also with this phenomenon: "Silence finds God", *šetqā lallāhā meškāḥ* 1.22.