

Prayer in St Isaac of Nineveh
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The theme of prayer is undoubtedly the most frequently discussed and most thoroughly developed theme in St Isaac of Nineveh, an East Syrian ascetical writer of the seventh century. When reading his works, one not only receives a clear idea about how he and other members of the Church of the East prayed in his times: one also gains a detailed picture of the theory and practice of prayer in the whole of the Eastern Christian tradition.

In this paper we shall outline the most characteristic features of Isaac's doctrine of prayer, in particular, his teachings on different outward aspects of prayer; on the prayer before the Cross; on reading; on night vigil; on the prayer for one's neighbour, the Church and the world; and on the highest mystical stages of prayer.

Outward aspects of prayer

There is a widespread opinion that an interest in the external aspects of ascetical activity and the practice of prayer is not characteristic of the mystical writers: they allegedly concentrate only upon the inner fruits of this practice. Isaac of Nineveh is one of many writers who provide confirmation of how misleading this opinion is. We find in him many descriptions of outward forms of prayer on the basis of his own practice and that of the solitaries of his time.

Here is one of these descriptions:

One person may spend the entire day in prayer and in reading Scripture, giving over only a small part to standing in the recitation of the Psalter... Another person may be occupied the whole day solely in psalmody, without specifically being aware at all of prayer. Yet another may occupy himself night and day just with frequent kneelings... And occasionally, standing up from there for a while in peace in his heart, he will turn himself for a little to meditating on Scripture. Yet another person may occupy the entire day in reading Scripture...^[1]

In this passage, there are several outward forms of prayer listed, such as psalmody, reading, kneeling.

Isaac renders much value to kneelings (prostrations), considering them as one of the most important spiritual exercises.^[2] In his writings we find indications both about multiple prostrations and a single extended prostration: the latter is falling down and lying prostrated for a long time. In particular, he mentions thirty and more prostrations at one time, as well as lying down before the Cross for three days.^[3]

Apart from prostrations, another external action which can accompany prayer is striking one's head upon the ground.^[4] This, or a similar, practice seems to be widespread not only in the Syrian tradition, but also in Oriental monasticism in general.^[5] Isaac emphasizes that one or another form of ascetical practice during prayer is suitable for every ascetic and that there is no common rule for everyone. But it is quite intriguing that he regards beating one's head as a possible substitute for the whole sequence of daily monastic offices: 'one man strikes his head all the day long, and does this instead of the hours of his services'.^[6]

The importance of outward forms of prayer is especially emphasized by Isaac in his polemics with the Messalians. The Messalian movement (from Syriac *msalyane*, 'those who pray'), which appeared in the fourth century and spread over the entire Christian Orient, rejected the Church's sacraments and asceticism: prayer was considered as the main spiritual activity, by means of which, the Messalians claimed, one reaches different ecstatic states. Among Isaac's writings which are dedicated to anti-Messalian polemics, chapter XIV of Part II occupies the first place: it is called 'On Prayer and Its Outward Forms'.

Here Isaac claims that reverential outward postures are conducive to one's inward progress towards pure prayer.^[7] It is not God who needs external signs of reverence; rather, a reverential outward posture is necessary for us so that we may be trained in a pious attitude to God.^[8] The Messalians, Isaac claims, despised these outward postures; they were not concerned with prostrations and making the sign of the Cross.^[9] By their neglect of outward forms of prayers, the Messalians placed themselves in opposition to the tradition of the ancient Fathers, who not only prayed in their heart, but also kept different external rules and cared for the posture of the body during prayer.^[10] With great reverence and deep lowliness the ancient Fathers stood up and made many prostrations, kissing the Cross five or ten times; some of them lay prostrated before the Cross for many hours.^[11] Isaac discusses in detail how it was possible for ancient monks to make fifty, sixty, one hundred or three hundred prostrations.^[12] Continuing his description of the outward forms of prayer, Isaac then comes to prayer with outstretched hands. This posture, according to him, promotes concentration of thought and a deep feeling of compunction. Isaac also emphasizes the necessity of prayer with one's own words; this prayer, he is convinced, leads to inner spiritual insights.^[13] The advantage of prayer with one's own words is that it does not require one to recite certain texts from a book or to learn texts by heart or to repeat them. Some ancient saints, Isaac notes, did not know the psalms at all, yet their prayer, unlike that of the Messalians, reached God because of their humility.^[14]

We see what the meaning for Isaac was of outward forms of prayers. He is convinced that prayer with all its outward forms is 'the fulfillment of all virtues'.^[15]

At the same time he understands that outward forms, however important they might be, are only an auxiliary means for acquiring pure prayer. Outside the context of the anti-Messalian polemic he speaks of the necessity of outward forms in a much more reserved manner. In particular, he accepts prayer while sitting, especially for old people.

