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Deification in the Medieval Copto-Arabic Writing of Ibn Sabbā‘*

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Egypt comprised a very dynamic time in Arabic Christian theology. Some scholars have described this period as the “golden age” for the production of Arabic theological writing in Egypt.¹ Unfortunately, Egyptian Christian thought from that period had received little attention from modern researchers, particularly in the West, although some scholars are persistently attempting to change this *status quo*.

The Writing² of Ibn Sabbā‘

In a period shrouded in mystery for many scholars, an especially enigmatic figure is present—Yūhannā Ibn Abī Zakariyyā, who was known as Ibn Sabbā‘ (sometimes transliterated as Ibn Sabā‘ or Ibn Sibā‘). Not much is known about this obscure figure in Egyptian history; he was not a well-known figure or a prominent writer.³ There is even uncertainty regarding the century in which he lived. Certain scholars such as Jean Périèr and Milad S. Zakhary place Ibn Sabbā‘ at

* This paper is an expanded and edited version of a paper presented at the *Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Conference*, Villanova University 2022, titled “Deification in the Copto-Arabic Writing of Ibn Sabbā‘.” I would like to thank Fr. Alexis Torrance (University of Notre Dame) who introduced me to much of the patristic writing on deification utilized in this paper.

¹ Stephen J Davis. “The Copto-Arabic Tradition of Theosis: A Eucharistic Reading of John 6:51-57 in Būlus al-Būshī’s Treatise On the Incarnation.” In *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, ed. M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), pp. 163-174, esp. 163.

² All translated passages of Ibn Sabbā‘ in this paper are my own translation, unless otherwise specified.

³ Arsenius Mikhail, *Guides to the Eucharist in Medieval Egypt: Three Arabic Commentaries on the Coptic Liturgy: Yūhannā Ibn Sabbā‘, Abū Al-Barakāt Ibn Kabar, and Pope Gabriel V* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2022), p. 7.

the end of the 13th century.⁴ On the other hand, Fr. Vincentio Mistrîḥ⁵ and Fr. Arsenius Mikhail place him in mid-14th century due to Ibn Sabbā's own words, "Those who believe it [the Gospel] have been for years, mounting to one thousand three hundred years".⁶

There is only one work that bears his name, and it is titled *al-Jawhara al-nafisa fi 'ulūm al-kanisa* (*The Precious Jewel in the Ecclesiastical Sciences*), often mentioned as *The Precious Pearl* or *The Precious Jewel*. This work remains largely untranslated, with only academic translations into French and Latin, the first of which was a translation of 56 chapters by Périer, published under the title *La Perle Précieuse* in 1924.⁷ The partially-translated 113-chapter work is described by Périer as an encyclopedia of "theological dogmatics of morality, liturgical matters, and ecclesiastical disciplines; in short, the doctrines utilized in the Coptic Church".⁸ A few decades later, Mistrîḥ translated the entire work into Latin.⁹ Recently, a few liturgical chapters (58–73, 83, 84) have been translated and published in English.¹⁰ For most of the English academic world, *The Precious Jewel* remains largely untouched, waiting to be mined. This paper will explore this valuable resource to uncover the understanding of deification in the mind of the Medieval Egyptian thinker.

Deification

Deification is a difficult concept to define in such a short paper, but it would help to echo another enigmatic figure, (*pseudo*) Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th c). He writes, "Deification is attaining the likeness of God and union with Him, as far as is possible".¹¹ Early Christian fathers have utilized an exchange formula to ground deification in Christology, "God became human, so that we may become God".¹²

⁴ Jean Périer, Youḥannā Ibn Abī Zakariyā Ibn Sabbā', *La Perle Précieuse*, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, ed. R Graffin and F Nau (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1924), pp. 593-760, esp. 593. Cf. Milad Sidky Zakhary, *De la Trinité à la Trinité: la christologie liturgique d'Ibn sabbā', auteur copte du XIIIe Siècle* (Roma: Ed. Liturgiche, 2007).

⁵ Vincentio Mistrîḥ, "Pretiosa Margarita de Scientiis Ecclesiasticis, Ioannis Ibn Abī Zakariā Ibn Sibā' (praefatio et Introductio)," In *Studia Orientalia Christiana. Collectanea (SOCC)*, 11 (1966), pp. 319-360, esp. 325.

⁶ Mikhail, *Guides*, p. 29, n21. Cf. Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXVI.

⁷ J. Périer, *La Perle Précieuse*, pp. 593-760. This translation only has the first 56 chapters.

⁸ J. Périer, *La Perle Précieuse*, p. 593.

⁹ Vincentio Mistrîḥ, *Yuhanna Ibn Abi Zakaria Ibn Siba', Pretiosa margarita de scientiis ecclesiasticis*, (Cairo: Centrum Franciscanum Studiorum Orientalium Christianorum, 1966).

¹⁰ Youḥannā ibn Abī Zakariyā ibn Sabbā', "The Precious Jewel on the Ecclesiastical Sciences (*al-Jawharah al-nafisah fi 'ulūm al-kanisah*)" in Mikhail, *Guides*, pp 60-107.

¹¹ "Ἡ δὲ θεώσις ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς Θεόν, ὡς ἐφικτόν, ἀφομοίωσις τε καὶ ἔνωσις". Dionysius, *EH* 1.3, PG 3.376A. English translation from Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 248. Cf. Daniel A. Keating, "Typologies of Deification", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17/3 (2015), pp. 267-283, esp. 275.

