

Article

Revisiting the Institution of *Bnay* and *Bnoth Qyōmo* in the Syriac Tradition

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Abstract: A group of Syriac Christian believers existed during the fourth century called the *Bnay Qyōmo* (with their female counterparts known as the *Bnoth Qyōmo*): the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant. There has been considerable controversy about the nature of this archaic Syrian monastic movement or, as it is known to some scholars, the Syriac “Proto-Monastic Tradition”. The controversy has not only been about the name, but also the origin, habits, and ascetic way of life of the *Bnay Qyōmo*. The intention of the present article is not to elaborate on the various terminology used to describe the *Bnay Qyōmo* or the nature of their vows and expected duties as introduced by Aphrahat and other Syrian Fathers, for these have been studied by many scholars. Rather, the intention of this article is to review some of the material discussing this group by key Syriac Fathers to present a fresh reading of the historical record to better apprise the order’s regulations and its social and ecclesiastical roles within the Syriac-speaking Church during the fourth and fifth centuries AD. The main Syriac writers who dealt with this topic were Aphrahat, known as “the Persian Sage” (ca. 260–345), and Rabūla, Bishop of Edessa (flor. 420s). Whilst the order appears to have declined by about the eighth century, understanding the roles of the *Bnay Qyōmo* during the earlier period (the focus of this writing) is crucial for explaining the development of the Syriac Tradition.

Keywords: *Bnay Qyōmo*; Sons of the Covenant; Syrian monasticism; monastic vows



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Introduction

The story of Syrian and Syriac-speaking monasticism is a very complex one. Our first important guide is Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus from AD 423 to 457, who was educated in one of the monastic schools of Antioch, and who produced a history of the monks of Syria (*Historia religiosa*) (ca. 444) that introduces a range of early ascetic lifestyles and monastery founder figures. At first, the paradigm for the monastic way was *hermitic* (solitary and in desert places), yet communities grew around spots associated with admired founder figures, leading to collective *cenobitic* or collective institutions. Later on, a third distinctive mixed form allowed hermits or solitaries to be connected to churches or communities (the *skete* model), providing protection in turbulent times (see esp. Vööbus 1958, 1960, 1988). This article is about an “Order” predominantly named *Bnay Qyōmo* (Sons of the Covenant) who presented as a special religious group in Syriac Christianity during the high Patristic period. I will be asking, since they were called the “Sons of the Covenant”, to what kind of “covenant” were they bound? How did they live and what rules were they following during the time of their appearance through the fourth and fifth centuries AD?

Even though it is well known that the *Bnay* and *Bnoth Qyōmo*, both the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, *vowed virginity and poverty* during those centuries, mainly in the northern part of Mesopotamia, data regarding *other and different aspects of their life and duties* within the wider Christian community and Late Antique society are scanty, even in the Syriac sources whence one would expect to find relevant information. For example, in a work by the earliest famed Syriac Father Aphrahat “the Persian Sage” (ca. AD 260–345 [Syr. also Pharhad; Grk. Aphraatis]), which was entitled *23 Demonstrations*, some parts were dedicated to the *Bnay Qyōmo* (esp. the sixth Demonstration); however, there is sadly insufficient

detail as to the lives of those belonging to this intriguing group. When information is offered, it is so vague that it has left scholars very puzzled (as I shall soon show). On the other hand, stories of many hierarchs and faithful martyrs suffering under prolonged persecution in 344 ignited by the Persian king Shapur II (309–379) against the Syrian Christians in Persia do exist in the literature. Recorded in the late-nineteenth century seven-volume collection of *Acta martyrium et sanctorum [Syriace]*, the stories include many names of the *Bnay Qyōmo* and *Bnoth Qyōmo* (*Acta Mart.* [ed. Bedjan] vol. 2, pp. 230, 241, 245, 254, 278, 325, etc.). But, again, few details are provided in the *Acta* about the Covenantal institution itself. While admitting that some institutional features have been tackled by scholars (mainly Burkitt 1939; Vööbus 1958, 1961; Nedungatt 1973; Griffith 1991, 1993, 1995; AbouZayd 1993; Amar 1995; Kathanar 1996; Murray 1999; Macina 1999; Koltun-Fromm 2001; Harvey 2005; Aydin 2017), in the following pages, as an indigenous Syrian voice, I will try to provide fresh insights as to the position, duties, lifestyle, and related issues of this distinguished group of people, drawing almost exclusively from Syriac primary sources from the fourth and fifth centuries. This article seeks to probe, with careful philological and semantic analytical support, the possibilities and probabilities of what the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant were about by both assessing, reassessing, and adding to what is known from studies of Eastern, in particular Antiochene, Christianity. The article is a detailed documentation and accompanying exposition of an Order or ancient Syriac monastic grouping that hitherto has not been given a full account.

1. The Sources

Let us first list the main sources of extant information concerning the *Bnay Qyōmo* in the fourth and fifth centuries. These are as follows:

1.1. Aphrahat and His Demonstrations

Aphrahat wrote 23 Demonstrations (hereafter Demon., using Parisot ed., *Patrologia Syriaca* [hereafter PS], vol. 1, cols. [=half page] 1–1050; vol. 2, cols. 1–150) called also “Chapters” (PS vol. 1, col. 1044 [line] 26; vol. 2, col. 1 [line] 2), “Homilies” (vol. 1, cols. 72 [line] 8, 457.23, 461.21, 952.22, 1044.23, 1048.18, 24), “Letters” (vol. 1, cols. 237 [ln.] 13, 272.25, 312.18, 573.2, 724.24; vol. 2, col. 149 [ln.] 1, etc.) (hereafter for convenience virtually all referencing is to columns and lines, not Demonstration numbers or sections) and many other names. The work was written at the request of an unknown believer to describe the faith of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century AD in Persia. In composing the *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat started each one with a letter of the Syriac language in alphabetical order (*Ōlaf*, *Bēth*, *Gōmal*, etc.). The first ten Demonstrations are dated to 337 AD, the following twelve to 344, and the last to 345. It is probable that Aphrahat intended to write a new cycle of *Demonstrations* since the last one starts with the letter A, but something, maybe his death, caused this work to cease. The sixth Demonstration was dedicated to the “*Bnay Qyōmo* = Sons of Covenant”. Aphrahat himself was a Bar Qyōmo, as he describes himself in many passages of his corpus (e.g., vol. 1, cols. 240.1–253.13, 276.23, 309.21, 256, 66–12, 1049.11; Nedungatt 1973, p. 211). The writings of Aphrahat are considered to be the main account of the life and institutions of the *Bnay Qyōmo* during the fourth century, and in this article, I refer to the critical Syriac text of *Demonstrations* much more extensively than other sources.

1.2. Liber Graduum (The Book of Steps or Degrees)

The Syriac text of *Liber Graduum* (using Kmosko (1926), ed. [PS vol. 3]; Eng. trans. Kitchen and Parmentier [Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 12a–c]) contains an introductory note that is apparently an addition made by an anonymous hand (see Vööbus 1958, p. 183). The note states that neither did the author of the *Liber Graduum* inscribe his name nor did any of the other scholars write about him, although the note-maker makes the unlikely claim that according to tradition the author was one of the last disciples of the twelve apostles (PS col. 1.1–8). Most probably, however, the book was composed around

the end of the fourth (or the beginning of the fifth) century, within the Persian Empire (Brock 1997, p. 28).

The *Liber Graduum* addresses two groups of believers: first, the “*كنا*—*Kīne* (Just, Righteous, Upright)” who are fulfilling the commandments of God (called “the commandments of faith” (col. 860.1–4)) in a balanced way along with their worldly duties and day-to-day issues (labour, worry, marriage and so forth), and second, the “*متمم*—*Gmīre* (Perfect)” who are aiming to attain a higher degree of spirituality by following the “commandments of love” (col. 860.1–865.24), and are, therefore, renouncing any attachment to this physical world (see cols. 324–32. on comparing both groups).

1.3. The Canons or Rules of Marūtha

The synod of Isaac and Marūtha of Maipherqat (AD 410) that was held in Seleucia issued a number of canons and regulations that organized the different categories of orders in the Syriac-speaking Church in the Sassanid territories (using *Synodicon Orientale*, ed. Chabot (1902) ed. for the Latin trans.; cf. Vööbus (1982), ed. [CSCO 439]).

1.4. The Rules of Rabūla

Rabūla became the Bishop of Edessa in 411. He was known for his philanthropic deeds, as well as for being a charismatic leader and administrator. Among his many achievements, history attributes to him that he substituted the *ܐܘܢܓܠܝܘܢ ܕܡܚܠܬܐ* (*Evangelion da-mḥalṭe*, or “The Gospel of the Mixed” known as the *Diatessaron* of Tatian) by the canonical *Evangelion da-Mpharshe* (the “Separated Gospels” or the “Four Gospels”) after the *Diatessaron* held pride of place and had been used in the Syriac-speaking Church for almost two hundred years.

Rabūla made it clear that during his time, at least to the people of Edessa where he was the Bishop, there were two categories of monasticism: the monks and *Bnay Qyōmo*. He set out rules for both groups (see *Opera Selecta* [for Rabūla, Ephrem, Balaei, etc.] [hereafter OS], ed. Overbeck, pp. 212–14 for monks, and pp. 215–21 for *Bnay Qyōmo*; or with *Syriac and Arabic Documents* [hereafter SAD] ed. Vööbus, pp. 27–33 for monks, pp. 36–50 for *Bnay Qyōmo*). Those issued for the *Bnay Qyōmo* shed quite clear light on different aspects of this order, revealing, first, that numerous rules relating to the *Bnay Qyōmo* were in common with those of the priests and deacons (*Rules* 2, 3, 4, 9, etc. [OS, pp. 215–16; SAD, pp. 36–39]; second, that some rules were issued specifically for the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo* (*Rules*, 18, 20, 29, etc. [OS, pp. 217–8; SAD, pp. 40–41, 44]); and, third, that some rules were set out for the priests and deacons to take care of the *Bnay Qyōmo* (*Rules* 10, 12, 18, etc. [OS, pp. 216–17; SAD, pp. 38–40]).

1.5. Other Possible Sources

There are signs that equivalents for such Covenanters as discussed here are known in the Church of the East, but the best signs of this, coming from a Syriac liturgical handbook at Turfan (in an oasis in far Western China) (Hunter and Coakley 2017), are dated to the eighth century and belong outside the purview of this paper. This study acknowledges that possible equivalents to the phrase “Sons or Daughters of the Covenant” appear in other traditions, among the Manichaeans (in Egypt, e.g., Brand 2022, p. 293) and perhaps among the Mandarins, but it is very hard to establish if there is any mutual influence between these usages and/or phenomena and those in the Antiochene churches discussed here.

2. Nomenclature

The terms *Bnay Qyōmo* (masc. plur. of *Bar Qyōmo* [=Son of the Covenant or Male Covenanter]) and *Bnoth Qyōmo* (fem. plur. of *Ba[r]th Qyōmo* [=Daughter of the Covenant or Female Covenanter]) were used in the fourth- and fifth-century literature of Syriac-speaking Christianity in the Orient. In his *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat uses the terms *ihido* (plur. of *ihido* (=single one)) and *Bnay Qyōmo* interchangeably (see AbouZayd 1993; Aydin 2017,

pp. 29–34). Due to their distinctive presence in the community, the catchphrase *Bnay Qyōmo* became more popular than *ihidoye*.

