religions

MDPI

Article

My Friend the Cross: Cross-Directed Prayer in Seventh-Century Monastic Communities and New Media Studies

Daniel An

Department of Ancient History, Goethe University Frankfurt, 60629 Frankfurt am Main, Germany; d.an@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Abstract: While scholars have long recognized the central importance of the cross within Syriac-speaking Christian communities in late antique Mesopotamia, the question of how physical crosses functioned as aids for prayer has only recently begun to be explored. The present article addresses this question with respect to East Syrian monastic communities in seventh-century Mesopotamia, focusing on the context of the monastic cell. Bringing together accounts of cross-directed prayer in Syriac monastic literature with archaeological evidence for crosses from the region, the article concludes that physical crosses played an important role as mediating devices of divine presence that were both always at hand and the frequent objects of monastics' sensorial attention. These conclusions are subsequently discussed through the lens of recent research from the field of new media studies toward the goal of understanding how cross-directed prayer may have served to bridge monastic spirituality and sociality in Mesopotamia.

Keywords: cross; prayer; mediation; late antiquity; Mesopotamia; monasticism; new media; smartphone; trust

check for updates

Citation: An, Daniel. 2024. My Friend the Cross: Cross-Directed Prayer in Seventh-Century Monastic Communities and New Media Studies. *Religions* 15: 708. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060708

Academic Editor: Greg Peters

Received: 2 May 2024
Revised: 29 May 2024
Accepted: 30 May 2024
Published: 7 June 2024

Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

The late sixth to early eighth centuries witnessed a remarkable flourishing of monastic communities in Mesopotamia, especially in areas associated with the Syriac-speaking Church of the East. A striking theme in the literature produced in these communities is the perception, by some monastic practitioners, of physical crosses as mediators of divine presence. In the early seventh century, for example, a guidebook for solitary monastics advised its readers to eat their meals seated face to face with the cross, "like a man who is always in front of our Lord".[1] Roughly a century later, the monk John of Dalyatha, writing in northern Mesopotamia, described kissing and embracing the cross in his cell until "the arms are wearied by the embrace of the beloved" (*Letters* 13.2–3, ed. Beulay 1978, pp. 342–44). Another monk, Isaac of Nineveh, author of a late-seventh-century treatise on the "mystery of the cross" (*ʾrāzeh d-ṣlībā*), summed up this perception concisely: "Whenever we approach the cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ: so it seems to us through our faith in him/it" (*Second Part* 11.18, ed. Brock 1995, p. 48 [text], 58 [tr.; modified]). Isaac's contemporary Dadishoʿ of Qatar put it even more strongly, stating that monastics "ought to trust that they have Christ our lord, the son of God, as a son of the community in the sight of his cross fastened on the wall opposite them". Physical crosses, Dadishoʿ asserted, were the means by which monastics might "love and kiss" Christ not only as their God, but also as their fellow monastic (*Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah* 13.3, ed. Draguet 1972, p. 177). Like Isaac, Dadishoʿ drew an explicit connection between the "trust" or "faith" (*haymānutā*) of monastics and the mediating power that crosses exercised for them.

Scholars have long noted the importance of crosses in late antique Mesopotamia. Historical theologians have emphasized the multivalent symbolism of the cross in early Syriac theological writings (Yousif 1976; Karim 2004), and a number of studies have

specifically highlighted the importance of the cross for Isaac of Nineveh (Van der Ploeg 1943; Alfeyev 2000, pp. 163–74; Behr 2015). At the same time, archaeological and art historical studies have increasingly documented the presence of a variety of physical crosses in Christian communities in late antique Mesopotamia.[2] Despite this recognition, it is only in the last few years that scholars have begun to situate cross veneration in the Church of the East in light of both textual and archaeological evidence (Brelaud 2022). Of particular note for the present study is a recent article by Erica Hunter that brings together evidence for stucco plaque crosses in Mesopotamia with passages from Dadishoʿ of Qatar and Isaac of Nineveh (Hunter 2020). Hunter's conclusion, which mirrors the statements of Isaac concerning the cross, is that the crosses she examined "convey[ed] a cardinal message that would have been readily comprehended by the faithful"—namely, "that the outward matter of the cross symbolised the hidden and unspeakable power of Christ". In this respect, Hunter concludes, crosses "acted as meditative objects, in which the divine indwelling of Christ was present in a mysterious, hidden fashion" (Hunter 2020, p. 320).

The present article furthers this line of research by contextualizing and discussing crosses as mediators of divine presence in late antique Mesopotamia against the backdrop of cross-directed prayer. Toward these goals, I first examine evidence for the manner and extent of cross-directed prayer as a historical practice in seventh-century Mesopotamia, focusing on the spatial context of the cell in East Syrian monastic communities. The relatively rich accounts of cell-based, cross-directed prayer in Syriac monastic literature from this period are here brought into conversation with the limited archaeological evidence for crosses that could have served as foci during prayer. Based on this evidence, the article concludes that physical crosses played an important role for at least some monastics as mediating devices of divine presence that were both always at hand and frequent objects of monastics' sensorial attention in the cell. Building on these conclusions, the article then discusses how the practice of cross-directed prayer could itself have shaped monastics' trust vis-à-vis their God and other people. Here, I incorporate two insights from the "religion as mediation" approach to religious studies put forward by Birgit Meyer: first, that attending to the mediating roles of specific objects can be a more productive research path than foregrounding religious practitioners' faith or belief, and second, that comparison of the mediating roles of different objects (regardless of whether they are "religious" or not) can help to elucidate the effects of those objects in their respective settings (Meyer 2013, 2014, 2015, 2020). In this vein, the present study draws on recent research from the field of new media studies—specifically, regarding the use of smartphones as personal mediating devices—to query the effects of cross-directed prayer on monastic practitioners. Ultimately it is suggested that crosses, as physical media of divine presence, fulfilled a key role as bridges between spirituality and sociality in late antique monastic communities. The article concludes by identifying further research paths to test this idea.

2. Cross-Directed Prayer in the Cells of East Syrian Monastics

Before treating the evidence for crosses as foci for prayer, an initial, practical issue arises: how much time did monastics spend praying in their cells? This question, which has not previously been addressed in the scholarship on monasticism in Mesopotamia, is difficult to answer concretely. Aside from the fact that time spent in prayer probably varied considerably across individuals and communities, accounts of time spent praying in Syriac monastic literature tend to present idealized portraits of monastics spending entire nights, or even days, engaged in prayer.[3] A relatively conservative approximation of monastic prayer time can, however, be gained from the contours of the daily office, a set of prayers to be said at seven fixed times between dawn and midnight each day.[4] Since the bulk of the office consisted of reciting psalms, it could be prayed alone as well as communally; monastic writers in the seventh century accordingly portray the office as a baseline norm that applied both to coenobitic monastics living in close community and to solitaries who might join their fellows only once a week for the eucharistic service.[5]

A rough approximation of the time necessary to complete the office in late antique Mesopotamia can be gained from Gabriel of Qatar, an East Syrian monk who authored an important commentary on the liturgy in the early seventh century.[6] In his commentary, Gabriel noted that the number of psalms allotted to each of the canonical hours was such that the entire psalter was recited over the course of each day in the monasteries known to him—a fact that may seem incredible to modern readers, but which Gabriel takes as unexceptional.[7] Judging by the time it takes the average reader to recite the psalter in English today, one can extrapolate that Mesopotamian monastics who adhered to the canonical office may have spent as much as four hours in psalmody each day.[8] In fact, since the recitation of psalms in the daily office was interspersed with acclamations and additional prayers at set intervals (Neroth van Vogelpoel 2018, pp. 101–4), one might reasonably conclude that monastics who observed the office would have spent upwards of five hours in prayer on ferial (that is, ordinary) days. Of course, this is not to say that *all* monastics spent this much time on prayer every day. The repeated injunctions in monastic literature concerning the importance of performing the entire office, along with explicit allowances made for weak or elderly monastics, indicate that the canonical hours were more a normative practice than a strictly enforced code.[9] Nevertheless, as a normative benchmark that was widely acknowledged, the daily office provides a helpful indication of the substantial amount of time that many monastics spent in prayer on a daily basis.

As Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony observed in her recent study of East Syrian prayer, for all that Syriac ascetic writers are often labeled as "mystical" for their focus on spiritual experience, many were also explicit about maintaining a visual focus on the cross during prayer (Bitton-Ashkelony 2019, p. 220). In the monastic communities of late antique Mesopotamia, the most important sites for such prayer were almost certainly the monastic cell and the church. Though the present study concentrates on the cell, it may be noted in passing that multiple types of evidence attest to the central visual presence of crosses in Mesopotamian churches. Large crosses dominate the apses of surviving late antique churches in the Tur Abdin region of northern Mesopotamia, while to the south, prominent crosses have been found in the sanctuaries of churches excavated at Resafa, Ḥīrtā (Arabic al-Ḥīrā), and Failaka in the Gulf (Keser Kayaalp 2021, pp. 181–82; Niewöhner 2020, pp. 196–98; Simpson 2018; Bernard et al. 1991, Figures 15 and 17). References in East Syrian liturgical commentaries of the sixth and seventh centuries attest to the presence of crosses above the altars and bemata of churches, as well as the movement of processional crosses through the church space during the liturgy.[10] Taken together, this evidence suggests that physical crosses played a prominent visual role within church spaces in Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, the absence of explicit textual descriptions of monastics focusing their attention on crosses while praying within the church space makes it difficult to delve deeply into cross-directed prayer as a practice within church spaces.

In the context of the monastic cell, the textual evidence is more explicit: the presence of crosses as visual and tactile foci during prayer in the cell is mentioned in East Syrian monastic writings from the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. Writings dealing with everyday life in the cell prescribe, for example, looking at the cross while praying, prostrations before the cross, "greeting" the cross, kissing the cross, and sitting facing the cross while eating.[11] A narrative description of what cross-directed prayer in the cell might have looked like during the night office (*lelyā*) is found in the writings of Dadishoʿ of Qatar. Writing to a monk who had recently begun a period of solitude in his cell, Dadishoʿ advised him on what to do when the midnight hour arrived:

> Get up at once, with earnest diligence, and kneel before the cross, and pray the 'Our father who art in heaven.' Then rise to your feet, and embrace and kiss the cross with passion and love. And while kissing, speak thus: 'Glory to you, O our Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, who was crucified for us!' (*On Stillness* 5.10, ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 112)

Dadishoʿ went on to prescribe an alternating succession of psalmody and personal prayers addressed to Christ, performed while standing in the middle of the cell facing the cross.

Reflecting on his own experience of cross-directed prayer, Dadishoʿ noted that he knew some monks who tied a string between their big toes to maintain a vigilant posture before the cross throughout the night office (*On Stillness* 5.10–11, ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 112).

While not every detail of Dadishoʿ's text necessarily reflects general monastic practice—he was writing, after all, in a prescriptive vein to a particular addressee—the general practice of cross-directed prayer within the cell was probably customary for many monastics. For, as noted above, Dadishoʿ is not the only writer to speak of cross-directed prayer. Other East Syrian authors, including Babai the Great, Shubḥalmaran, Isaac of Nineveh, Shemʿon d-Ṭaybuteh, and Yawsep Ḥazzaya, all assumed the focalizing presence of a cross when they spoke of prayer in the cell. This assumption meshes with the perspective of non-Christian observers in late antique Mesopotamia, for whom cross worship was one of the most visible practices of Christian communities, featuring regularly in inter-religious debates from the seventh and eighth centuries (Williams 1996; Payne 2015; Tieszen 2017).

In contextualizing the mediating potential of crosses for Syriac-speaking monastics, it is important to acknowledge two points. First, the physical form of crosses pointed to an "original" prototype: the cross on which Christ was crucified. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that some monastic writers described praying toward a cross as praying toward Christ crucified.[12] As the East Syrian bishop Shubḥalmaran explained, the point of praying toward a cross was to foreground Christ's crucifixion as the most important reminder of his love for the monastic facing the cross in prayer (Shubḥalmaran 5.9.3, ed. Lane 2004, p. 161). Second, and relatedly, it should be born in mind that the terms for "cross" in Syriac (*ṣlībā* and *zqīpā*) are identical to the emphatic passive participles of the verbs denoting crucifixion, so that any instance of these terms might be translated on its own as either "cross" or "crucified one" in English. The medieval theologian ʿAbdishoʿ bar Brikha spelled this out explicitly in his explanation of the sacrament of the veneration of the cross in the Church of the East: "For *ṣlībā* ["cross"] is a title of Christ, in the same way as 'the killed one' or 'the worshipped one'" (*Margānitā* 5.2, ed. Mai 1838, p. 336). As scholars have observed, this linguistic ambiguity is particularly apparent in Syriac texts concerning cross veneration, which tend to intentionally occlude a distinction between Christ and the cross as agents of divine action (Payngot 1981, pp. 107–8; Bryant Gibson 2020, p. 125; Brelaud 2022). In the case of the present study of cross-directed prayer, both considerations make it difficult to draw a clear line between crosses as symbolic objects and crosses as media of divine presence.

The passage from Dadishoʿ quoted above raises a practical question: when monastics described praying to crosses in their cells, what kind of crosses did they have in mind? A rare glimpse of the potential variety of forms is provided by Dadishoʿ's contemporary Isaac of Nineveh. In a passage emphasizing the ubiquitous indwelling of divine presence in every cross, Isaac noted that the form of the cross could be "represented on a wall or on a tablet", "fashioned out of some kind of gold or silver and the like", or "carved out of wood".[13] Isaac thus described at least two locations for crosses, "on a wall" (*b-ēstā*) and "on a tablet" (*ʿal dapā*), the latter word being a general term for a flat, movable surface that could also denote "board", "table", or even "page" (Payne Smith 1903, p. 96; Sokoloff 2009, p. 316). Isaac's remark that crosses could be "represented" or "depicted" (*mettṣīr*) on these surfaces also hints at the use of representational media such as paint or (in the light of the archaeological evidence discussed below) stucco. Finally, Isaac explicitly named metal and wood as materials out of which freestanding crosses could be made.

While Isaac's description is unusual for its explicit naming of different materials and placements of crosses, certain features find confirmation in other sources. For one thing, it is plausible that some monastic habitations in late antique Mesopotamia featured crosses painted on their plaster walls. In southern Mesopotamia, excavations of two seventh- or eighth-century churches at the site of ancient Ḥīrtā uncovered simple crosses painted on the eastward walls of the churches, one of them possibly accompanied by a painted orans figure, suggesting a focus toward crosses during prayer.[14] In Egypt, where archaeological evidence for late antique monasticism is much richer than in Mesopotamia, crosses have

been found painted in niches in the eastward walls of monastic cells dating to the sixth and seventh centuries, suggesting that they served as visual foci during prayer (Rassart-Debergh 1988; Bolman 2007; Spalding-Stracey 2020). Since multiple East Syrian writers in the seventh century explicitly mentioned monks *writing* prayer-related reminders on the walls of their cells, it seems plausible that they would not have been averse to painting crosses on the walls as well.[15]

Isaac's reference to crosses made of metal also finds confirmation in the material record. Although no gold or silver crosses are known from Mesopotamia, copper-alloy crosses, some with holes pierced through them for hanging, have been found at several sites in central and southern Mesopotamia, including Bazyan, Tikrit, and Najaf in Iraq; Qasr-i Abu Nasr in Iran; and Jabal Berri on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia (Ali Muhamad Amen and Desreumaux 2018, Figure 10; Harrak 2010, no. FA.01.04; al-Kaʿbi 2014, Figure 13; Whitcomb 1985, Figure 66q; Potts 1994, Figures 2–4). The cross from Jabal Berri—which in late antiquity belonged to the East Syrian ecclesiastical province of Beth Qaṭraye—is notable in that it seems to have been fixed to a flat surface, judging by the holes pierced in each arm (Figure 1). Found in the same area as an East Syrian church that was partially excavated in the early 1990s, this cross has been dated to the sixth or seventh century (Potts 1994, pp. 62–63; Langfeldt 1994). One finds a possible reference to such a cross in another passage from Dadishoʿ (himself a native of Beth Qaṭraye), in which he described the physical affordances of the cross on the wall of his cell. Noting that "when the sun shines upon the cross, and you pray and kiss it, your sight perceives its light and your lips feel its heat", Dadishoʿ concluded, "It is our Lord whom you kiss and cherish with love" (*On Stillness* 5.5, ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 110). Here, the fact that Dadishoʿ mentioned the sun reflecting on the cross might indicate its placement on an exterior surface, while his description of the cross's "light" and "heat" suggests that he was speaking of a metal cross.

