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The mystery in the community. Isaac of Nineveh and his instructions

When in one of the scenes in “The Karamazov Brothers” by F. Dostoevsky, the works of the mystic Isaac appear on the table, only few readers are aware that the history of Christianity has come full circle. The author from the Assyrian Eastern Church, recognised by his contemporary Church in Constantinople as a heretic, a Nestorian, becomes the moral and spiritual authority for the Orthodox clergyman. Is the mystic a heretic? The history of Isaac’s texts, which made their way to the Orthodox Church through the anchor of orthodoxy – the community of the Mount Athos, is even stranger. His works were translated into Russian there; they found their way from the monastery community to the East, to Russia. But this is not the only odd event from the life of the saint of Nineveh.

The life and activity of Isaac of Nineveh

We have only little reliable information about Isaac’s life. The only certain date concerning his life is 661 – the year of his bishopric in Nineveh. All other information, both about his life and the titles of his works, are hypothetical.¹ Isaac was probably born in the area of Bet Qatraye, on the coast of the Persian

¹ The information we possess originates from two sources that are quite distant in time from Isaac. The principal source of knowledge on his life is the mention in *Liber castitatis*, the work written in 860–870 and attributed to Isho’denah of Basra. The work itself was designed as a history of monasticism in the area of Mesopotamia and includes short biographical entries of the most popular monks. Given the time of its creation, the information was recorded over two hundred years after Isaac’s death. The other source is the text published in the previous century by I. Rahmani, whom we do know nothing about – neither about his origin nor the date of creation, nor the author (I. Rahmani stated that it had been created about 1471/1472). Another author, Abdisho of Nisibis, in his *Catalogue of Church Writers*, states only that *Isaac wrote seven volumes on spiritual development, God’s secrets, the judgement and providence.*

Gulf. There he entered monastic life as a monk (Syr. *darjo*, which suggests a cenobitic monastic community) and later on he became a teacher, the master of spiritual life (*malfono*). His later texts referring to his resignation from bishopric indicate his return to solitary life, which would suggest his anchorite experience of which we have no mentions at that stage.

The only historically reliable event from his life is his contact with mar George, the Catholicos of Seleucia – Ctesiphon in the years 660–680, who during one of his journeys ordained him the bishop of Nineveh at the monastery of Bet’Abe. His very journey to that area as well as his arrival at the monastery, in the face of a schism in the Church, had a tragic dimension. The invasion of Islam was underway. After the initial lack of interest in the conversion of the conquered people, the Muslim mission, aimed at changing religious relationships in the area, was launched. Meanwhile, the fight of the bishops and archbishops from Bet Quatraye for independence from the patriarchal capital in Seleucia-Ctesiphon led to a schism. Facing a schism the monks became involved in disputes instead of supporting and strengthening the faithful. This was happening when people’s faith and their faithfulness to Christ was at risk. Catholicos himself tried to ensure unity with his own authority and respect for the other party. This was the purpose of his journeys to the region that was at risk of schism. Mar George’s journeys took place between 676, i.e., the date of the first synod convened to overcome the crisis, and 680, i.e., the date of his death. It was the period when Isaac was to be ordained a bishop.

However, Isaac’s pastoral activities as the bishop of Nineveh lasted only several months. After his resignation² from bishopric he moved to the monastery of Bet Huzaye, and after a few years spent in solitude he stayed in the community of the monastery of Rabban Saabur. A creeping loss of vision, according to the records probably resulting from studying the Holy Scriptures, could have been one of the reasons for another transfer. The monks from the monastery of Rabban Shabur wrote down conversations with Isaac as well as prayers created by him. They also stored Isaac’s works for many years, guarding them as a unique treasure of their monastery.

² We do not know the reasons of his resignation. *Liber castitatis* presents them in a manner compliant with the then style stressing the superiority of solitary life, devotion to God and difficulties in the fulfilment of the function, which, due to having constant contact with people, prevents a true mystic from the continuation of his previous contemplative practice. However, the author of the work also states that his successor also resigned after several months’ bishopric. Perhaps the reasons were more objective. Some researchers associate the resignation with the need to face up to the difficulties of the management of the community in the area distant from the place of his birth, thus, in a strange territory (Nineveh is in the north of Mesopotamia, a region distant in terms of geography, climate and culture from the coast of the Persian Gulf) while others associate it with the overall situation in the Church and the schism, which occurred in the Assyrian Church.