Studying Syriac monasticism of this period, scholars have provided numerous meanings for the term *Qyōmo* to help us grasp what the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo* was about. Besides the term “covenant” used in the Old Testament sense, as a solemn agreement between God and His chosen people, some writers have suggested that the term *Qyōmo* in context meant “resurrection”, others suggest “stance”, “standing”, or “vigil, watch” (see Griffith 1993, pp. 149–53 and ns. 37–38; Murray 2006, p. 14 and no. 65). Some interpreters even proposed that the *Bnay Qyōmo* were a group of ascetics who had their roots in the Qumran community (Griffith 1993, pp. 141–60). Sebastian Brock noted that none of these suggested meanings has firm or sufficient evidence (Brock 1989, p. 52; 1992, pp. 134–35). On the other hand, examining the 77 occurrences of the term *Qyōmo* in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*, Nedungatt (1973, pp. 191–200) remarked that approximately half of them (35 times) are used to indicate “any religious covenant in the history of salvation” (p. 195). The important meanings of the term “*Qyōmo*” are set out in the following paragraphs.

2.1. Covenant—Church

In many places in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat, the word *Qyōmo* (covenant) means the “Church” of God. The expression “holy people—Christians” was chosen in the place of the “people—the Jews” (PS vol. 1, col. 232. 3–4; Eng. trans. Lehto 2010) because of their belief in Jesus Christ, who Himself became their “covenant” and liberated them (col. 232.3–11, 780.22–781.24; Acta Mart., vol. 3, p. 64), and they thus, became the “Church of God” (cols. 44.21, 464.24, 573.5, 1040.22, 1049.12, etc.). Faith is the first requirement that a person needs before being baptized in order to become a member of this newest “covenant—Church” (cols. 44.13–16, 72.10–11). Recounting the many symbols of covenants that God has made with humanity, Aphrahat shows that the symbol of the “new covenant” changed over time. He says:

In each case the Law and the covenant were changed. First, God changed the covenant of Adam and gave another [one] to Noah... he gave another [one] in the final generation, a covenant that will not be changed. . . This is clear and known to the wise and to the one who understands that in the case of everyone who is from the covenant and (then) after circumcision, he is cast out because of his licentiousness and his lasciviousness, he has been circumcised but he does not understand what the Apostle had said, ‘May those who are troubling you be themselves expelled (lit. castrated)’ [Gal 5:12]. For our God is true and his covenants are very trustworthy. Every covenant was firm and trustworthy in its time. Those who are circumcised in their heart and those who will be circumcised a second time in the true Jordan, the baptism for the forgiveness of the sins, will live (*Demon.* 11, sect, 11 [PS vol. 1, cols. 497.17–501.10], using here Eng. trans. of *Demon.* by Lehto (2010) and Valavanolickal (2005, vol. 2, p. 15)).

With the expression “everyone who is from the covenant” (col. 501.1–2) who is “circumcised a second time in the true Jordan, the baptism for the forgiveness of sins” (501.9–10), Aphrahat apparently implies the baptized members of the “covenant—Church”. If, however, the phrase “everyone. . . of the covenant” in Aphrahat’s expression of this paragraph means the *Bnay Qyōmo* order, no action of “casting out” will be taken against the *other* baptized people of the Church because of their “licentiousness and lasciviousness”. The theme of this whole paragraph is baptism, substituting the sign of baptism that underpinned the Old Law.

2.2. Covenant—Baptismal Promise

One of the senses that the term *Qyōmo* “covenant” that can be established in Syriac literature is that of “baptismal ‘promise’ made by each Christian at baptism, ‘I commit myself to You, O Christ. . .’” (Brock 1989, p. 52). Following this same line, and in contrast with some who think that “originally the baptized community consisted *solely* (italics mine)

of those who had undertaken ascetic vows” (Burkitt 1904, pp. 125, 127; cf. Brock 1989, p. 52), the expression of baptismal promise is also attested in the story of Samuel bar Hanon, a married Jew who was converted by St. Eugen (early fourth century) in Nisibis and confessed his faith by saying, “I establish a covenant ‘Qyōmo’ before the name of Christ that. . .” (*Acta Mart.*, vol. 3, pp. 414–15). Similar notions and testimonies are encountered in *Liber Graduum* (PS vol. 3, cols. 296.10–22; 720.2–25 [ܡܠܟܐ ܡܥܕ ܕܡܝܬܐ = you have taken up my covenant with your words (lit. “mouth”)] as well as in the Syriac translation of one of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s catechetical homilies, “I establish a covenant ‘Qyōmo’, believe, and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Theodore, *Catechticae homeliae* [eds. Tonneau and Deyreese], Hom. 13, fol. 92v, 94r; cf. Brock 1989, p. 52).

2.3. Covenant—Baptismal Promise

As elaborated below, the promise of celibacy and poverty vowed by the *Bnay Qyōmo* could have been made at the time of their baptism, given that recipients were generally adults at that time. Aphrahat often expresses this vow by the phrase, “the one who take up the yoke of the holy ones” (PS vol. 1, cols. 248.26–249.2, 253.10–12, 272.21–24, 276.18–22. 613.17–18, 681.2).

3. Denotations of Taking up a Committed Way of Life

The expressions “Sons” and “Daughters of the Covenant” obviously denote a religious, spiritual, devotional, and ascetic movement or order, and it is worth investigating as to what it would require to be a member of it, and by this means apprehend better the movement’s or order’s characteristics.

3.1. Preparation

It could be suggested that the exemplary mode of life and behaviour of the already ordained *Bnay Qyōmo* was the instrument of preparation for being a member of the order. By seeing their good behaviour within society, together with their distinguished mode of dress and way of life (see below sects. 5–7), many people would be eager to imitate this new state (*kyōno*) of *Bnay Qyōmo* (Aphrahat, *Demon.* vol. 1, col. 356.11–12).

Not only were virgins accepted into the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, but also those who were married. The very fact that a *Bar Qyōmo* was allowed to live with his daughter (see *SAD*, p. 36; *OS*, p. 215) means that he was either a widower or left his married life and joined the institution (*Acta*, vol. 2, p. 513). Aphrahat also confirms this fact by his denotation of the “holy ones” (*Demon.* col. 345.10).

Not everyone, though, was accepted as part of this group: they had to be people without a blemish, whether married or virgins. According to the canons of Marūtha, when an archpriest (*chorepiscopus*) visits the district under his supervision, he will encouragingly announce to the local parishioners “to set some of their sons and daughters apart” to dedicate them as *Bnay Qyōmo* (*SAD*, p. 122). But any who were adulterers, as expected, were rejected from joining the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo*. Rabūla states that “They shall not admit for instruction (discipleship) any woman who has a man besides her husband, nor any man who has a woman instead of his consort, that the name of God may not be blasphemed” (*SAD*, p. 44).

There was no specified age limit for a candidate to join the order. Aphrahat categorizes people who were willing to join the institution as “young unmarried men and women, and holy ones” (col. 345; cf. *Acta*, vol. 2, p. 513). The *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* also speaks about a martyr in Persia who was a young boy named “Ohanom”, without providing his age (*Acta*, vol. 2, p. 287).

The location for training was, in all probability, local church premises. Aphrahat implies without stating it clearly that local churches were centres where the *Bnay Qyōmo* were trained and prepared (*SAD*, p. 125), yet naturally when monasteries were established toward the first half of the fourth century in the northern Mesopotamian region, they also became places of preparation. As the Marūtha synodal canons state: “They (the

Bnay Qyōmo) shall be instructed, and given to the churches and monasteries, and he (the archpriest) shall order that they shall be educated in doctrine and instruction that they shall become inheritors, and the churches and monasteries will be established (or will have their existence) through them" (SAD, p. 122).

Candidates were enjoined to prepare themselves for the spiritual struggle. Since the contest was a continuous struggle against evil that did not cease once a person vowed to be a member of the institution, it was the individual's duty to be aware of the dangers to be faced (Aphrahat, *Demon.* vol. 1, col. 321.16–24). Aphrahat cited such dangers and advised candidates how to be trained and prepared in order to tackle them: "Let the one who is training for the contest keep himself from the world . . . run as a champion in the competition (1 Cor 9:24–25) . . . learn about his opponent . . . take armour for himself in order to fight, and let him keep it clean at all times" (*Demon.* col. 248.19–25). The Church Father also gave practical defense strategies for a list of temptations used by the adversary to attack the *Bnay Qyōmo* (col. 256.3–24). As depicted by a large part of Aphrahat's sixth Demonstration (cols. 256.22–277.18, 309.21–312.20), significantly, the prime dangers that the *Bnay Qyōmo* contended with were how to retain virginity and holiness, and how to detach themselves from the materialistic world, i.e., through voluntary poverty.

The subject matter of the training sessions that the candidates had to undergo consisted mainly of learning the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and life manners (see SAD, p. 122). Aphrahat admonishes those already "vowed" *Bnay Qyōmo* to constantly meditate and study the Bible and the Fathers, including his own writings (*Demon.* cols. 245.6–8, 252.25–26, 304.22–25, 349.6–7, 464.21–24, etc.). He also cites many exemplars from the Bible to be imitated and encourages members to learn from related life experiences (e.g., col. 312.6–18). According to Rabūla, crucial things to learn and memorize were the Psalms and *Madrōshe* (or stanzas from poems or choral chants, most probably those of Ephraim) (SAD, p. 41, cf. OS, p. 217) and the Marūtha canons also urge ceaselessly reciting the Psalms along with studying the Bible (SAD, p. 125).

3.2. Initiation

The connection between commitment to the order and the baptism of *Bnay Qyōmo* members has been raised by the eminent Francis Burkitt as a point for debate during the last century. The matter deserves a separate article to tackle it, but at least an attempt can be made here to summarize the issue.

Problems started when Burkitt (1904, p. 125) hypothesized that "in Aphraates, Baptism is not the common seal of every Christian's faith, but a privilege reserved for celibates". He also claimed that for Aphrahat, "the Christian community, therefore, . . . consists of baptized celibates, together with a body of adherents who remain outside and are not really members of the body" (p. 127). Some scholars, such as Adolf von Harnack (1906, p. 122, n. 6), have supported this theory, while others, like Hugh Connolly (1906, pp. 522–38) and Edward Duncan (1945), have opposed it, and others still, for instance Paul Schwen (1907, pp. 96–99, 129–132), seriously modified it (for bibliography and discussions, Duncan 1945, pp. 82–83; Vööbus 1958, pp. 184–90; Vööbus 1961, pp. 19–27; Vööbus 1988, pp. 25–30). Burkitt held strong to his position (Burkitt 1906, p. 10), "adamantly affirming that Aphrahat has classified Christians as consisting first of baptized full members and then as penitents or general adherents" (Vööbus 1988, pp. 25–26). The main issue of confusion revolved around Aphrahat's statement in his seventh Demonstration regarding the Penitents, and it is worth quoting the sections that should determine the issue:

"O you who have been invited to the struggle, listen to the sound of the trumpet and take heart. I speak also to you who hold the trumpets: priests, scribes, and sages. Call out and say to all the people, 'Let he who is afraid turn back from the struggle (cf. Jud 7:3), lest he cause his brother to become as disheartened as he is. And whoever has planted a vineyard, let him return to cultivate it, lest he think of it in the war and suffer defeat. And whoever is betrothed to a woman and wishes to marry her, let him return and rejoice with his woman. And let the one

who is building a house return to it, lest he call it to mind and not fight [with] full [attention]’ (cf. Deut 20:2–9). It is the single ones who are ready for the struggle, since they set their faces toward what is before them and do not call to mind what is behind them (Phil 3:13), for their treasures are before them, and whatever they plunder is for themselves; they will receive their reward abundantly. I say to you who sound the trumpets, that when you have finished issuing warnings keep watch over those who have returned, care for those who remain, and send down to the waters of testing those who have vowed [lit. chosen, singled out] themselves to war. The waters approve every strong person, but those who are lazy will be found out there (*Demon.* 7, sect. 18 [PS vol. 1, cols. 342.11–344.9], using Lehto trans. [GECS 27] p. 210).