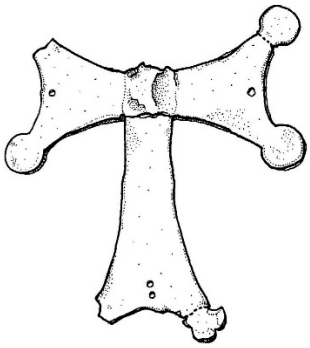


Figure 1. Drawing of a bronze cross from Jabal Berri, 8.4 × 7.3 cm (dimensions of horizontal and vertical arms without serifs), current location unknown. Drawing: Hildreth Burnett Potts.

Finally, Isaac's description of crosses on "tablets" finds possible confirmation in the stucco crosses that have been found at sites ranging from Nineveh (modern Mosul) in the north to the shores of the Persian Gulf in the south.[16] In general, these take the form of small, rectangular plaques or tablets with a cross incised or in relief on the surface, often within a geometrical framing design. In cases where the findspots are documented, the crosses are reported to have been found broken on the floors of excavated buildings, and it has therefore been suggested that some were originally wall-mounted, although many appear to have remained portable.[17] An example is a cross excavated at a monastic complex at Bazyan (near modern Sulaymaniyah) in northern Mesopotamia (Figure 2). This small plaque, roughly the size of a modern cellphone, was discovered together with several similar plaque crosses, which excavators tentatively dated prior to the ninth century (Ali Muhamad Amen and Desreumaux 2018, pp. 141–42, 147). According to the most recent study of the site, at least some of the plaques probably derived from the church, where they are conjectured to have been set in recesses found in the interior wall of the sanctuary (Amin et al. 2023, p. 135).[18]



Figure 2. Fragmentary stucco plaque cross from Bazyan, 8.0 × 16.5 × 1.6 cm, now at the Slemani Museum, acc. no. P-2433/046125. Photo: Hemn Nuri.

While much about these plaque crosses remains up for debate, Erica Hunter has argued that at least some of them acted as foci during prayer.[19] Specifically, Hunter speculated that such stucco crosses may have been what Isaac of Nineveh had in mind when he wrote of crosses being represented on "tablets" or "boards" (*dapē*) (Hunter 2020, pp. 319–20). The plausibility of this speculation is difficult to gauge on its own. There is, however, at least one other East Syrian text that points more definitively to the plaque crosses known from the archaeological record. According to a story preserved in the *Chronicle of Seert*, the Catholicos Aba I (d. 552) made a "plaster cross" that he set up in the newly established School of Seleucia, located on the precincts of a former Zoroastrian fire temple outside the Sasanian capital. The placement of the cross in the building had the effect, first, of making manifest all the demons in the building, which Aba duly expelled. Subsequently, the cross

was said to have served as a kind of "key" that the students at the School used "to open the door of their spirit and let the teaching enter. . . and indeed God opened the spirit of those who took a small piece of this cross" (*Chronicle of Seert*, ed. Scher 1911, p. 166).

This story is important for several reasons. First, the text's mention of a "plaster cross" from which pieces might be removed points strongly to the plaque crosses known from the archaeological record.[20] Since the account was most likely composed at the School of Seleucia itself in the late sixth or seventh century, we have here an important witness to the existence of such crosses in this period, located moreover at the center of the East Syrian ecclesiastical infrastructure.[21] Indeed, it is possible that Isaac of Nineveh encountered this cross or one like it at the School in person, since there are indications that he visited the School in or shortly after 676 (Brock 1999–2000, pp. 88–92). Second, the story complicates the picture of cross-directed prayer provided by monastic writers in the seventh century through its mention of the cross's direct apotropaic action—making manifest the building's demonic occupants—accomplished apparently without any specific input from Aba. While exposing demons certainly fits with the portrayal of Christ in the New Testament, and thus with an understanding of the cross as mediating Christ's presence, in this case the cross (or Christ) was thought to have taken a more active role in the local environment than simply serving as a visual recipient of prayer. Finally, the text also indicates that at least one famous plaque cross was used, if not explicitly as a direct focus for prayer (although this remains plausible), certainly as a mediating device through which the students at the School were expected to receive spiritual illumination from their God. In this case, the story adds another means of physical interaction with the cross to those mentioned above: removing small pieces of it for personal illumination.[22]

Summing up the foregoing investigation, some basic conclusions emerge. First, many East Syrian monastics probably spent a significant portion of their waking hours engaged in prayer in their cells. While the figure of four to five hours spent in prayer each day might seem incredible to contemporary readers, it seems safe to say that, for at least some monastics, this was standard practice. Second, for many monastics, this prayer was likely to have been cross-directed. Literary accounts of cross-directed prayer, while framed primarily as prescriptive guides for monastics in their cells, also tend to assume the presence of a cross in the cell and sometimes contain personal descriptions of prayer toward the cross based on the experience of the writers. These accounts receive contextual support via evidence of cross-directed prayer within monastic churches and inter-religious exchanges that foreground cross-worship as characteristic of Mesopotamian Christians. Finally, it can be noted that archaeological evidence in part corroborates the existence of various types of crosses that could have served as foci for prayer, while also provoking additional questions. While metal crosses such as the one found at Jabal Berri correspond in form to crosses described in monastic literature as "fixed" to the walls of cells, the widespread presence of plaque crosses in the material record opens the possibility that stucco crosses may also have served as material media of divine presence. The mention of a "plaster cross" in the School of Seleucia offers the strongest evidence for such a claim, while also offering additional examples of what such presence entailed, namely illumination and protection.

The remainder of this article discusses the implications of these conclusions. Returning to the question posed at the outset of the study, I ask: how might the regular practice of cross-directed prayer have shaped monastics' trust vis-à-vis their God and vis-à-vis one another? As noted above, monastic writers do not themselves address this question directly, preferring rather to describe both the practice of cross-directed prayer and the mediating power of the cross as outcomes of their trust in it. In what follows, I approach the question of monastics' trust in or via the cross through the lens of contemporary research on a mediating device with which nearly every person today is very familiar: the smartphone. In so doing, my goal is not to posit a simple correspondence between these devices, but rather to use the relatively well-documented mediating roles of smartphones today as a means to open up additional perspectives on cross-directed prayer in late antique Mesopotamia.

3. Discussion: Cross-Directed Prayer through the Lens of New Media Studies

Perhaps the most straightforward points of congruency between personal crosses in Mesopotamia and smartphones today are their near-constant physical presence and the high levels of sensorial attention lavished on each object in their respective settings. Above, it was argued that crosses were a regular feature in monastic cells, where they served as visual and tactile foci during the prayers of the daily office—a practice that, at least for some monastics, occupied a substantial portion of their waking hours. Today, the constant physical presence of and attention given to smartphones hardly needs exposition. In the roughly 15 years since the first iPhone became available, smartphones have quickly risen to the status of mediating devices that are both always at hand and frequent objects of sensorial attention in many parts of the world (Ceci 2023). Indeed, in some countries, the average time spent attending to smartphones roughly parallels that estimated above for crosses: a survey of one thousand American smartphone users in 2023 that asked participants to report their usage statistics (recorded automatically in the phone) found that the average user spent approximately four and a half hours each day physically attending to their smartphone, including looking at the screen, touching its surface, and speaking and listening to the phone (Kerai 2023). At least at the basic levels of physical presence and sensorial attention, then, crosses in late antiquity find a parallel in smartphones today.

The mediating potential of crosses and smartphones presents a more complex congruency. On the one hand, from the point of view of their "users", both crosses and smartphones mediate relationships with others. On the other hand, whereas monastic authors wrote of crosses mediating relationships with one specific entity—Christ—smartphones and other new media devices serve today to connect their human users to a potentially limitless array of other people and, increasingly, to other-than-human entities such as virtual personal assistants and chatbots. Although most people would not consider the latter type of relationships to be "religious", setting them side by side is productive in that it generates new ways to think about the effects of crosses as mediating devices. More specifically, as I discuss below, research on how the use of smartphones today affects the trust patterns of their users offers an intriguing entry into querying, from a social-historical point of view, how crosses shaped the trust patterns of monastics vis-à-vis other people, crosses themselves, and Christ.