¹² Athanasius. *De Inc.*, 54. Translation is mine.

Russell breaks down the overall methodology of understanding deification into four approaches: nominal, analogical, ethical, and realistic deification.¹³ The nominal approach interprets words such as “gods” as honorary titles, when Biblically attributed to humans.¹⁴ The analogical approach forms imagery that ties the nominal to a sketch of divinity; for example, Moses being a god to Pharaoh.¹⁵ Ethical deification centers around reproducing divine virtue in one’s life through ascetic and moral efforts; this approach focuses on imitation of divine attributes to model the likeness of God.¹⁶ Finally, there is the realistic approach, which accepts that human beings are divinely transformed through deification.¹⁷

In examining *al-Jawhara al-nafisa (the Precious Jewel)*, this paper will investigate deification in the theological understanding of Ibn Sabbā'. Russell’s nominal deification might be easily excluded, since Ibn Sabbā' does not use the word “deification” or “gods,” when referring to humans. However, this paper demonstrates that the other three approaches to deification are present to varying degrees.

Vocabulary

Admittedly, there are several key words and references that are completely missing. The word *تأليه* (literal Arabic equivalent of “deification”) is not in this work at all. References to “partakers of Divine nature”¹⁸ and “you are gods”¹⁹ are all absent.

Yet, other important words and references are present. The word اتحاد (“unity/united”) is strongly used to allude to deification. The word is used by Ibn Sabbā' in describing the creation of humanity, the incarnation of the Word, and the sacramental life. The Eucharist and Baptism are especially important for Ibn Sabbā', as evident by the number of chapters he dedicates to them. One concept that resonates throughout the work is identifying the Holy Spirit as life.

In his work, Ibn Sabbā' also uses the word *كامل* (“perfected”) to describe an elevated state of humanity. This perfection is tied into his sacramental view of the church and the believer, again drawing from the Holy Spirit’s identity as life itself manifested through the mysteries. The perfection is also described adjacent to the incarnation, the redeeming works of Christ, and the hypostatic union which elevated humanity.

¹³ N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 3.

¹⁴ N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1.

¹⁵ N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1-2.

¹⁶ N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 2.

¹⁷ N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 2.

¹⁸ 2 Pet 1:4

¹⁹ Psa 82 and Jn 10.

Deification of Humanity Through Christ

The patristic tradition is full of statements regarding the deification of Christ's humanity, which extends to all believers by participation. In continuity with the patristic tradition, Ibn Sabbā' appears to have a very similar understanding.

Patristic Background

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – c. 253) sees the deification of human nature in the union of the incarnation. Origen highlights the deification of Christ's own humanity, which participated in the very *Logos* (τὴν ἄκραν μετοχὴν τοῦ αὐτολόγου).²⁰ Christ's human soul was "united by supreme participation" (φάσκοντες τῇ ἄκρᾳ μετοχῇ) to the divinity²¹ and by "the utmost participation in the *Logos* Himself" (τῇ ἄκρᾳ μετοχῇ τοῦ αὐτολόγου).²² Origen then extends this deified humanity to all the believers, saying:

For Christians see that with Jesus human and divine nature began to be woven together, so that by fellowship with divinity, human nature might become divine, not only in Jesus, but also in all those who believe and go on to undertake the life which Jesus taught.²³

Athanasius (c. 298-373) focuses on the place of humanity in the redeeming works of Christ, saying, "For if the works of the Word's Godhead had not taken place through the body, man had not been deified; and again, had not the properties of the flesh been ascribed to the Word, man had not been thoroughly delivered from them".²⁴ For Athanasius, redemption must happen through Christ's humanity, or more specifically through His human body. To that end, humans cannot be deified apart from this salvific work.

The Cappadocian fathers, especially Gregory Nazianzus (329-390), also expressed the deification of Christ's humanity in the hypostatic union and our share in this deified humanity.

²⁰ Origen, *C. Cel.* 5.39 trans. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 146. For a study of Origen's thought on the deification of humanity see: Beniamin Zakhary, "Μετοχῇ θεότητος: Partakers of Divinity in Origen's *Contra Celsum*." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 32/3 (2024), pp. 315-340.

²¹ Origen, *C. Cel.* 6.47.

²² Origen, *C. Cel.* 7.17.

²³ Origen, *C. Cel.* 3.28 English text from H. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, p. 146. The Greek text in context reads: ὁρῶσιν ὅτι ἀπ' ἐκείνου ἤρξατο θεία καὶ ἀνθρωπίνη συνυφαίνεσθαι φύσις, ἢ ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη τῇ πρὸς τὸ θεϊότερον κοινωνία γένηται θεία οὐκ ἐν μόνῳ τῷ Ἰησοῦ ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς μετὰ τοῦ πιστεύειν ἀναλαμβάνουσι βίον, ὃν Ἰησοῦς ἐδίδαξεν, ἀνάγοντα ἐπὶ τὴν πρὸς θεὸν φιλίαν καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἐκείνον κοινωνίαν πάντα τὸν κατὰ τὰς Ἰησοῦ ὑποθήκας ζῶντα; Origen, *C. Cel.* 3.28.

