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The Stages of Spiritual Life according to Joseph Hazzaya

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Abstract

In this paper the author seeks to identify the fundamental elements of the spiritual life structure according to the writings of Joseph Hazzaya. Fundamentally, this structure corresponds to the three stages of the spiritual life: bodily, of the soul and spiritual. Each of these stages is analyzed by the author in the light of Hazzaya’s works. The bodily stage begins in the coenobium and ends with the purity. The purity is fulfilled in the state of limpidity, both of them belonging to the stage of the soul. This is the usual spiritual disposition of the progressed monks and, from here, they are lifted by the grace in the spiritual stage. All these changings are described with a multitude of details which confer to Joseph’s theology a great interest and precision.

Keywords

Joseph Hazzaya, Syriac mysticism, asceticism, monasticism, spiritual ascent, stages of the spiritual life

Introduction

A few centuries after his repose, in the Syro-Oriental Church Abba Joseph Hazzaya was considered, together with Saint Isaac the Syrian, “pillar of the Church and of monasticism”¹.

¹ John BAR KALDUN, “Life of Rabban Joseph Busnaya”, in *Histoire du moine Rabban*

Only four years after the printing of his first writings in the Romanian language, Abba Joseph Hazzaya enjoys a well-deserved appreciation from the university theological environment and a great interest among monks. Certainly, his success is due not only to the spiritual teachings he expounds, but also to the systematic, easy-to-follow way in which they are presented. The detailed way in which he describes the vision of the uncreated light makes him – *avant la lettre* – a kind of Gregory Palamas of Syria.

I. The Life and Writings of Joseph Hazzaya

One of the few sources of information about Abba Joseph Hazzaya comes from the *Book of Chastity (Liber castitatis)*, a collection of 140 short ascetic biographies of the most important monastic figures in the history of the Assyrian Church, beginning with Mar Augin (fourth century) and continuing until the middle of the ninth century, compiled by Metropolitan Ishodenah of Basra in the ninth century². In chapter 125 of the aforementioned collection, Ishodenah gives us the most consistent biographical information preserved about “Saint Abba Joseph Hazzaya”. In short, he was born into a Persian Zoroastrian family in the city of Nimrud about 710. At the age of seven he was taken captive by Caliph Omar II and sold as a slave to an Arab from Sinjar, who sold him to a Christian from Qardu. At the latter, Joseph became familiar with the Christian life and asked to be baptized. After becoming a Christian, his master released him, and Joseph entered the monastery of Abba Sliba as a novice brother. He lived for a time as a hermit in the Qardu mountains, and after a period as abbot of Mar Bassima Monastery he continued his hesychast life in Mount Zinai in Adiabene. He was elected abbot again, this time at Rabban Bektiso Monastery, where he ended his life³.

Youssef Bousnaya par son disciple Jean Bar-Kaldoun, transl. from Syriac by J.-B. Chabot (extract from *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*), Paris, 1900, p. 165.

² Sebastian BROCK, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, Baker Hill, Kottayam, 1997, p. 68.

³ Cf. ISHODENAH OF BASRA, *Book of Chastity 125 (Le Livre de la chasteté, composé par JÉSUSDENAH, évêque de Baçra, Rome, 1896, pp. 54-55)*.

A disciple of Rabban Joseph, Bishop Nestorius of Nuhadra⁴, wrote him a *Life* at length, unfortunately lost.

Other information about Abba Joseph Hazzaya we have from the *Nomocanon* (IX, 6) of Metropolitan Abdisho of Nisibis (†1318), which says that Joseph wrote no less than 1900 works, of which only ten were preserved in his time⁵. The number of Abba Joseph's writings, even if exaggerated, corresponds to the statement in the *Book of Chastity* that he "did not cease to write books"⁶. His best-known writing is the *Letter on the Three Stages of Monastic Life*, his work being completed by other epistles and prayers, a writing *On Providence*, and the recently edited *Gnostical Chapters*. Many of these writings have been critically edited and are already translated into various modern languages⁷.

⁴ More about this author see at Vittorio BERTI, "Grazia, visione e natura in Nestorio di Nuhadra, solitario e vescovo siro-orientale", *Annali di Scienze Religiose* 10 (2005), pp. 219-258.