[16] In general, for the old and the sick, there must be special rules which would exclude bodily labour. [17]

Outward forms of prayer are necessary, but they should be measured in accordance with the strength of every person. Not only the old and infirm are freed from the necessity of performing many prostrations and other external actions of prayer: anyone who is exhausted from prayer is deserving of rest.[18] One can pray standing, sitting or kneeling; what is more important is that prayer should be accomplished with the fear of God.[19] Ultimately, Isaac comes to the conclusion that there are no outward postures that would be inevitable during prayer. A deliberate rejection of outward forms of prayer may cause one's falling into pride and the 'Messalian error'. However, this does not imply that it would be completely impossible to pray without outward forms. On the contrary, one should pray at any time and in any posture of the body:

...A person can be occupied with this while standing up or sitting down, while working or while walking inside his cell, while he is going to sleep, until the point when sleep takes over, while he is indoors or while he is traveling on a journey, secretly occupying himself with them within his heart; likewise, while he is constantly kneeling on the ground, or wherever he happens to be standing, even if it is not in front of the Cross...' [20]

Prayer before the Cross

In many places Isaac mentions prayer and prostrations before the Cross, kissing the Cross, and other signs of special reverence which must be shown by a Christian to the Cross. These frequent references to the Cross in Isaac's writings are connected with the exceptional place that the Holy Cross occupies in Syriac Christianity. The Syrian Church has never had its own tradition of icon-painting.[21] At the same time, since very early on, the Syrian Church has surrounded the Holy Cross with devotional and liturgical veneration, as a symbol of human salvation and of God's invisible presence. In this respect Isaac's teaching on prayer before the Cross is of special interest as it allows us to come into contact with the ancient tradition of the Syrian Orient and to see what the importance was of the Cross in the spiritual life of Isaac's compatriots and contemporaries.

In Chapter XI of Part II Isaac expounds the teaching on the Holy Cross as a symbol of divine dispensation and an object of religious veneration. He presents a very elaborated theology of the Cross, which is based on the idea of the power of God being constantly present in the Cross. According to Isaac, this power is nothing else but the invisible Shekhina (Presence) of God, which dwelt in the Ark of Covenant. This power was venerated by Moses and the people of Israel, who lay prostrated before the Ark[22] because of divine revelations and wonders manifested in it. The very same Shekhina is now residing in the Holy Cross: it has departed from the Old Testament Ark and entered the New Testament Cross.[23] This is why the miracles of the Apostles, which are described in the New Testament, were more powerful than those performed in Old Testament antiquity.[24] In fact, the whole of the Old Testament cult, with all its signs and wonders, was primarily a symbol pointing forward to the New Testament realities:

this cult was unable to eradicate sin, whereas the Cross destroyed the power of sin and death.[\[25\]](#)

Speaking of the Old Testament images, Isaac asks why was it that before the wooden construction of the Ark, which was built by the hands of craftsmen, 'adoration filled with awe was offered up continuously', in spite of the prohibition of the Law to worship the work of human hands or any image or likeness.[\[26\]](#) Because in the Ark, he answers, unlike in the pagan idols, the power of God was manifested openly and the name of God was set upon it.[\[27\]](#) Isaac therefore sweeps aside the accusation of idolatry, the very same accusation that was brought up against the Iconodules in Byzantium in the seventh and eighth centuries. Though the context of Byzantine polemic with Iconoclasm was different, and the main argument for the veneration of icons was the Incarnation of God the Word, which made possible the depiction of God in material colours (a theme not touched upon by Isaac), in more general terms Isaac's idea of the presence of the Godhead in material objects has much in common with what Byzantine polemicists of his time wrote on the presence of God in icons. In particular, Isaac says that if the Cross was made not 'in the name of that Man in whom the Divinity dwells', that is, the Incarnate God the Word, the accusation of idolatry would have been just.[\[28\]](#) He also alludes to the interpretation of the 'Orthodox Fathers', according to which the metal leaf, which was placed above the Ark,[\[29\]](#) was a type of the human nature of Christ.[\[30\]](#) Old Testament symbols, according to Isaac, were only a type and shadow of New Testament realities: he emphasizes the superiority of the Cross over Old Testament symbols.[\[31\]](#) The material Cross, whose type was the Ark of the Covenant, is, in turn, the type of the eschatological Kingdom of Christ. The Cross, as it were, links the Old Testament with the New, and the New Testament, with the age to come, where all material symbols and types will be abolished. The whole economy of Christ, which began in Old Testament times and continues until the end of the world, is encompassed in the symbol of the Cross:

For the Cross is Christ's garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the Divinity.[\[32\]](#) Thus the Cross today serves as a type, awaiting the time when the true prototype will be revealed: then those things will not be required any longer. For the Divinity dwells inseparably in the humanity... For this reason we look on the Cross as the place belonging to the Shekhina of the Most High, the Lord's sanctuary, the ocean of the symbols of God's economy. This form of the Cross manifests to us, by means of the eye of faith, the symbol belonging to the two Testaments... Moreover, it is the final seal of the economy of our Saviour. Whenever we gaze on the Cross..., the recollection of our Lord's entire economy gathers together and stands before our interior eyes'.[\[33\]](#) We see that in the Syriac tradition in general and in St Isaac in particular, the Cross is in fact the main and the only sacred picture which becomes an object of liturgical veneration. If in the Byzantine tradition, different stages of Christ's economy, as well as different heroes of Biblical and Church history (prophets, apostles, saints) might have found their incarnation in different iconographic subjects, for a Syrian Christian all this variety of iconography was replaced by the sole image of the Cross. This is an extremely concentrated and ascetic vision, which does not need different painted images. In the Syriac tradition prayer is, as it were, focused on one point, and this point is the Cross of Christ.

Isaac describes different forms of prayer before the Cross. One of them is lying prostrated before the Cross for a long time in silence.^[34] Thus, lying down before the Cross is, according to Isaac, higher than all other forms of prayer as it encompasses them in itself, being an experience of extreme concentration and collectedness, which is accompanied by an intensive feeling of God's presence.

Another form of prayer before the Cross is the prayer with the raising of the eyes and continual 'gazing' upon the Cross: this prayer can be accomplished while standing or sitting, as well as kneeling with the hands stretched out.^[35] In one passage Isaac speaks of 'insight into the Crucified One' during prayer before the Cross.^[36] The question here is not of the Crucifixion, the Cross with the image of the crucified Christ, but of the simple Cross without any image, which is a symbol of the invisible presence of the Crucified One. The images of the crucified Christ, which were so popular in Byzantine East and Latin West, did not spread to the Syrian tradition. Isaac also speaks of the prostrations before the Cross and kissing it many times.^[37] Isaac tells us of the prayer of a solitary at whose house he happened to spend night when he was ill:

...I saw this brother's custom of rising at night before the other brethren to begin his prayer rule. He would recite the psalms until suddenly he would leave off his rule, and falling upon his face he would strike his head upon the ground a hundred times or more with fervour that was kindled in his heart by grace. Then he would stand up, kiss the Cross of the Master, again make a prostration, again kiss the same Cross, and again throw himself upon his face... He would kiss the Cross some twenty times with fear and ardour, with love mingled with reverence, and then begin again to recite the psalms'.^[38]

It is therefore very clear that the practice of the veneration of the Cross and prayer before the Cross was one of the most important constituents of Isaac's teaching on prayer.

Reading

Another important element was the practice of prayerful recitation, or 'reading' (qeryana), which is often spoken of or described by Isaac. This term refers primarily, though not exclusively, to the reading of Scripture. For Isaac, as for the whole of ancient monastic tradition, the reading of Scripture is not so much study of the biblical text with a cognitive aim, but rather converse, encounter, revelation: the text of the Bible is a means for a direct experience of converse with God, for a mystical encounter with God, for insights into the depths of the divine reality.