3.1. Cross-Directed Prayer and Monastic Sociality

Today, the increasing importance of smartphones in peoples' lives corresponds, at least in some situations, to a lessening of trust in non-smartphone-mediated relationships. Research suggests that people who habitually rely on their phones for information tend to give less credence to information from other sources, including the humans around them (Kushlev and Proulx 2016). Simply put, trusting other people requires practice, and relying on smartphones for information retrieval tends to reduce opportunities to practice trusting other people (especially strangers) in everyday non-mediated situations. Indeed, the degradation of direct, human-to-human conversations due to the allure of smartphones as attention magnets is now commonly acknowledged. Studies of the social effects of "phubbing"—snubbing those around one by ignoring them in favor of a phone—have shown that the mere visual presence of a phone during a conversation can degrade the perceived importance of that conversation, and thence the emotional connection between those involved (Thornton et al. 2014). As the sociologist Sherri Turkle puts it, people need "to create sacred spaces—the kitchen, the dining room, the car—that are device-free and set aside for conversation. When you have lunch with a friend or colleague or family member, don't put a phone on the table between you".[23]

What about crosses? In fact, monastic writers in late antique Mesopotamia show an awareness of precisely the issue that Turkle seeks to combat, namely the distractive potential of physical mediating devices in human-to-human interactions. In contrast to contemporary concerns about smartphones, however, some monastic writers embraced this potential with respect to crosses. An example is the advice of Shubḥalmaran, bishop

of Karka d-Beth Slokh (modern Kirkuk, Iraq) in the early seventh century. Writing on the topic of how monastics should interact with the crosses in their cells when they receive visitors, Shubḥalmaran had two pieces of advice. First, if a monk was outside the cell when a visitor approached, the monk ought first to address the cross in his cell before addressing the visitor: "Keep him at a distance, salute him in silence, and enter and close your door. Salute the cross and pray, and then go out and speak with him" And second, even after the visitor entered the monk's cell, the two people should first "salute" (*šalem*) the cross and pray before physically approaching and greeting one another (Shubḥalmaran 5.10.1–2, ed. Lane 2004, pp. 162–63).

Of note here is the manner in which Shubḥalmaran sought to establish crosses as both facilitators and limiters of monastic social interaction. On the one hand, crosses, by serving as a mutual focus of verbal and bodily attention, brought Christians in late antique Mesopotamia into parallel relationships with one another. On the other hand, the very nature of that attention—speaking to and physically reverencing Christ through the medium of the cross—also ensured that cross-mediated relationships were limited to Christians (or at least, to those willing to venerate crosses). One can glimpse something of this dynamic in play in a story about Abraham of Beth Rabban, the leader of the School of Nisibis in the early and mid sixth century. According to his biographer, Abraham lived in a cell enclosed by an outer wall in which a low gate was set. Opposite this gate was a cross painted on the wall of Abraham's cell. The result was that all who visited him were forced to bow to the cross on his wall when they entered through the gate. That this functioned as a way of sorting visitors—whether intended as such by Abraham or not—is clear from the fact that some detractors of the holy man accused him of hiding an idol behind the cross, only to be discredited when only the cross was found to be there (Barḥadbshabba, *Church History* 32, ed. Nau 1913, pp. 624–25). In this case, the practice of bowing to a physical cross—here explicitly compared to an idol with respect to its mediating function—served to limit Abraham's interpersonal contact to those willing to perform such an action.

The foregoing comparison raises interesting questions for future research. Granted that some monastic leaders were aware of the social roles that crosses might play between and among monastics as mediators of divine presence, it remains unclear to what extent physical crosses featured in inter-monastic interactions—and to what extent they retained their mediating roles in such contexts. Scattered references in monastic hagiographical literature hint at a broad range of roles for crosses outside the cell. To give just one example, in the *Life* of Rabban bar ʿEdta (d. 611/612), founder of a large monastery in northeastern Mesopotamia, one finds several stories concerning a cross said to have been "fixed" (*qbīʿ*) on the wall outside the eponymous elder's cell.[24] In one anecdote, a monk with gout is said to have "knelt and worshipped before the cross" at night, whereupon he had a vision of a dove flying out of the cell. Recounting his own story, the monk told of how he rose from the ground with his gout healed: "...and I said with joy, 'Hail, cross! [*yā ṣlībā*]'" (*Life of Rabban Bar ʿEdta*, ed. Budge 1902, vol. 1, p. 192). Here, a cross is presented as physically mediating between two monastics—the secluded elder in his cell and the sick monk who seeks healing—and was also in some way responsible for the miraculous healing. The newly healed monk's direct address to the "cross" (or, recalling the ambiguity of the term *ṣlībā*, to the "crucified one") emphasizes the latter's personal agency. At the same time, the story appears in a rhetorical context aimed at extolling the holiness of Rabban bar ʿEdta. In this context, the author's point seems to be not so much that a cross effected the healing, as that bar ʿEdta's cross effected the healing. Stories like this one provide glimpses of the mediating roles that crosses could play between and among monastics, even as they also hint at the complex overlapping of divine and human agencies that crosses brought together.

3.2. Cross-Directed Prayer and Monastic Spirituality

A second salient area of contemporary research on new media devices concerns the increasing trust that phone owners put both in their phones as entities and in relationships

with AI entities mediated via phones and other new media devices. Already in 2017, a qualitative study of college-aged British smartphone users showed that some students relied on their phones for information that they had previously obtained from their parents; the participants explicitly linked this shift from relying on their parents to relying on their phones to the latter "becoming like virtual friends" (Fullwood et al. 2017, p. 350). A 2019 study conducted with more than a thousand smartphone users in Britain and Germany asked participants to rank their closeness to both people and personal media devices in their lives. Overall, smartphones ranked as more important than flatmates, classmates, colleagues, and all other media devices; perhaps more surprisingly, roughly one in three participants ranked their smartphone as more important than their parents and siblings, while roughly one in five rated their phone more important than their partner (Carolus et al. 2019, pp. 926–27). The study also assessed how much participants trusted their phones, using questions derived from the "Trust in Close Relationships Scale" traditionally used to assess human-to-human relationships (Carolus et al. 2019, p. 922).[25] The resulting questionnaire, which included questions such as "My mobile has proven to be trustworthy", and "I can rely on my mobile to keep the promises it makes to me", was used to generate a "trust in phone" score for each participant. Overall, the authors of the study found that the closer participants ranked their phones to themselves, the higher their trust in their phones (Carolus et al. 2019, p. 929).

Here again, a comparison with new media helps to illuminate additional aspects of crosses as relational mediators. First, it highlights the reciprocal connections between embodied practice and trust in the realm of relational mediation. In none of the examples just mentioned did smartphone users' trust in their phones arise from a conscious decision to perceive their phones as close companions. Rather, users' trust—along with their perception of their phones as companions—developed gradually in connection with the repeated practice of relying on and physically interacting with their phones in daily life. In this light, it is probably unrealistic to ground monastics' perceptions of crosses as media of divine presence in doctrinal assertions to that effect by monastic elders such as Isaac of Nineveh. Such assertions, I suggest, are better seen as outcomes, and perhaps justifications, of what was already a widespread phenomenon: the presence and roles of crosses across multiple spheres of monastic life. The extent of this presence remains to be mapped out and exceeds the limits of the present article. At the least, however, physical crosses were prominent in the church space during the East Syrian eucharistic liturgy (as noted above), and probably also in other communal monastic spaces.[26] It is therefore likely that monastic neophytes would have had opportunities to become accustomed to crosses as recipients of prayer outside the context of the cell.

Second, the fact that smartphones have come to be seen as being "like friends" by some contemporary users raises the question of whether crosses in late antiquity, as the physical media most frequently on the receiving end of monastics' tactile, oral, and visual devotion, may in some cases have taken on a status as recipients of trust almost in themselves. Such a status, I suggest, is partially adumbrated in the healings and exorcisms performed by or through crosses mentioned above, especially if one adopts the perspective of an onlooker. It is perhaps visible, too, in descriptions of monastics addressing crosses directly ("Hail, cross!"), referring to the cross with personal forms such as "my Lord Cross" (*māryʰ ṣlībā*), or stating that their cross saved them from their adversaries (whether demonic or mundane).[27] At the same time, however, such language has to be read in conjunction with the statements of monastic writers that crosses made Christ physically present to them, as well as with the ambiguity of the very language of "cross" in Syriac. In other words, to the extent that cross-directed prayer was synonymous with Christ-directed prayer, trusting in "the cross" was synonymous with trusting in "the crucified one".