In the next section (19), Aphrahat proclaims that this mystery of choosing the *Bnay Qyōmo* through the waters of baptism was shown beforehand by a *typological* act of Gideon when he chose the soldiers for the battle (see Jud 7:3–7). Aphrahat then returns for the warning and selection of the *Bnay Qyōmo* from among the people, when he states the following:

On account of this, it is fitting that those who sound the trumpets, the preachers of the Church, should call and warn all those who have made a covenant with God in advance of [or before] baptism, those who have vowed [lit. chosen, singled out] themselves to virginity and holiness, young unmarried men and women, and holy ones. Let the preachers warn them and say: ‘Whoever has set his heart on the state of marriage, let him be married before baptism, lest he fall in the struggle and be killed. And whoever is afraid of the conflict [lit. lot, portion of fighting], let him return, lest he cause his brothers to become as disheartened as he is. And whoever loves his property, let him turn away from the army, lest when the war overwhelms him he calls his property to mind and turns back to it. There is only shame for the one who turns away from the struggle. The one who turns away but who has not yet vowed [lit. chosen, singled out] himself nor put on armour is not blamed. But if any of those who have vowed [lit. chosen, singled out] themselves and have put on armour turn away from the struggle, they are ridiculed. The one who has emptied himself is ready for war, since he does not call to mind what is behind him nor turn back to it (*Demon.* 7 [sect.] 20 [cols. 345.4–26]).

and

When they have preached, and announced, and warned all those who have made a covenant with God, let them bring those who have been chosen for the struggle to the waters of baptism so that they might be tested. After baptism they will see who is strong and who is weak. The strong ought to be encouraged, but the lazy and the weak will openly turn them from the struggle, lest when fighting overtakes them they conceal their weapons and take flight and suffer defeat. . . ([sect.] 21 [col. 348.1–10]).

Elaborating on the *typological* analogy of Gideon’s selection of fighters for the battle (sect. 19) and the choosing of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, Connolly (1906) presented the representation of things in an organized and contextual sequence, a useful point needing no further comment here; yet a few extra notes are worth making about the passages quoted above to better clarify the matter at hand.

1. Aphrahat makes it clear that his seventh Demonstration is dedicated to Penance (col. 360.5–6, 1041.10–12). He tries to explain all the aspects of this topic to the reader.
2. In sections 18–21 of this same Demonstration, he only *incidentally* reminds the *Bnay Qyōmo* of their vows, to include them as one of the categories who needed to undergo penance.
3. These sections are *specifically* directed to those who were willing to join the institution of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, not to the whole people who came to baptism. Thus: “O you who

have been invited to the struggle” (cols. 341.11, 15, 245.9–10, 348.2; with Connolly 1906, p. 529).

4. Some phrases in sect. 18 are directed to the whole community, from whom the *Bnay Qyōmo* had chosen/singled themselves out (ܐܓܒܝܘܢ ܢܦܫܗܘܢ—*d-’agbiū nafšhūn*) for the vow (cols. 344.6–7, 345.9, 20, 348.3).
5. According to Aphrahat, there are two main phases for the selection of the *Bnay Qyōmo*: before baptism and after baptism.
 - a. Before Baptism.
 - i. Aphrahat says that the priests, scribes, and sages call out to all the people (ܐܠܟܠܗ ܐܡܐ—*l-kūleh ’āmo*). This call is for every one of the people, as it is implied by Aphrahat’s later phrases: “those who have vowed [chosen/singled out] themselves (ܐܓܒܝܘܢ ܢܦܫܗܘܢ—*d-’agbiū nafšhūn*)” (cols. 344.6–7, 345.9–10, 348.3) and “keep watch over those who have returned, care for those who remain, and send down to the waters of testing those who have vowed themselves to war” (col. 344.4–7).
 - ii. The phrases “those who have vowed [chosen/singled out] themselves (ܐܓܒܝܘܢ ܢܦܫܗܘܢ—*d-’agbiū nafšhūn*)” (cols. 344.6–7, 345.9, 20, 348.3) and the direction to “keep watch over those who have returned, care for those who remain, and send down to the waters of testing those who have vowed themselves to war” (col. 344.4–7) play a major role in the selection of the *Bnay Qyōmo*. The first phrase, “those who have vowed [chosen/singled out] themselves”, denotes a group of people who singled themselves out to be part of something different. The latter phrases, as Aphrahat presented in Syriac, however, contain three categories of people (as Lehto 2010, p. 211, n. 68 put forward for consideration): 1. keep watch over *those who have returned* (from the contest), 2. care for *those who remain* (?), and 3. send down to the waters of testing *those who have vowed themselves to war* (the *Bnay Qyōmo*). Now, who are those (the second category) who *remained* in or from the community at baptism? They are not the people who returned from the struggle (the first category), and they are not the people who chose themselves and vowed to go to war (the third category)! Most probably, *those who remained* have nothing to do with the vow of contest (*Bnay Qyōmo*) but still have to do with baptism itself. It appears that they were the catechumens (married or unmarried) people who came to be baptized and had no concern whatsoever for those who *return* from the contest and those who *vow* to become *Bar Qyōmo* or *Bath Qyōmo*. Moreover, the three imperative verbs (keep watch over, care for, and send down) (cf. *ibid.*), and the use of Syriac plural common pronoun “ܐܝܠܗܢ—*’aylēn* (those who)” combined with the third person masculine “ܐܢܗܘܢ—*enūn* (they, them)” in the third phrase, strongly suggests that Aphrahat distinguishes between three groups of people. Otherwise, if the third phrase was intended to be addressed to the second category, its wording would have been arranged differently, and there would have been no need to either repeat the last “ܐܝܠܗܢ—*’aylēn* (those who)” or to cite it with “ܐܢܗܘܢ—*enūn* (they, them)” in the same phrase (col. 344.6).
 - iii. While explaining the process of baptism, the related text *Testamentum Domini* (ca. 350) (ed. and Latin trans. Rahmani (1899, p. 126); Eng. trans, Cooper and Maclean (1902, p. 125)) sheds light on who “*those who remained*” are in Aphrahat’s mind. As the *Testament* puts it: “But let them be baptized thus. When they come to the water, let the water be pure and flowing. First the babes, then the men, then the women. But if anyone wishes to make a promise of virginity (*Bnay Qyōmo*), let him be baptized *first* by the Bishop”.
 - iv. The term “ܐܓܘܢܐ—*’agūno* (contest, struggle, fight)” (e.g., cols. 244.4–5; 248.19–21, 316.8, 19–20, 317.15–16, 341. 11.23) in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*

- plays an important role in defining the process of the *Bnay Qyōmo*'s vow. Without a doubt, fighting against sin in this world is a contest common to all Christians. Hence, penitence is needed for all (cols. 313.1–316.5). Aphrahat, however, distinguished between the contest of the “common Christians” and that of the *Bnay Qyōmo*. He often called the contest of the *Bnay Qyōmo* “our contest” (316.8.20, 217.15–16, 341.11.23), which involves virginity, chastity, and poverty. This could be labeled as a “special contest” as distinct from the “common contest” of the Christian laypersons.
- v. Let us keep in mind how the above term “ܠܥܥܝܢܐ—*‘agūno* (contest, struggle, fight)”, combined with the aforementioned phrase “ܐܘܡܬܐ ܕܥܥܝܢܐ—*d-‘agbiū nafshūn* (those who have vowed [chosen/singled out] themselves)” when compared to (the term *baptism*) is important for the *Bnay Qyōmo*. They voluntarily chose their future life *before baptism*, or, if incapable of continuing such a commitment, they are to be sent back to their normal life by the priests *immediately after baptism*. If baptism is the *‘agūno* (contest) itself, then the conclusion of Burkitt (1904, p. 125) and those who agree with him that the baptized people of the Church consisted only of celibates would be correct. Thus, baptism would truly be a “privilege reserved for celibates”, and the vow of baptism and that of “contest” was one and the same. Aphrahat, however, never claimed that baptism is the *‘agūno* (or contest) per se, but rather it is the *testing water* for the *Bnay Qyōmo* to determine whether they were worthy of their contest or not. In fact, on a close examination of the *typology* of Gideon (see cols. 344.10–345.5, 348.10–18, 349.18–27), Aphrahat clearly indicated that “the waters of testing” are “a type of baptism” and “war” is “a mystery of the struggle” (344.22–25). The *Bnay Qyōmo* had to choose/single themselves out for the contest, not for baptism because the *contest* is for the “single ones (*ihydōye*) who are ready for the struggle” (341.23). The contest of the *Bnay Qyōmo* comes after their vow at baptism. Baptism is for all people who believe in Jesus, the special *‘agūno* or contest, on the other hand, is for those people who choose virginity, continence, and poverty. As Aphrahat states, “Those who are circumcised in the heart live, and they are circumcised a second time at the true Jordan, the baptism of the forgiveness of sins” (501.8–10), and “The servant who is bought (cf. Exod. 12:44) represents the sinful person who repents and is bought by the blood of Christ. When his heart has been circumcised of evil actions, he then comes to baptism, the consummation of true circumcision, and he is joined to the people of God, and participates in the body and blood of Christ” (*Demon.* col. 528.7–15). Duncan (1945, p. 89) has correctly put it: “Nothing is said here of any special form of asceticism to be undertaken by those who are baptised. Anyone who believes and ‘has circumcised his heart of all evil works’ is eligible for baptism. Marriage definitely does not belong to the category of ‘evil works’”, and “We seem thoroughly justified in concluding, from the words of Aphraates himself, that there was in that part of the Church which he represents no such thing as a general requirement of celibacy for all aspirants to baptism and membership in the Church” (*ibid.*, p. 93).
 - vi. Aphrahat also makes a clear distinction between the faithful/sons and daughters of the faith and the *Bnay Qyōmo*. Both groups received baptism, and both are eligible to partake of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though this needs a separate paper, a clear example of this distinction from the writings of Aphrahat will suffice. He states that “The point of the sword is removed from before the Tree of Life (Gen 3:24) which is given as food to the faithful, and Paradise is promised to the blessed and the virgins and the holy ones. The fruit of the tree of life is given as food to the