²⁴ Athanasius, *CA*, 3.33, English text from *NPNF* (1994) 2.4: pp. 303-447. The Greek text in context reads: Εἰ γὰρ τὰ τῆς θεότητος τοῦ Λόγου ἔργα μὴ διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐγένετο, οὐκ ἂν ἐθεοποιήθη ἄνθρωπος· καὶ πάλιν, εἰ τὰ ἴδια τῆς σαρκὸς οὐκ ἐλέγετο τοῦ Λόγου, οὐκ ἂν ἡλευθερώθη παντελῶς ἀπὸ τούτων ὁ ἄνθρωπος.

Gregory makes this clear when he says, “What greater destiny can befall our humility than that humanity should be intermingled with God, and by this intermingling should become divine?”²⁵ The “intermingling” of Christ’s divinity and humanity is usually described through the patristic image of iron and fire. In this analogy neither fire nor iron lose its property, but the iron becomes red hot with the fire that is contained within it.²⁶ Overall, the patristic passages mentioned can be reduced to three main points here: (1) Christ’s humanity was deified through the hypostatic union, (2) Christ’s redeeming works were done through His humanity, and (3) the deified humanity is expanded to all the believers.

The Hypostatic Union

In harmony with the patristic tradition, Ibn Sabbāʿ highlights the incarnation as the root and cause of the renewed humanity. First, Ibn Sabbāʿ sees a true unity in the incarnation of Christ, saying, “He cannot be called Christ except from two different sides—one is His divinity and the other is His humanity—for both have become together one Christ and one Lord”.²⁷ Using the patristic imagery of fire and iron, he explains the hypostatic union as such:

Mixing and confusion can only occur when two things are both material²⁸—water and wine or *sdrā*²⁹ and flour—but the union is different than mixing or confusion; it is like the union of fire with iron or the soul with the flesh, the immaterial with the material.³⁰ To this measure was the unity of Christ’s divinity with His flesh, without mixing or confusion.³¹

²⁵ Gregory, *Or.* 30.3. English text from NPNF 2.7.

²⁶ The analogy of iron and Fire are seen throughout the writings of the fathers, beginning with Origen who introduces this analogy in Origen, *De princ.* II, 6, 6: 181-195. Cf. Basil of Caesaria, Idem, *C. Eun.* III, 2, 29-53: PG 29b, 660. Cf. Cyril, *Theasurus*, PG 75, 200A; Cyril, *Comm Jo.* IV, 3, 57. For a more comprehensive list of Fathers who have used this analogy see Dmitry Biriukov, “Penetration of Fire into Iron,” *Scrinium* 15/1 (2019), pp. 143-162.

²⁷ “لا يسمّى مسيح الا من جهتين مختلفين، احدهما لاهوته و الاخر ناسوته، فصارا معاً مسيحاً واحداً و رباً واحداً” Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XXI.

²⁸ The word used by Ibn Sabbāʿ is كثيف (*katīf*), which literally means “heavy” or “dense,” he uses this word often to describe material or corporeal things.

²⁹ This is an uncommon word. Périer translates it as “le fruit de lotus” (The fruit of the Lotus flower), J. Périer, *La Perle Précieuse*, p. 714.

³⁰ لطيفاً بكثيفاً (literally “the soft with the dense” or “the thin with the thick”). He uses these words throughout the work to indicate the difference between immaterial and material or incorporeal and corporeal. Perier translates them as “subtil avec le grossier”, J. Périer, *La Perle Précieuse*, 714. Mistriḥ translates them as “subtile et crasso”, Mistriḥ, *Pretiosa Margarita*, p. 456.

³¹ ما يختلط و يمتزج الا شينين كثيفين اما ماء و نحراراً و اما سدر و دقيق يختلطاً، و اما الاتحاد فانه غير الاختلاط و الامتزاج فهو كاتحاد” Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIV.

In his discussion of the censer, Ibn Sabbā' mentions a similar analogy, but using coal and fire imagery.³² To echo his earlier statements, he adds, "When the immaterial divinity, united with the material humanity, and through the union they became One, only then was He called 'Christ'".³³

Another way Ibn Sabbā' describes the hypostatic union, is through the union of mercy and justice. He says, "If you desire to explain this, then know that that it is the union of divinity with humanity and His manifestation to the creation. For justice is divinity, and mercy is humanity".³⁴ At first glance it may seem as if he is separating God's mercy and justice, but later he explains this in a similar fashion to the divine dilemma of Athanasius.³⁵ The just punishment would be for Adam and his children to suffer eternally, but the incarnation of mercy Himself took the form of a human to bear the punishment. Here, Ibn Sabbā' cites the verse "mercy and justice have met"³⁶ as summary of the hypostatic union of the incarnation.

Anthropological Considerations

The anthropological understanding of Ibn Sabbā' is also based on unity. Truly, Ibn Sabbā' sees the human as a union of material and immaterial, which he ties to the hypostasis of the Son. "The human also, being an immaterial soul and material body, united from their creation by the Only Son...every immaterial united with material—like the heaven or the human—they were (came into being) through the Son".³⁷

He further places the union of human soul and body as a sign of the hypostatic union. However, he acknowledges that humanity can never behold "the first light," which is the "first sign" of the hypostatic union.³⁸ Thus, he sees the human being as a limited symbol of the hypostatic union. This limitation grows exponentially after Adam's transgression. Ibn Sabbā'

³² Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, LXV

³³ "لما اتحد اللاهوت اللطيف بالناسوت الكثيف وصار بالاتحاد واحد عند ذلك سمي المسيح", Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIV.

