

The knowledge of God according to St Isaac the Syrian. *A religious itinerary from “ascetical justice” (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ) to “spiritual love” (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ)*

PhD Student Valentin Vesa
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca

1. Summary

One of the most famous monastic authors over time, with an almost universal spreading in the Christian world, is St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Nineveh, mystical author of the seventh century, which belonged to the East-Syriac Church. Particular importance is given to his theology for at least four reasons. First and the most prominent one is the optimistic and opened character of his theological vision. Seldom in the history of the Church one can identify an author who insisted so much on the love and mercy of God, which stands, on one hand, at the very base of the divine economy – from creation to Incarnation up to eschatology – and out of it the divine economy cannot be understood, and, on the other hand, it counts as imperial way by which human can reach the knowledge of God, lectured and described as participation to the life of God.

Secondly, St. Isaac of Nineveh is a good example of the ecumenical role played by the East Syriac monastic literature: though coming from a religious community traditionally described by both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian as “Nestorian”, his writings have been translated shortly after his death all around Christian world (all three Christological traditions) with some changes, censorship, omissions and substitutions. Ever since, translated into various languages, his opera was the source and the ascetic life guide for generations of monks, but not only.

The third aspect to be underlined is connected this time with the history of Christian Patristics – belonging to the so-called “third theological tradition”, Syriac theology, of Semitic type, in a period of bright synthesis with the Byzantine tradition, rediscovered by contemporary scholars, especially in the last decades of the last century. Next to the great hymnographer, St. Ephrem the Syrian, St. Isaac of Nineveh is the second largest known name belonging to this tradition, whose works distinguish by their poetic-symbolic character, relatively lacking the philosophical categories specific to the Greek theological schools, as well as the juridical character, pessimistic and closed, related to the Latin theological tradition. Or, more accurately, these categories are used in a happy synthesis that avoids the hazards in which one might fall by an overuse or exclusiveness of one or other of the two theological directions.

Fourthly, the importance of St. Isaac's writings comes in connection with the historical period and place in which they were recorded – it is about the seventh century monastic life, in the Persian Empire, a time of turmoil caused by the Arab invasion, the internal schisms or by the West-Syriac proselytism. It is the time when Oriental Christianity experiences a direct contact with those who will mark its entire existence from then on – the Arabs. Despite the instability and confusion that characterized this century, the East-Syriac literature is undergoing a period of development and that if we consider at least two major contemporary authors, less known in the Romanian theological school: Dadisho Qatraya, from the same geographical area as St. Isaac (Bet Qatraye) and Simon Taibuteh (of the grace), living in the same monastery as St. Isaac (Rabban Shabur/ Bet Huzaye), whose primary work – “The book of grace” (hence derives its name) – was until recently attributed by scholars to St. Isaac.

And finally, a great importance of St Isaac's personality comes from his writings and the synthetic character of his spiritual theology (experiential). One can identify two specific synthesis: on the one hand, between the two authors belonging to two “opponent” theological schools – Theodore of Mopsuestia, a great representative of the Antiochian school, “the Interpreter” par excellence of the East Syriac Church, and Evagrius of Pontus, disciple of Origen, instructed in the School of Alexandria; and the second synthesis between the Byzantine theological thought (the two mentioned traditions), and the local Syriac one, represented by the great mystic John of Apamea or John the Solitary, “the father” of the East Syriac monastic theology. Linear and horizontal history meets the vertical time in the spiritual life, biblical anthropology develops and expresses itself by some philosophical categories and the mystical biblical-Semitic language is refreshed by the Byzantine patristic one (Alexandrian and Antiochian), all these in a well done, original and bold synthesis.

The research theme we propose is dedicated to St. Isaac the Syrian's gnoseologic doctrine. If we are to do a summary of his theological perspective, one could say without doubt that, from one end to another of his works, St. Isaac describes a detailed itinerary of knowledge, from a simple and natural perception up to a spiritual gnoseology (theanthropic). The research we propose will be developed on two different planes that intersect and complement each other: we will refer first to an objective history, which describes a “theological epistemology”, ie a “dogmatic knowledge”, focused on the three essential moments of the divine Economy – creation, incarnation and eschatological life – which influences its theological discourse, and a subjective or spiritual plan that focuses on the possibility of a concrete perception of creation, the knowledge of the divine economy, and of God Himself, in the ascetical- mystical life – “spiritual gnoseology”.

St. Isaac's perspective achieves and maintains a direct correspondence between the gnoseological and ascetical itinerary. The gnoseology he proposes is experienced as a progress of "knowledge after knowledge", or a progress of "virtue after virtue". Theological knowledge is a "passion", that means it is not just about a discursive process, but intuitive too, that cannot be achieved without a process of ontological transformation and purification. From this perspective, the theme we propose envisages a parallel journey of two progressive processes which eventually identify one with the other:

- ignorance - natural knowledge - spiritual knowledge - holy ignorance;
- state submitted to passions - purification - state of justice - spiritual love - simplicity (feeling God).

The final thesis of this research proclaims the idea that *knowing God means feeling God*.

