



“Through Love’s Arms the Man Can Fly in Every Corner [of Creation]”. Love of God and Love of Neighbors in John the Solitary’s Letters¹

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Abstract: The present contribution offers a first critical edition of a short text ascribed to John the Solitary, named *Letter on love* and witnessed in a 6th century manuscript (BL Add 17169, ff. 124v-126r). This text uses a vocabulary and imagery that can be found in other works of the Johannine *corpus*, and, therefore, can be ascribed to the same author. The letter is addressed to unnamed ascetics, living in a monastery, and describes love as the main goal of ascetic life. Through love, the monk may attain the full knowledge of the mystery of God and receive the crown of victory and the beautiful garments in the “last day”. The commentary on the letter shows how this short text summarizes some of the key terms and images associated with love in the Johannine *corpus*.

Keywords: John the Solitary; John of Apamea; Syriac spirituality; Letter on love; Syriac monasticism

Among the works transmitted under the name of John the Solitary (or “of Apamea”), a few have been cataloged by Werner Strothmann under the title of *Brief an ein Kloster über die Liebe* and *Zwei Briefe über die Liebe*. It should be noted that these are not the only texts of the Solitary that address the theme of love. In this study, we focus on an unedited letter (no. 1.3.2.3 of Strothmann’s list) attested in one manuscript. We will offer, in appendix, the edition and English translation of the Syriac text, together with a concise commentary on its theological cornerstones. A fresh comparison with edited and unedited works of the same author

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may highlight how the theme of love of God and love of the neighbors are crucial in his ascetical-theological system⁴.

1. The identity of John the Solitary

The Syriac manuscript tradition hands over a good number of manuscripts that represent a vast and diverse literary *corpus* ascribed to an author named “John the Solitary” or “John the Monk” (ܝܫܘܥ ܫܘܠܝܬܐ), whose identity remains elusive after over a century of scholarship⁵. The name of John is also mentioned in other sources, recently overviewed by Vittorio Berti in a thorough article⁶: Babai the Great (†638); Dadisho‘ Qatraya (VII cent.); Teodor bar Koni (VIII cent.)⁷; Isho‘dnah of Basra (VIII century)⁸; Elias of Nisibis (†1046); Michael the Syrian (†1199)⁹, and Gregory Barebreus (†1286)¹⁰. A “John of Apamea” was condemned

⁴ A survey of the thought of John the Solitary may be found in the introduction of the critical editions or translations of his works, and in several studies. Cf., among others, P. Harb, *Doctrine spirituelle de Jean le Solitaire (Jean d’Apamée)*, ParOr 2 (1971) p. 225-260; A. de Halleux, *La Christologie de Jean le Solitaire*, “Le Muséon” 94 (1981) p. 5-36; M. Nin, *La sintesi monastica di Giovanni il Solitario*, in: *Le Chiese sire tra IV e VI secolo: dibattito dottrinale e ricerca spirituale. Atti del 2 incontro sull’Oriente Cristiano di tradizione siriana (Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 28 marzo 2003)*, ed. E. Vergani – S. Chialà, Milano 2005, p. 95-117; S.J. Beggiani, *The Incarnational Theology and Spirituality of John the Solitary of Apamea*, “Hugoye” 21 (2018) p. 391-421; R.J. Constantin, *Passions, Virtue, and Moral Growth in John of Apamea’s Dialogues on the Soul*, Catholic University of America, Washington 2020 (Ph.D. Diss.).

⁵ Cf. the thorough analysis of V. Berti, *Il telaio del sospetto. Una proposta per risolvere l’enigma dell’identità di Giovanni di Apamea*, “Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo” 20 (2023) p. 131-154. Full references of the scholarship on John’s identity may be found in this article.

⁶ Cf. Berti, *Il telaio*.

⁷ Theodorus bar Kōnī, *Liber Scholiorum*, SS 66, p. 331-333.

⁸ The date of the so-called *Liber Castitatis* has been recently questioned by a team of Italian and French researcher (Carlo E. Biuzzi, Giovanni Gomiero, Christelle Jullien, Florence Jullien, Giorgia Nicosia) working on a new critical edition of the text attributed to Isho‘dnah of Basra, an East-Syrian bishop of the mid-9th c. Despite the current scholarly *opinio communis*, the work transmitted in the whole manuscript tradition is an interpolated epitome abbreviated from the work (or the works?) of Isho‘dnah. Given this stratified and fluid nature, it cannot be dated *sic et simpliciter* to the mid-9th c., without an in-depth analysis of the text, its structure and its contents. We are indebted to Giovanni Gomiero for sharing this information.

⁹ Michael Sirus, *Chronicon*, v. 2, p. 250; v. 4, p. 313.

¹⁰ Gregorius Barhebraeus, *Chronicon* I 46.

together with Joseph Ḥazzaya and John of Dalyatha in 786/787 during a Synod held under the *Catholicos* Timotheos I (†823)¹¹. It is not entirely clear if the “John the Egyptian” mentioned by Philoxenos of Mabbug (†523) should be identified with “John the Solitary” of the manuscript tradition¹². The abundance of data and the lack of critical editions of *all* the works of the *corpus* do not allow a simplistic solution to the issue of the identity of the author(s) of the works ascribed to ܝܫܘܥ ܫܘܠܝܬܝܘܬܐ in the extant manuscripts. For the sake of our argument, we will limit ourselves to summarize the most relevant data.