³⁴ "فان اردت شرح ذلك اعلم انه اتحاد اللاهوت بالناسوت وظهوره للخلق لان العدل هو اللاهوت والرحمة هي الناسوت", Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXII

³⁵ Athanasius. *De Inc.*, 11-18.

³⁶ Psa 85:10

³⁷ و الانسان ايضاً كونه نفس لطيفة وجسد كثيف متحدين تولا خلقتهم الابن الوحيد... كل لطيف متحد بكثيف كالسموات والانسان "Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

³⁸ لا يستطيع احداً من الناس النظر الى ذلك النور الاول وهذا اول رمزاً على اتحاد اللاهوت بالناسوت ثم بعد ذلك خلق ما خلق الى اليوم السادس خلق فيه ابونا ادم وجعله نفس كالملائكة وجسد بهيمي كالحيوان، لطيف وكثيف ايضاً وهذا ايضاً رمزاً ثاني على اتحاد "اللاهوت بالناسوت". "No one from the people could look to that first light, which is the first sign to the union of the divinity with the humanity. After this, He created what he created until the sixth day when He created our father Adam and gave him a soul like the angels and a bovid body like the animal—immaterial and material. This is the second sign to the union of the divinity with the humanity", Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, III.

sees the soul as angelic and the body as animalistic;³⁹ thus after the fall, the natural animal desires became inflamed and restless in the human.⁴⁰ To put it in English words, this is “the fallen state of humanity” in the eyes of Ibn Sabbā'.

Christological Deification

When putting his Christology and anthropology together, deification flourishes. Much like earlier patristic fathers, Ibn Sabbā' sees that Christ's humanity was deified, although he does not use the word. Instead, he paints an image of elevation and centers Christ's humanity within it.

He sat at the right of the Father, meaning the humanity with which the eternal Son united and lifted in the air by His exalted power until it reached the highest of the high regions; then He sat this body in His simple pure light, and this light became inside the body through the union, emanating out of it to enlighten the worlds above the highest. There was never separation after the union.⁴¹

There is little doubt that Ibn Sabbā' sees Christ's humanity deified in this passage. The assertion that Christ's humanity is exalted to heaven, sitting at the right of Father, and radiating light all point to a deified humanity.

This deified humanity is then transferred to the believers in a few ways. The first, is through the salvific redemption. The Egyptian writer believes that Christ redeemed the “entire nature” of humanity on the cross.⁴² Since Christ defeated Satan while participating in our humanity, we all became victorious through the inheritance he has given us. Here, Ibn Sabbā' sees that humanity itself defeated Satan and reigned over him through the cross of Christ. He uses the motifs of kingship, victory, and inheritance to describe humanity's deification through the cross, as summarized in his meditation on the Lord's Prayer:

Concerning the essence of humanity, taken from Mary, when the Creator's simple essence united with it, it became Creator and Lord through the union. When this human essence battled the devil and defeated him through the cross and reigned (became king) over him, the kingship over the

³⁹ “When He created our father Adam and gave him a soul like the angels and a bovid body like the animal”, Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, III.

⁴⁰ “ثم انّ ادم من ذواكل من الشجرة وهو ملتهب بالشهوة الحيوانية المركبه فيه ولم يستقر”، “Then, ever since Adam ate from the tree, he has become inflamed with the animalistic desire, formed in him, and he became restless”. Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, V.

⁴¹ جلس عن يمين الاب، اي انّ الناسوت الذي اتّحد به الابن الازلي ورفعه بقوته العزيزة في الهوا الى حيث صار الى اعلا المنازل العلوية، ثم اجلس ذلك الجسد في نوره البسيط المحض، وصار ذلك النور داخل في ذلك الجسد بالاتحاد خارجا منه يضي على العوالم فوق القوق، ولم يكن بعد الاتحاد اقتراق ابدا، Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIV.

⁴² “فلما فداه وفداننا معه بصلبه اي فدا الطبيعة كلها صار ذلك عنا ولاجلنا”، “When He redeemed him [Adam], and redeemed us with him by His cross, meaning that He redeemed the entire nature; this was [done] for us and on our behalf”, Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIV.

devil was extended to humans...this kingship itself is for the human essence...this kingship and victory—in the image of Adam—over the devil, through Christ the dual-essence in hypostasis—the divine and human essence—He has given inheritance in it to his brethren; through his humility he called them brethren because of His union with their humanity.⁴³

This passage contains all the patristic points mentioned earlier. The deification of Christ's humanity is clear, especially as Ibn Sabbā' explains that Christ's humanity itself "became Creator and Lord through the union." Next, Ibn Sabbā' attributes kingship and victory to Christ's humanity, then he extends this kingship and victory to all his "brethren."

Deification and Grace

Although Ibn Sabbā' exalts humanity in the battle and victory over Satan, at no point does he disregard grace. Understandably, Ibn Sabbā' condemns any attempt of self-deification apart from grace, using the example of Satan, who "desired divinity for himself, and immediately God cast him down from his rank to the deepest depth".⁴⁴ Interestingly, Ibn Sabbā' continues the thought after this passage to show that the one creature who replaced Satan's former heavenly rank was the human.⁴⁵ Thus, Ibn Sabbā' sees that humans received a special grace from creation, that was not given to any other creature.