The reception of Isaac's reflections

Like most Oriental writers, Isaac of Nineveh was not known both in the East and in the West for a very long time. In fact, this also concerned the entire theological legacy of the Oriental Church. From the 10th century, and irrespective of confession, his texts became a very important testimony of spirituality to the Church in the Armenian circle in the area while Isaac himself started to be treated as a master of inner life. From the 19th century, as his subsequent works, which had been considered lost by Christians of different confessions, were discovered, he started to be treated more as an original author, a mystic, the Holy Father of the Church, the witness of the tradition of Armenian-speaking Christians. Strictly speaking, it was only during the last years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century that the reflections of the bishop of Nineveh from the 7th century were discovered as part of systematic scientific studies. It is worth mentioning that the latest edition of his newly-discovered texts has been prepared in the 21st century, based on the manuscripts identified and attributed in the 1990s!³

The reasons for difficulties in spreading Isaac's ideas

Therefore, it is evident that despite admiration the reception of Isaac's ideas was initially difficult. Such an attitude to his legacy was caused by several factors. Most of them are related to the topic of our interest, namely mercy re-discovered in religions and cultures of the East.

The first factor was of a technical nature. The Ninevite was active in the areas under the Arab dominance. And soon the Syriac language ceased to be used by the faithful and was replaced by Arabic. The monastic communities, in which St. Isaac lived and worked after the period of heyday, experienced a period of decline and in result, monasteries were closed down and fallen into ruin. It was hard to popularise mystical texts when the physical existence of Christ's disciples was at risk. Facing this risk, the teaching of the Ninevite was not a matter of utmost importance and thus it could have sunk into oblivion.

However, the next factor was the conscious and well-thought-out attitude to the legacy of the bishop of Nineveh based on his instructions! In other words, the attitude of fellow monks to the legacy of the Ninevite was the result of calculation as well as the fulfilment of the author's will. As one of the first writers fascinated with Isaac's legacy, Ibn as-Salt wrote down during his search and

³ According to the publisher of the Italian translation of *Isaaco di Ninive, Tertia collectione*, Sabino Chialá, the basic text for the collection of *the Speeches* is the manuscript purchased by the bishop of Teheran of the Chaldean rite, mar Yuhannan Samaan Issayi (died on 7 February 1999) in one of the Jewish antiquarian bookshops in Teheran.

studies concerning God's mercy and his relationship with people that he came across Isaac's texts by chance. During his tour to one of the Syro-Orthodox monasteries in Ankar, some father told him that his thoughts about God's mercy and his role coincided with the teaching of Isaac of Nineveh.

Yet, the texts of the Syrian mystic concerning this issue were not made available to everyone. They constituted a unique treasure of the monastic community in which he passed away. As it turned out the texts were neither made available to outsiders nor discussed with strangers, and the words of Ibn as-Salt were a breach to their customs. According to the information Ibn as-Salt obtained not all of the monks from the monastery were allowed to read Isaac's works. In the opinion of the elders of the community the books were intended only for reliable people, which was why he obtained the first pieces of information on their existence with great difficulty and only after years of searching. The quest was crowned with the decision of the superiors of the monastery of Anbar in Bet-Aramaye to admit him to the books. The decision was preceded by checking whether Ibn as-Salt was a man "who through God's grace meets the conditions to learn about it "[Isaac's doctrine of mercy].