Isaac speaks of the reading of Scripture as the main means of a spiritual transformation that is accompanied by rejection of sinful life.^[39] The reading in the cell includes also the writings of the Fathers of the Church on dogmatic and ascetical subjects.^[40] The reading of Scripture and the Fathers, as well as the lives of the saints, is, like prayer, the converse with God. Isaac recommends alternating prayer and reading, so that the ideas drawn from Scripture fill the mind during prayer.^[41]

However, 'not all books are profitable for the concentration of the mind'[42] An ascetic should abstain, first, from reading heterodox and heretical literature.[43] In general, any kind of literature outside the circle of scriptural and patristic writings should be excluded from the daily reading of an ascetic.[44] For some monks, especially for the beginners, even the books of the Fathers on dogmatic matters are not useful, as their intellect is not cleansed from the passions: their reading should be appropriate to the spiritual stage they have reached.[45] This reflects a general attitude of ancient monasticism, according to which the only significance of reading is that it can improve one's life. A monk is not supposed to be well-read: he is rather supposed to be pure in mind. Hence the recommendation:

The course of your reading should be parallel to the aim of your way of life... Most books that contain instructions in doctrine are not useful for purification. The reading of many diverse books brings distraction of mind upon you. Know, then that not every book that teaches about religion is useful for the purification of the consciousness and the concentration of the thoughts.[46]

Now the recommendation to abstain from reading not only secular, but also Christian dogmatic literature may seem to be a sort of obscurantism on the part of Isaac. We think, however, that Isaac does not mean that a monk is not in need of understanding Christian doctrine clearly and distinctly. His intention in the passage quoted was, first, to remind his reader of a monastic maxim, one which is very traditional indeed, that reading should correspond to life. Furthermore, Isaac probably had in mind the situation of the continuing conflict on Christological matters in which he and his contemporaries had to live. His warning against reading books on dogmatic matters should be understood in the context of this situation: he did not want the monks to be involved in any kind of theological argument, even if the question was about the truth and the true faith. 'He who has tasted the truth will not enter into dispute concerning the truth... He is not even aroused concerning the faith'.[47] The true faith, according to Isaac, derives not from books, but from experience: it is born of purification of mind rather than of reading.

Isaac makes suggestions concerning how reading should be accomplished in practice. His first requirement for any kind of reading in the cell is that it should be done in silence and stillness.[48] The second requirement is collectedness of mind and absence of exterior thoughts.[49] The third requirement is prayer before the beginning of reading.[50] One can see that the reading of Scripture, as well as of patristic literature, was included by Isaac in the idea of prayer. We should remember that in Christian antiquity, especially in monastic practice, reading was accomplished not with one's eyes, but aloud, even if one was alone. Scripture was read slowly, with pauses, thinking of the meaning of each phrase and word. This culture of reading practically fell into disuse in modern time because of the necessity for one to swallow a great deal of meaningless words and glance over tens and hundreds of pages. It is clear, however, that 'prayerful reading' which is recommended by Isaac, that is, reading involving the maximum attention of the mind to every word, remains an ideal for everyone who wants to

penetrate into the spiritual meaning of Holy Scripture. In this sense, the experience and recommendations of Isaac have not lost their validity.

The understanding of the inner and hidden meaning of Scripture is the main goal of reading. The question is not of the allegorical interpretation of the text, which was not favoured by the East-Syriac tradition, though Isaac employed it here and there. The question is of mystical insights (sukkale) into the spiritual meaning of certain words and phrases of Scripture which appear in an ascetic's mind while reading with deep recollectedness and attention. These insights are like a ray of the sun that suddenly appears in the mind of the one who reads.^[51] Isaac discerns in Holy Scripture, on the one hand, 'the words spoken simply', which say nothing to one's heart and mind, and, on the other hand, 'what is said spiritually' and what is aimed directly to the soul of the reader.^[52] This distinction does not imply that there are in Scripture both meaningful and meaningless words: it rather implies that not every word of Scripture has equal significance to each particular reader. Isaac puts the accent on the subjective attitude of a person to the text he reads: there are words and phrases that leave him cool and indifferent, and there are some which kindle the flame of the love of God in him. It is important not to miss these 'meaningful' verses of Scripture and not to be devoid of those spiritual insights which are contained in them.