God nurtured humanity, after the fall, through teaching and preparing it for the incarnation.⁴⁶ For Ibn Sabbā', the appearance of God in the human form was done in a child's progress to prepare humanity for such an event.⁴⁷ This progression model is also seen in the understanding of Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-c. 202), who highlights progress in God's grace.⁴⁸

At the incarnation, Ibn Sabbā' sees that "in the same truth, if the Lord, the eternal Son, had not put on the form of a servant to save Adam and his seed, none of them would have been saved".⁴⁹ Thus, he highlights the role of the grace given by the incarnation in the redemptive

⁴³ عن جوهر الناسوت الماخوذ من مريم، أنه لما اتحد به الجوهر البسيط الخالق صار باتحاده به خالقاً ورباً، ولما جاهد هذا الجوهر الناسوتي الشيطان وغلبه بالصليب وملك عليه، صار للبشر الملكة على ابليس بهذا...هذه الملكة نفسها للجوهر الناسوتي...هذه الملكة والغلبة بصورة ادم، "على الشيطان بالمسيح المتقوّم من الجوهرين، الجوهر الالهي و الناسوتي، وورثها لاختوته بتواضعه بتسميتهم اخوته لاتحاده بناسوتهم Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁴⁴ "فقصد الالهيه لذاته وللوقت اسقطه الله تعالى من مرتبته الى اسفل الاسافل...وبقيت مرتبته خالية الى يوم الناس" Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, IV.

⁴⁵ "His rank remained empty, until the day of humans...and he remained waiting to see whom the exalted God would create to fill it, but He did not create any one else except Adam. At this, the devil knew and confirmed that this image is different than the images of animals", Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, IV.

⁴⁶ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXIII.

⁴⁷ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXIII.

⁴⁸ Cf. Irenaeus, *AH*, 4.38-39.

⁴⁹ "وفي نفس الحقيقة لولا أنّ الربّ الابن الازلّ لبس شكل العبد حتى خلص ادم وذريته، ما خلص احداً منهم" Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXVII.

works of salvation.⁵⁰ After the incarnation, Ibn Sabbāʿ sees that Christ’s victory was “by the power of His divinity”.⁵¹ Moreover, he further clarifies that our victory over the tempter is impossible except through Christ.⁵²

Finally, Ibn Sabbāʿ sees a connection between the vision of God and the light of the intellect. He discusses Jacob who saw God in the vision of the ladder.⁵³ He also discusses Moses who saw God in the burning bush, which Ibn Sabbāʿ sees as the unity of the divinity and humanity.⁵⁴ In a similar, yet nuanced unity, he explains the unity of the *Logos* with a person’s intellect, which allows the mind to see the higher things, moving from the sensible world to the logical world.⁵⁵ Hence, Christ graces people with the vision of higher things, and even God Himself. Then, Ibn Sabbāʿ asserts that Christ made the unity of logic and intellect natural through the incarnation.⁵⁶

Additionally, when commenting on the Lord’s prayer, this writer connects divine enlightenment and graced higher knowledge to acts of forgiveness. He asserts that by “the Divine light,” the human was enlightened and transformed from animal captivity to the “perfection of humanity” through forgiveness.⁵⁷

Overall, Ibn Sabbāʿ is positioning the grace of God central by showing that humanity was favored at creation, nurtured after the fall, victorious through Christ after the incarnation, and enlightened through forgiveness. Also, since “victory” and “kingship” are his ways of expressing deification, Ibn Sabbāʿ highlights the role of grace in such a victorious state of humanity is key.

Human Responsibility in Deification: Ascesis and Ethical Deification

Although there is a place for grace in the understanding of Ibn Sabbāʿ, this does not translate to a lack of responsibility on the part of the believer. There is a place for asceticism, forgiveness, and mercy in the heart of human deification. This understanding, which Russell describes as “ethical deification”, is consistent with certain patristic writings.

⁵⁰ Aside from patristic thought, there seems to be some clear parallels here with the Narrative of Salvation typically found in post-sanctus prayers of early Christian liturgies, see Benjamin Zakhary, “*Imago Dei* in Early Christian Anaphoras,” *Studia Liturgica* 53/1 (2022), pp. 24-36. These prayers may have influenced his thinking as it is clear that Ibn Sabbāʿ is well-acquainted with the liturgies as he dedicates multiple chapters to them. Moreover, he mentions the liturgies of St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Cyril of Alexandria by name (*al-Jawhara*, LVIII).

⁵¹ “لما جربه المجرب، غلبه بقوة لاهوته”، Ibn Sabbāʿ, *La Perle Précieuse*, XXIII.

⁵² Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XXIII.

⁵³ Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XII.

⁵⁴ Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XIV.

⁵⁵ Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁵⁶ Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁵⁷ “واستنار من النور الالهي وانتقل من رق العبودية بالحيوانية الى كمال الانسانية وتجلل باجلال الربوبية”، Ibn Sabbāʿ, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

For example, John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) sees that mercy is the “queen” of virtues, “making humans like God”.⁵⁸ Chrysostom also highlights that in giving secret alms, the believers “become like God”.⁵⁹

In continuing this patristic understanding, Ibn Sabbā‘ sees an imitation to the likeness of Christ in ascetical efforts and virtue. In general, the human ethical behavior is a subject of interest of Ibn Sabbā‘ and comprises key sections in his book. These sections are grouped and labeled as *Pars mystico-moralis* (the mystical-moral portion) by Vincentio Mistrîh; they contain remarks on topics such as fasting, speech, and virtues.⁶⁰ Deification themes are intertwined throughout these sections. For instance, in his discussion of fasting, there is a sense of Christosis where the believers become just like Christ through enduring the suffering of hunger and thirst.⁶¹ Through ascetical works, such as fasting, the believer shares in Christ’s passion.