We are going now to describe below, in summary, the structure of the research. In the first chapter we will point to a brief bio-bibliography of St. Isaac of Nineveh, in the context of his belonging to the East Syriac Christian community, during the Greco-Syriac synthesis of the seventh century in the Persian Empire. We will make use in this overview of the latest Western studies and researches that provide more accurate information and a specific course of his historical itinerary, vis-a-vis the information available short time ago in the European academic area. Of utmost importance are the two biographical notes discovered early last century (that of Isodenah of Basra and the second anonymous, published by Patriarch Ephrem II Rahmani), outlining a concise history of the author's historical journey. We will dwell on the analysis of St. Isaac of Nineveh's short episcopate, trying to identify possible explanations for his retiring, from the less information we have, coupled with some historical and recurring challenges that period observed – we refer here to the political and religious environment of the seventh century in the Persian Empire: numerous political and religious turbulences (intra and inter-confessional).

A section of this chapter will be dedicated to St. Isaac's works, using the modern historical critique, an analysis that opens a territory for future researches. We will refer to the religious world of St. Isaac, identifying the sources of his theology. Here we consider, in addition to the Old and New Testament, patristic authors that influenced his own system and generated a personal vision: Evagrius Ponticus, John of Apamea, Theodore of Mopsuestia and (Pseudo) Macarius. We will give particular attention to the synthesis that St. Isaac makes between these authors – on one side between the Syriac and Byzantine theology, and, on the other hand, between the intellectualist and existentialist vision, within a theology generated at

the level of an “experiential gnoseology”, in a concrete and real time and space. This section will provide the objective frame for the analysis of Isaac’s experiential theology.

In the last section of this chapter we will evoke the posthumous spreading of his writings throughout Christian world, from his native territory, East-Syriac territory, continuing with the West-Syriac community. We will give special attention to the spreading of this works in the Byzantine and Slavic communities, where St. Isaac manifested a significant influence, which contributed to building a courageous, optimistic and positive perspective on the ascetic-spiritual life. Finally, we will do a brief analysis of the liturgical memory of the St Isaac, to complete the panorama of his personality. Saint Isaac, a mystical author with a great ecumenical relevance, whose works overcame confessional boundaries, even religious ones, representing the source for spiritual renewals and reforms over time. The method used in this chapter, in particular, is the historical-critical one.

The analysis of the proposed theme will be developed on two axes: historical-objective, respectively, eschatological-subjective. Here one refers to the knowledge of God in the light of the “objective faith”, identified in the line of Theodore of Mopsuestia in three key moments of the economy of salvation – creation, incarnation and afterdeath life, and “subjective faith”, ie the divine Knowledge, identified in the concrete spiritual experience. In this frame, the second chapter will be devoted to the first two moments of the economy of salvation (creation and incarnation) from a gnoseologic perspective, with particular emphasis on the Incarnation, which marks the difference between two types of knowledge in terms of quality. The first section will be divided into two parts: in the first one we will refer to creation and how God is present in it and the way He interacts with the created beings, and second part will be devoted to the analysis of St. Isaac’s theological anthropology, according to which human can have access to a certain knowledge of the world, in general, and of God, in particular.

The second section will be dedicated to Incarnation, the inaugural event of the second catastasis, that is eschatological knowledge. In a first subchapter we will give a brief summary of the Christology of St. Isaac. This short analysis will enable us to identify the gnoseological significance of incarnation and will confirm the author in the theological heritage of Antiochian tradition, in particular, in the line of Theodore. In this frame, we will identify the reason for incarnation – an act of revelation, as a means of union with the Creator of all and the possibility of contemplating the glory of the Divine Being. In this second part we will pay special attention to identifying the primary purpose of incarnation – the manifestation of God’s love for creation and especially to human, more important than the deliverance from

original sin, committed in Eden, reason considered unworthy and inappropriate for such a glorious event. Regarding the research methodology of this chapter, since this goal of the analysis refers to an objective domain, based on Scripture and the Church Fathers' writings, we will use, in particular, the deductive method. But one should emphasize that, in this case too, spiritual experience plays an important role, so the inductive method will not be excluded.

The third chapter, the central part of our research, will be devoted to analysing the process of the divine knowledge in the spiritual life, which is identified with the ascetic itinerary from passionate state (against the nature), to ascetical justice (according to nature), up to spiritual luminous love (above nature). This chapter will be constructed on the second axis mentioned above – vertical-subjective, that actually focuses on the knowledge that comes from experience and points to a given goal. The first section of this chapter will be devoted to a semantic analysis of the terms involved in describing the process of knowledge, divided in four categories: firstly, the three ascetic stages (of the body, of the soul and of the spirit); then the divine knowledge and the soul's faculties involved in this process; thirdly, some adjacent terms connected to the knowledge process; and fourthly we will consider a semantic analysis of the terminology related to forms of experiential knowledge. The role of this first chapter is to provide a clear linguistical picture of St. Isaac's gnoseology, not an easy process, but absolutely necessary to deal with his theological discourse. For such an analysis we will use the philological-critical method. We will make reference to the Syriac published text and some other fragments to be published, detailed in the bibliographical list.