For all his love of reading, especially that of Scripture, Isaac admits that there could be such a spiritual state when no kind of reading is necessary:

Until a man has received the Comforter, he requires inscriptions in ink to imprint the memory of good in his heart, to keep his striving for good constantly renewed by continual reading... (But) when the power of the Spirit has penetrated the noetic powers of the active soul, then in place of the laws written in ink, the commandments of the Spirit take root in his heart and a man is secretly taught by the Spirit and needs no help from sensory matter'.^[53]

Isaac was not alone in his emphasis on the priority of inner spiritual experience over any formal expression of this experience, including reading of scriptural and ascetical texts: this is, in fact, one of the characteristic themes of monastic and hagiographic literature.^[54] For Isaac, the text that is read is not that important: more important are the spiritual and mystical insights which one can receive by means of reading. Reading as a form of converse with God leads one to where the activity of the mind on the human level ceases as the mind enters into direct contiguity with God.

Night vigil

Nocturnal prayer is traditional in both Christian liturgical practice in general,^[55] and, particularly, in the monastic practice of prayer. When recommending night vigils to monks, the teachers of ascetical life underlined the fact that because at night the whole world is immersed in sleep and there is nothing that could distract an ascetic, this is the most suitable time for prayer. 'Let every prayer that you offer in the night', Isaac says, 'be more precious in your eyes than all your activities of the day'.^[56] Night vigil is that 'work filled with delight' during which 'the soul experiences that immortal life, and by

means of this experience she puts off the vesture of darkness and receives the gifts of the Spirit'.[\[57\]](#)

According to Isaac, one should not begin night vigil without proper preparation, namely one should first make a prostration, make the sign of the Cross, stand in silence for a while and then pray with one's own words.[\[58\]](#) The night vigil of every ascetic should include a certain 'rule', that is, the succession of prayers, psalms, hymns, readings and prostrations, which are prescribed to be accomplished every time when the vigil takes place. However, this rule, according to Isaac, does not need to contain a fixed number of prayers: to remain in God with one's intellect is much more important than to adhere rigidly to a particular rule.[\[59\]](#) There is a 'rule of slavery' and a 'rule of freedom'. The first consists of reciting a fixed number of psalms and prayers at every Office: he who is subject to this rule, 'is inalterably bound by obligation... to follow the details of the number, length, and fixed character of the quantity (of prayers)...'[\[60\]](#) On the contrary, the 'rule of liberty' does not fix the sequence and quantity of prayers to be read and 'does not set a time limit for each of these prayers, nor does one decide upon specific words to use'.[\[61\]](#)

The order of nocturnal vigil is not the same for all ascetics. There are many types of vigil and different sequences of prayers which might be read, as well as various means of attaining attention and humility. Of special interest is Isaac's reference to the prayer with a short formula[\[62\]](#) and to the practice of prayer without kneeling:

Neither prayer nor a simple psalmody fully comprise a monk's vigil. One man continues in psalmody all the night long; another passes the night in repentance, compunctionate entreaties, and prostrations; another in weeping, tears and lamentation over his sins. It is written concerning one of our Fathers that for forty years his prayer consisted of but one saying, "As a man I have sinned, but Thou, as God, forgive me"... Another man passes the night in glorifying God and in reading marmyata,[\[63\]](#) and between each marmyta he illumines and refreshes himself with reading from the Bible until he is rested. And again another makes for himself the rule not to bend his knees, not even in the prayer that concludes a marmyta, though this be customary during vigils, and he passes the entire night in the unbroken silence.[\[64\]](#)

The aim of the night vigil is spiritual illumination: nothing makes the mind so radiant and joyous, as do continual vigils.[\[65\]](#) Isaac calls night vigil 'the light of the thinking (tar'itha)', by which 'the understanding (mad'a) is exalted, the mind (re'yana) is collected, and the intellect (hauna) takes flight and gazes at spiritual things and by prayer is rejuvenated and shines brightly'.[\[66\]](#) This is a unique passage in Isaac where all four Syriac terms for the mental faculties of man are employed together. By this Isaac probably wants to emphasize that night prayer can embrace an entire man and can totally transfigure the whole of man's intellectual sphere. Nocturnal prayer has, in Isaac, an all-embracing character and is regarded as a universal means for attaining to the illumination of mind.