⁵ Cf. J.W. CHILDERS, "Abdisho bar Brikha", in: Sebastian P. BROCK, Aaron M. BUTTS *et alii* (ed.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, (henceforth, *GEDSH*), p. 3; R. A. KITCHEN, "Yawsep Hazzaya", *GEDSH*, p. 437.

⁶ ISHODENAH OF BASRA, *Book of Chastity*, p. 125.

⁷ In English: Alfonso MINGANA, *Christian Documents flax Syriac, Arabic AND Garshuni*, edited and translated in *Woodbrooke Studies*, vol. VII, Cambridge, 1934, pp. 148-184 (English translation) and pp. 256-281 (Syriac text); JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Providence*, text, introduction and translation by Nestor Kavvadas, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2016; in French: JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes de la vie monastique*, Critical edition of the Syriac text, translation and introduction by P. Harb And F. Graffinin *PO* 45, Brepols, Turnhout/Belgique, 1992; JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur la vie monastique*, edited by Archimandrite Placide DESELLE, Monastere de Saint Antoine le Grand, Saint-Laurent-en-Royans, 2017; in German: Rabban JAUSEP HAZZAYA, *Briefs über Das Geistliche Leben und verwandte Schriften*, introduction and translation by Gabriel BUNGE, Paulinus-Verlag, Trier, 1982; 2nd Edition revised in the collection *Paradies Der Väter – Schriften Syrischer Mystiker*, edited by Schiarchimandrite Gabriel BUNGE, Grigory KESSEL and Gerd VATTER, Beuron Kunstverlag, Beuron, 2020; in Italian: GIUSEPPE HAZZAYA, *Le tappe della vita spirituale*, introductory study, translation and notes by Valerio LAZZERI, Edizioni Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, Magnano, 2011; GIUSEPPE HAZZAYA, *I Capitoli di conoscenza. Centurie I-V*, (ed.) Paolo Raffaele PUGLIESE, *Patrologia Orientalis* 255, Brepols, Turnhout/Belgique, 2023; in Russian: JOSEPH HAZZAYA, "Epistle on the Various Works of Grace", trans. by M. G. KALININ, notes by A. M. Preobrazhensky, in: *Herald of Orthodoxy* No. 22-23, Sergiev Posad, 2016, pp. 426-436; JOSEPHI PERSPICACIS (HAZZAYĀ), *Capita gnostica*, nunc primum reperta, edidit Maximus KALININ, Moscoviae-Monte Athone, 2018; in Romanian: Avva IOSIF HAZZAYA – Văzătorul de Dumnezeu, *Scrieri duhovnicești*

II. Joseph Hazzaya and the Syriac Spiritual Tradition

Abba Joseph Hazzaya is part of a monastic spiritual tradition very well defined within the Syro-Oriental Church⁸, framed in a wider chronological range, considered by Syriac scholars as the “golden age” of East-Syriac mystical literature. During this time, several spiritual authors wrote in an obvious theological unity and spiritual vision, unity that led to talk about a true Syro-Oriental spiritual school. These authors belong to an interval between the sixth and eighth centuries, among them being, in chronological order: Abraham of Kashkar (VIth century), Sahdona (first half of VIIth century), Dadišo Qatraya (second half of VIIth century), Isaac the Syrian, (second half of VIIth century), Simon Taybuteh (VII-VIII centuries), John Dalyatha (VII-VIII centuries), Joseph Hazzaya (VIII century). It is important to note that, in a well-defined period of time and space, there has been a special flowering of spiritual writings, without any parallel in the West-Syriac tradition. Although illustrated by the writings of numerous authors, this so-called spiritual school proves extremely coherent, having the specificity of “a homogeneous corpus, coming from a common environment”⁹.

This tradition has common elements, of great theological depth, which does not prevent each of these authors from having their own features, which particularize them, without making a discordant note with the unity of their common tradition. Joseph Hazzaya’s writings present us a synthesis between the ancient and rich Syriac heritage and elements taken, more or less confessedly, from Greek authors such as Evagrius of Pontus, Macarius the Egyptian, Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁰.

(Philocalica Syriaca 1), transl. hierom. Agapie Corbu, Ed. Sfântul Nectarie, Arad, 2018.

⁸ See in this regard Adrian PIRTEA’s excellent synthesis, “The Mysticism of the Church of the East”, in: Daniel KING (ed.), *The Syriac World*, Routledge, 2019, pp. 355-376.