- faithful, to the virgins and to those who do the will of God" (Demon. col. 265.18–24, cf. cols. 237.7, 465.2–4, and see for the phrase "حَتَّ حَبَلًا—Bnay ʾĪto ['sons of the Church']" cols. 533.21–22, 573.2–9, 841.6, 1040.21–22; and "حَبَلًا حَبَلًا—ʾāmo qadīsho ['the holy people']" cols. 232.3,6).
- vii. Since a distinction is evident and established between the believers and the *Bnay Qyōmo* who are both coming to baptism, based on the purpose of each group, the first for a normal life and the latter to start their *ʾagūno* or contest, a point of dissimilarity is required between the vows or vow process taken by each group. In all probability, a demarcation was made immediately after baptism because before baptism all the baptized have to commit themselves firstly to Christ. This could also justify the "sending back" of the newly baptized *Bnay Qyōmo* before starting their contest. Or possibly there were two vows: one for the *beginners* (or novices, or "Fallen Sons of the Covenant" [see below]), who have the right to be "sent back from the contest" and afterward live a normal Christian life, without being excommunicated or expelled from the community; and another to become a *full member* of the *Bnay Qyōmo*. Aphrahat, however, does not clearly provide the pertinent information.
 - viii. In *Demon.* 7, sect. 20, Aphrahat becomes more specific and warns only the *Bnay Qyōmo* by direct instructions. The warnings to return or retreat from the contest are announced before the vow at baptism. It is the *Bnay Qyōmo's* own choice to accept or reject to proceed if they see themselves as fit: "Let he who is afraid turn back from the struggle, lest he cause his brother to become as disheartened as he is" (cols. 341.15–16, 345.14–17), and "The one who turns away but who has not yet vowed (or chosen/singled out) himself nor put on armour is not blamed" (345.20–22).
 - ix. The warnings about fear (cols. 341.15–16, 345.14–16), sexuality (marriage [341.19–20, 345.11–14]), love of property (possessions [345.16–19] and vineyard [341.17–18]) and unfinished work (house [341.20–22]) are often the weak points that the *Bnay Qyōmo* struggle to uphold after the vow at baptism. Aphrahat advises the people who want to become *Bnay Qyōmo* that they ought to detach themselves from worldly matters and, if they cannot, to voluntarily retreat before being sent to "the waters of testing", i.e., baptism.
 - x. So the following is made clear: after knowing the dangers and being warned about the temptations that the *Bnay Qyōmo* will face, whoever is freely willing to enter into the struggle, let them mark their target *before* vowing at baptism, viz. becoming *Bnay Qyōmo*. Whoever, on the other hand, is willing to get married and live a normal life (marriage, vineyard, house, etc.), not that of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, let them do that before coming to vow at baptism, because *after* vowing at baptism and failing in the battle "There is only shame" (345.4–26).
 - xi. The stumbling block for the Burkitt theory centres around the phrase "Whoever has set his heart on the state of marriage, let him be married before baptism" (col. 345.11–14; cf. Burkitt 1904, pp. 125–27). Aphrahat, however, did not say that married people are disqualified from baptism (cf. Connolly 1906, pp. 534–35). He is basically saying that those people whose heart is set on marriage, possessions, etc., are disqualified and must retreat before becoming *Bnay Qyōmo*. Adam Lehto rightly deduces that "this (sentence) clearly implies that baptism was not reserved for an ascetic elite" (2019, p. 212) because after getting married, someone can come to baptism, but after taking the vow of asceticism at baptism, one cannot marry. Unless they renounce marriage, married people cannot become *Bnay Qyōmo*. Connolly (1906, p. 534) states correctly that "It is probable, however, that we have here an incidental reference to a particular discipline connected with

baptism, and that persons who had already decided upon matrimony may have been required to marry before baptism”, and again, “an analogy may be found in the present practice of some portions of the Eastern Church, which, though it forbids priests to marry, does not deny them the use of marriage contracted before ordination” (ibid., p. 534, n. 1).

- xii. It seems that, from around the middle of the fourth century to the beginning of the fifth, the vow that the candidates were taking up was not necessarily sworn at the baptismal ceremony. In the biography of St. Eugen, for example, a pagan priest of a certain village was converted to Christianity and was baptized by St. Eugen himself. On becoming Christian, the pagan priest asked to be St. Eugen’s disciple. It is stated that St. Eugen “gave him the sign of *Bnay Qyōmo*, and he himself tonsured him” (*Acta*, vol. 3, pp. 444–45). Whilst the timing of the ceremony of becoming *Bnay Qyōmo* agrees with that of St. Eugen, i.e., after baptism, the canons of Marūtha have different steps (instead of giving the sign and tonsure) of dedicating the *Bnay Qyōmo*, “He [the *chorepiscopus*] shall mark them through prayer, and shall lay his hand on them and bless them, and these shall become the *benai qeīāmā*” (SAD, p. 122).
- b. After Baptism.
 - i. The candidates who are ready to take the vow of virginity and poverty are sent to the waters of baptism.
 - ii. Once the candidates have taken the vow at baptism, two categories will be noticed by the priests: the strong and the weak (Aphrahat, *Demon. PS*, vol. 1, col. 348.5–6). There is no information about the formula uttered by the candidates to become a member of the order, but surely it was to a lifetime commitment to virginity and poverty.
 - iii. It is the duty of the priests to encourage the strong in order to continue in their contest, and the weak and lazy should be openly turned from the struggle (col. 348.6–10). Aphrahat, however, does not state with clarity how the priests would discern the weak from the strong, although a hint lies in his references to the qualities of love, loyalty, and readiness to sacrifice like the dog toward his master (cols. 348.20–349.17). Maybe there was some sort of testing required of the *Bnay Qyōmo* immediately after their vow at baptism to ascertain who were the strong, lazy, and weak of the group.
 - iv. The question of the time gap between “after baptism” (col. 348.4) of the *Bnay Qyōmo* and “turning [back] openly” the newly weak and lazy from the struggle is answered by a previous statement by Aphrahat: “but those who are lazy will be found out there” (344.8–9), i.e., immediately after baptism.
 - v. Aphrahat does not inform us whether those who were *openly turned [back] from the contest* after the baptism had the freedom to get the blessing of the Church for marriage since they had already vowed virginity.
 - vi. Aphrahat concludes his important portion about the *Bnay Qyōmo* in *Demon. 7*, sects. 18–21 by the incidental summary statement (at 22): “For this reason, my friend, it is right that those who fall in (or go down) (see Hallock 1967, p. 53; cf. Valavanolickal 2005, p. 178 [not ‘who have entered’ as in Lehto (2010, p. 213)]) the struggle should not resemble those lazy ones, lest they turn away from the fight and become a disgrace to all their friends” (*Demon.* col. 349.23–27).
6. Looking from the perspective of the main theme of the seventh Demonstration, viz. Penance, it may be argued that Aphrahat is questioning or depreciating the *Bnay Qyōmo* for being weak and falling in the contest *after baptism*. They have been warned and it was their choice *before baptism*, in which they vowed not to fall into sin, and they had the prior choice to live an ordinary life (get married, have properties, vineyards, houses, etc.)!

Based on the previous notes and statements, I believe the following:

1. In the relevant sections of his seventh Demonstration (quoted *in extenso* earlier), Aphrahat “deviates” from the main context of the whole theme, i.e., penance, to direct his discourse to include the penitent *Bnay Qyōmo* and describes *incidentally and briefly* the process by which the candidates join the institution.
2. Some of the *Bnay Qyōmo* who vowed not to fall into sin have sinned and need penance, but they should not be *lazy* like those (novices) who were openly turned back after their baptism (*Demon.* PS, vol. 1, col. 344.8–9).
3. In examining the relevant paragraphs, it is essential to keep in mind the conclusion in sect. 22, which defines the three previous sections.
4. Examining the language of these paragraphs, phrases such as “vow [choose/single out] themselves (ܐܓܒܝܘ ܢܦܫܗܘܢ—*d-’agbiū nafšhūn*)”, “keep watch over those who have returned, care for those who remain, and send down to the waters of testing those who have vowed themselves to war”, and “ܐܝܠܐܢ (those who)” and “ܐܢܘܢ (they, them)” are all important to determine the different categories that Aphrahat is mentioning. These categories, most probably, are those who return from the contest, the catechumens (married or unmarried), and the *Bnay Qyōmo*.
5. Of other categories, at least one mentioned by Aphrahat, a group is to be baptized along with the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, but not to join them completely or by vow. And for the cluster of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, there was, in all probability, a special rite, formula, statement, or act that would be performed to “legalize” their initiation into the institution.

4. Denotations of a Settled Way of Pious Life

Since it has become increasingly obvious that the expressions “Sons” and “Daughters of the Covenant” denote an ascetic movement, order, or institution, it is now worth asking questions about where and how they lived, what regulations or stipulated duties they followed, and what were the characteristics and outward appearances of their spiritual life.

4.1. Form and Place of Dwelling

The rules covering both the form of living and place of dwelling of the *Bnay Qyōmo* are connected. They aimed to assist the *Bnay Qyōmo* in their spiritual contests and to protect them as much as possible against social and other surrounding risks. In order to minimize temptations from sexual tendencies, expectedly, the *Bnay Qyōmo* were to minimize to the utmost any contact with the opposite sex (Aphrahat, *Demon.* PS vol. 1, cols. 256.22–24, 264.25–265.2; SAD, p. 37; OS, p. 215; *Synod. Orient.* p. 24). The *Bar/Bath Qyōmo* (Son/Daughter of the Covenant) were either to live solitary lives (later called “hermits” in the strict sense), or to dwell together with others of the same sex (later: “coenobites or monastery life”).

There are some indications in the fourth- and fifth-century Syriac literature that *Bar/Bath Qyōmo* lived a solitary life. The statement of Aphrahat that “You virgins who have betrothed yourselves to Christ: if a covenanter says to one of you, ‘I will live with you and you will serve me’, you should say to him. . . Rather, remain in honour on your own, and I [will remain] alone in my honour” (*Demon.* col. 272.1–13), for instance, implies that both Covenanters (the male and the female) were not only living a single unmarried life but a solitary one as well (*ibid.*, col. 256.22–24, 261.5–8). Thus, although the term *ihydōyo* used generally for *Bnay Qyōmo* denotes various meanings in Aphrahat, mainly just “‘not to have taken a wife’ or ‘not to be in the married state’” (Nedungatt 1973, pp. 206–7), as in other Syriac sources (see Brock 1989, pp. 50–52), it does not exclude the possibility of denoting a solitary life, especially when the term is used along with the adverb “ܐܝܠܐܢ—alone, by himself” in the singular (e.g., Aphrahat, *Demon.* cols. 164.1–2, 6–7, 19–26, 256.22–24, 260.13–20, 261.2–11, 737.3–7).

But Aphrahat’s exhortations also indicate that in his time some *Bnay Qyōmo* were living together in small community groups, two or more, though actually sometimes comprising

both men and women (*syneisaktoi*). He was disapproving of this latter form of dwelling (Nedungatt 1973, pp. 421–22), and states that if a *Bar* or *Bath Qyōmo* wishes to live with the other counterpart Covenanter, let them marry openly and “not become wild with lust [see 1 Cor 7:9]” (col. 260.17) for “It is good for a woman to live with a woman, and a man ought to live with a man” (col. 260.20–22). Furthermore, Aphrahat warns the married man who vowed to be a *Bar Qyōmo* not to live with his wife anymore, so he “will not return to his former state and be considered an adulterer. . . even if a person encounters difficulty, it is proper and right and good that he [or she] should remain alone” (cols. 260.13–261.6; cf. 256.22–24; cf. Lehto 2010, p. 179).

The same notion is expressed by Ephraim the Syrian (Sermones [Beck 1973 ed., vol. 4] pp. 9 [stanza] 447–10 [st] 482) and by Rabūla of Edessa in his *Rules* (SAD, pp. 36, 38; OS, pp. 215–16), the latter stating that “if possible, they (the *Bnoth Qyōmo*) shall dwell with one another; and the same also with the *benai qeīāmā*” (SAD, p. 40; OS, p. 217). He also gives permission for the *Bnay Qyōmo* (male Covenanters) to dwell with their mothers, sisters, or daughters, but not with other laymen (SAD, pp. 36, 38; OS, pp. 215–16). He did not approve of the *Bnay Qyōmo* (males) to let women, albeit in a separate place, live next to their residence (SAD, p. 36; OS, p. 215).

These instructions of the Fathers for the symbiosis of the same sex were fairly observed by the *Bnay Qyōmo*. One *Bath Qyōmo* (Daughter of the Covenant) called Tarbo, though, a sister of Šem’ūn bar Šabo’e, is said to have a handmaiden, who was also a *Bath Qyōmo*, living with her, and other similar cases are found in the *Acta Martyrium et Sanctorum* (vol. 2, p. 254, cf. pp. 308, 337).