A final area of comparison concerns the use of smartphones and other new media devices to mediate relationships between humans and other-than-human entities. Recent research has explored the use and effects of "AI companion" apps, which are designed to provide individualized emotional support more than specific knowledge or expertise

(Ta et al. 2020). A good example is the app Replika, an AI companion app with some ten million users worldwide.[28] Users who install the app choose a visual avatar, gender, and name for their AI companion, with whom they interact at increasingly sophisticated levels through text, speech, and image, as the Replika builds a database of the user's likes and dislikes over time. Studies indicate that Replika users tend to relate to their AI companion as a friend (or in some cases, a mentor or romantic partner) in whom they can confide, whose greatest strength is its/her/his unwavering and nonjudgmental emotional support (Ta et al. 2020; Trothen 2022). These findings are also supported by anecdotal evidence in the form of reports from Replika users testifying to the high levels of trust that they put in their AI companions, to the extent that some have ultimately married their Replikas in online ceremonies (Huet 2023).

On the surface, one might draw a comparison between the use of smartphones to mediate relationships with AI companions such as Replika and the use of crosses to mediate relationships with Christ. Both cases involve the use of physical devices to mediate relationships with entities that in one way or another transcend the boundaries of flesh-and-blood, here-and-now personhood. Moreover, both cases involve relationships that are, potentially, highly meaningful for the "users" of the devices, who invest a high degree of trust in the entities with whom they interact. At the same time, there are obvious problems in such a comparison. AI companion apps, as customizable avatars powered by large language models, have little in common with the transcendent, eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent God of Christian tradition. Likewise, while interactions with AI companion apps are exclusively device-based and limited mostly to audiovisual interactions, no monastic author surveyed here would limit relationships with Christ to those facilitated by crosses (or by any other physical media).

As with the previous examples, the comparison is useful less for the conclusions it permits than for the questions it prompts. First, it raises the question of how social context might influence susceptibility to device-mediated, trusting relationships. A recent study found that a majority of Replika users report that the app alleviates their loneliness and provides an ever-present vehicle for their trust by allowing them to self-disclose without fear of judgment (Ta et al. 2020). The correlate of this point is that users who are lonely and lack trusting human-to-human relationships are thereby primed to develop close relationships with their Replikas (Skjuve et al. 2021; Trothen 2022, pp. 9–10). Might an analogous situation pertain in the case of crosses as mediators in Mesopotamia? Dadishoʿ of Qatar, in his advice to monastics undertaking periods of seven days or seven weeks of solitude in the cell, hinted at the loneliness and boredom that accompanied such isolation, prompting monastics to seek excuses to visit their fellows or simply converse through the aperture of their cell (*On Stillness* 1.7–8, ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 51). Dadishoʿ presented cross-directed prayer as an antidote to these feelings, the means by which monastics, in treating the cross in their cell as a fellow "son of the community" (*Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah* 13.3, ed. Draguet 1972, p. 177), might thereby realign their relationships to make Christ the primary vehicle of their trust and companionship. How widespread such a view was is difficult to gauge. The fact that the most explicitly emotional accounts of crosses as media of divine presence occur in writings concerning solitary prayer in the cell may indicate a positive correlation between the social isolation of monastics and the emotional intensity of cross-mediated relationships with Christ.

A final area of enquiry raised by the foregoing comparison is the interchangeability of mediating devices, illustrated in the case of AI companion apps by the ability of users to relate to their companions not only via their phones but also via media such as computers or, more immersively, AR ("augmented reality") glasses. This article has focused primarily on crosses within the context of the monastic cell because monastic writers are most explicit in identifying crosses as media of divine presence in that context. To what extent, however, might monastics have perceived the presence of Christ through crosses in other settings—even settings that were seemingly far removed from the cell? One avenue of investigation that has not much been explored concerns the use of crosses as instruments of

execution under Sasanian rule in Mesopotamia.[29] In the early seventh century, for instance, the monastic superior Babai the Great wrote a biographical account of one of his monks, Gewargis, who was executed by the authorities for the crime of apostatizing from Zoroastrianism. In his account, Babai placed particular stress not only on the fact of Gewargis's crucifixion, but on the manner in which he greeted the instrument of his martyrdom:

> And when [Gewargis] saw the wood on which he would be crucified, he was in great haste and agitation. And with joy and gladness beyond compare, he approached and kissed the wood, and he readily embraced it. Then, turning his face to the east and stretching out his hands to heaven, he spoke in a clear voice before the whole great crowd that was assembled there: "I confess you, Christ our Lord, the true hope of Christians. . ." (*Life of Gewargis*, ed. Bedjan 1895, pp. 536–37)

As Gewargis's abbot and a fellow Christian, Babai had his own reasons for portraying Gewargis as he did, not the least of which being alignment with the trope that, as a heroic martyr of the faith, Gewargis would have welcomed his own death.[30] Nevertheless, I suggest that the context of cross-directed prayer outlined in this article provides a further ground to understand Gewargis's purported enthusiastic greeting of the cross on which he was crucified. For, at the time of his martyrdom, Gewargis had already been a monk at the Great Monastery of Mount Izla for more than 12 years (Reinink 1999, pp. 174–75)—more than enough time to have become accustomed to the kind of cross-directed prayer enjoined by contemporaneous writers such as Shubḥalmaran and indeed by his own abbot, Babai.[31] Seen against this background, it is not so surprising that Gewargis should have greeted the cross with kisses and embraces, nor that he should have followed these actions with a direct address to Christ. In so doing, Gewargis was simply engaging in the kind of prayer toward the "crucified one" that he had previously learned—even as, from Babai's perspective as an onlooker, Gewargis subsequently took on the status of "crucified one" himself.

4. Concluding Remarks

Almost immediately following the announcement of the first iPhone's release in 2007, the new device was christened the "Jesus phone".[32] Photoshopped images circulated online showing Jesus holding the new phone, or, in one example, Mary holding an iPhone in lieu of the infant Christ (Payão 2007). As one popular webcomic quipped, "Jesus has come back and he's a phone now" (Kurtz 2007). Capitalizing on this publicity, Apple followed up the iPhone's release with an advertisement featuring an image of a disembodied finger reaching out to touch an iPhone floating against a black background, with the caption "Touching is Believing". For many viewers, the advertisement evoked parallels from Christian tradition, such as Michelangelo's painting of the creation of Adam or the touching of the resurrected Christ's body by a doubting Thomas (Robinson 2014). Whether or not Apple's advertisement was meant to evoke an analogy between the iPhone and a transcendent divinity, the underlying message was clear enough: the iPhone induced consumers' "belief" precisely through its physical, ready-to-hand nature as a media device. Reviewing the meteoric growth in smartphone use since 2007 and the research mentioned above, one can say that Apple's advertisement has proved in some ways prescient. By their simple physical presence, smartphones present a constant invitation to participate in the relationships that they mediate and, thereby, inevitably shape their users' trust patterns.

This article has suggested that personal crosses in late antique Mesopotamia afforded an analogous—albeit much more specific—means of shaping interpersonal trust for their monastic bearers. As I argued in the first part of the article, for many monastics, a large part of their daily life in the cell consisted of praying toward crosses. Seen through the lens of research on the effects of smartphones as new media devices, this daily practice comes into clearer focus as a ground not only for the claims of monastic writers that crosses made their God physically present to them, but also for their trust in that God through the specific medium of the cross. As mediators of relationships both among monastics and between monastics and Christ, crosses thus played an important role as physical media that brought

together the realms of monastic sociality and spirituality. The examples mentioned in the discussion above indicate that further research might profitably explore the range of this role beyond the context of the monastic cell.

Funding: This research was completed under the auspices of an Alexander von Humboldt postdoctoral fellowship at Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. The APC was funded by the Open Access Publication Fund of Goethe University.

Data Availability Statement: The submitted article is based on already-published sources.

Acknowledgments: I thank Susan Eastman, Joel Marcus, Hartmut Leppin, and the article's anonymous reviewers for their comments on previous versions of this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Shubḥalmaran 5.9.3 (ed. Lane 2004, p. 161). Here and following, translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

2 Although there is as yet no survey of cross imagery in Mesopotamia, several important studies of crosses from particular sites have been published (Okada 1990; al-Kaʿbi 2014; Ali Muhamad Amen and Desreumaux 2018; Lic 2017, 2023).