⁹ Sabino CHIALÀ, “Les mystiques syro-orientaux: une école ou une époque?”, in: Alain DESREUMAUX (ed.), *Les mystiques syriaques (Études syriaques 8)*, Geuthner, Paris, 2011, pp. 65-66.

¹⁰ Robert BEULAY, *La Lumière sans forme. Introduction à l’étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*, Chevetogne, 1987, p. 94.

Thus, Abba Joseph Hazzaya is the first writer who makes a synthesis between the three types of contemplation found in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus and the tripartite vision of the spiritual life of John of Apamea¹¹.

III. The Theological Method of Rabban Joseph

Of all the East-Syriac mystical writers, Joseph Hazzaya is certainly the most systematic, without ever being scholastic. Its systematization does not express a rigid system, but is only the orderly exposition of spiritual teachings, carried out for didactic purposes. When we speak, therefore, of the systematic character of Abba Joseph's exposition, we must not interpret it in terms of textbooks, whose "attempt at systematization has easily become rigid and coercive, [...] transforming what, in principle, is nothing more than an analysis of a dynamic process of spiritual transformation into a theoretical and static system"¹². As abbot of a monastery, spiritual guide, and author of numerous writings, Abba Joseph was aware of the importance of the form in which spiritual teachings are imparted to his disciples so that they can assimilate them more easily.

Abba Joseph's preference for systematic exposition is best seen in his division of the monk's spiritual life. To the addressee of his *Letter on the Three Stages of the Monastic Life* he writes that he will not only list the stages, but will also describe the temptations, the visitations of the grace, and the contemplations proper to each stage¹³.

IV. The Stages of spiritual life - etymological and theological considerations

First of all, I must point out that the translation by "stage", which I use for the Syriac ܡܫܘܚܬܐ (*mšuhṭa*), is unsatisfactory, its small advantages being

¹¹ Cf. Karl PINGGÉRA, "Joseph Hazzaya", in: Oliver NICHOLSON (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 836.

¹² Hein BLOMMESTIJN, "Progrès-Progressants", in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 12, p. 2383.

¹³ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes de la vie monastique*, c. 5.

that, on the one hand, it is somewhat intelligible to today's reader, and on the other hand, it is the translation established in modern versions. The original Syriac term, however, is much more wider, having a multitude of meanings, such as "measure", "age", "position", "step", "proportion", "size", "poetic and musical metric", "song". The original verb, ܡܫܐܗ (*mšah*), has the following meanings: "to measure", "to anoint with myrrh", "to beat the rhythm (in music)", "to proportion".

These brief semantic observations paint a picture of what the so-called "stages" of spiritual life actually represent for Joseph Hazzaya. Rather, it is about a certain spiritual age, a position you have at a certain moment in the *continuum* of the spiritual life, a position defined by the dynamic relationship between virtues and passions, and by a certain rhythm of life.

From the same verbal radical, ܡܫܐܗ (*mšah*), comes the name "Messiah", "the anointed one" – in many modern languages becoming "Christ", in the line of his Greek translation. Herefrom we can understand that in the measure of his spiritual progress, the monk also participates in the spiritual anointing of the Holy Spirit, through which he becomes "Christ according to grace". Therefore, the stages of spiritual life should not be understood as closed compartments, into which we enter in order to leave definitively and completely the previous one.

In general, the division of spiritual life, as it appears in Hazzaya's writings, corresponds to the tripartite division found throughout the Greek and Syriac spiritual tradition. To this pattern, however, Abba Joseph adds intermediate stages, which make his division a detailed map of the entire ascent, from the state of compassion to that of deification. The three main stages are: bodily, of the soul and spiritual¹⁴. To each of these corresponds a certain conduct and a specific purification: the bodily purity is acquired by the somatic ascetic conduct; in the second stage, the soul is purified from the hidden passion and, finally, in the spiritual stage, the hermit is purified by divine revelations and contemplations¹⁵.

¹⁴ A detailed approach to Joseph's teaching on the spiritual life's stages at Thomas OLICKAL, *The Three Stages of Spiritual Realization according to Joseph Hazzaya* (Catholic Theological Studies of India 4), H.I.R.S. Publications, Changanassery, 2000, *passim*.

¹⁵ Cf. T. OLICKAL, *The Three Stages of Spiritual Realization...*, p. 87.