The Johannine *corpus* includes roughly 93 works witnessed in 63 manuscripts ranging from the late VI to XIX century AD¹³. The most ancient manuscript (BL Add 17169, AD 581)¹⁴ is an anthology of 12 compositions ascribed to a single author, named “John the Solitary, the Seer of the Thebaid” (ܝܫܘܥ ܫܘܠܝܬܝܘܬܐ ܫܘܠܝܬܝܘܬܐ)¹⁵. The name refers to the renowned John of Lycopolis, an ascetic whose story is narrated in Palladius’ *Historia Lausiaca*¹⁶. The pseudepigraphic attribution may be explained as merging the (Syriac) John the Solitary with the (Greek)

¹¹ The text of the synodal decision is witnessed in the *Nomocanon* of ‘Abdisho’ of Nisibis (†1318) and in the Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s *Fiqh an-Naṣrāniyya* (†1043). Cf. V. Berti, *Grazia, visione e natura divina in Nestorio di Nuhadra, solitario e vescovo siro-orientale (†800 ca.)*, “Annali di scienze religiose” 10 (2005) p. 219-257; V. Berti, *Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée Ier: la perspective du patriarche*, in: *Les mystiques syriaques*, ed. A. Desreumaux, *Études syriaques* 8, Paris 2011, p. 151-176.

¹² Cf Berti, *Il telaio*.

¹³ Cf. the thorough list of W. Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea. Sechs Gespräche mit Thomasios, Der Briefwechsel zwischen Thomasios und Johannes und Drei an Thomasios gerichtete Abhandlungen*, v. 1, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 11, Berlin 1972, p. XI-XIII and in more detail p. 5-39. To Strothmann’s list two further manuscripts should be added: cf. footnote 32. A good (but incomplete) summary of the edited works of the Solitary may be found in D.R. Acosta, *The Historical John of Apamea. A Framework of the Problem of His Identity*, *JECH* 5 (2015) p. 4-25.

¹⁴ Cf. W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired since the Year 1838*, v. 2, London 1871, p. 450-454. For the edited part of this manuscript, see S. Brock, *An Inventory of Syriac Texts Published from Manuscripts in the British Library*, *Gorgias Handbooks* 50, Piscataway 2020, p. 163.

¹⁵ Cf. BL Add 17169, fol. 1r. In fol. 126r, the colophon states that the scribe compiled the “book of Mar John the Solitary” (ܝܫܘܥ ܫܘܠܝܬܝܘܬܐ), without any reference to Thebaid.

¹⁶ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 35. In the 9th century manuscript BL Add 17172, ff. 164r-167r, Palladius’ history of John of Lycopolis is prefaced to a short collection of works of John the Solitary to constitute a ‘dossier’ on the life and literary production of what was clearly believed to be one and the same character.

genres he explored and the wide range of topics he discussed with Eutropios, Eusebios, and Thomasios may be taken as proof of his literacy and education. He was well versed in the knowledge of Scripture and Greek philosophy; he also showed a good knowledge of ‘scientific’ matters that he famously used as metaphors to describe the process of entering the New World²⁴. These data may confirm that John lived in the Apamea region, where a renowned neo- and middleplatonian school was founded²⁵. The so-called *Letter to Hesychius* reveals a deep knowledge of ascetic topics such as watchfulness, humility, fasting, meditation of Christ’s Incarnation and Passion, etc.²⁶ André de Halleux, in a thorough analysis of the Christology of the Solitary²⁷, made the hypothesis that John would have lived in the pre-Chalcedonian mid-5th century, and, while placing himself outside the Christological debate of that time, he would have covertly polemicized with Ephrem’s understanding of the hypostatic union²⁸.

²⁴ Cf. e.g., Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* III: “just as the beginning of the birth at the level of the body consists in going forth from the afterbirth and existing in this way of life, so also the real birth of our true person does not consist only in not being held back by purity, but rather by going forth from limpidity and remaining in the awareness of the life of that world to come”, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 124. John uses also metaphors from *Physiologus*, see J. Scully, *Redemption for the Serpent: The Reception History of Serpent Material from the Physiologus in the Greek, Latin, and Syriac Traditions*, ZACH 22/3 (2018) p. 422-455.

²⁵ The hypothesis he received “great deal of his formative experiences in Alexandria” (Acosta, *John of Apamea*, p. 16) as stated by Lavenant (Jean, *Dialogues*, Sch 311, p. 21), is not warranted by any textual data.

²⁶ So far, a critical edition of this important text (the most attested among the Solitary’s works in manuscript tradition) has not yet been produced by scholarship. It has been translated into English (S.P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo 1987, p. 77-100 [based on his provisional edition, S.P. Brock, *The Teaching of the Syrian Fathers on Prayer*, Glane – Losser 1988, p. 30-47]) and Italian (Abramo di Kashkar – Giovanni il Solitario, *Nell’umiltà e nella mitezza, Regole monastiche*, tr. S. Chialà, *Lettera a Esichio*, tr. M. Nin, monaco di Montserrat, Testi dei padri della chiesa 45, Magnano 2000, p. 23-40 [based on BL Add 17166, ff. 39v-47v]).

²⁷ That is, of the Christological thinking that can be ascertained from the works already edited in de Halleux’s period.

²⁸ Cf A. de Halleux, *La Christologie*. In another article (A. de Halleux, *Le milieu historique de Jean le Solitaire: une hypothèse*, in: *III Symposium Syriacum 1980: les contacts du monde syriaque avec les autres cultures*, ed. R. Lavenant, OCA 221, Roma 1983, p. 299-305), the same author puts John within the miaphysite stream that influenced the so-called “School of the Persians” of Edessa (430-450 AD), “quella stessa fucina intellettuale da cui sarebbe poi emersa la figura del vescovo Rabbula” (Berti, *Il telaio*, p. 135). Cf. also S. Chialà, *Metodo teologico e divisioni tra i cristiani secondo Giovanni il Solitario*, in: *Symposium Syriacum XII*, ed. E. Vergani – S. Chialà, OCA 311, Roma 2022, p. 153-161.