3 E.g., Isaac of Nineveh, *First Part* (ed. Bedjan 1909, p. 58); idem, *Second Part* 6.4 (ed. Brock 1995, 17 [text]).

4 Robert Taft provides an overview of the East Syrian daily office (Taft 1986, pp. 225–37).

5 Shubḥalmaran 5.4.1 (ed. Lane 2004, p. 154); Dadishoʿ of Qatar, *On Stillness* 1.15 (ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 55). Gabriel of Qatar, writing in the early seventh century, speaks of solitaries emerging from their cells on Sunday to "mingle with the coenobites and stand together before Christ in the service" (*Commentary on the Liturgy* 5.5 [unpublished; MS British Library Or. 3336, f. 219b]).

6 The commentary, consisting of five *mēmrē*, or treatises, exists entire in a single manuscript, British Library Or. 3336. Portions dealing with the eucharistic liturgy (Mēmrā 5.2) and the daily office of morning prayer (Mēmrā 2) have been published, respectively, by Sebastian Brock and Alex C. J. Neroth van Vogelpoel (Brock 2009; Neroth van Vogelpoel 2018).

7 Gabriel of Qatar, *Commentary on the Liturgy* 2.17 (ed. Neroth van Vogelpoel 2018, pp. 370–72). Gabriel refers here to the daily psalmody of both the "lesser monasteries" and the "great and ancient monasteries"; the latter phrase, as Gabriel elsewhere specifies (ibid. 2.13, ed. Neroth van Vogelpoel 2018, p. 306), includes the monasteries of Mount Izla and of Rabban Shabur, with which Isaac of Nineveh and Dadishoʿ of Qatar were later associated.

8 The estimate of four hours is based on the amount of time necessary to recite the psalms in English (approximately 46,000 words) at an average speed of 183 words per minute (Brysbaert 2019). It should be stressed that the time of four hours is only a rough approximation; while Brisbaert concludes that English reading rates predict reading rates in other languages relatively well at the level of wordcount, this conclusion has not been tested with respect to Syriac.

9 For the allowance that some solitaries might shorten their daily service due to weakness, see Dadishoʿ of Qatar, *On Stillness* 1.13 (ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 54). Dadishoʿ's contemporary Shemʿon d-Taybuteh, while strictly exhorting his readers to observe the regular canonical hours, further advised them to remain at prayer in the cell between the hours of morning prayer (*ṣaprā*) and the third hour: *On the Cell* 10–11 (unedited; tr. Louf 2002, p. 39).

10 For example, a sixth-century East Syrian commentary on the eucharist mentions a wooden cross above the altar: Pseudo-Narsai, *Homily* 17 (ed. Mingana 1905, p. 281). Gabriel of Qatar describes the movement of a cross (which he identifies as a stand-in for the body of Christ) between the altar and the bema, as well as the presence of a cross on the altar: *Commentary on the Liturgy* 5.2.8–45 (ed. Brock 2009, pp. 224–30).

11 E.g., Barḥadbshabba, *Church History* 32 (ed. Nau 1913, pp. 624–25); Shubḥalmaran 5.9.3–6 (ed. Lane 2004, pp. 160–62); Babai the Great, *Useful Counsels on the Ascetic Life* 3, in MS Vatican Sir. 592, f. 22r (tr. Chediath 2001, p. 57); Dadishoʿ of Qatar, *On Stillness* 5.10–14 (ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, pp. 112–14); Shemʿon d-Ṭaybutheh, *On the Cell* 11 (tr. Louf 2002, p. 40); Yawsep Ḥazzaya, *On the Three Stages of Monastic Life* 76, 81, and 85 (ed. Harb and Graffin 1992, pp. 348, 352, and 358).

12 E.g., Dadishoʿ of Qatar, *On Stillness* 5.10 (ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 112); and Yawsep Ḥazzaya, *On the Three Stages of Monastic Life* 32 (ed. Harb and Graffin 1992, p. 310).

13 Isaac of Nineveh, *Second Part* 11.12 (ed. Brock 1995, pp. 46 [text], 56 [tr., modified]). On this passage see also the comments of Erica Hunter (Hunter 2020, pp. 318–20).

14 The excavations were published by David Talbot Rice (Rice 1932a, p. 265; 1932b, p. 280, pl. 2; 1934, p. 4, Figures 4–5). More recent scholarship has discussed these results against their local context (Simpson 2018; Hunter 2008; Müller-Wiener and Siegel 2018).

15 Cf. the descriptions in Shubḥalmaran 5.4.1 (ed. Lane 2004, p. 154); Isaac of Nineveh, *First Part* (ed. Bedjan 1909, p. 407); and Dadishoʿ of Qatar, *On Stillness* 5.6 (ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 92).

16 St John Simpson has collected much of the published evidence from Mesopotamia and the Gulf, as well as some examples of clay plaque crosses from Central Asia that can also be ascribed to Church of the East contexts (Simpson 2018, pp. 14–17). In

Mesopotamia, such crosses continue to be found, e.g., in recent excavations at Ḥīrtā (Müller-Wiener et al. 2015, Figure 3; Salman et al. 2023, Figure 13c). The most significant site-specific, published collections from Mesopotamia are from Ḥīrtā and Bazyan (Okada 1990; al-Kaʿbi 2014; Ali Muhamad Amen and Desreumaux 2018).

17 Crosses at Ḥīrtā were found near walls (Okada 1990, p. 109; al-Kaʿbi 2014, p. 91) and on the floors of excavated structures (Martina Müller-Wiener, personal communication, 25 September 2023, concerning a cross recently excavated at Ḥīrtā). Already in 1932, Rice noted that the plaques he found at Ḥīrtā must have been portable because of their rounded edges (Rice 1932b, p. 282).

18 The authors identify the site, whose origin they date to the sixth or seventh century, as a monastery that was also open to lay visitation.

19 The designation of the plaque crosses as "icons" goes back to Rice (1932b, p. 282), and has been repeated by subsequent scholars (e.g., Okada 1990, p. 109; Simpson 2018, p. 17).

20 Although no plaque crosses have been recovered from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, a small stucco cross was discovered attached to a wall in the suburbs of Ctesiphon (Kröger 1982, pl. 10). The author of the story about the founding of the School seems to have had a larger cross in mind, perhaps on the order of those found in a monastic church at Failaka, dating probably to the eighth century, where excavators unearthed two stucco relief crosses that measured (not including their frames) 60 and 80 centimeters in height (Bernard et al. 1991, p. 160; Lic 2017, pp. 155–56).

21 On the School's influence, see the comments of Adam Becker (Becker 2006, pp. 158–59). Philip Wood dates the account of the School's founding to the late sixth century on the basis of its apparent attempt to glorify the School of Seleucia through a suitable founding narrative (Wood 2013, p. 109). In any case, the story almost certainly predates the end of the School of Seleucia in the early eighth century, when the catholicos moved to the new capital in Bagdad.

22 The relic-like treatment of the cross at the School of Seleucia may be compared with that of the "true cross", captured by a Sasanian army and brought to Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 615 CE, where it became a source of cross relics for monastic leaders in Mesopotamia: *Chronicle of Khuzestan* 24–5 (ed. al-Kaʿbi 2016, pp. 47–53).

23 Quoted in an interview about her monograph, *Reclaiming Conversation* (Suttie 2015).

24 Abraham Zabaya, *Life of Rabban Bar ʿEdta* (ed. Budge 1902, vol. 1, pp. 189–92). Abraham's text is based on an earlier *Life* by Mar John the Persian, a disciple of Rabban Bar ʿEdta.

25 The authors adapted the "Trust in Close Relationships Scale" from an earlier study of human-to-human relationships (Rempel et al. 1985). Some questions from the original survey were removed, including the entirety of the "faith" section of the survey. For example, the statement "When I share my problems with my mobile, I know it will respond in a loving way even before I say anything" was deemed unsuitable for human-phone relationships because "a smartphone is not a responsive recipient of trust in a way known from human-human interactions" (Carolus et al. 2019, p. 922). While this is in some ways true, it is also probable that the participants of the study would have found such questions more meaningful if the authors had replaced "my mobile" with the name of a popular virtual personal assistant such as "Siri".