V. The Bodily Stage (ܡܫܘܚܬܐ ܕܦܘܓܪܢܘܬܐ - *mšuhṭa d-paḡranuṭa*)

The bodily stage, called ܡܫܘܚܬܐ ܕܦܘܓܪܢܘܬܐ (*mšuhṭa d-paḡranuṭa*), begins, for Joseph Hazzaya, only after entering the monastery and receiving the monastic clothing. Until this moment, each one remains a layman, not entering the bodily stage. In this respect, Abba Joseph differs from other Syro-Eastern mystical authors, who consider the life of the Christian in the world to be part of the bodily stage. For Abba Joseph, however, the world is an obstacle that prevents man from fixing his gaze on God:

“Just as, while the Jews were in Egypt, the arduous labor to which the Egyptians forced them would not set their eyes upon God, so those who are in the troubles of this world are not permitted to lift up their eyes, fix them upon God, and begin the bodily stage.”¹⁶

To this bodily stage corresponds the stage of *πρακτική* in Evagrius’ writings and that of purification in the writings of Dionysius. Its purpose is to fight the most rudimentary passions and attain the state of purity, ܕܐܟܘܬܐ (*dakyuta*), by fulfilling, in the monastery, the evangelical commandments and ascetic labors, “because the state of purity, in which the bodily stage reaches its goal, is reached by the fulfillment of the commandments in the monastery”¹⁷.

Asceticism in coenobium consists of obedience, fasting, vigil, prostrations, reading prayers and participation in church services. Their main purpose is for the monk to learn authentic obedience and humility. Only in this way will he be able to achieve not only the physical departure from the world, but also the spiritual one. In this respect, Abba Joseph warns: “you will find many people who have gone out of the world, but people freed from the habits of the world you will find one in a thousand”¹⁸. The bodily separation from the world is represented by the definitive

¹⁶ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes de la vie monastique*, c. 21.

¹⁷ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 20.

¹⁸ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 19.

departure to the monastery, and the spiritual depart is the inner one, of dispassion, through the spiritual struggle in the monastery. The coenobium is also called “desert” and is integrated into the Old Testament typology of the Jews’ departure from Egypt, the symbol of the devil¹⁹.

In the bodily stage, all the asceticism and knowledge that the monk can attain is related to the body²⁰. For this reason, knowledge at this stage has sometimes been misidentified with the second natural contemplation in the Evagrian division, which, according to Evagrian texts²¹, is reached only after the attainment of passionlessness and love²². The term *ܬܝܘܪܝܐ* (*theoryia*), “contemplation,” with which we have encountered and will meet many more times, entered Syriac late, under the influence of translations from Evagrius Ponticus, not before the sixth century²³, and occupies an important place in Abba Joseph’s theological thought.

Philanthropic deeds also belong to the bodily stage, such as “mercy to the poor and needy, mercy to the afflicted, sorrow for those in suffering and pain, welcoming strangers, washing the feet of the weary, visiting the sick, ministering to the suffering, and other similar virtues”²⁴. These charitable actions are not rejected by Abba Joseph, but, for him, the specificity of the monastic calling remains the hesychast one, linked by definition to stillness, carelessness and solitude. Therefore, such activities are only an expression of bodily living, without the prospect of acceding to the vision of God, the true goal of the monk.

The bodily stage reaches its fullness in the state of purity, *ܕܚܝܘܬܐ* (*dakyuta*), identified by Abba Joseph with man’s original nature before the fall. Now, the monk can have, during the night prayer, the contemplation of his own mind, which he sees in the color of sapphire and cloudless

¹⁹ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 20.

²⁰ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 135.

²¹ EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, *Praktikos*, Prologue 8, in: ÉVAGRE LE PONTIQUE, *Traité pratique ou Le Moine*, vol. I-II, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 170-171, Ed. Cerf, Paris, 1970-1971.

²² Confusion present also at Sameer MAROKI, *Les trois étapes de la vie spirituelle chez les Pères syriaques: Jean le Solitaire, Isaac de Ninive et Joseph Hazzaya. Source, doctrine, influence*, Harmattan, Paris, 2014, p. 235.

²³ Cf. S. BROCK, “Some Uses of the Term *THEORIA* flax the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh”, in: *Parole de l’Orient* 22 (1996), p. 407.

²⁴ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Prayer*, c. 6.

sky, and the mind becomes again the “place of God”²⁵. After attaining this purity, also called “the first peak”²⁶, the monk can retreat, with the consent of his spiritual father, to live in solitude.