The study of the mentions of John in authorial works stirred a wide debate on his identity in past decades. While Sven Dederling – the first editor of a small portion of the Johannine *corpus*²⁹ – did not hesitate to identify the Solitary with Palladius’ John of Lykopolis, other scholars proposed different solutions to the problem. According to Irénée Hausherr, the compositions of the *corpus* should be ascribed to three different authors: the ‘orthodox’ John (*Dialogues* and some of the *Letters*); the ‘heretic’ John described by Philoxenos and Theodore bar Koni; and another ‘heretic’ John, condemned by Timotheos’ Synod³⁰. On the contrary, Werner Strothmann ascribed the entire *corpus* to *one* author, who influenced Philoxenos and Stephen bar Sudaili³¹. Recently, Nestor Kavvadas and especially Berti³² proposed an alternative solution: the works of the *corpus* should be ascribed to *two* different authors, John of Apamea, a 5th-century monk and writer, and another “John”, an Origenist monk from the late 5th to early 6th centuries³³.

As said, the debate on the identity of John of Apamea/the Solitary and the authorship of the *corpus* ascribed to him still suffers from a lack of critical editions. Strothmann’s overview is, in some respects, outdated and needs to be revised³⁴. At the same time, a good overview of the manuscript tradition and a careful literary analysis of *all* the works ascribed to John should complement the historical analysis, usually brought about based on the evidence gathered from other authorial works (such as Philoxenos, Theodor bar Konai, etc.). For the sake of our ar-

²⁹ That is, the four *Dialogues* with Eutropios and Eusebios.

³⁰ Cf I. Hausherr, *Un grand auteur spirituel retrouvé: Jean d’Apamée*, OCP 14 (1948) p. 3-42. Hausherr further refined his hypothesis on the identity of John the Solitary in the preface of his translation of Dederling’s critical edition of the *De anima*.

³¹ On Stephen, cf. L. van Rompay, *Stephanos bar Šudayli*, GEDSH 384-385.

³² Cf. J. Hazzaya, *On Providence: Text, Translation and Introduction*, ed. N. Kavvadas, Leiden 2016, p. 2-3; Berti, *Il telaio*.

³³ Cf. Berti, *Il telaio*, p. 136: “il Giovanni di Apamea di Teodoro non è la semplice proiezione o espansione narrativa del personaggio conosciuto da Filosseno, ma (...) una sintesi eresiologica che sovrappone il maestro gnostico di Stefan Bar Sudaili all’autore del *corpus* di Giovanni il Solitario”. Cf also Acosta, *John of Apamea*, p. 23-25.

³⁴ For example, two manuscripts now available at HMML website that are not listed by Strothmann: Enḥil, Mār Qurīaqōs 4 [CFFM 00076] (<https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/137247>, accessed: 03.09.2025), a large monastic florilegium, AD 1207-1208 (cf. A. Pirtea, *Die geistige Sinne in der ostsyririschen christlichen Mystik. Wahrnehmung und Gotteserkenntnis in der griechischen und syro-orientalischen asketischen Literatur der Spätantike*, Freie Universität, Berlin 2020, p. 262-263, Ph.D.); Mardin, CFFM 422 (<https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/502711>, accessed: 03.09.2025), a large monastic florilegium dated to 15th cent.

these affections: desire and yearning (...). If at the level of the soul one loves a certain person, his love is not from knowledge but from a cause which urges him. And if his love is true, and he loves with knowledge whose whom he desires, then he will not hate those who do him evil (...). The one whose knowledge is at the level of the soul is only able to love that one who accepts his teaching, but this love is not genuine because love which is genuine also love those who do not accept one’s teaching, just as God loves those who do not accept His will. Now a person at the level of the spirit has completely attained the love of God and of others, not by chance or for a visible reason, but by knowledge (...). True love is acquired from limpidity (ⲉⲩⲟⲩⲏⲕ) and above it, and all which is inferior to it has not yet advanced to its heights. That gift of perfect love, however, will be given to all human nature in the next world. Indeed, every gift which one receives from beyond limpidity of soul is from the gifts after the resurrection. For when there is no one who hates his neighbor after the resurrection, is it not evident that true love is a gift of God?⁴⁴

In the same vein and in the same discourse, the Solitary states:

For the love of God is not acquired by labor of the body but by insight into its mysteries (mysteries of that love) (...). For this is perfect love: to love all persons like God. If at the level of the soul one loves a certain person, his love is not from knowledge but from a cause which urges him. And if his love is true, and he loves with knowledge those whom he desires, then he will not hate those who do him evil (...). The one whose knowledge is at the level of the soul is only able to love that one who accepts his teaching, but this love is not genuine because love which is genuine love also loves those who do not accept one’s teaching, just as God also loves those who do not accept His will⁴⁵.

That love is the cornerstone, and the goal of the ascetic endeavor is stated again on the basis of the well-known commandment of love (Deut 6:5). The Solitary explains:

If [men] do not keep to that initial principle in order to know Him, that He is the one God, nor will they be able to love Him. And if they do not remain in the love of Him, they also will not be kept from murder and fornication. But if they apply themselves to know His Lordship and to

⁴⁴ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 18-20, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 42-46.

⁴⁵ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 19-20, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 44.

love Him with all their heart, surely they will also obey the rest of the commandments (...). The blessed Gospel does not only forbid evil deeds, it also prohibits the thoughts which become a cause of the deeds: “Love your enemies and do well to those who hate you; and pray for those who persecute you”⁴⁶.