Generally, virtues are seen by Ibn Sabbā‘ to be a direct imitation of Christ. Humility makes us look like Christ who humbled Himself taking the form of a servant and also humbled Himself to wash feet.⁶² Purity is a great virtue that brings the servant closer to the Creator Christ.⁶³ Every baptized person must give alms because “blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy”.⁶⁴ Forgiveness makes us resemble Christ who forgave and prayed for those who crucified Him.⁶⁵ On forgiveness, Ibn Sabbā‘ also adds:

Christ did not come—out of His abundant mercy and compassion—except to perfect the human nature. Thus, He instructed people in prayer to seek forgiveness from another first, then he alerted

⁵⁸ “For mercifulness is as it were a most excellent art, and a protector of those who labor at it...For she is truly a queen indeed, making men like God. For, he says, you shall be merciful, as your Heavenly Father is merciful...She has saved the race of humankind: For unless she had pitied us, all things would have perished. When we were enemies, she reconciled us, she wrought innumerable blessings; she persuaded the Son of God to become a slave, and to empty Himself.” John Chrysostom, *Hom. Heb.*, 32.7, English text from NPNF 1.14.

⁵⁹ “You have become like to God in giving alms; be thou then like Him in not making a display. For even He said, when healing, that they should tell no man.” John Chrysostom, *Hom. Mt.*, 71.13, English text from NPNF 1.10.

⁶⁰ Mistrîh, “*Pretiosa Margarita*”, (*SOCC*), p. 327.

⁶¹ “Our fathers the apostles have organized those two fasting days [referring to Wednesday and Friday] on every baptized person, whether male or female, because we were like Christ—first in rebuking the devil, second in fasting, third in prayer, and fourth in His suffering—thus we ought to suffer willingly as He willingly suffered. Suffering willingly is fasting...when a person endures the lack of power willingly, this is willing endurance of suffering, just as Christ endured suffering willingly...crucifixion and true suffering was in it [Friday], in which Christians take on the likeness of His suffering by voluntary hunger and thirst”, “فرتبوا اباينا الرسل صوم هذين اليومين”، “على كل متعمد ذكراً كان او انثى وذلك لاننا عندما مائتنا المسيح اولاً في جحود الشيطان وثانياً في الصوم وثالثاً في الصلاة ورابعاً في الامه فوجب علينا التالم بالاختيار كما تالم المسيح بالاختيار والالم بالاختيار هو الصوم...فاذا احتمل الانسان نقص قوته اختياراً منه كان ذلك حمل الم اختياري كما حمل المسيح الالم اختياري...الصلب و الالم الحقيقي كون فيه الذي تماثل المسيحيين كلها الله فيه بالجوع والعطش اختياراً”, Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXII.

⁶² Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXVIII.

⁶³ Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, LV.

⁶⁴ Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXVI. cf. Mt 5:7.

⁶⁵ Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIX.

them, secondly, that they are reaching perfection and being honored with the honor lordship by them saying "as we forgive those who trespass against us".⁶⁶

Thus, he sees the act of forgiving one another as a direct link to the honor of lordship bestowed upon us. Because the one who forgives is the Lord, by practicing such function ourselves, we are honored with Lordship.

In connecting virtue and asceticism, Ibn Sabbā' tells a story of Abraham's servant. In this story, the servant gives one of his meals to a person in need and immediately his hand become radiant. Marveling at this, he abstained from food longer and gives his nourishment to another person in need. Immediately, both his arms became white as snow. He fasts longer, giving his own food to a third person; this action "pleased the Lord, so He sent His own light and it descended upon him, making him entirely white as snow".⁶⁷

This story is certainly apocryphal, but its inclusion uncovers Ibn Sabbā's reception of ethical deification. The term "white as snow" was used in Psalm 51 as a request for God's forgiveness and holiness.⁶⁸ In the mind of the Psalmist, when one's sins are blotted out and the person becomes perfectly holy, he is likened to being washed "whiter than snow". This imagery was also used during the Transfiguration of Christ, which certain church fathers have linked to deification.⁶⁹ In using the language of light and whiteness as snow, the story is directly connecting the charitable servant to a deified state mentioned in the psalm and materialized in Christ's transfiguration.

Deification and Sacramental Life of Prayer

In his work, Ibn Sabbā' sees that the holy apostles were opened to the mysteries of the Spirit when Christ breathed onto them saying receive the Holy Spirit. For him, the Holy Spirit lifted their humanity to praise and sanctification.⁷⁰ By the descent of the Holy Spirit, humans become "equal to angels" through engaging in "praise and glorification".⁷¹ Through praise we become "like the angels"⁷² and through prayer we are identified as Christ's brethren:

⁶⁶ لم يأتى بكثرة رحمته وتحننه الا لتكميل الطبيعة الانسانية حتى علم الناس فى الصلاة ان يسغفروا عن بعضهم اولاً ونباهم ثانياً انهم صايرون "الى الكمال والتجلل باجلال الربوبية بقولهم كما تغفر نحن لمن اخطا اليانا", Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁶⁷ "فارضى ذلك الرب الاله وارسل نوره فحل عليه وجعله كله ابيضاً كالثلج", Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, IX.

⁶⁸ Psa 51:7.