The monk who lives as a hermit in a cell apart from the monastery has a very rigorous lifestyle established by Abba Joseph. The monk needs discernment now, more than ever, because he must lead himself, meetings with the spiritual guide being much rarer²⁷.

VI. The stage of the soul (ἡδύαυτα ἡδύαυτα – *mšuhṭa d-napšanuta*)

Life in the spiritual stage requires a lot of watchfulness on the part of the novice hermit, since the struggles specific to this period of the spiritual life are also thinner and harder. According to Joseph Hazzaya’s exposition, inspired in large part by the writings of Evagrius, among the most bitter wars that the monk will have to fight in the cell is that with the demons of akedia and laziness. These are followed by the demons of wandering of the mind, intoxication and lust, as well as that of anger and vain glory. Each of these struggles of the soul stage is described in detail by Joseph Hazzaya, followed by remedies and practical examples²⁸.

If the monk leads correctly his life in the cell, he will enter the spiritual stage, ἡδύαυτα ἡδύαυτα (*mšuhṭa d-napšanuta*), in which he focuses on cleansing the soul from all traces of filth, on the inner virtues and the conduct of the mind. The spiritual stage is also called the “promised land”, in which the hermit enters after the “crossing of the Jordan”, symbolized by the retreat into the desert²⁹.

Of particular importance is the state of limpidity, ἡδύαυτα (*šapyuta*),

²⁵ On this Contemplation wrote also Abba Evagrius: “A sign of dispassion is that the mind began to see its own light” (*Praktikos* 64).

²⁶ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 136.

²⁷ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 67-86.

²⁸ Cf. JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 88-98, 100 etc. See also Albert MICHELIN, “La doctrine spirituelle de Joseph Hazzaya”, in: *De la conversion*, Paris, 1997, pp. 205-215.

²⁹ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 56-57.

which the hermit attains through the visitations of the grace during the stage of the soul. The Syriac term is built on the radical ܠܗܝ – meaning “to become clear, limpid, transparent, serene”, “to be simple, sincere, innocent”, being a term specific to Syriac spirituality³⁰. Joseph Hazzaya systematized and synthesized the Syriac tradition, already rich at that time, regarding the state of limpidity, being the first to distinguish it clearly from the state of purity, from which previous mystical authors did not always distinguish it terminologically very well. If the state of purity represents man in the state before the fall, limpidity represents the fulfillment of the first creation, being the boundary between it and the new creation. This state is also called the “place of limpidity”, ܐܬܪܐ ܕ-ܫܦܝܘܬܐ (*atra d-šapyuta*)³¹, which is gradually reached, the hermit acquiring first partial limpidity and then complete limpidity³². In the substage of partial limpidity, the hermit experiences the contemplations specific to second natural knowledge, Judgment and Providence, a specific sign being the vision of his own mind as a crystalline light. When he attains complete limpidity, the monk experiences ceaseless tears of wonder, ܐܝܬܗܪܐ (*tehra*), and joy, graceful contemplations, his spiritual powers being overwhelmed and idle before the divine peace, which overwhelms every mind³³. Because of these contemplations, the place and state of limpidity clarity are above the natural state of purity attained at the end of the bodily stage. However, the hermit still performs the ascetic deeds of fasting, vigil, prayer, reading and meditation – ܠܗܝܘܬܐ (*herga*), “meditation”, the Greek equivalent of μελέτη – of the Divine Scriptures³⁴. In this stage he is imparted with visitations of the grace, during which the light of his mind unites with the holy light, ܢܗܪܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ (*nuhra qadiša*), this experience being the boundary line separating the natural state from the “place of perfection” or

³⁰ More on limpidity, in our “Šapyuta. An Essential Term to the Syriac Spirituality. Significations and Usage“, *Le Muséon* 135 (1-2) 2022, pp. 111-142.

³¹ Gabriel BUNGE, “Le «lieu de la limpidité». À propos d’un apophtegme énigmatique: Budge II, 494”, in: *Irenikon*, vol. LV, Monastère de Chevetogne (Belgique), 1982, pp. 10-11.

³² JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Prayer*, c. 13.

³³ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Prayer*, c. 8.

³⁴ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Contemplation*, c. 7.

deification by grace³⁵. Limpidity is like a seal and a seal, placed over the virtues of the hermit, and he acquires adoption, “is sealed with the seal of the Holy Spirit, is placed upon all the possessions of the Father, all his fear is dissipated, acquires the trust of the sons, and calls God ‘Father’”³⁶. This state is called by Joseph “the second peak”³⁷.