The author combines Deut 6:4-5 and a discussion on the relationships between Law (ܠܗܘܪܐ) and Gospel (ܘܥܘܢܐܢܐ). Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:27 are evoked as prooftexts to show where the main divide between OT and NT can be found – i.e., in two different ways of teaching the love of God, since the OT commandments forbid “evil deeds” but the Gospel “also prohibits the thoughts which become a cause of the deeds”⁴⁷. Similarly, an interesting passage in the letter to Theodulos⁴⁸ recognizes two kinds of love: one agrees with the law of the OT and the other with the Gospel⁴⁹. The law teaches to have mercy on the weak, to love brothers and sisters, and to give alms since it is written “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:17-18). On the contrary, Jesus put forth a different understanding of love, namely, the love of one’s neighbor “more than your life”⁵⁰. According to John, such a love flows from a higher love, God’s love, demonstrated by God’s love for enemies, not just for friends⁵¹. The love preached and realized by the Lord was only previously foreshadowed in the idea of “future hope” as the ultimate goal of God’s “economy” (ܠܗܘܪܐܘܢܐ)⁵². Therefore, a progression can be observed between the OT and the NT⁵³. Moreover, the love revealed by Jesus in the Gospel is congruent with the ideal of ascetic life, especially

⁴⁶ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 5, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ For his exegesis, see the summary in S. Chialà, *La perla dai molti riflessi. La lettura della scrittura nei padri siriaci*, Bose 2014, p. 81-84.

⁴⁸ Johannes Solitarius, *Ep.* I, pp. 3*-39*. The letter is no. 1.1.3 according to Strommann’s list.

⁴⁹ Such an opposition should not be overstated since the relationship between the law and faith in Christ can be understood as a series of interconnected pathways: Johannes Solitarius, *Ep.* II, p. 42*-44*.

⁵⁰ Johannes Solitarius, *Ep.* I, p. 4*: ܠܗܘܪܐ ܘܥܘܢܐܢܐ.

⁵¹ Johannes Solitarius, *Ep.* I, p. 5*.

⁵² Johannes Solitarius, *Ep.* I, p. 21*. For God’s economy in the Old Testament, see also Johannes Solitarius, *Tractati ad Thomasios* IV, p. 45-46.

⁵³ Johannes Solitarius, *Ep.* II, p. 69*. See P. Bettiolo, *Testimoni dell’eschaton: monaci siro-orientali in un’età di torbidi*, Bologna 2019, p. 215-248. In the new covenant of Christ there is no strict obedience to the law, but the freedom of Christ (ܠܗܘܪܐܘܢܐ ܠܗܘܪܐܘܢܐ).

with the renunciation (ܠܗܘܡܝܘܬܐ)⁵⁴, and the overtaking of the “service of justice” (ܠܗܘܠܠܗ ܠܗܘܠܘܬܐ), that is marriage⁵⁵. According to his general understanding of spiritual life, the Solitary distinguishes between exterior and *interior* love, being the latter a particular feature of the commandment of the Gospel: “I command you to do with the exterior members, but you must even have love in your inner senses for your enemies, as God also loves those who hate Him”⁵⁶.

The Solitary is one of the first Syriac authors to use the noun ܠܗܘܡܝܘܬܐ (“renunciation” or “emptying”) as a general ‘definition’ of ascetic life⁵⁷. According to him, the act of ܠܗܘܡܝܘܬܐ marks the beginning of asceticism, since renunciation of the *love* of money and the *love* of praise leads to the “purity” (ܠܗܘܠܠܗ). In other words, the *inner man* begins with the ܠܗܘܡܝܘܬܐ. The perfect love stems from the knowledge of Christ’s mystery:

[a]fter they understood what knowledge they had received in Christ’s mystery, not only were they elevated beyond anger but also they were perfected in love for the wicked. The zeal then of the person at the level of the spirit, if it is proper to speak of zeal, is nothing other than his being fervent in divine zeal and in a total love for others, to bring those who err to the knowledge of the truth as our Lord and his disciples did⁵⁸.

The Solitary compares the growth towards the perfect love to the growth of the human body and the different phases of human life: infancy is the stage of bodily love, characterized by *fear*; the second stage is that of ܠܗܘܠܠܗ, “purity” and love for others. The third stage (“the true love”) is “not found in anyone who has not yet arrived at limpidity [ܠܗܘܠܘܬܐ] of the soul; nor is found that joy which arises in the spirit, unknown to the body, being hidden in the mind’s capacity”. The condition named “limpidity” is described by the Solitary as follows:

⁵⁴ S.P. Brock, *Radical Renunciation: The Ideal of msarrqûâtâ*, in: *To Train His Soul in Books: Syriac Asceticism in Early Christianity*, ed. R.A. Darling – M.J. Blanchard, Washington 2011, p. 122-133, here p. 127-129. Even if the Solitary may be considered the first author to explore the possibilities of the semantic field of the root ܘܡܝܘܬܐ, the term is already well attested in the *Liber Graduum*, as Brock points out.

⁵⁵ For this term see Bettiolo, *Testimoni dell’eschaton*, p. 235.

⁵⁶ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 6, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Cf. Brock, *Radical Renunciation*.

⁵⁸ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 22, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 50.

It is not by the hearing of names that one knows their [of limpidity] mysteries, not only of a spiritual mystery but also the names of another form of wisdom. Indeed, everyone hears the names of medicinal plants but which ones are to have a hot quality and which a cold one, and what is the sense of the names of these plants, no one knows except the one who has studied the science of medicine (...). So also concerning the wisdom of Christ, we only know the term itself⁵⁹.

Love arises in a soul purified by the *passions*:

by stilling words against others the inner passion withers. And after the extermination of this passion, the passion of love comes in. But there is no way that their soul may be stirred up by love for others as long as the passion of malice arises in it⁶⁰.

An echo of the above statements may be found in another passage of the second letter edited by Rignell, quoted by Babai in his commentary on Evagrius' *Kephalaia gnostica*: "after his exodus from the passions, one is made worthy of entering in the region of life, which is God's love, where he receives, through revelation, the vision of His mysteries. And when he reaches the full peace of charity, his soul rejoices because his hidden fights cease"⁶¹. The foundation of the Solitary's view on the *status* of the purified soul may be tracked back to the Greek thought on the soul itself, as stated in another passage: "they [the Greeks] say it [the soul] is stirred up by three passions: by discernment, love and anger. But they think too much little of it, for even animals are stirred up by these three passions"⁶².