⁶⁹ Cf. Mt 17:1-8, Mk 9:2-8, Lk 9:28-36. Cyril connects the Transfiguration of Christ with the deified believer and eschatological transformation our bodies to conform to Christ's body of glory (Phil. 3:21). (In *Luc. Frag.* on Luke 9: 32 f., TU 34. 4. 3: 81). cf. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 200.

⁷⁰ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXV.

⁷¹ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁷² Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, VII.

He [Christ] lifted human nature to the honor of Lordship when He became our equal in everything except for sin alone. He bestowed upon us the exaltation to the position of Lordship by teaching us in prayer to say to His Father, “Our Father,” thus making us His brethren and fellow heirs in the inheritance of His Father through His equality with us in the humanity.⁷³

It is clear that Ibn Sabbā‘ sees a divinizing role for prayer, and most notably the Lord’s prayer. He also sees a continuum of prayer between this life and the eschaton. He notes the after our resurrection, “we share with the angels in their praise, especially this angel to whom He [Christ] gave the praise of victory, power, and kingship at the time of His revealing of this weakness for our sake”.⁷⁴

For Ibn Sabbā‘, sacramental life begins when the Holy Spirit becomes fastened to the souls of the believers, allowing them to see the hidden mysteries of God.⁷⁵ The Holy Spirit gives immortal life from Spiritual death, through Christ’s saving works received at baptism.⁷⁶ Moreover, believers become like Christ when they die like Him in baptism.⁷⁷ Baptism becomes the gateway to the mysteries, particularly the Eucharist. He expands further on the sacraments saying:

Then, when the baptized eats from the tree of life, which is the flesh of Christ, and drinks His blood, he becomes connected to the gifts of eternal life and his soul lives. A relationship forms between himself and Christ, first because the Holy Spirit gave him life from spiritual death, and second because eating His flesh and drinking His blood, as He said, “whoever eats my body and drinks my blood, abides in me and I in him”.⁷⁸ Thus, if a human abides in Christ and Christ in him then he must walk in His way.⁷⁹

⁷³ ورفع الطبيعة البشرية الى اجلال الربوبية ولما ساوانا في كل شئ خلا الخطية وحدها اوجب علينا لاجل ذلك بالترقى الى محل الربوبية “ بتعليمه لنا في الصلاة ان نقول لايه يا ابانا جعلنا اخوته ومساهمي في ميراث ابيه بمساوته لنا في البشرية XXXIII.

⁷⁴ اتنا بعد القيامة من الاموات نشارك الملائكة في تسبيحهم، و خصوصاً هذا الملاك الذي اعطاه تسبيحة الغلبة والقوة والملك في وقت “ اظهاره هذا الضعف لاجلنا Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁷⁵ “If the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, is fastened to your souls, then He would direct you to all of truth. I [speaking as Christ] mean that He would make known to you all the hidden mystery in My economy of your salvation, so that you may praise Me and glorify Me”, Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁷⁶ Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXI.

⁷⁷ Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXIV.

⁷⁸ Cf. Jn 6:56.

⁷⁹ ثم ان المتعمد اذا اكل من شجرة الحياة التي هي لحم المسيح و شرب من دمه، اتصل بمواهب الحياة الابدية وعاشت نفسه وصار بينه وبين المسيح صلة اولا ان الروح القدس اعطاه الحياة من الموت النفساني وثانيا اكله من لحمه وشربه من دمه، كما قال، من يأكل من جسدي ويشرب من دمي يثبت في وانا فيه، فإذا ثبت الإنسان في المسيح وثبت المسيح فيه، وجب عليه ان يسير بسيرته Ibn Sabbā‘, *al-Jawhara*, XXXI.

The deified humanity of Christ, through which He did the redemptive works, becomes available to us by the Holy Spirit through the sacraments. Through baptism we inherit immortality and through the Eucharist we share in His very body. In such mysteries, we become participants in Christ through “abiding” in Him.

The bread of the Eucharist for Ibn Sabbā' is not confined to the physical realm, but it transcends to the spiritual reality.⁸⁰ He sees that the human is liberated through the Eucharist. He connects the bread of the Eucharist to the bread mentioned in the Lord's Prayer; for Ibn Sabbā', the Eucharist is the bread that we ask for when saying, “give us today our daily bread”.⁸¹ In his thought, the human was imprisoned, and becomes free through the “bread” of the Eucharist; thus when praying for bread in the Lord's prayer, humanity is praying for liberation. This liberation will come through the events of the passion and resurrection of Christ, but such events include the giving of bread in the Last Supper. Thus, Ibn Sabbā' understands Christ to have taught the prayer “give us today our daily bread” two years before the institution of the sacrament, in anticipation of the liberation that would occur through the Eucharist.⁸² For Ibn Sabbā', the bread and wine of the Eucharist represent the unity of humanity and divinity,⁸³ bestowing the grace of immortality and eternal glory to those who partake of them.⁸⁴

Furthermore, Ibn Sabbā' uses biblical passages connecting the Eucharist to a very real unity with God that leads to immortality. Psalm 34:8 “Taste and See that the Lord is good” is used in conjunction with John 6:56: “Whoever eats my body and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him,” to make the case that tasting God from the Psalm is connected to the Eucharist. Whoever partakes “worthily” of the Eucharist, becomes united to Christ to the point that the communicant “is praised by the exalted angels, the Cherubim, and the Seraphim. They give him the praise of victory over his foe, just like they gave the Lord Christ the praise of victory over the devil our enemy, when [Christ] defeated him and reigned over him”.⁸⁵ For Ibn Sabbā', the partaking of the Eucharist allows one to become so united with Christ, to the point of prompting the praise of angels.