The place of dwelling was usually either the *Bnay Qyōmo*’s own homes or a place dedicated to them within or close to the local church. The general impression of most of the stories of martyrs and saints and rules related to the *Bnay Qyōmo* expresses this fact. The *Bath Qyōmo* (Daughter of the Covenant) of Karkho d-Ledōn, for instance, was living in her own house with her maidservant, who was also the former’s disciple (ibid., pp. 230–31; Vööbus 1958, pp. 205–6). It is said in the biography of one of the *Bnoth Qyōmo* named Thecla (ca. 347 AD) from Khaboz village in Persia that there were other *Bnoth Qyōmo* living in the same village (Vööbus 1958, p. 247; Acta, vol. 2, p. 308). The sources also mention that some other villages have settlements of *Bnay Qyōmo* within their boundaries (Acta, vol. 2, p. 337), and as Rabūla teaches, “The priests shall live in the church, also the deacons, and if possible, also the *benai qeīāmā*” (SAD, p. 46; OS, p. 220).

It appears that in certain places during the end of the fourth and early fifth centuries, the *Bnay Qyōmo* were using some places outside cities called “ܩܝܡܪܐ—*ūmre* (dwelling places)”. St. Ephraim the Syrian’s biography relates how when the Huns invaded Edessa the city in 395, they ascended to the mountain beyond the city, where “many ܩܝܡܪܐ—*ūmre* (community dwelling places) of *Bnay Qyōmo* lay, for both males and females” (Acta, vol. 3, p. 657; Beck 1973, pp. 6.267–76; SAD, pp. 121, 148).

These communities of *Bnay Qyōmo* were managed by the *Chorepiscopus* or archpriest (SAD, pp. 120, 125). Yet it seems that because of his many duties, local priests and deacons were assigned to oversee the welfare of the *Bnay Qyōmo* living within or around the boundaries of their churches. Whether consisting of small groups or larger communities, in villages or towns, all were meant to be rightly organized and managed (Nedungatt 1973, p. 443; SAD, pp. 125, 148). As Rabūla preferred, in directing the priests and deacons, “Do not permit the *benat qeīāmā* to come one by one to the church or go (back) at night; but, if possible, they shall dwell with one another; and the same also with the *benai qeīāmā*” (SAD, p. 40, OS, p. 217). Likewise, the *Bnoth Qyōmo* (female Covenanters) are the responsibility of the local deaconess. The biographer of the life and instructions of Rabūla himself confirms that “none of them (*Bnoth Qyōmo*) ought to go to the assembly [for worship] or to any official place (best translation for the Syriac ܩܝܡܪܐ) without the company of many [other women]. He (Rabūla) wanted that all the [spiritual] daughters of each deaconess live with her in continence, holiness, and chastity, [saying] ‘The unity of many can be [such]

that it guards each of them''' (OS, p. 177; Rabbula Corpus (eds. [Phenix and Horn 2017](#), pp. 37–39); cf. [D-beth Yahkub 2016](#), p. 195).

4.2. Duties

The duties of the Covenanters' Orders are best divided into four strata: ecclesiastical and religious in particular; and their members' expected behaviour and work in society more generally.

– Ecclesiastical

Although the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo* is always listed with the priests and deacons ([AbouZayd 1993](#), p. 59; cf. SAD, pp. 122–23, 138, 147; Vööbus 1975, p. 199), the members are not considered to be one of the priestly ranks (SAD, p. 49; OS, p. 221). The order of the *Bnay Qyōmo* is similar to the order of monks and nuns in the present day, and since they have their unique lifestyle, the order connects to the oath they vow, not to the priesthood. A clear distinction was made by the prayer of Martha the Martyr in affirming that the members of the *Qyōmo* are helpers to the pastors: "I confess You, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes the sin of the world, for the sake of Your name the shepherd-bishops were sacrificed, and were sacrificed the chief-stewards (namely) pastors, and the stewards (namely) deacons, and the helpers to the stewards (namely) the holy *Qyōmo*. . ." (*Acta*, vol. 2, p. 238).

The canons of Marūtha state that the priests and deaconesses were actually elected from the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo/Bnoth Qyōmo*. Concerning the priests, *Rule 25* states that "He (the *Chorepiscopus*) shall see whether there are villages that are lacking and need priests, and he shall make [priests] among them, and he shall not allow these villages to be led into the habit of unseemliness; and if there are villages where there are no *benai qeiāmā*, of whom he shall make priests, [in this case] he shall bring out brothers from the monasteries or churches which are under his authority, and shall make them" (SAD, p. 120). Furthermore, canon 41 rules that blameless sisters (*Bnoth Qyōmo*) aged sixty "shall be made deaconesses, in order to perform the service of the rite of baptism alone" (SAD, pp. 125–26).

– Religious

By composing special *Rules* for the *Bnay Qyōmo*, Rabūla denotes clearly that he is labeling and recognizing them as a *separate order* to that of the priests, deacons, monks (see SAD, pp. 27–33; OS, pp. 212–14), and the "sons of the church" (see SAD, p. 39; OS, p. 216). In many cases, admittedly, the *Rules* for the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo* are common with that of the priests and deacons, especially with regard to religious and social principles. One important and relevant rule shared by *Bnay* and *Bnoth Qyōmo* with the priests and deacons is that they "shall not demand interest or usury or any craftiness of profane profits" (SAD, p. 38; OS, p. 216).

The canons of Marūtha order the *chorepiscopus* to gather the entire *Bnay Qyōmo* of the villages under his supervision to visit their bishop, participate with him in the holy Liturgy, take his blessings, and go back to their respective places. This will be carried out twice a year: once at the beginning of winter and a second time after the feast of Resurrection (SAD, pp. 122–23), and probably something similar was expected of priests and deacons.

The *Bnay Qyōmo* have the duty to attend the services of the Church and assist the priests and deacons in performing them. Ephraim the Syrian had already established a choir consisting of *Bnoth Qyōmo* (females) and taught them hymns and *Madrōshe* about Christmas, Epiphany, fasts, and other feasts celebrated by the Church, to be sung in the churches (*Acta*, vol. 3, p. 653; Jacob of Serug, *Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem* (ed. Amar PO, vol. 47 [1995], pp. 48, 96–99; cf. [Amar 2011](#), p. xiii)). Rabūla asserts that "The priests and deacons and the *benai qeiāmā* and *benat qeiāmā* shall be continually in the worship-service of the church and shall not neglect the times of prayer and psalmody night and day", and they should not travel to anywhere without the permission of the bishop "and leave his (*Bar Qyōmo*) church, not even if he has the business of the village or of his church" (SAD, pp. 43, 45; OS, pp. 218–19). This would surely apply to the *Bnoth Qyōmo* also.

qeiāmā, shall keep themselves far from wine and meat; but if there is any among them who is infirm in body, he may use a little, as it is written [in 1 Tim 5:23]; those, however, who become drunken or who enter taverns, shall be expelled from the church” (SAD, p. 42; OS, pp. 217–18) and “The *benai qeiāmā* or the *benat qeiāmā* shall not drink wine after the defunct (at the funeral-feast)” (SAD, p. 47; OS, p. 220).

They can, however, attend some other functions at which they might partly fulfill their duties. The *Rules* of Rabūla refer to two such occasions that they were obliged to take the permission of the local priest and, in some cases, of the bishop: “You (the priests) shall not allow the *benai qeiāmā* to go to gatherings, or other places without priests, and the *benat qeiāmā* without the deaconesses” and “No one among the priests or deacons or *benai qeiāmā* shall travel without our permission to the (imperial) court or to any far off place and leave his church, not even if he has the business of the village or of his church” (SAD, p. 45; OS, p. 219).

c. Truthfulness and calumny

The *Bnay Qyōmo*, Aphrahat exhorts, should “get rid of a deceitful tongue, put away envy and strife, and cast away lying lips. When words are spoken about a person who is not present, let [the Covenanter] not listen or receive [such words], so as to not sin, until he investigates [the matter]. Mockery is a repulsive blemish, and it is wrong for it to arise in the heart” (*Demon.*, col. 273.14–21). This proves that the *Bnay Qyōmo* were considered part of general society and mingled with their social environment, who inter alia ought to be alert not to be involved in any defamation of other peoples’ characters.

d. Possessions

On the matter of possessions, consider the words of Aphrahat: “He (*Bar Qyōmo*) should not lend and receive interest (using Valavanolickal (2005) trans. and ed. [Mōrān ‘Eth’ō 23], p. 144; cf. Lehto 2010, p. 184), nor should he love greed. He should suffer wrong but not do wrong [to others]” (col. 273. 21–23); this verbiage implies that some of them were lending money and receiving interest. Some others, as shown later (see below, under g), were poor and needed to beg for a living. This suggests that not all of the *Bnay Qyōmo* renounced their total possessions to live in complete poverty.

e. Respect for others

Regarding respect for others, Aphrahat offers the following: “Let him (a *Bar Qyōmo*) stay away from commotion, and not speak frivolous words. He should not scoff at the person who repents of his sins, nor mock his brother who is fasting, nor shame the one who is not able to fast” (col. 273.23–27). Concerning fasts, some are organized by the Church for certain periods, there are also those taken up voluntarily by people for different reasons (e.g., repentance, vows, etc.). In addition, there are many kinds of fasting (cols. 97.1–100.24). Whatever the case might be, the *Bnay Qyōmo* should not blame or criticize others for their inability to fast or for any other actions.

Furthermore, Aphrahat firmly orders the *Bnay Qyōmo* to “Let insults not come out of our mouths, with which we pray to God (see James 3:9–10). Let us not curse [lit. not be cursers], so that we might be set free from the curse of the Law” (col. 244.11–13).

f. Fraternal Correction

Aphrahat directs the *Bnay Qyōmo* by saying that “Where he (*Bar Qyōmo*) is received, let him rebuke, but where they do not receive him, let him keep his honour. At an appropriate time let him speak his word, but [if there is no opportunity] let him be silent [lit. Let him speak wherever his word will be accepted, otherwise he should remain silent]” (cols. 273.27–276.3).

g. Begging

Aphrahat shows the correct way for begging for physical hunger: “He (*Bar Qyōmo*) should not despise himself on account of the demands of his stomach, but should reveal his secret to one who fears God, and keep himself from the Evil One” (ibid., col. 276.4–6).

h. Comportment with enemies

Aphrahat strikingly instructs that “He (*Bar Qyōmo*) should not respond to an evil man, nor to his enemy. Let him fight in such a way as to have no enemies at all. When they envy him because of what is good, let him add to his goodness and not be plagued by jealousy” (ibid., col. 276.6–10).

i. Almsgiving

As shown earlier (see *supra*, under d), some of the *Bnay Qyōmo* were somehow economically capable of sustaining themselves, others, however, were not. Aphrahat presents both cases and comforts them by saying that “When he (*Bar Qyōmo*) is able to give to the poor, let him rejoice, but when he is not able, he should not be sad” (col. 276.10–12).

j. Inappropriate Dialogue

Aphrahat classifies the people whom *Bar Qyōmo* should not deal with. He warns the *Bnay Qyōmo*: “Let him (*Bar Qyōmo*) not be acquainted with an evil person, nor let him speak with a disgraceful man, so that he will not give himself over to disgrace. He should not dispute with a blasphemous man, or his Lord will be reviled because of him. He should stay away from the slanderer and should not try to make one person pleasing to another with flattering words” (col. 276.12–28).

k. Legal Issues

The *Rules* of Rabūla single out two legal issues of which the *Bnay Qyōmo* should be well aware. The 26th *Rule* states that “The priests and deacons and the *benai qeiāmā* shall not become ‘*epiṭrāpē*’ (=‘representatives’) or *šālīṭanē* (=‘rulers, taskmasters, leaders’) to the lay-people, nor take on them [any] lawsuit of their relatives, or of those who bribe judges (lit. ‘who buy judges for themselves’), and persevere at the door of a judge” (see SAD, p. 43; OS, p. 218); and the 41st *Rule* states that “The priests or deacons shall not give surety to anyone, nor the *benai qeiāmā*, neither in writing nor without writing” (SAD, p. 46; OS, pp. 219–20).