Prayer for the world

Isaac of Nineveh was a solitary by vocation. Yet in his mind the whole of the universe was present. This is the paradox of a solitary life: withdrawing from people, a solitary does not forget them; renouncing the world, he does not cease to pray for the world. Isaac loved solitude and stillness, but any kind of closing into himself, as well as the thought of his own salvation in isolation from that of his brethren, was entirely alien to him. He possessed that 'merciful heart' which is characterized by having pity for all creatures, including not only Christians, but also apostates, animals and demons. His personal prayer grew, like liturgical prayer, to a cosmic scale, embracing not only neighbours and strangers, but also the whole of humanity and the whole universe. This is especially clear in Chapter V of Part II, which contains a lengthy prayer for the whole world. Isaac begins with the thanksgiving to God for His Incarnation,^[67] asking God to hold him worthy of insight 'into the mystery of the killing' of His beloved Son.^[68] After a long and expressive prayer to Christ,^[69] he turns to prayer for monks and solitaries, both living and departed. This is when his prayer acquires that universal ring which characterizes the eucharistic anaphoras of the Eastern Church. It is not by mere chance that the offering of the Body and Blood of Christ is referred to in his prayer: May there be remembered, Lord, on Your holy altar at the fearful moment when Your Body and Your Blood are sacrificed for the salvation of the world, all the fathers and brethren who are on mountains, in caves, in ravines, cliffs, rugged and desolate places, who are hidden from the world and it is only known to You where they are - those who have died and those still living and ministering before You in body and soul, You the Holy One Who dwell in the holy ones...^[70] O King of all worlds and of all the Orthodox Fathers who, for the sake of the truth of the faith, have endured exile and afflictions at the hands of persecutors, who in monasteries, convents, deserts and the habitations of the world, everywhere and in every place, have made it their care to please You with labours for the sake of virtue...^[71]

After the prayer for monks and solitaries, one for the sick and captives follows.^[72] Then Isaac prays for deliverance of the Church from persecution and inner conflicts, as well as for the preservation of love and unanimity between 'kings and priests' (i.e. between the state and the Church). In his final petitions, Isaac remembers those who have gone astray and those who have departed this life without repentance and true faith:

I beg and beseech You, Lord, grant to all who have gone astray a true knowledge of You, so that each and every one may come to know Your glory.^[73] In the case of those who have passed from this world lacking a virtuous life and having had no faith, be an advocate for them, Lord, for the sake of the body which You took from them, so that from the single united body of the world we may offer up praise to Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the kingdom of heaven, an unending source of eternal delight'.^[74]

This last petition, for those who died without having true faith, shows that the idea of the impossibility of prayer for the departed non-Christians was totally alien to Isaac. He did not imagine the Kingdom of heaven which would be accessible only to certain chosen people, whereas the rest of mankind would remain outside of it. As we can see, Isaac regards the whole world as a single body, in which every human being is a member. In

the age to come, the whole universe will be transformed into the Body of Christ, which is the Church of those redeemed by Him.

Thus, Isaac is convinced that Christians should pray for all people, regardless of their virtues or religion: with suffering we should make our supplication to God for the whole of the universe and for all human beings.[\[75\]](#)

The highest stages of prayer

Among the different kinds of prayer mentioned by Isaac, meditation is the one which is regarded as one of the highest states of prayer. Isaac uses several terms to designate this type of prayer, including three which are characteristic for the whole of the East-Syrian tradition: herga, meditation; renya, reflection; 'uhdana, recollection, remembrance. Each of these three terms, for all their difference in nuances, may refer to what Isaac called herga db-alaha, meditation on God. This meditation is closely connected with prayer, and one cannot easily separate the one from the other: prayer sometimes gives birth to meditation, and at other times it is born from meditation.[\[76\]](#) Meditation on God includes remembrance of the whole economy of God concerning humanity, beginning with the creation of man and finishing with the Incarnation.[\[77\]](#) At the same time, meditation on God also includes pondering upon the ascetical life and Christian virtues: this meditation, according to Isaac, leads one to spiritual illumination.[\[78\]](#) This examining of virtues and their different kinds, which is suggested by Isaac, is a sort of rather abstract meditation on moral issues. It is, however, necessary for an ascetic to be accomplished in this, as it provides a theoretical background to his virtuous living. Meditation on God, which is accompanied by total forgetfulness of this world, leads one to the state of spiritual contemplation, when one penetrates into the 'dark cloud' of God's glory,[\[79\]](#) and becomes like the angels.[\[80\]](#) 'Luminous meditation' on God is one of the highest stages of prayer: from thence, there is only one step to mystical 'wonder', a state when the intellect is totally withdrawn from this world and entirely captivated by God.[\[81\]](#) In some instances Isaac equates 'luminous meditation' on God with 'pure prayer', which is 'culmination of every kind of collectedness of mind and of excellence of prayer'.[\[82\]](#)