When the Holy Spirit leads the mind to the “place of limpidity”, it teaches the new man’s way of being. Therefore, while in this state of grace, the mind has no longer has an activity of its own, and the hermit must no longer occupy himself with readings and psalmodies, obligatory even for the spiritually advanced. “Since the mind, in this state of wonder, is no longer capable of acting by itself, it would be injurious if the hermit tried to compel himself to observe his usual rules”³⁸. At this moment, he needs only to keep his mind in the state of hesychia, in order to receive the luminous outpourings of grace. This is the famous situation in which Joseph advises the monk to enter “into the innermost cell, to close all doors,” where, if possible, “he may not even hear the song of birds”³⁹, in order to maintain his mind in full hesychia, without any material imprint of this world. It is only in this state that Joseph allows the canon to be set aside and any connection with the outside world to be avoided⁴⁰.

³⁵ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Contemplation*, c. 6. On deification in the Syriac tradition, see Norman RUSSELL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, Appendix 1: “Deification in the Syriac and Latin Traditions”, pp. 321-325; Serafim SEPPĂLĂ, “The Concept of Deification in Greek and Syriac”, in: *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 11 (3/2019), pp. 439-455.

³⁶ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Prayer*, c. 26.

³⁷ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 141.

³⁸ G. BUNGE, “Le «lieu de la limpidité»...”, p. 18.

³⁹ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Grace*, c. 5.

⁴⁰ We recall that Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite retired for more hesychia to the desert island Skyropoulla, “where not only has no nightingale ever been seen, but not even the swallow can make nest, not being place sufficiently nor for making the nest” (*cf.* Elia CITTERIO, *Nicodim Aghioritul. Personalitatea – opera – învățătura ascetică și mistică*, Romanian transl. by Maria Cornelia and diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, p. 68).

VII. The spiritual stage (ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ – *mšuhṭa d-ruhanuta*)

From the place of complete limpidity where he has arrived, the monk is lifted up by grace into the spiritual stage (ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ – *mšuhṭa d-ruhanuta*), symbolized by the “ascent into Zion”, to which corresponds the contemplation of the Holy Trinity (ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ – *teoriya da-tlitayuta qadišta*)⁴¹ and a shapeless state of mind, corresponding to the vision of the “light without form”⁴². The term ܪܘܗܢܘܬܐ (*ruhanuta*) is formed from the radical ܪܘܗ – “to breathe, to blow” – hence the noun ܪܘܗܐ (*ruha*), meaning “spirit, breath”. The monk cannot remain in this state definitively, as it is an interruption of ordinary life, characteristic of the spiritual stage. Such interruptions are due to the free and unforeseen working of God, the monk’s mind being in total passivity to the works of grace, as “it is the target to the arrows”⁴³. The light that the monk contemplates in the stage of perfection is called by Abba Joseph either “light of the Holy Trinity”⁴⁴, either “light of our Saviour”⁴⁵, or “light without form”⁴⁶, and the soul contemplates it as fire or sun.

Conclusions

Joseph Hazzaya presents the stages of the spiritual life in close interdependence with the stages of monastic life, an approach that corresponds to an anthropological and mystical tradition deeply rooted in Syro-Oriental monasticism, this vision combining John of Apamea’s theology of the tripartition of the spiritual life with the ascetic Evagrian

⁴¹ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Prayer*, c. 15.

⁴² JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *On Spiritual Prayer*, c. 17.

⁴³ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 144.

⁴⁴ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 98, 142; *On Stirrings*, c. 7; *Book of Questions*, c. 5; *The Shortest Path that brings us near to God*, c. 15; *On the Workings of the Grace*, c. 5, 13.

⁴⁵ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 82.

⁴⁶ JOSEPH HAZZAYA, *Lettre sur les trois étapes...*, c. 107; *On the Workings of the Grace*, c. 11.

synthesis. The importance of the spiritual ascent set out in his writings lies in the fact that it derives from a practical and personal experience⁴⁷, both of the author and of entire generations of monks and hermits.

⁴⁷ Cf. Benedict (Valentin) VESA, “Joseph Hazzaya and the Spiritual Itinerary“, in: *SUBBITO* 62, nr. 2 (2017), p. 115.