The second section will be devoted to the types of knowledge proposed by the Bishop of Nineveh, analysed in relation: first we will refer to a threefold knowledge – the knowledge of the nature, the knowledge of the Scripture and the experiential knowledge – similarities and differences; the second relationship will be devoted to the so-called knowledge of “philosophers” and the knowledge of “saints”. This second relation is extremely important since, at this level, St. Isaac establishes the differences between the theological knowledge and the generic so called “philosophical”, which refers to the scientific-rational knowledge in general. The bishop of Nineveh describes the common space of the two, but also features the differences. The second one is carried out in fixed bounds, while the first is unlimited, and continues even after death. Thirdly, we will give much attention to the knowledge “from virtue to virtue” or ascetic knowledge in three stages – knowledge according to the flesh, knowledge according to the soul and, lastly, the spiritual knowledge. We will look, in particular, to the specific knowledge which pertains to each ascetic stage and the way it can be

achieved. An important place in this chapter will be given to the forms of knowledge already semantically analysed in the previous section, which differentiate between the specific knowledge of the second and the third stage, in this threefold ascetic scheme, recommending St. Isaac as an original theologian, individualised from other authors on whose mystical theology he bases his spiritual perspective. We are going to underline in this chapter the development of a parallel evolution: from ignorance to knowledge, up to so-called holy ignorance and progression from hatred, contrary to nature, to ascetical justice, according to nature, which reaches its end in spiritual love (above nature). In summary, this third chapter will be dedicated to the description of the gnoseological process, its objectives, the steps observed in its development, and finally, the rapport St. Isaac establishes between the two types/ dimensions of knowledge: discursive and intuitive. We will make appeal to the primary sources St. Isaac uses to develop his vision, in particular, Evagrius of Pontus and John the Solitary. We will make use of the inductive method, as the starting point and the main source of St Isaac's speeches in this chapter is his experience. This time, the speech goes the other way round, from experience towards its objective content, or from particular to universal. We will use the philological tool too, which will bring clarifications to some problematic fragments.

The last chapter will complete the historical-horizontal line of our research, which begins with the knowledge in creation, continues with Incarnation, and now points to perfection in the eschatological life. Therefore, we will refer in this fourth chapter to the divine knowledge in eschatology and, consequently, to the relationship between God's justice and love in the afterlife. The first subchapter will be devoted to the possibility of theologizing about future life, recalling the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Fathers and, finally, one of the constitutive factors of Isaac's discourse, his spiritual intuition generated by experience. Once created a space for the development of the eschatological discourse, the next subchapter will be devoted to the analysis of death, judgment and the state after death – heaven and hell. We will provide a generous analysis of the relationship established between God's love and justice in the existence of hell, in what theology calls "apocatastasis". We will point to the sources of St. Isaac' optimistic perspective and we will identify some fundamental theological principles on which he builds his vision. At the same time, we will try to respond to some challenges raised by his bold vision. Finally, in the frame of a contextual analysis, we will suggest some reading keys for Isaac's eschatology, which will give the reader a nuanced vision of the author's perception. In preparing this chapter we will again use the deductive method, seconded by the historical-critical one. Nor this time one cannot omit the inductive

method, since a fundamental constituent of his eschatological discourse is precisely the spiritual intuition on future life generated by his spiritual experience.

The last chapter will be dedicated to the final conclusions and eventual suggestions for other possible lines of research of the author's mystical vision. Both conclusions and suggestions will consider the two parallel lines involved in our research, which prove to be finally two identical itineraries: intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge, or synthesizing the knowledge of the mind and of the heart. Lastly, the harmonious way the two faculties of knowledge are brought into relationship makes Eastern mysticism a realistic and holistic process.

In addition to these four chapters followed by the section of conclusions, we will add at the annex a translation of two homilies considered as belonging to the "Fifth part" of St. Isaac's works, discovered by Sabino Chialà. According to the introduction he writes, there is no certainty that St. Isaac the Syrian is their author, but there are many internal and external evidence to support this affiliation. The translation into Romanian language is inedited.

If we are to summarize the present research objectives, we would refer to four aspects:

- a gnoseologic reading of St. Isaac of Nineveh's doctrine, generated by the synthesis between the intellectualist Byzantine vision in the line of Evagrius of Pontus and the Syriac existentialist Mystics of John the Solitary and (Pseudo) Macarius of Egypt;
- a recovery of an original anthropological theology, generated in the Semitic-biblical space of the East-Syriac Church, by meeting with the Byzantine theology of philosophical-ascetical tradition;
- a recovery of the linear-historical and pedagogical vision of Theodore of Mopsuestia, as a sign of the presence (and survival) of a chief author of the Antiochian school in the Persian Christian tradition;
- and, finally, we will offer a panorama of the ascetic vision of a mystical author of utmost importance for the universal Christian world, St. Isaac the Syrian.

2. Keywords: knowledge, feeling, knowledge faculties, ascetical itinerary, justice and spiritual love.

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