3. The Letter *On Substance of Love*

The theme of love is at the core of the unedited letter *On Substance of Love*, here edited for the first time. A full commentary on the letter and a thorough discussion of its place in the Johannine corpus are beyond the scope of our paper. We will limit ourselves to addressing

⁵⁹ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* III, p. 55, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 114.

⁶⁰ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 26, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 58.

⁶¹ Babai Magnus, *Commentarius in Centurias Evagrii* II 7, p. 135.

⁶² Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* I, p. 26, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 58.

some topics and situating the letter within the context of John’s conceptualization of love sketched above.

The vocabulary and the basic ideas of the letter seem to fit with the general framework of the works of the Johannine *corpus* listed above. Since the syntax is sometimes obscure and convoluted, there is a small possibility that the letter is partly corrupted or is, indeed, an epitome of a longer text of the same author. In any case, under the flow of words and images, so to speak, a loose logical development can be identified.

The letter is addressed to some unnamed ascetics living in a “monastery” (ܟܠܝܬܐ)⁶³, rather than an individual⁶⁴, and is framed by an articulated beginning (§ 1) and conclusion (§ 6-7) where the personal relationship between John and his addressees come to the foreground. The language is somewhat formulaic and there is no reference to the occasion that prompted John’s letter. Unlike other works of the Solitary’s *corpus*, this letter does not answer a previous question made by fellow monks or friends.

The addressees are not called “monks” (ܟܠܝܬܐ), but rather “friends” (ܕܘܢܝܐ)⁶⁵, “co-laborer” (ܚܘܒܪܐ), “imitators” (ܚܘܒܪܐ), “fathers” (ܐܘܘܪܝܢܐ) and “brothers” (ܐܘܘܪܝܢܐ), in both cases with the suffix “mine”⁶⁶. These titles underscore the friendly relationship between John and his listeners and the mutual belonging to the monastic endeavor.

The subject of the epistle is identified as ܥܘܒܪܐ ܕܥܘܒܪܐ, which can be translated as “substance of love”, albeit it is unclear whether the title was written by John or by a later editor or copyist. The term ܥܘܒܪܐ has different meanings in various contexts, including the basic meaning of “standing”, as it appears in a passage from the treaty *On the Soul*⁶⁷, but also “support” and “consistency”. Except for the title, the term reappears

⁶³ The terminology of the letter should reflect a phase in the development of ascetic life in Syriac speaking communities not yet fully institutionalized. It is unclear, therefore, what is the exact referent of the noun ܟܠܝܬܐ. It may be that title reveals the 6th-century mindset of the (Western) copyist or editor of the text rather than that of the author. It is beyond the scope of the contribution to discuss the monastic terminology of the Solitary’s *corpus*.

⁶⁴ In the Johannine *corpus* most of the letters are addressed to individuals: Eutropios, Eusebios, Theodulos, Theodosios, etc.

⁶⁵ The noun “friend” (ܕܘܢܝܐ) comes from the root ܥܘܒܐ, “to love”.

⁶⁶ The term “(my) imitators” evokes at least two passages from Paul’s letters: 1 Cor 11:1 and Eph 5:3. These are also referenced in the letters of Ignace of Antioch, specifically Ign. *Phil.* VII 2 and *Eph.* I 1. The concept of the “imitator” is also present in Pseudo Macarius, for instance Mac. *Aeg. hom.* VII 17 of the *collectio prima* and *hom.* XII 5 of the *collection secunda*.

⁶⁷ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* IV, p. 81, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 166.

at the end of the letter, where John asserts that peace should serve as a guiding and assisting force “in the substance of their conduct”. In this instance, the concept of “substance” (ܡܫܚܐ) is associated with “conduct (of life)” (ܟܘܨܒܐ), a pivotal notion in monastic life, though distinct from the idea of “love”.

The initial greetings (§ 1) are structured in three steps, followed by the exclamation “great peace” (ܥܘܠܡܐ ܥܘܠܡܐ). Even if one cannot but notice a loose analogy with the incipit of some of the Pauline letters, the author is maybe following a general custom of epistolography.

It is especially worth noting that the main goal of ascetical life is here described as: the “quest for the love of God” (ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ) and the “living sign” (ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ) that should guide the race of the conduct. It is not entirely clear what the noun ܟܘܨܒܐ is referring to. It is quite probable that ܟܘܨܒܐ here refers to the cross since the last part of § 1 alludes to it:

- The Lord is described as the One who “gathers the wanderers to Himself” (ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ). This can be interpreted as an allusion to John 12:32, a passage where the cross is meant⁶⁸.
- At the same time, a reference to the reconciliation (ܟܘܨܒܐ) through the blood may allude to different NT passages where the cross may be meant⁶⁹.
- The expression ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ is found in liturgical text with the specification of the cross (e.g. ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ) and it is found on many gravestones from later periods⁷⁰.

In § 2 two images are especially interesting. The first is a reference to looking for “the one who has cast fire in our souls”. The idea of “casting fire” in the souls may be rooted in Luke 12:49⁷¹. At the same time, the fire as a metaphor for love or even God himself is famously mentioned in Song 8:6, a passage that is probably the matrix of the first sentences of the paragraph: “because strong as death is love [ܟܘܨܒܐ] and hard as Sheol is jealousy [ܟܘܨܒܐ]; its rays are bolts of fire and a flame

⁶⁸ The Peshitta reads here: ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ ܟܘܨܒܐ. Cf. the short notes of Lavenant in Jean le Solitaire, *Dialogues*, SCh 311, p. 45-46.

⁶⁹ Cf. Rom 5:10,11; 11:15; 2Cor 5:18,19.

⁷⁰ R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, v. 2, Oxford 1901, c. 2367; W. Hage, *Crosses with Epigraphs in Mediaeval Central and East Asian Christianity*, “The Harp” 8-9 (1995-1996) p. 376.