4.3. Work

The Syriac literature of the fourth and fifth centuries, in general, does not provide enough information concerning the type of employment that the *Bnay Qyōmo* were allowed to undertake for a living. Still, our sources convey some arresting impressions.

Aphrahat’s general rule concerning employment for the *Bnay Qyōmo* is affiliated with poverty. He repeatedly encourages them to abandon the world and its materialistic properties (col. 249.2–6) by selling their possessions (col. 241.8–9) and distributing them to the poor (col. 256.19–20) in order to “buy the pearl, so that we might be rich [cf. Matt 13:46]” (col. 241.8–9; cf. 244.22, 248.9–10, 280.20). Their pattern is the Lord Himself, who in His humility “He made himself poor (Phil 2:6–8). . . though he was a fountain that quenched thirst, he grew thirsty and asked for water to drink [John 6:7], though he was fullness and satisfied our hunger, he hungered when he went out to the wilderness to be tempted [Matt 4:2; Luke 4:2]” (col. 276.24–277.8). Aphrahat is calling the *Bnay Qyōmo* to live in poverty when he refers indirectly to the poverty of Elisha the prophet by stating that his provisions were only a bed, table, chair, and candlestick (col. 264.20–22). Rabūla expresses the same thought about poverty when stating that “All those who have become disciples of the Messiah (priests, deacons, *Bnay Qyōmo* and *Bnoth Qyōmo*) shall not be covetous to possess more than their needs, but they shall distribute it to the poor” (SAD, p. 42; OS, p. 218; cf. Harvey 1994 on this as a principle of social welfare).

It seems, however, that not every member of the *Bnay Qyōmo* order was following this promoted rule of poverty. Vööbus (1958, p. 202) claims that Aphrahat “could not speak of absolute poverty as a common trait of these elite-groups” because some of them were giving to the poor and others were lending money and receiving interest. The goal of “absolute poverty” for the *Bnay Qyōmo* was probably not Aphrahat’s aim anyway. He did not want the *Bnay Qyōmo* to go around begging from everyone to survive, even in extreme cases, for food (cf. col. 276.4–6). Surely his intention was that covenant members should live self-sustained lives (“give us our daily bread [Matt. 6:10]”) and detach themselves from the materialistic world in order to grow spiritually (e.g., col. 249.2–3). If the phrase “when he is able . . . when he is not able” in the statement of Aphrahat: “When he (*Bar Qyōmo*) is able to give to the poor, let him rejoice, but when he is not able, he should not be sad” (col. 276.10–12) applies to the *one* and the *same person*, then the statement conveys the notion that the *Bnay Qyōmo* did not always have the opportunity to donate to the poor. If, however, Aphrahat points to different categories of *Bnay Qyōmo*, i.e., some being able to donate and others not, then the question may be posed: how much and in what form is the donation to the poor? Even a smaller amount than a penny (cf. Mark 12:42) given is considered a donation. In fact, a statement made by Aphrahat criticizing the contemporary leaders of the people, i.e., the bishops, for violating what seems to be the *acquiring possessions* and *lending-interest* rules of the *Bnay Qyōmo* because the bishops were elected and ordained from the order, and poverty, which proven herein were required of them, asserts the following: “There have arisen leaders among our people who have forsaken the Law and have adorned themselves with evil. They have acquired possessions, and greed has conquered them. They have lent at interest and demanded advance interest. . .” (*Demon.* col. 577.1–4; cf. SAD, p. 42; OS, p. 218). Not following the rule does not mean that it does not exist.

Such trade with worldly money and goods is prohibited work for the *Bnay Qyōmo*, and Aphrahat repeatedly warns against such acts since commerce involves possessions, lending money, and demanding interest. This sort of work, he asserts, would lead to greed and other sins because they have “adorned themselves with evil. . . The one who loves fields and merchandise will be deprived of the city of the holy ones” (col. 248.9–10); “Let the one who takes on the yoke of the holy ones remove himself from commerce” (cols. 248.2–249.2; cf. 249.10–12; see Smith (1903, p. 283) for the technical Syriac term for “commerce”, as against Valavanolickal’s (2005) “money affairs”, p. 110, and Lehto’s (2010) “getting and giving”, p. 174); and “He (a *Bar Qyōmo*) should not lend and receive interest (using Valavanolickal’s accurate trans. in this case), nor should he love greed” (col. 273.21–23). Rabūla is in obvious agreement and adds to the list of prohibited work “any craftiness of profane profits” (SAD, p. 38; OS, p. 216).

Some other specific, named professions are not allowed to Covenanters. They should not be “watchmen of granaries and vineyards or hirelings for the laymen”, just, as noted above, they are not to represent or lead over laypeople and plead with judges (SAD, p. 43; OS, p. 218). It seems that employment as any sort of “watchman” was considered to be degrading and prohibited to the *Bnay Qyōmo* because during times of persecution in the Orient they were assigned to this same profession as their punishment (see *Acta Sanctorum Confessorum Guriae et Shamonae exarata Syriaca lingua Theophilo Edesseno Anno Christi 297* [ed. Rahmani], p. 27).

What kind of work, then, are the *Bnay Qyōmo* able to perform? Aphrahat is constantly expressing the idea that the *Bnay Qyōmo*’s main duty is evangelizing and promoting the Christian faith. So, they have to proclaim the Gospel and be diligent in teaching (cols. 637.25–640.1) and spreading it (cols. 241.19–20; 244.6–8) because the Lord has hired them “for his vineyard” (col. 244.13–17). The Lord, moreover, has given them talents to trade and multiply for spiritual benefits (col. 248.9–15) instead of trading for worldly profits: “Let us do business with the silver that we have received, so that we might be called diligent servants (cf. Matt. 25: 12,23)” (col. 240: 13–14; cf. also 248.12–14, 252.1–3, 356.27–357.1, 401.2–5, 637.35–640.1, 716, 23–24, etc.). Thus, Aphrahat is calling the *Bnay Qyōmo* to spread the word of the Gospel “Let us be poor in the world (cf. James 2:5), but let

us enrich many with the teaching of our Lord” (col. 244.22–23) because the workers did not receive their reward yet for “their Lord has not yet come” (401.17–21).

The relative paucity in Syriac sources on possibilities for any definite employment among the Covenanters to sustain themselves is troubling, and the difficulty is compounded by Aphrahat’s reticence. Some statements by Rabūla, however, do fill out the picture by acknowledging clearly that one of the *Bnay Qyōmo*’s possible day jobs was to act as stewards or managers of Church affairs: “The laymen shall not become the *rabai bātē* (stewards, managers) in the church except where there are no *benai qeiāmā* who are suitable” (SAD, p. 47; OS, p. 220). Moreover, in addition to their pastoral care, the parish priests of the local community are obliged to care for the well-being and behaviour of the *Bnay Qyōmo* who live within the boundaries of their congregations (SAD, p. 38; OS, p. 216). They should take care of the poor of the order, and if they cannot, they should inform the local Bishop so he will attend to the *Bnay Qyōmo*’s needs “so that because of their need they may not be compelled to do something that is not suitable” (SAD, pp. 39, 41; OS, pp. 216–17), or in other words, work not fitted for them.

5. The Spiritual Life of the Covenanters

To understand the spiritual life of the *Bnay Qyōmo*, one needs a short description of the main requirements (and related terminology) of Syriac monasticism of the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

5.1. Virginit

Virginit (ܒܬܘܠܐ—*bthulūtho*) and chastity were especially important characteristics that the *Bnay Qyōmo* had to preserve (see, e.g., Aphrahat, *Demon.* cols. 268.26–272.19). According to numerous Syrian writers (see Brock 1989, pp. 40–41, 56), every Christian soul is betrothed to the heavenly Bridegroom at baptism, but this is particularly so for any *Bnay Qyōmo* (cf. *Demon.* col. 272; *Acta*, vol. 2, pp. 236–37), male or female, because each made their special ascetic vows at the time of baptism to remain perpetually virgin. Not just in the exterior or physical way, but inwardly or spiritually, in the heart or soul; virginit and chastity are important features for Covenanters to watch and keep intact at all times. Even though a person of *Bnay Qyōmo* could remain a *virgin* outwardly, one could commit adultery secretly or in thought. Hence, they should not marry and remain in a state of complete sexual continence, physically or by thought, neither openly nor secretly. They ought to take prophet Elijah (Aphrahat, *Demon.* col. 253.9–10) and John the Baptist (col. 264.22–25) as examples of their virginit. They should live a spiritual life that is “angelic” in essence. According to the Gospel, angels live in a marriageless state (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35–36) and so should the *Bnay Qyōmo* (cols. 841.3–4.10–13, 23–26). Even though living among people, they should be in the likeness of the angels, *strange* in their spiritual way of life to the common people (see col. 248. 25–28).

To abstain from sexual inclinations amounts to one of the fiercest battles the *Bnay Qyōmo* struggle to uphold to keep their virginit intact. One of the best and most effective *weapons* to fight this kind of temptation is to minimize contact, as much possible as they can, with the opposite sex (cols. 264.25–265.2). Along with other Fathers of the Syrian Church in his time (as mentioned earlier in Section 4.1), the directives which were given by Aphrahat in this connection indicate that some of the *Bnay Qyōmo* adopted the *syneisaktoi* (mixed-gender communal) form of living. But Aphrahat encourages all Covenanters to either live a single (not married) or solitary life (later called “hermit”) or with others of the same sex (later: “cenobites or monastery life”) (cf. Nedungatt 1973, pp. 421–22), in order to maintain holiness and purity (cols. 260.13–261.14 [using Lehto 2010, p. 179]; cf. col. 256.22–24). The Church Father insists that under no circumstances should the *Bnay Qyōmo* cohabit with the opposite sex, especially the females who are considered to be specifically betrothed to Christ (col. 272.1–19).

Ephraim the Syrian (Beck 1973, pp. 9.447–10.482) and Rabūla of Edessa expressed similar views. Rabūla’s *Rules* require that “if possible, they (the *Bnoth Qyōmo*) shall dwell

with one another; and the same also with the *benai qeīāmā*". However, he permits the *Bnay Qyōmo* to live with the other sex with only one condition: that person has to be their mother, sister, or daughter. He also warns priests and deacons in his 4th Rule not to "be served by women and particularly not by the *benat qeīāmā*." Rabūla goes further in his Rules by prohibiting the priests, deacons, and *Bnay Qyōmo* (males) to compel the *Bnoth Qyōmo* (females) "to weave garments for them by coercion" (SAD, pp. 36–38, 40; OS, pp. 215–17). All these rules and warnings have one intention: keep the least possible direct contact with the opposite sex whenever they are by themselves, not with the wider community, to lessen as much as possible the temptation of carnal desires.

Virginity is upheld, not because marriage is a sin, an evil, or something forbidden for the faithful to do, but because celibacy is superior to marriage. Aphrahat openly clarifies that marriage is holy and is in accordance with the teachings of the Bible "Far be it from us to find any fault with marriage, which God has given to the world! For it is written: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Gen 1:31)" (col. 836: 20–23). But when compared to celibacy, which is chosen by the *Bnay Qyōmo* by their own free will (col. 841.19–22), marriage becomes inferior. As he puts it, "But some things are more excellent than others. God created heaven and earth, and they are very good, but heaven is more excellent than earth . . . He created Adam and Eve, but Adam is much better and more excellent than Eve. And he created marriage, the procreation of the world, and it is very good, but virginity is more excellent still" (cols. 836.24–837.11).