Admitting him the superiors clearly stated that the prohibition and the test of his character were prepared by Isaac himself.⁴ According to them, he said and left the following words as a testament: "mar Isaac forbade us to talk about grace to young people so that not to bring them to the path to sin, and said "do not discuss it with those who deny the truth, and do not conceal it from those who ask for it, teach tactfully those who have difficulty accepting it, and still are fit to accept it."⁵

In other words, Isaac himself allegedly talked about the risk of misunderstanding his teaching by young people, who could deem it as an incentive to sin. The custom and such an attitude of the monks towards Isaac's legacy also caused that his works were not known to a broad group of readers. But there is something peculiar about it. As we are dealing with the intra-Christian gnosis, with concealed books, secret knowledge, in which part of the message of the Christian faith was available only to the initiated. It should be emphasised that, as opposed to the Oriental gnosis, the message was not treated as a key to salvation, but as the opening of a door allowing people to meet God here on earth. Thus, Isaac's teaching of God's mercy is not a redemptive knowledge but rather knowledge opening the way to contemplation, to the chamber of marriage with God's Betrothed here on earth. Such an attitude towards Isaac's teaching defines it as a guide for the advanced and not as a key to secret knowledge.

⁴ The reasons for this conduct will be explained later in the article.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7. 8.

But was the issue of observing the author's prohibition the only reason for hiding his texts by the community? It seems that it is not a sufficient explanation. What could be the other reasons for the phenomenon?

One can formulate the next hypothesis having in mind the following information about Isaac, which Ibn as-Salt left. According to him one of the leaders of the Syro-Oriental Church Catholicos John Ibn Narsa allegedly told him that Isaac's teaching was suitable only for the best monks and people living in solitarily in cells and devoting themselves to prayer.⁶ An unprepared recipient of Isaac's words could state, for instance that "sin and death have no existence in God. Sin and death are results and fruit of our acts and do not form part of the substance (Syr. Ituto). Sin is a fruit of the will. There used to be a time when there was no sin and there will be such a time when it shall cease to exist,"⁷ could think that our effort is useless since God in his mercy wants to save everyone. Such an explanation, referring to the opinions associated with the disputes over the issue of universal salvation of the entire humankind, would emphasise a pedagogic threat posed by the Ninevite's teaching to the monastic community. The teaching was backed by the authority of a saint, the authority of a charismatic man, and it was difficult to deny his mystical nature. His authority was indisputable. But as the texts of Isaac's advice and conferences were created in this specific mystical circle they were not suitable for unprepared readers.

In other words, the lack of broader knowledge of Isaac's texts resulted not only from technical difficulties related to the treatment of his texts as guides for the initiated. Both his fellow monks and the representatives of the hierarchy could assume that Isaac's teaching of God's infinite mercy to sinners, of love that is overwhelming and brings forgiveness to everyone, is so bold that it would be unwise to make it available to unprepared readers. Otherwise stated, they agreed with St. Isaac that the teaching of God's Mercy, taken out of context, could be dangerous, in particular to young people. In the context of confrontation with Islam and the apostasy of the faithful, talking about salvation of all humankind seemed to be exaggeration. It was better to hide the texts from a wider public for the sake of one's own identity.

Isaac's views

Are Isaac's views indeed close to the statements of Evagrius of Pont who was accused of propagating apokatastasis? In our view, a thorough study of his thoughts leads to the conclusion that there is no such risk as Isaac's theses presented not only in a much less controversial way, but the very statements

⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁷ P. Bedjan, *Mar Isaacus Ninivita. De perfectione religiosa*, Paris – Leipzig 1909, 189.

are much more moderate. Isaac, like each Semite, did not want to comment on what God would do or what his nature is like because such a presentation of the issue would be contrary to his perception of God whose essence is always inscrutable and who could not be seen by anyone on this earth. It is clear that in the course of previous controversies the issue recurring in theological discussions in the Oriental Church always had the nature of deliberations in which everybody strived to emphasise the unacceptability of *defining* God since such a *definition* could restrict him. Isaac's formulations are simply different, not only in terms of form but also of content.