⁷¹ This Lukan passage is found in Pseudo-Macarius but is absent from both *Liber Graduum* and the works of Ignatius of Antioch.

[ܐܘܪܝܢܐ]!”⁷². In John’s understanding, the fire must be re-activated by Jesus himself so that the ascetic’s soul can reach the “height of knowledge”. This latter is an uncommon phrase, as far as we can see⁷³, which is referenced again in John’s corpus. In the dialogue *On the Soul* IV 7 it is written: “Turning away from the height of knowledge is the fall of the soul”⁷⁴. The soul should refrain from attachment to the world⁷⁵, and its stability “occurs when it stands through the authority of its freedom”⁷⁶. Christ is evoked in § 2 also as a guide of the ascetic’s knowledge, whose goal is the ܐܘܪܝܢܐ⁷⁷, one of the Syriac definitions for the “solitary life”. However, the Syriac term may be rooted in the Greek Christological notion of only-begottenness (Christ is defined ܐܘܪܝܢܐ in John 1:14.18 and 3:16.18), or instead refers to the Aristotelian idea of the “unmoved mover”. In this particular instance, ܐܘܪܝܢܐ refers to God-Christ, and the meaning of ‘transcendence’ was preferred. The second image is that of seeing:

- The ascetic sees “the vision of his glorious splendor”.
- The vision causes “wonder” (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ).
- And wonder causes “stillness” (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ), “silence” (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ), and keeping the sight upon the “promised hope” (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ).

This concise description of the contemplation or knowledge of God may be considered a trademark of some of the works of the Johannine

⁷² In this instance, a textual analogy between the Peshitta ܐܘܪܝܢܐ (possibly, an interpretation of the ambiguous שלהבתיה in Hebrew text [«flame» or «flame of Yah»]: cf. G. Barbiero, *Song of Songs. A Close Reading*, VT.S 144, Leiden – Boston 2011, p. 462-467) and the form used by John (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ, šafel form of ܐܘܪܝܢܐ) may confirm this hypothesis. Song 8:6 is also quoted Johannes Solitarius, *Epistula ad Hesychium* 45 (Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, p. 92). The noun ܐܘܪܝܢܐ is used several times in the Peshitta: e.g., Exod 3:2; Num 21:28; Deut 28:22; Judg 13:20; Ps 29:7.

⁷³ It is attested in Philoxenos of Mabbug (†523, at least a generation after John), and in Babai the Great (†628).

⁷⁴ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* IV, p. 90, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 190 (modified).

⁷⁵ A few lines later, John uses the expression “non-inclination”, ܐܘܪܝܢܐ, a phrase frequently used in Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose authority in Edessa during the 5th century was strong albeit contested, in particular by Rabbula and his miaphysite party, cfr. N. Kavvadas, *Translation as Taking Stances. The Emergence of Syriac Theodoranism in 5th Century Edessa*, ZCh 19/1 (2015) p. 89-103.

⁷⁶ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* IV, p. 90, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 190. The term “freedom” is ܐܘܪܝܢܐ, a pivotal concept in early Syriac asceticism, particularly associated with Aphrahat *Liber graduum*, see Bettolo, *Testimoni dell’eschaton*, p. 215-248.

⁷⁷ This term is used also in the Syriac translation of many Evagrius’ works, such *Kephalaia gnostica*.

corpus, which influenced later authors in a clear way⁷⁸. It may be compared with John's description of "limpidity" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ) in the *Dialogues*⁷⁹. Limpidity may be described as an intermediate stage between "purity" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ) and the knowledge of the New Life, an inner state where the New Person begins to share in the mystery of God. As such, ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ is characterized by knowledge without passions:

Limpidity is an intermediary phase that our inner person experiences when being between the well-pleasing conduct in this life that we leave and that true life of the mind that we enter when the mind understands the spiritual world⁸⁰.

The vision of Christ's glory guides the ascetic to a state of "wonder" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ) at Christ's glory and magnificence, thereby enabling the monk's "thinking" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ) to remain in a state of stillness. It is essential to maintain stillness through silence and to distance oneself from any hideous "passions" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ) that may be perceived as disturbing. The focus of the "thinking" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ) must remain on the "promised hope" (ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ)⁸¹.

The first section of the letter presents many complex images, some of which are challenging to comprehend and are intertwined densely. At § 3 John establishes his argument by invoking the "marvel [ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ] of the Almighty"⁸². The starting point of John is something astonishing, which affects him so much so that the shape of Christ can shine in the beauty of the monk's victories.

In § 3, the soul is described as winged, which can be elevated to a state of spiritual knowledge through the "arms of love". The metaphor suggests that the soul can soar to a height that is accessible only through that divine love that unites the soul with the Creator. The

⁷⁸ Cf. B. Bitton-Ashkelony, "More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue": John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity, *J ECS* 20 (2012) p. 303-331 = B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer and the Ship of Stirrings: The Praying Self in Late Antique East Syrian Christianity*, Leuven 2019, p. 53-78.

⁷⁹ Cf. A. Corbu, *Šapyuta. An Essential Term to the Syro-Oriental Spirituality. Significations and Usage*, "Le Muséon" 135 (2022) p. 111-142. Cf. also Nin, *La sintesi monastica*, p. 104-105.

⁸⁰ Johannes Solitarius, *De anima* III, p. 60, tr. Hansbury, *On the Soul*, p. 124.

⁸¹ This expression is present in another letter of John, see Johannes Solitarius, *Ep. I*, p. 34*.