Finally, Ibn Sabbā' sees an important function for the priesthood. Because of the heavenly and spiritual essence of the sacraments, the priesthood itself, which presides over such sacraments, is then seen as angelic and heavenly.⁸⁶ Through praying and sanctification, the priest becomes a divine angel on earth.⁸⁷ The priest becomes an intercessor at the rank of the angels,

⁸⁰ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁸¹ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁸² Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁸³ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIV.

⁸⁴ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, XXXIII.

⁸⁵ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, LXXXIV. Cf. Mistrīh, *Pretiosa Margarita*, pp. 267-268, صار لحمًا من هذا الخبز الذي صار دما بحلول الروح القدس عليه وانقاله من طبيعة الخمرالي جوهرية المسيح باستحقاق بواسطة مسكنتي و شرب من هذا الكاس الذي صار دما بحلول الروح القدس عليه واعطته تسبحة الغلبة على عدوه كما اعطت فانه قد ثبت في المسيح و ثبت المسيح فيه، سبحت له الملائكة العلوية والشاروبيم والصارافيم والسيد المسيح تسبحة الغلبة على الشيطان عدونا عندما غلبه وملك عليه.

⁸⁶ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, LVIII.

⁸⁷ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, LVIII.

even having an angelic spirit.⁸⁸ In a sense, because prayer and sacraments are both channels for deification, the priest who practices both becomes a heavenly agent of deification.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that several deification motifs are present in *The Precious Jewel* of Ibn Sabbā'. This Copto-Arabic writer clearly sees that the humanity was exalted to the honor of Creator and Lord through the hypostatic union. He also asserts that humanity battled and defeated Satan through the cross of Christ, meaning that victory and kingship over the devil is given to humans. Building upon the patristic tradition, Ibn Sabbā' is consistent with Origen, Athanasius, and Gregory Nazianzus who see that the humanity of Christ was deified, and this deified humanity spread to the believers. The means by which we participate in such deified state of humanity would be through the Holy Spirit who manifests Himself in the sacramental life of the church. A focus on Baptism and the Eucharist become evident, but the priesthood is also discussed. Through prayer, and especially the Lord's prayer, we become Christ's brethren and share the same Father.

Additionally, Ibn Sabbā' sees a place for grace in deification through the favor bestowed on us in creation, the nurturing given to us after the fall, the redemption provided through the incarnation, the victory given to us through Christ, and the illumination given to us through forgiveness. He also sees a responsibility that the believer carries in ascetical efforts and striving for virtue. Thus, ethical deification, consistent with John Chrysostom, can also be seen in *The Precious Jewel*.

Although on the surface deification might seem absent within the Copto-Arabic work due to the lack of vocabulary, upon a closer examination, one finds that deification motifs flourish throughout. The patristic views on deification, rooted in Christology, appear vividly throughout the work. Overall, it can be concluded that Ibn Sabbā' has clear deification theology consistent with earlier patristic thought, even if lacking the explicit vocabulary.

⁸⁸ Ibn Sabbā', *al-Jawhara*, LVIII.

Abstract: In Egypt, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Christian theological writing in Arabic began to reach new heights. Within this period, there is an especially enigmatic figure present—Yūḥannā Ibn Abī Zakariyā, who was known as Ibn Sabbāʿ. His work titled *al-Jawhara al-nafīsa fī ʿulūm al-kanīsa* (*The Precious Jewel in the Ecclesiastical Sciences*), is an important work for understanding Copto-Arabic thought within this time period. This paper explores this work to uncover deification motifs and their relationship to earlier patristic thought. Although Ibn Sabbāʿ does not use the explicit vocabulary of deification, the concept is vividly present in his Christology and anthropology. He presents the deification of Christ’s humanity through descriptive imagery and then extends this deified humanity to all believers. He also has a role for grace and human virtue, working together in a model of ethical deification.

Keywords: Yūḥannā Ibn Abī Zakariyā; Ibn Sabbāʿ; *al-Jawhara al-nafīsa fī ʿulūm al-kanīsa*; Deification; Christ’s humanity.

Resumen: En Egipto, durante los siglos XIII y XIV, las obras teológicas cristianas en árabe alcanzaron un nuevo apogeo. En este periodo destaca la figura de Yūḥannā Ibn Abī Zakariyā, conocido como Ibn Sabbāʿ. Su obra, titulada *al-Jawhara al-nafīsa fī ʿulūm al-kanīsa* (*La Joya Preciosa sobre las ciencias eclesiásticas*), es fundamental para captar el pensamiento copto-árabe de este periodo. Este artículo explora esta obra para descubrir los motivos de la deificación y su relación con el pensamiento patrístico anterior. Aunque Ibn Sabbāʿ no utiliza el vocabulario explícito de la deificación, el concepto está muy presente en su cristología y antropología. Presenta la deificación de la humanidad de Cristo mediante imágenes descriptivas y, a continuación, extiende esta humanidad deificada a todos los creyentes. La gracia y la virtud humana también desempeñan un papel, trabajando juntas en un modelo de deificación ética.

Palabras clave: Yūḥannā Ibn Abī Zakariyā; Ibn Sabbāʿ; *al-Jawhara al-nafīsa fī ʿulūm al-kanīsa*; Deificación; Humanidad de Cristo.