26 Cf., e.g., Shubḥalmaran 5.1.2 and 5.7 (ed. Lane 2004, pp. 152 and 157), where new monastics are instructed to place their possessions before either the superior of the community or "the cross" (if the community lacked a superior) in order to obtain permission to continuing owning them within the community. Subsequently they ought to do the same with any handiwork they produced as members of the community. Shubḥalmaran seems to have in mind here a cross set up in a communal space, perhaps the church, though this is not explicit.

27 Abraham Zabaya, *Life of Rabban Bar ʿEdta* (ed. Budge 1902, vol. 1, p. 192); Dadishoʿ of Qatar, *On Stillness* 5.6 (ed. del Río Sánchez 2001, p. 111); John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 6 (ed. Brooks 1923, pp. 114–15).

28 Descriptive overviews of the Replika application are given in recent reporting (Murphy and Templin 2019; Bote 2023). As of March 2024, "over 10 million people have joined Replika" according to the application's website, https://replika.com/ (accessed on 20 March 2024).

29 Christelle Jullien provides a list of crucifixions recorded in the *Persian Martyr Acts* (Jullien 2004, p. 260).

30 Gerrit Reinink sketches the wider ecclesiastical background of Babai's *Life* (Reinink 1999).

31 Earlier in the *Life*, Gewargis engages in a debate with a Zoroastrian official in which he explicitly states that "we [Christians] worship the cross" (Bedjan 1895, p. 528). For Babai's own advice concerning cross-directed prayer, see Babai the Great, *Useful Counsels on the Ascetic Life* 3 (Ms. Vat. Sir. 592, f. 22r).

32 For the early publicity around the iPhone discussed in this paragraph, see the study of Heidi A. Campbell and Antonio C. La Pastina (Campbell and La Pastina 2010).

References

al-Kaʿbi, Nasir. 2014. A New Repertoire of Crosses from the Ancient Site of Ḥira, Iraq. *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 14: 90–102. [CrossRef]

al-Kaʿbi, Nasir. 2016. *A Short Chronicle on the End of the Sasanian Empire and Early Islam: 590–660 A.D*. Piscataway: Gorgias.

Alfeyev, Hilarion. 2000. *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian.

Ali Muhamad Amen, Narmen, and Alain Desreumaux. 2018. Les décors des croix portatives de Bazyan. In *Études Mésopotamiennes—Mesopotamian Studies N°1*. Edited by Narmen Ali Muhamad Amen, Lionel Marti, Olivier Rouault and Aline Tenu. Oxford: Archaeopress, pp. 135–50.
Amin, Narmin A., Simon Brelaud, Vincent Déroche, and Justine Gaborit. 2023. The Fort and the Church of Bāzyān, Latest Discoveries and New Hypotheses. In *Christianity in Iraq at the Turn of Islam: History and Archaeology*. Edited by Julie Bonnéric, Narmin A. Amin and Barbara Couturaud. Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, pp. 121–41.
Becker, Adam. 2006. *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Bedjan, Paul. 1895. Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha, de Trois Autres Patriarques, d'un Prêtre et de Deux Laïques, Nestoriens. Paris: Harrassowitz.
Bedjan, Paul. 1909. *Mar Isaacus Ninivita: De Perfectione Religiosa*. Paris: Harrassowitz.
Behr, John. 2015. St Isaac of Nineveh on the Cross of Christ. In *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*. Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary, pp. 87–96.
Bernard, Vincent, Olivier Callot, and Jean-François Salles. 1991. L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweit: Rapport préliminaire sur une première campagne de fouilles, 1989. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 2: 145–81. [CrossRef]
Beulay, Robert. 1978. La Collection des Lettres de Jean de Dalyatha. *Patrologia Orientalis* 39: 257–538.
Bitton-Ashkelony, Brouria. 2019. *The Ladder of Prayer and the Ship of Stirrings: The Praying Self in Late Antique East Syrian Christianity*. Leuven: Peeters.
Bolman, Elizabeth. 2007. Depicting the kingdom of heaven: Paintings and monastic practice in early Byzantine Egypt. In *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*. Edited by Roger S. Bagnall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 408–33.
Bote, Joshua. 2023. Replika Wanted to End Loneliness with a Lurid AI Bot. Then Its Users Revolted. *SFGate*, April 27. Available online: https://www.sfgate.com/tech/article/replika-san-francisco-ai-chatbot-17915543.php (accessed on 27 April 2023).
Brelaud, Simon. 2022. L'Arbre de vie et la Croix syro-orientale. Paper presented at the 13th Symposium Syriacum, France, Paris, July 4.
Brock, Sebastian. 1995. *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian). 'The Second Part', Chapters IV-XLI*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vols. 554–555. Leuven: Peeters.
Brock, Sebastian. 1999–2000. Syriac Writers from Beth Qaṭraye. *ARAM* 11–12: 85–96.
Brock, Sebastian. 2009. Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy. *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 6: 197–248.
Brooks, E. W. 1923. John of Ephesus: Lives of the Eastern Saints (I). *Patrologia Orientalis* 17: 1–307.
Bryant Gibson, Kelli. 2020. An Early Syriac Apologia Crucis: Mēmrā 54 "On the Finding of the Holy Cross". In *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World*. Edited by Aaron M. Butts, Kristian S. Heal and Robert A. Kitchen. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 117–32.
Brysbaert, Marc. 2019. How many words do we read per minute? A review and meta-analysis of reading rate. *Journal of Memory and Language* 109: 1–30.
Budge, Ernest A. Wallis. 1902. *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmîzd the Persian and Rabban Bar-ʿIdtâ*. 2 vols. London: Luzac.
Campbell, Heidi A., and Antonio C. La Pastina. 2010. How the iPhone became divine: New media, religion and the intertextual circulation of meaning. *New Media and Society* 12: 1191–207. [CrossRef]
Carolus, Astrid, Jens F. Binder, Ricardo Muench, Catharina Schmidt, Florian Schneider, and Sarah L. Buglass. 2019. Smartphones as digital companions: Characterizing the relationship between users and their phones. *New Media and Society* 21: 914–38. [CrossRef]
Ceci, Laura. 2023. Daily Time Spent Online via Mobile for Users Worldwide 2022, by Region. Statista. Available online: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1288783/daily-time-spent-online-via-mobile/ (accessed on 29 August 2023).
Chediath, Geevarghese. 2001. *Mar Babai the Great—Some Useful Counsels on the Ascetical Life*. Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute.
del Río Sánchez, Francisco. 2001. *Los Cinco Tratados sobre la Quietud (šelyā) de Dāḏīšōʿ Qaṭrāyā*. Barcelona: Editorial AUSA.
Draguet, René. 1972. *Le commentaire du livre d'Abba Isaïe (logoi I-XV) par Dadišo Qaṭraya (VII s.)*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 326. Leuven: Peeters.
Fullwood, Chris, Sally Quinn, Linda K. Kaye, and Charlotte Redding. 2017. My virtual friend: A qualitative analysis of the attitudes and experiences of Smartphone users: Implications for Smartphone attachment. *Computers in Human Behavior* 75: 347–55. [CrossRef]
Harb, Paul, and François Graffin. 1992. Lettre sur les trois étapes de la vie monastique. *Patrologia Orientalis* 45: 255–442.
Harrak, Amir. 2010. *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*. Paris: Boccard.
Huet, Ellen. 2023. What Happens When Sexting Chatbots Dump Their Human Lovers. *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 22. Available online: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-22/replika-ai-causes-reddit-panic-after-chatbots-shift-from-sex (accessed on 1 April 2024).
Hunter, Erica. 2008. The Christian Matrix of al-Hira. *Cahiers de Studia Iranica* 36: 41–56.
Hunter, Erica. 2020. The Veneration of the Cross in the East Syrian Tradition. *ARAM* 32: 309–24.
Jullien, Christelle. 2004. Peines et supplices dans les Actes des Martyrs Persans et droit sassanide: Nouvelles prospections. *Studia Iranica* 33: 243–69. [CrossRef]
Karim, Cyril. 2004. *Symbols of the Cross in the Writings of the Early Syriac Fathers*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press.
Kerai, Alex. 2023. Cell Phone Usage Statistics: Mornings are for Notifications. *Reviews.org*, July 21. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20230729001654/https://www.reviews.org/mobile/cell-phone-addiction/ (accessed on 3 June 2024).
Keser Kayaalp, Elif. 2021. *Church Architecture of Late Antique Northern Mesopotamia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kröger, Jens. 1982. *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
Kurtz, Scott R. 2007. He Has Risen. *Player vs. Player*, January 9. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20080110004652/http://www.pvponline.com:80/2007/01/09/he-has-risen/ (accessed on 3 June 2024).
Kushlev, Kostadin, and Jason D. E. Proulx. 2016. The Social Costs of Ubiquitous Information: Consuming Information on Mobile Phones Is Associated with Lower Trust. *PLoS ONE* 11: e0162130. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Lane, David. 2004. *Šubḥalmaran: The Book of Gifts*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 612. Leuven: Peeters.
Langfeldt, John A. 1994. Recently discovered early Christian monuments in Northeastern Arabia. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5: 32–60. [CrossRef]
Lic, Agnieszka. 2017. Chronology of Stucco Production in the Gulf and southern Mesopotamia in the early Islamic period. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 47: 151–61.
Lic, Agnieszka. 2023. The Beribboned Cross in Christian Art of the Early Islamic Period in Iraq and the Gulf. In *Christianity in Iraq at the Turn of Islam: History and Archaeology*. Edited by Julie Bonnéric, Narmin A. Amin and Barbara Couturaud. Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, pp. 291–304.
Louf, André. 2002. Discours sur la cellule de Mar Syméon de Taibouteh. *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 64: 34–55.
Mai, Angelo. 1838. Qānunā d-Ṯ̈beylālē. In *Scriptorum Veterum Nova Collectio 10.2*. Rome: Typis Collegii Urbani, pp. 317–66.
Meyer, Birgit. 2013. Material Mediations and Religious Practices of World-Making. In *Religion Across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity*. Edited by Knut Lundby. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 1–19.
Meyer, Birgit. 2014. An Author Meets her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer's 'Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion'. *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 5: 205–54.
Meyer, Birgit. 2015. Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27: 333–60. [CrossRef]
Meyer, Birgit. 2020. Religion as Mediation. *Entangled Religions* 11: 1–21. [CrossRef]
Mingana, Alphonse. 1905. *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*. Mosul: Mausilii, vol. 1.
Murphy, Mike, and Jacob Templin. 2019. This app is trying to replicate you. *Quartz*, August 29. Available online: https://qz.com/1698337/replika-this-app-is-trying-to-replicate-you (accessed on 1 April 2024).
Müller-Wiener, Martina, and Ulrike Siegel. 2018. The Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic City of al-Ḥīra: First Results of the Archaeological Survey 2015. In *Proceedings of the 10th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*. Edited by Vera Müller and Marta Luciani. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 639–52.
Müller-Wiener, Martina, Ulrike Siegel, Martin Gussone, and Ibrahim Salman. 2015. Archaeological Survey of al-Hīra/Iraq: Fieldwork Campaign 2015. *Bulletin of the Fondation Max van Berchem* 29: 5–7.
Nau, François. 1913. La seconde partie de l'histoire eccelsiastique de Barḥadbešabba ʿArbaïa et une controverse de Théodore de Mopsueste avec les Macédoniens. *Patrologia Orientalis* 9: 492–677.
Neroth van Vogelpoel, Alex C. J. 2018. *The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the East Syriac Morning Service on Ordinary Days*. Piscataway: Gorgias.
Niewöhner, Philipp. 2020. The Significance of the Cross before, during, and after Iconoclasm. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 74: 185–242.
Okada, Yasuyoshi. 1990. Reconsideration of Plaque-Type Crosses from Ain Sha'ia Near Najaf. *al-Rāfidān* 11: 103–12.
Payão, Rafael. 2007. Jesus-Phone. *Blog Rafael Payão: Cybercultura Criatividade*, June 29. Available online: https://rafaelpay.typepad.com/rafa/2007/06/jesus-phone.html (accessed on 3 June 2024).
Payne, Richard. 2015. *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Payne Smith, J. 1903. *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon.
Payngot, Charles. 1981. The Cross in the Chaldean Tradition. *Christian Orient* 2: 106–18.
Potts, Daniel. 1994. Nestorian Crosses from Jabal Berri. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5: 61–65. [CrossRef]
Rassart-Debergh, Marguerite. 1988. Quelques croix kelliotes. In *Nubia et Oriens Christianus*. Edited by Piotr O. Scholz and Reinhard Stempel. Cologne: Dinter, pp. 373–85.
Reinink, Gerrit. 1999. Babai the Great's Life of George and the Propagation of Doctrine in the Late Sasanian Empire. In *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient*. Edited by Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt. Leiden: Brill, pp. 171–93.
Rempel, John K., John G. Holmes, and Mark P. Zanna. 1985. Trust in Close Relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49: 95–112. [CrossRef]
Rice, David Talbot. 1932a. Hira. *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 19: 254–68. [CrossRef]
Rice, David Talbot. 1932b. The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931. *Antiquity* 6: 276–91. [CrossRef]
Rice, David Talbot. 1934. The Oxford Excavations at Ḥīra. *Ars Islamica* 1: 51–73.
Robinson, Brett. 2014. The Marriage of Religion and Technology: Reading Apple's Allegorical Advertising. *Second Nature*, January 27. Available online: https://secondnaturejournal.com/the-marriage-of-religion-and-technology-reading-apples-allegorical-advertising/ (accessed on 15 April 2023).
Salman, Ibrahim, Martin Gussone, Catherine Hof, Martina Müller-Wiener, Agnes Schneider, Burkart Ullrich, and Mustafa Ahmad. 2023. Al-Hira, Irak: Feldforschungen. Prospektionen und Ausgrabungen. *e-Forschungsberichte des DAI* 1: 21–32. [CrossRef]
Scher, Addaï. 1911. Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert): Seconde partie (I). *Patrologia Orientalis* 7: 95–203.