5.2. Holiness

Virginity was not the only test involved in "covenanting" with Christ. Holiness (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ—*qadishūtho*), treated with length by Aphrahat, was another, if nonetheless related to virginity and required of both genders of the *Bnay Qyōmo* (cf. *ibid.* col. 261.2–14; Koltun-Fromm 2001, p. 213).¹ The Syriac Fathers use *qadishūtho* (holiness) and its adjectives *qadisho* / *qadisho* (=holy man/holy woman) in its wider as well as narrower senses of the meaning. The wider or general sense is used to denote the *state of holiness* that God, a person, people, or a thing possesses. So, God is The Holy One (Demos., cols. 192.2, 13, 425.22, 469.4. etc.), the Bible is holy (cols. 1.7, 45.8, 97.5, 1045.18, etc.), the Law is holy (cols. 105.13, 22, 121.8, etc.), the people of God in Old Testament are holy (cols. 221.1, 22, 224.25, etc.), the people of God of the New Testament (Christians) are holy (col. 232.3, 6, etc.), the inhabitants of heaven are the holy ones (cols. 241.20, 248.10, etc.), etc. Christians generally are encouraged to attain this sort of holiness in this world as well as in the other (e.g., cols. 12.16–17, 296.3). The base of this sense lies in the commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy" (Matt 5:48). To acquire this kind of *qadishūtho*, for which every Christian including the *Bnay Qyōmo* is exhorted to strive, a person has to pray, fast, perform good deeds, and generally follow Christ's commandments (see e.g., col. 240.2–5).

A narrower sense of holiness finds its base in the command of the Lord to Moses to go to the people and "hallow [sanctify, consecrate] (=qadēsh, as imperative verb of *qadishūtho*) them today and tomorrow . . . and Moses came down from the mountain to the people and hallowed (qadesh) the people. . . he said to the people: Be ready the third day; you shall not touch a woman" (Exod. 19: 10, 14–15). In other words, being in *Qadishūtho* in the special sense is the *sexual continence* that the people practice after marriage. Aphrahat speaks elaborately concerning this kind of *qadishūtho* in his Demonstration 18: "A Demonstration against the Jews and on Virginity and Holiness (*Qadishūtho*)" (cols. 825.2–25, 832.2–4, 7–10), showing the term was used for special occasions, temporarily or permanent, and for a specific person or group of people (cols. 261.15–18, 26–264.1). The *Bnay Qyōmo*, in particular, are "ܩܕܝܫܐ—*qadīshe* (holy ones)" who have abstained from sexual relations and kept themselves spiritually and carnally "pure" (cols. 260.22–24, 261.12–14), although this does not then mean that married people cannot be "holy" unless they abstain from sexual relations. As Aphrahat teaches, "Let us be faithful in His service, so that He might serve us in the dwelling place of the holy ones" (col. 241.19–20), while "The one who loves fields and merchandise will be deprived of the city of the holy ones" (co. 248.9–10; cf. 265.18–24).

Surely, the “holy ones” of the Kingdom of Heaven are not only the *Bnay Qyōmo* (see col. 833.4, 1013.21, 1020.18–19), but also married people. Aphrahat also made it clear that not all *Bnay Qyōmo* are “*qadīshe* (holy ones)” in either the narrower or broad sense of holiness (e.g., col. 356.4–7).

In such a case, then, it is obviously important to be careful in distinguishing between the general/wider and the special/narrow usages of the term *qadishūtho* as found in the writings of Aphrahat, being aware that context will be important in determining meaning. Note, for example of interest, how Aphrahat states that virginity (*bthulūtho*) and holiness (*qadishūtho*) vowed by the *Bnay Qyōmo* can be considered as kinds of fasting (col. 97.11–14).

5.3. Other Virtues

Besides other numerous virtues that the *Bnay Qyōmo* should follow (e.g., *ibid.* col. 240.6–10), it is necessary for them to pray constantly and fast, which Aphrahat calls “desirable fruits” (col. 245.20), read the Scriptures (349.6–7), be humble (277.19–23), and show mercy (through giving alms) to those who are needy (240.17–18, 272.26, etc.). Even though every Christian has to perform these virtues, *Bnay Qyōmo* aim to achieve a higher level of these as the spiritual ones. Aphrahat and other Fathers admonished the *Bnay Qyōmo* to be spiritually perfect and fulfill all the commandments of Jesus in deeds (e.g., 240.1–6, 272.20–24; OS, p. 177). To do so, for instance, the *Bnay Qyōmo* should be just and judge themselves truthfully to ascertain that they are following the instructions of the Gospel in order not to turn their “faces downward [before the members of] the tribunal, who sit on thrones and judge the tribes” (Aphrahat, *Demon.* 245.4–6). They are “sanctified, watchful, ready [for the spiritual battles] and standing [in prayer] before God all their days” (col. 829.11–13). Being vigilant and praying ceaselessly the vigils are essential acts required of the *Bnay Qyōmo* to observe (256.16–18). If, however, they are struck in their struggle against sin, there is a remedy for that: repentance (see cols. 316.8–10, 317.15–17, etc.) because “for all illnesses there are remedies; they are cured when a wise physician finds them” (316.6–10). The physicians are the bishops, the disciples of our Wise and Glorious Physician (316.10–11, 317.22–23; cf. 357.8–12, 457.9–10), who neither should withhold medicine from the one who needs to be healed nor should they reveal the sin that person has confessed to anyone (cols. 317.22–320.16).

Fulfilling the commandments written in the Gospel is considered the “weapon” of the *Bnay Qyōmo* to make them ready for the spiritual fight (cf., e.g., col. 245.6–8). In numerous declarations, Aphrahat demonstrates that the *Bnay Qyōmo* are athletes (col. 265.8), and they should not be defeated (col. 677.13–14) but always be victorious in struggle (col. 609.19–21) taking place in the world, which is the arena of their fight (248.18–20, 612.6–8). They have to equip themselves with the suitable and right armaments: be vigilant and hold fast to the oath vowed at baptism and the teachings of the New Testament, especially the Gospel, which are extremely important for their spiritual struggle (240.1–256.24; *Liber Graduum* [Kmosko] PS, vol. 3, col. 452.16–22). Otherwise, they will surely lose the contest (Aphrahat, *Demon.* PS vol. 1, col. 321.16–24) because “Our Adversary is skillful, my friend, and the One who fights against us is crafty. He prepares himself against the strong and the heroic, so that they might be weakened. For the weak belong to him, and he does not oppose those whom he has captured” (col. 253.14–19). Aphrahat is keen to present practical tactics for the *Bnay Qyōmo* to fight against various temptations of the devil (256.3–24). If the Adversary “tries to come to them in sleep”, for example, “they are to be attentive and keep watch, singing songs and praying. If he entices them with possessions, they should give them to the poor” (256.16–20).

Aphrahat warns the *Bnay Qyōmo* that the life of virginity adhered to by them is not favoured by everyone. There will be mockers who mock them (*Demon.* cols. 312.6–9, 14–15, 613.17–18), and he notes that such scoffing is not a new strategy against Christians because one sees it already explicitly used by the opponents of Jesus (cf. Luke 16:14; *Demon.* col. 312.9–14), giving a case of the Jews at that time criticizing and sneering at the *Bnay Qyōmo* for keeping virginity and not marrying and having children (cols. 817.1–8, 841.3–10).

The *Bnay Qyōmo*, therefore, should be patient, on guard against mockers, and “Read and learn, and be zealous to read and to act. Let this Law of God be your meditation at all times” (312.6–18; using Lehto 2010 trans. p. 198).

But what of those who do not “make the grade”, or “fall from grace”? There is more to tell.

5.4. Fallen Sons of the Covenant

In his seventh Demonstration, as already noted, Aphrahat states that after making their vows at baptism, the newly *Bnay Qyōmo* are classified into two categories: the *strong* and the *weak*. The priests should encourage the strong, and openly turn back from the struggle those who are lazy and weak “lest when fighting overtakes them they conceal their weapons and take flight and suffer defeat” (col. 348.1–10). He does not say whether those who immediately after baptism were *openly turned [back] from the contest* then had the freedom to obtain the blessing of the Church for marriage, since they had vowed virginity, but were now only going to live a normal life. By his statement, though, that “There is only shame for the one who turns away from the struggle. The one who turns away but who has not yet vowed (lit. ‘chosen’ or ‘singled out’) himself nor yet put on armour is not blamed. But if any of those who have vowed themselves and have put on armour and turn away from the struggle, they are ridiculed” (col. 245.19–24), a problem is encountered if one assumes the hypothesis of Burkitt and his supporters is right, because “surely the state and privileges of those who ‘went back’ at first, and those who after trial are ‘sent back’ are the same. The second class has been tried by the water of baptism and found wanting; they ought to have turned back at first. Neither one class nor the other is a scandal to the community; they are not blamed, but Church privileges are not for them, they are not to live the Church’s life, they have retired from the ‘contest.’ In one word, they are out of communion” (Burkitt 1906, p. 12). But this is a curious deduction. The issue is not with those who simply “went back” before baptism because nothing happened in connection with them yet. But, if “baptism is not the common seal of every Christian’s faith, but a privilege reserved for celibates,” as Burkitt awkwardly contended (Burkitt 1904, p. 125), will those who are “turned back openly” by the priests from the contest *after baptism* and get married be sacked from baptism and considered sinners all the days of their life, “out of communion”? If the vow of celibacy is associated with that of baptism and both are one, is their baptism revocable? (Vööbus, for one (Vööbus 1958, p. 198) concludes it must be irrevocable). Although no time frame is set for the *Bnay Qyōmo* after the baptism to turn them back from the contest, Aphrahat’s relevant assertion apparently implies that they are considered *novices*. This could suggest that they did not come into a *full vow* of their celibacy. The present writer believes that the vow taken by the people who are willing to join the *Bnay Qyōmo* order is either *separate* or *different* from that of baptism (see above on Initiation). Otherwise, if the vows of baptism and those of the *Bnay Qyōmo* are “the same”, what theological difference does it make for the fallen ones, if they were sent back openly immediately after baptism *or* if they willingly left the institution after a while?

So, what would be their spiritual (excommunicated or not) and liturgical status (ability to participate in Holy Sacraments) within the Church community? The sources actually distinguish between the fallen *Bnay Qyōmo* who are expelled from the Church by the hierarchy for certain reasons and those who are repentant. The admonitions of Aphrahat before and after the vow are warnings for the *Bnay Qyōmo* not to be lazy and fall in battle. If they fall, however, they should not justify themselves (*Demon.* col. 356.12–16) or lose hope and ask for repentance. He says: “For this reason, my friend, it is right that those who fall in the struggle (following Hallock’s trans. 1967, p. 53, as against Lehto’s (2010) ‘have entered’, p. 213, and Valavanolickal’s (2005) ‘go down’, p. 178) should not resemble those lazy ones, lest they turn away from the fight and become a disgrace to all their friends” (*Demon.*, col. 349.23–27). He adds by stating that repentance is neither an excuse for sinning nor a cause to become a slack (352.1–5). The priests, on the other hand, should not withhold repentance for those who confess their sins (356.18–22) because, first, it is contrary to the

Lord's practice since He never rejected a repentant sinner, and secondly, the Judgement Day has not yet come (356.18–357.7; cf. Nedungatt 1973, p. 437).

The fallen *Bnay Qyōmo* are to be sent for spiritual rehabilitation. Rule 29 of Rabūla orders the following: "Send into the monasteries the *benai qeīāmā* or the *benat qeīāmā*, who have fallen from their rank, for repentance; but if they do not stay in the monastery they shall not be received in the Church, but be suspended with their parents, as long as it is right" (SAD, p. 44 [some trans. needs correction]; OS, p. 218). The conditional phrase "if they do not stay" implies that they should stay a certain period of time. This period, however, is not identified; yet a canon from the Synod of Catholicos Ezekiel in AD 576 rules the period to be six months (Chabot 1902, p. 116).