⁸² In another letter ascribed to John, it is written that it would be marvelous to comprehend Christ, Johannes Solitarius, *Epistulae quinque* I 3: ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ, "Car ce serait Merveille s'il était possible de [Le] comprendre". The term ܠܝܡܦܝܕܝܬܐ is used in Isa 9:6 as title for the newborn in the prophecy; in the NT it is used to indicate the state of the people during the miracles, such in Mk 5:42 and Acts 5:10.

image of being lifted up upon “God’s wings” is not entirely uncommon in Biblical texts (e.g., Isa 40:31)⁸³. Ephrem also makes use of this image in reference to the grace of the Lord and even the soul⁸⁴. Another quite close parallel that comes to mind is the Platonic portrayal of the winged soul in *Phaedrus*: “fully winged, it mounts upward and governs the whole world”⁸⁵. The notion of the winged soul governing the world – “with those feathers that dominate [ܐܘܪܝܢܐ] every place” – may refer to the same source too. Plato was known in Syriac culture, yet he did not occupy the same position of primacy among philosophers as he did among Greek readers. It is debated if his works were translated into Syriac⁸⁶, and it is somewhat challenging to ascertain whether John is directly quoting Plato’s *Phaedrus* or other sources. Other common images of Plato’s works are used by John: the helmsman, who is also found in *Phaedrus*⁸⁷, or the soul imprisoned in the body⁸⁸. These images appear quite ubiquitous, however, and it would be unjust to assert that John had direct knowledge of Plato’s work. In any case, the image of the winged soul is noteworthy. It can be stated with some certainty that the Platonic imagery has also made its way into Syriac native literature by the 5th century. This provides valuable examples for thinkers such as John, who employ it to explain the ascent of the soul and the height of God’s knowledge effectively. In addition to the imagery used by Plato, the paragraph presents the ascent to God as a means of meeting other ascetics: “We reach your love and see the sight of you in Him, who is the seer of our souls”. Christ is the connection between ascetics because He sees inside the human being, as John states in another text: “Ils se voient eux-mêmes en lui. C’est en lui qu’ils sont

⁸³ Isa 40:31: “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;/they shall mount up with wings like eagles;/they shall run and not be weary;/they shall walk and not faint”.

⁸⁴ Ephraem, *Hymni de Paradiso* I 14 and IX 19.

⁸⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus* 246c.

⁸⁶ See in general Y. Arzhanov, *Plato in Syriac Literature*, “Le Muséon” 132/1-2 (2019) p. 1-36; S.P. Brock, *Charioteer and Helmsman: Some Distant Echoes of Plato’s Phaedrus in Syriac Literature*, in: *Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism: Studies in Honor of Alexander Golitzin*, ed. A. Orlov, Leiden 2020, p. 358-375. A different opinion is that of Harb (*Doctrine*, p. 229) according to whom the Solitary’s doctrine is still unaffected by neo-Platonism, neither by Evagrius’ doctrine.

⁸⁷ Brock, *Charioteer and Helmsman*, p. 360-361, he thinks the images come to John through *Macarian Homilies*.

⁸⁸ Johannes Solitarius, *Tractati ad Thomasios* I, p. 10 and *Tractati ad Thomasios* IX, p. 120.

en communion les uns avec les autres, qu'ils se perçoivent et se connaissent les uns les autres"⁸⁹.

To achieve this kind of link between the ascetics, John introduces in § 4 the concept of “inner love” (ܠܘܒܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ), which is perfected by the crown of Christ’s fullness. The crown is a multifaceted image that may be associated with either the kingship or the martyrdom. Christ is defined as the crowner (ܡܠܝܚܐ), yet the crown is constructed with His beauty. The dual role of Christ, in conjunction with the notion of perfection through His love, is already evident in another text of John⁹⁰. He alludes to the temple imagery of sacrifice and martyrdom not only by mentioning the crown but also referencing the garments and the stole (§ 5). Edward Malone stated that during the period between the third and fifth centuries, the martyr’s figure was increasingly supplanted by that of the monk⁹¹. This theological shift seems to affect the crown-and-garments imagery used by John⁹². Indeed, ascetics should offer themselves as a living sacrifice. Additionally, the crown is presented as a reward for victories – a possible allusion to Paul’s reference to the Christian as an athlete that has been utilized by Greek and Latin authors prior to John to elucidate the transition from martyrs to monks⁹³. In the letter, the victories are summarized in the “love of the sons of our flesh” (ܠܘܒܐ ܕܒܢܝ ܒܫܪܐ). As John elucidates in § 5, the “love of the Almighty is composed of mutual love”. The primary sources of inspiration are the commandments of Jesus regarding mutual love, as well as the intratrinitarian love, which ultimately represents the love of the singular God but must be expressed solely in a relation of three persons.

In contrast to the more extensive texts, the technical vocabulary does not appear to be precise. For example, the terminology used to describe wonder is somewhat vague, with both ܠܘܒܐ (“wonder” § 2) and ܠܘܒܐ (“marvel” § 3), being used. These terms have been translated differently,

⁸⁹ Johannes Solitarius, *Tractati ad Thomasios* IX, p. 100.

⁹⁰ Johannes Solitarius, *Tractati ad Thomasios* VII, p. 87-88.

⁹¹ E.A. Malone, *Monk and Martyr. The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr*, Washington 1950.

⁹² The idea could come, as Brock proposed earlier for Plato’s images, from *Maccarian Homilies*, which have important images of the crown between martyrs and monks, see Malone, *Monk and Martyr*, p. 55. The image of the crown and the phrase “be crowned” are also employed in a number of Evagrius’ writings.

⁹³ Malone, *Monk and Martyr*, p. 64-65. In *Epistula ad Hesychium* John states: “Ponder on the sufferings of the martyrs so that you may become aware of how great is the love for God” (Johannes Solitarius, *Epistula ad Hesychium* 38, tr. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, p. 90).

but they could be considered interchangeable⁹⁴. An additional example can be found in the concept of stillness and silence. In the opinion of Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, John is to be commended for his use of the terms “stillness” (ܥܠܘܬܐ) or “silence” (ܟܘܠܘܬܐ)⁹⁵. Nevertheless, in our text, they appear in close proximity in § 2, and it is unclear how they differ. A similar observation can be made about the two words for “glory”, ܩܘܪܘܬܐ and ܩܘܪܘܬܐܘܬܐ, which appear to be essentially synonymous in this context⁹⁶. This general discrepancy may be attributed to the limited context of the brief letter, which does not address a specific topic, such as prayer or passions, but rather offers general guidance on the monastic life.