Simpson, St John. 2018. Christians on Iraq's Desert Frontier. *al-Rāfidān* 29: 1–30.
Skjuve, Marita, Asbjørn Følstad, Knut Inge Fostervold, and Petter Bae Brandtzaeg. 2021. My Chatbot Companion—a Study of Human-Chatbot Relationships. *International Journal of Human—Computer Studies* 149: 1–14. [CrossRef]
Sokoloff, Michael. 2009. *A Syriac Lexicon*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
Spalding-Stracey, Gillian. 2020. *The Cross in the Visual Culture of Late Antique Egypt*. Leiden: Brill.
Suttie, Jill. 2015. How Smartphones Are Killing Conversation: A Q&A with MIT professor Sherry Turkle about her new book, Reclaiming Conversation. *Greater Good Magazine*, December 7. Available online: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_smartphones_are_killing_conversation (accessed on 15 March 2023).
Taft, Robert. 1986. *The Liturgy of the Hours East and West*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
Ta, Vivian, Caroline Griffith, Carolynn Boatfield, Xinyu Wang, Maria Civitello, Haley Bader, Esther DeCero, and Alexia Loggarakis. 2020. User Experiences of Social Support from Companion Chatbots in Everyday Contexts: Thematic Analysis. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22: e16235. [CrossRef]
Thornton, Bill, Alyson Faires, Maija Robbins, and Eric Rollins. 2014. The Mere Presence of a Cell Phone May Be Distracting: Implications for Attention and Task Performance. *Social Psychology* 45: 479–88. [CrossRef]
Tieszen, Charles. 2017. *Cross Veneration in the Medieval Islamic World*. London: Tauris.
Trothen, Tracy J. 2022. Replika: Spiritual Enhancement Technology? *Religions* 13: 275. [CrossRef]
Van der Ploeg, J. 1943. Un traité nestorienne du culte de la croix. *Le Muséon* 56: 115–27.
Whitcomb, Donald S. 1985. *Before the Roses and Nightingales: Excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Old Shiraz*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Williams, A. V. 1996. Zoroastrians and Christians in Sasanian Iran. *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78: 37–54. [CrossRef]
Wood, Philip. 2013. *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Yousif, Pierre. 1976. Le symbolisme de la croix dans la nature chez saint Éphrem de Nisibe. In *Symposium Syriacum*. Rome: Pontificium Institutem Orientalium Studiorum, pp. 207–28.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.