The *Bnay Qyōmo* could also be expelled by the hierarchy of the Church for several reasons. Drunkenness, going frequently to taverns to enjoy the pleasures of life (food, drink, etc.), and breaking the vow of virginity were major causes for expulsion. Thus, the Rules of Rabūla inform that those "who become drunken or who enter taverns, shall be expelled from the church" (SAD, p. 42; OS, pp. 217–18). Another Rule of Rabūla states that "They shall anathematize, bind and send to the town for judgement the layman who dares to take a *bart qeīāmā* (as a wife); [and] if she, too, became corrupted by her consent, they shall send her, too" (SAD, p. 43; OS, p. 218).

In short, the Fathers of the Syrian Church wanted to stress that every Christian, but especially the *Bnay Qyōmo*, should be a real and active temple for the dwelling of the Spirit of Christ they received on the day of their baptism (so, Aphrahat, *Demon.* cols. 292.15–293.11, 309.22–26). They should not make His Spirit angry with them and they ought to let Him take control of their lives by being diligent in following His commandments (cols. 292.15–305.21, 312.15–18). Nedungatt (1973, p. 444) has conveyed matters excellently by saying that "The life of a Covenanter is life according to the Spirit. The spirituality of the Covenanters thus leads the way in the spirituality of the Syriac Church, which emphasizes the Spirit (*rouḥā*) over against the characteristic Greek accent on the *Logos*".

6. Covenanters' Physical Appearance and Dress

Bringing matters toward a close, some remarks are surely worth making about what is known of the outward appearance of the Covenanters.

6.1. Form of Dress

Numerous sources confirm that the *Bnay Qyōmo* had a special uniform to distinguish them from the other orders of the Church during the fourth and fifth centuries. Among the martyrs of the severe persecution of the Persian king Shapur II was a eunuch named Ōzōd. Seeing that many Christians of Karkho d-Ledōn were martyred for the sake of the name of Jesus, Ōzōd, himself a Christian, was eager to attain the "crown of martyrdom". And since he was close and a respected eunuch of the king, the soldiers and government personnel were acquainted with him. So, he disguised himself by wearing the uniform of the *Bnay Qyōmo* and joined the persecuted, whereupon he was killed. When Ōzōd was summoned by the king to the court the next day, he was not found. Personnel of the king went out searching for him, only to find that he had been killed. The excuse of the killers was that, while they suspected him of being Ōzōd because "he was wearing the clothes of the *Bnay Qyōmo*" they dropped their suspicion (*Acta*, vol. 2, pp. 244–45). Another piece of evidence of the special uniform of the *Bnay Qyōmo* turns up in the (compositely written) *Doctrine of Addai* (ca. 400). The text praises the spiritual and social behaviour as well as the evangelization of the *Bnay Qyōmo* among even the non-believing communities: "For every one who saw them ran to meet them, that he might honourably salute them; because even the sight of them spread peace over the beholders" (*The Doctrine of Addai* (ed. Phillips 1876, pp. 48, 50–51)). The words "saw them" clearly indicate that they were distinguished by their appearance, i.e., a uniform. Testimonies for their appearance are also attested in various other sources (e.g., Gregory Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (eds.

Abbeloos and Lamy 1877) vol. 3, col. 39; *Acta*, vol. 2, p. 296. n.2, OS, p. 177; Vööbus (1960, pp. 201–2)).

Moreover, although it could be argued that relevant statements in the work of Aphrahat and the *Liber Graduum* are just exhortations for the *Bnay Qyōmo* about what to wear, and not about any set uniform, it can still be maintained that these statements are about the spiritual meaning of clothes. They do not provide information about *what* the uniform was per se, but *how* it should be. Elaborating on the spiritual meaning of defilement, the *Liber Graduum* states that “Whoever dresses lavishly does not defile himself, but becomes really puffed up and extremely haughty and is brought down from the pursuit of Perfection” (Kmosko, col. 265.9–14). On Aphrahat’s advice, “He (the *Bar Qyōmo*) should not love the adornment of clothing, nor let his hair grow long and decorate it, nor should he anoint himself with aromatic oils. . . nor is it appropriate for him to wear fancy clothing. . . It is not appropriate for him to look at fancy clothing, or to wear stylish cloaks” (*Demon.* col. 273.7–9, 10–11, 13–14 [here preferring Valavopolickal’s trans. over Lehto’s]).

6.2. Colour of Clothing

A note among the *Rules* of Jōhannan bar Qūrsos (beginning of the sixth cent.) implies that the clothes of the *Bnay Qyōmo* were black: “Those who have children dedicated to the *qeiāmā*, shall give them a decent garment since their childhood so that they do not become luxurious in white linen garments” (SAD, p. 59). Later still, in his *Ecclesiastical Chronicon*, Bar Hebraeus (1226–1286) states that when Bar Ba’oshmīn became the Metropolitan of the East in ca. 344 AD, he encouraged the clerics, *Bnay Qyōmo*, and bishops to change their uniform and wear white-coloured clothes, similar to those worn by many lay people. The intention of the Metropolitan was that the clergy would avoid being targeted by the authorities during the persecution of Shapur II since they could be easily identified by their special uniform. Bar Hebraeus continues by saying that after the persecution ended and when “Nestorianism entered the East, with the change of (the colour of) clothing followed the change of doctrine, for those who adhere to it. They (their clerics, *Bnay Qyōmo* and bishops) did not accept to go back to wear the previous holy uniform, in order to distinguish themselves from (the clergy) of all other Christian peoples, who their monks are humbled by the Antonian uniform” (*Chron. Eccles.* vol. 3, cols. 39–41; cf. *Acta*, vol. 2, p. 296, n. 2 [by Bedjan]). Bar Hebraeus does not state his source regarding this information, yet when the earlier statements of Aphrahat, the *Liber Graduum*, and the testimonies of *Acta Martyrium* are considered, one may fairly safely infer that the style of the Antiochene *Bnay Qyōmo*’s uniform during the fourth and fifth centuries was simple and monochrome, most probably black.

6.3. Hood, Shoes, and Girdle

In the story of Ōzōd mentioned earlier (Section 6.1), it is said that he covered his head with a black hood (*Acta*, vol. 2, p. 245; Vööbus 1958, p. 206). It seems that the black hood was part of Covenantors’ clothes, although one cannot ascertain whether it was decorated with crosses on top of it, like the black hoods of the Syrian Orthodox monks today, or was simply black. In any case, the impression gained is that it covered the whole top of the head, tied to it, and most probably covered the back of the neck and extended to the shoulders.

There is a long exhortation by Aphrahat, which runs as follows:

Let us place the *helmet* (Ephes 6:17) of salvation on our heads, so that we will not be wounded and die in the battle. Let us *gird our loins* (Ephes. 6:14) with justice and truth, so as not to be weak in the contest. . . Let us take as a *shield* (Ephes 6:16) against the Evil One the readiness that comes from the Gospel of our Saviour (*Demon.*, col. 244.2–8).

It could not be determined whether the Church Father refers in any way to Covenantors’ clothes or simply reproduces a short version of Paul’s text in his Epistle to the Ephesians. The armoury that Paul mentions in the Epistle consists of six parts: a girdle, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword. Aphrahat enumerates only three: helmet,

girdle, and shield, and it is possible that he was alluding to the hood, girdle, and garments of the *Bnay Qyōmo*'s order. Besides the garments and the cutting of the head's hair, though, it is discovered in the instructions of Rabūla that shoes are a definite part of the *Bnay Qyōmo*'s uniform (OS, p. 177).

6.4. Hair

The cutting off of the hair when becoming a member of *Bnay Qyōmo* is attested in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat and in the biography of Rabūla. The former requests that a *Bar Qyōmo* should not “let his hair grow long and decorate it” (col. 273.8 [preferring Valavopolickal's trans. over Lehto's]; cf. Nedungatt 1973, p. 426), and the latter conveys the same idea (OS, p. 177). Both sources, however, do not say whether this also applies to the *Bnoth Qyōmo* (female Covenanters) or not; and they also do not make clear how short the *Bnay Qyōmo*'s hair should be cut off. In any case, their main goal is to urge the *Bnay Qyōmo* to detach themselves from the adornments of the flesh and typical ways of living in the physical world, and so concentrate on their spiritual life.

6.5. Veil

Rabūla's clear instructions to the *Bnoth Qyōmo* were for them to use the veil while walking or going out into the streets. He says: “He was admonishing the whole *Qyōmo* of women (female Covenanters) at all times, that the face of a bride of Christ must never appear in the street in front of anyone without the covering of chastity. That they should not display at all any sign of licentiousness in any of their manners of dress” (OS, p. 177; Phenix and Horn 2017, pp. 36–37).

Conclusions

By examining the available evidence of the fourth- and fifth-century Fathers of the Syrian Church, generally and down to the finest detail, it was determined that the *Bnay Qyōmo* (males and females) existed as a discrete order within the Syriac-speaking communities in northern Mesopotamia at that time.

In terms of their rites and traditions, this paper has covered various matters that help characterize the *Bnay Qyōmo* community more thoroughly than before. Baptism, as established, was not only for celibates (as Burkitt and his supporters wrongly supposed), but for everyone who was married or unmarried (ܐܠܚܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ). Those who willingly volunteered (choosing/or singling themselves out—ܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ) to enter into the spiritual “contest (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ—*agūno*)” were required to take a vow, which marked their covenant with the Lord and was connoted by the phrase “the one who takes up the yoke of the holy ones”. Based on the data presented, mainly by Aphrahat, the logical suggestion for the vow taken by the *Bnay Qyōmo* as the vow of baptism was different from that for celibacy. The latter, for its part, was a vow consisting of two parts: the first at the ceremony of baptism, which could be revoked by the priests immediately after baptism, who sent select *novices* back to live a normal life, and the second after a period, when the priests gave approval for the novice to become a *full member* of the order. The order had firm rules and regulations and an ascetic way of life that was strictly adhered to, including the wearing of a special form of dress (black with a hood) that distinguished them from others. From the fully admitted and consistently holy Covenanters, also, members of the clergy could be selected.

The *Bnay Qyōmo* played a singularly important role in the spiritual, ecclesiastical, religious, and social life of Syriac Christians living in northern Mesopotamia for several hundred years. Their influence is still felt in the life of the Syriac-speaking Church. While the order of the *Bnay Qyōmo* was ultimately overtaken by the Antonian order of monasticism and fell into abeyance around the eighth century, the title *Ba[r]th Qyōmo* (Daughter of the Covenant) has continued until this day, for the wives of priests in the Syrian Orthodox Church are generally called *Bnoth Qyōmo* (*Phenqitho d-khirotūnīas* (ed. Iwaz 2009, p. 280); cf. *Rasamat Al-Qissisāt* (ed. Hayek 2001)). The lives and influence of this unique order of men

and women, who committed themselves to holy service to Christ and the Church so long ago, continue to speak to us about dedication to Christian living in our own century.

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Note

- ¹ It is worth noting that it is well-known general rule of grammar in Syriac, similar to other Semitic languages, that the plural masculine verbs and nouns generally represent both genders, males and females. So, when the Syriac writers attribute the action or the noun to include both genders, they denote it with a plural masculine verb or noun. Otherwise, they will specify it with a proper or gender verb or noun. This grammatical fact in Syriac could mislead some scholars to inaccurate conclusions. Cf. Parisot, *Aphraatis*, PS vol. 1, col. 261: 2–14; Koltun-Fromm 2001, p. 213.

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