The most characteristic idea of Isaac concerning the highest stages of prayer is that at these stages prayer in fact ceases, giving birth to mystical states of 'spiritual prayer', contemplation-theoria, and inebriation by the divine love.

According to Isaac, the difference between prayer and the state which begins beyond its borders is that, during pure prayer, a person's mind is full of different movements (zaw'e, stirrings), such as the prayers for deliverance from trials, whereas in the beyond-the-borders state, the mind is free from all movements. There is pure prayer and 'spiritual prayer' (slota ruhanayta): the last phrase is borrowed from John of Apamea and other early ascetical writers, and is understood by Isaac as the state which is beyond the borders of pure prayer. 'Spiritual prayer' does not involve any movement of the mind: it is the very prayer with which the saints of the age to come pray, when 'their intellects have been swallowed up by the Spirit'.[\[83\]](#)

Is this complete cessation of the intellectual activity which Isaac calls 'stillness of mind' not a sort of Buddhist Nirvana, a migration beyond the borders of every personal existence, a full loss of personal self-consciousness? The answer must be negative. In Isaac, 'stillness of mind' is not a synonym for unconscious and insensible oblivion: there is a positive element in Isaac's 'stillness', the capture of the mind by God. Unlike Nirvana, 'stillness of mind' is an extremely intense state of the mind, which finds itself entirely under the power of God and is drawn into undiscovered depths of the Spirit.^[84] The question concerns, therefore, the absence of the movements and desires of the intellect, but not the loss of personal existence: on the contrary, in the stillness of mind there is an intense personal communion of a human person with personal God. 'Spiritual prayer', which begins beyond the borders of pure prayer, is the descent of mind to a state of peace and stillness: it is synonymous with te'oryia-contemplation.^[85] The term te'orya (from Greek theoria) is borrowed by Isaac from the language of Evagrius and Dionysius the Areopagite. Isaac uses this term as a synonym for the 'vision of God'. He speaks of the supernatural state of the soul, which is 'her movement in the contemplation of the transubstantial Deity'.^[86] In this state, the soul 'rushes forward' and 'becomes as one drunken in awestruck wonder of her continual solicitude for God'.^[87]

The term 'wonder' (temha or tehra, which both correspond to the Greek ekstasis), is closely linked to the states of the 'stillness of mind' and 'spiritual contemplation'. The state of wonder is born from a prayerful meditation.^[88] It may also come out of the reading of Scripture,^[89] or from the recollection of God.^[90] It is characterised by forgetfulness of oneself, losing self-control and one's mind being entirely 'captured' by God.^[91] It can be accompanied by a weakening of the bodily members,^[92] a loss of the sense of one's corporeality and the withdrawal of the mind from the body.^[93]

Isaac often speaks of the joy which arises in a person who is in a state of wonder. It is a supernatural and divine joy that has come about from a feeling of freedom and love of God, and is also accompanied by a liberation from fear.^[94] To describe this unspeakable and unearthly joy, Isaac uses the term 'inebriation' (rawwayuta), which is intended to refer to an especially strong experience of the love of God, accompanied by joy and spiritual elevation in a state of mystical ecstasy. The theme of 'sober inebriation' is a central one in the whole of the Christian mystical tradition, from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa onwards. In the Syriac tradition, this theme is outlined as early as in Ephrem and John of Apamea; among the writers of the seventh century, it was developed by Dadisho and Symeon d'Taibutheh. For Isaac the Syrian, the theme of spiritual inebriation is a synthesis of the whole system of his mystical theology: when analyzing it, we can perceive the most characteristic traits of his mysticism. In one of the chapters of Part II, speaking of the state of wonder which begins beyond the borders of prayer, Isaac uses the image of wine to describe the spiritual exaltation which grips a person:

From here onwards he finds the senses continuously stilled and the thoughts bound fast with the bond of wonder; he is continually filled with a vision replete with the praise that

takes place without the tongue's movement. Sometimes, again, while prayer remains for its part, the intellect is taken away from it as if into heaven, and tears fall like fountains of waters, involuntarily soaking the whole face... Very often he will not be allowed even to pray: this in truth is the state of cessation above prayer when he remains continually in amazement at God's work of creation - like people who are crazed by wine... Not only do the lips cease from the flow of prayer and become still, but the heart too dries up from all thoughts, due to the amazement that alights upon it... Blessed is the person who has entered this door in the experience of his own soul, for all the power of ink, letters and phrases is too feeble to indicate the delight of this mystery'.^[95]

This description of spiritual 'inebriation' illustrates in a very striking manner that the mystical experience which is described by Isaac is of a very active and dynamic nature. The ultimate goal of any prayer is in fact this spiritual state, when prayer ceases and gives place to what Isaac calls 'pure prayer', 'meditation', 'wonder' or 'inebriation'. In this state, a person's intellect is ravished, and he remains silent before the Mystery that surpasses all human understanding.

Based on: The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian by Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2000). To order the book, [click here](#)

Abbreviations

B = Mar Isaacus Ninevita, De perfectione religiosa, quam edidit Paulus Bedjan (Leipzig, 1909).

I = The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian [translated by D.Miller], (Boston, Massachusetts, 1984).

II = Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian). 'The Second Part', chapters IV-XLI, translated by Sebastian Brock, CSCO, vol.555 (Scriptores syri, t.225), (Louvain, 1995).

^[1] II/30,4-7.

^[2] I/64 (307) = B65 (446).

^[3] I/18 (97) = B15 (129).

^[4] I/21 (105) = B18 (140).

^[5] Thus John Climacus (Ladder 5: PG 88,765 AC) mentions the practice of beating one's breast during prayer, whereas Symeon the New Theologian speaks of beating one's face and pulling one's hair (Catechetical Discourse 30,168-169).

^[6] I/6 (62) = B6 (98).

^[7] II/14,8-12.

^[8] II/14,13.

^[9] II/14,14.

^[10] II/14,22.

^[11] II/14,24.

^[12] II/14,25.

^[13] II/14,43.

^[14] II/14,44.

^[15] II/14,45.

^[16] I/20 (103) = B17 (137-138).

[17] II/14,15.

[18] II/21,1-3.

[19] II/21,4-6.

[20] II/5, title.

[21] It should be noted that in Chalcedonian Eastern Orthodox Churches the practice of the veneration of icons became commonly accepted only after the victory of Iconodules over the Iconoclasts in the eighth century. In the Christian West, icons were never used so widely as in the East: statues and stained-glasses were more popular. As to the non-Chalcedonian Orient, in particular, the Church of Syria, icons did not find much acceptance there, and the churches were adorned with ornaments rather than icons.

[22] Cf. Josh.7:6.

[23] II/11,5.

[24] II/11,7-8.

[25] II/11,8.

[26] Cf. Exod.20:4-5; Lev.26:1; Deut.5:8.

[27] II/11,10-11.

[28] II/11,13.

[29] Cf. Exod.25:17.

[30] II/11,13. Isaac has in mind Narsai, Homily on the Ark 183-184: 'With the term "leaf" (tassa, a gold leaf on the Ark of Covenant), Scripture tells us of the humanity of our Lord'.

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[33] II/11,24-26.

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[36] II/5,16.

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[39] I/1 (3-5) = B1 (2-5).

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[42] I/64 (307) = B65 (446).

[43] I/4 (33) = B4 (48).

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[47] Gnostic Chapters IV,77 (original text is still unpublished).

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[49] I/4 (34) = B4 (48).

[50] I/48 (233) = B45 (329).

[51] I/1 (6-7) = B1 (6-7).

[52] Ibid.

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[54] Cf. the Life of Mary of Egypt 31 (PG 87/3,3717 D-3720 A), where we are told of a women who went into the desert without ever reading a word from Scripture; after many

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[74] II/5,29-30.

[75] II/5,32. Cf. Matt.6:10.

[76] II/10,3.

[77] Gnostic Chapters II,84.

[78] II/10,4-6.

[79] Cf. Exod.20:21.

[80] II/10,17.

[81] II/10,29; 38-40.

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