The essence of Isaac's teaching on God's mercy is the conviction that God's creation is through His mercy to man (the gift of existence is the gift of God's merciful love), thus mercy must accompany man throughout his life. Therefore, as Isaac writes, "God's will is: to forgive each man at any opportunity."⁸ All people, both good and evil, are closed inside God's immeasurable love that exceeds anything else. "God detests sin, and not sinners,"⁹ Isaac writes! Hence, in his texts Isaac frequently emphasised that the gift of God's love to man is the Creator's selfless gesture, a free and underserved gift of grace. Only through it do we participate in his life. Therefore, the teaching of mercy is neither an attempt at stating what will happen at the end of time nor a deliberation on who will be saved. It is the teaching of God's love, which is incomprehensible to any creature, of God's will to save each man, of his effort taken to that end. In Isaac's view, God is the Father of all humankind and reaches out to every man. As evil and sin do not exist in and of themselves, they cannot be eternal. God's love to his creatures is eternal. This very love (mercy – Syr. Rahme) is the quality that enables people to understand why God became man. It is the key to interpret the history of salvation. This mercy of God is the object of his contemplation.

The "perils" of mar Isaac's teaching

As Ibn as-Salt wrote the texts of Isaac of Nineveh delighted him with the depth of the teaching of the mercy of God who has the power – and will fully respecting man – to cause that all his children live in one home. God's mercy itself is said to require man to discover the role and relationship between the mercy provided by the Creator and the mercy to one's neighbours. This aspect of Isaac's teaching resembles the one of sister Faustina from Kraków-Łagiewniki, who talked not only about one prayer but above all, about the need to show, imitating God's mercy. The sign of attachment to the Creator, the sign of faithfulness to God and the beginning of discovering his nature in us is the moment when we

⁸ Isacco di Ninie, *Discorsi ascetici*, VI, 33, 95.

⁹ VI, 24, 92.

start showing this mercy to other people. Therefore, according to Isaac, “The clear sign of chastity and transparency of one’s heart is the following: when looking inside yourself you will see that you are filled with mercy to all men, your heart will tremble and burn like fire with compassion to them, without discrimination against anyone, and the image of our Heavenly Father will reveal to you through it [mercy].”¹⁰

These statements assume that the recipient is advanced on their path to God. He aims at achieving a state, in which man is no longer closed to others, but in his experience of faith he is open to other people’s experience. It is not about achieving virtue or the very desire for perfection. Coming from the creation, which is the first revelation and the first manifestation of God’s mercy towards his creatures, “the son of the covenant” follows a path to discover love incarnated in Jesus Christ. A natural complement is looking at the Saviour’s call in the context of other believers, in the context of all men, both good and evil.¹¹ But this drew attention not to the statements on who would be saved, but what should be the attitude of a perfect man or a man acting according to this perfection.

In other words, Isaac’s teaching, in its essence, is an instruction on what a monk should be like, what should be the features of his prayers and his attitude to other people. It was a call for mercy following the example of God’s mercy – “Be saint, as I am saint.” But treating the teaching as a theological treatise became the basis for speculations that could shatter the peace of the community and other believers, who would be allowed – without preparation – to read the Ninevite’s texts. The statement that this could be an incentive to sin is exaggerated, but stating that showing God’s immeasurable mercy could decrease the fear of punishment, which is a significant reason for many people to choose to be good, is more probable. To be precise, in the face of the pressure of Islam, such an attitude could facilitate a compromise or even provide the basis for apostasy.

The following problem arises here: is faith to be based on fear or choosing love? To Isaac it seemed that it was out of discussion. Mercy calls for mercy and man becomes ready for it in his vocation. But would everyone share this attitude? Perhaps this is why the Syrian mystic accepted the partial concealment of his reflections. Therefore, his teaching includes the discovered and obscured mercy. However, this does not change the fact that the doctrine of God’s mercy plays a central role in his teaching, in the doctrine of one of the most eminent Fathers of the Assyrian Eastern Church.

¹⁰ P. Bedjan, *Mar Isaacus Ninivita. De perfectione religiosa*, Paris – Leipzig 1909, 492.

¹¹ See E. Kalif, *Dieu miséricorde, Dieu amour; chez saint Isaac de Ninive, [in:] Dieus miséricorde Dieu amour. Actes du colloque VIII Patrimoine syriaque*, Lebanon-Antelias 2003, vol. II, 82–83.