4. Conclusion

The letter here edited should be ascribed to the same author of the Dialogues with Thomasios and with Eutropios and Eusebios. In fact, it fits with some of the most prominent ideas of these works⁹⁷. The possibility that it represents an abridgment of a longer text cannot be totally ruled out, even if it seems not plausible. Unfortunately, nothing certain can be said about the identity of the addresses and the circumstances that prompted the author to write his letter.

In this short text, the author describes the prominence of love in ascetic life following a somewhat coherent path, which may be discerned by the flow of the images and metaphors. Such a path could be described as follows.

Love is described as a *fire* that is cast in human souls by God (§ 2), whose sight the ascetic longs for since the contemplation of God’s unicity (ܩܘܪܘܬܐܘܬܐ) leads the soul to wonder and stillness, in the freedom “from

⁹⁴ For the specificity of this type of vocabulary in John, see A. Pirtea, *Divine Incomprehensibility and Human Wonder: Tehrā/Temhā in Isaac of Nineveh and Early Syriac Ascetical Literature*, in: *Der Mensch als Bild des unergründlichen Gottes: Von der Theologie zur Anthropologie und zurück*, ed. G. Huian – B. Wyss – R. Hirsch-Luipold, Berlin 2023, p. 270-272.

⁹⁵ Bitton-Ashkelony, *The Ladder of Prayer*, p. 70. Besides the texts evoked by Bitton-Ashkelony, the relation between word, silence, and writing is touched at Johannes Solitarius, *Epistula ad Hesychium* 1 (tr. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, p. 81-82).

⁹⁶ The same couple appears in another text attributed to John, Johannes Solitarius, *Homilia de pauperibus spiritu* 33.

⁹⁷ It is not yet possible to draft an inner chronological development of John’s works due to the lack of critical editions.

the movement of the hideous things” (§ 2). Wonder is, in fact, the impulse of love (§ 3), which leads towards knowledge of God and perfection. Through love, the shape of God Himself is drawn in the human soul and, at the same time, through love’s arms, the soul itself can fly everywhere to reach “the Creator of all” (§ 3). This act of reaching God’s height allows the ascetic to maintain a connection with other ascetics⁹⁸.

The fullness of inner love (كسوة) is described as a crown and a garment, being both possible allusions to martyrdom or to the *priestly* status of the ascetic who has brought himself to such a stage of perfection (§ 4). Even if the syntax and the ideas of § 4 are somewhat convoluted, it is possible that the author is here describing the eschatological situation of the ascetic crowned and clothed with full love – a situation that can be reached only by *grace*. The mention of the ascetic being adorned by Christ “as if He is the One who is weaved into our labor instead of his victories, being Himself our Redeemer” seems to underscore such an idea: the “victories” of the ascetic are rooted in Christ’s victory, since “the beauty of his [the ascetic] victories is adorned with the beauty of Christ” (§ 4). In the final day, “God (...) will crown us with His crown of inner love” – a clear reference to the idea (stated in other Solitary’s works) that the perfection of inner love cannot be attained in the earthly life. Finally, the perfection and sum of such a gift is the love “of the sons of our flesh” (§ 5), a situation described as “the temple where God dwells” – another reference to priesthood and sacrifice.

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⁹⁸ God’s love is proposed as a strong bond also in Johannes Solitarius, *Epistula ad Hesychium* 2: “Just as his love is not divided up between them, so they are not separated from one another” (tr. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, p. 82).

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Appendix: Edition of the Letter *On the Substance of Love*

The letter *On the Substance of Love* is preserved only in one manuscript: London, British Library, Add. 17169⁹⁹. The manuscript is an anthology of works of John the Solitary. Its date is still very late, according to the colophon 581 AD (A. Gr. 892), and it is the oldest dated manuscript that bears John’s works. Various notes and colophons in the manuscript attest its various owners until its arrival at Deir al-Suryan monastery, from where it was acquired by the British Museum (today British Library) in 1847 by August Pacho (commissioned by William Cureton)¹⁰⁰. According to Wright, the manuscript is written in a good *estrangelo*

⁹⁹ Wright, *Catalogue*, v. 2, p. 450-454. For the published items of this manuscript, see Brock, *An inventory*, p. 163. Cf. also W.H.P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts*, Monumenta Palaeographica Vetera, Boston 1946, p. 31, 82. For the content of the manuscript cf. also Strothmann, *Sechs Gespräche*, v. I, p. 6-21.

¹⁰⁰ Brock, *An Inventory*, p. 3.

the Almighty is composed of mutual love, as if it were the temple where God dwells. God [Himself] will then crown us with His crown of inner love on the day of the glory of the revelation, so that, full of His various beauties, it may shine with the stole of the glory [and] may knock at the place of the chamber of the light of divinity, so that we may dwell in the place of gatherings where the spirituals will rejoice in his grace.

6. We ask your love for the One who is the sustainer of our life, that you may intercede tirelessly for us with your prayers, just as we receive from them the strength of our conduct, so that they may stand up for us as a shield of many liberations at the proper moment, so that, without being wounded, we may save our life. And we will be made worthy [of] that trust which every man needs through grace in the last [day] so that the sins will be forgiven through the mercy we receive from the Judge of all, that His justice will not mock us with reproach.

7. And may the peace of Our Lord, which is better than every creature, be the guide and help for your life in every substance of your conduct.

The letter of the Solitary is finished.

