

# “Isaac the Syrian. Hermit and mystic”

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## SUMMARY

### “Isaac the Syrian. Hermit and mystic”

**KEY WORDS:** Syrian spirituality, spirituality of Isaac, asceticism, passions, mind, intellect, heart, body, ascetic practices, tears, humility, prayer, mysticism, apatheia, ecstasy, contemplation, uncreated light.

The work “Isaac the Syrian. Hermit and mystic” rehashes the essentials aspects of isaachian way of thinking, from a historical perspective and also phenomenological perspective, passing through the pure histories, to the essence of the Eastern theology based on dogma, spirituality and experience. The spiritual and theological personality of Isaac the Syrian starts to fascinate more and more the present theological society, his writings being rigorously studied in its different implications such as: historical, spiritual, ascetical, mystical and ecclesiastical.

In this paper I have tried to make a point about the importance of the Syrian theology and especially the theological reflection of the Saint Isaac the Syrian which its have and had passing the centuries in handing down of the dogmatic and spiritual of Eastern tradition. The theme of my paper is genuine, nobody touched or analyzed in a doctoral degree from Romanian theology or in Orthodox overview. The device of the scientific research of this paper is structured on three distinguish parts but not isolated, where I have tried to explain in few chapters and subchapters, the historical context within the Saint Isaac the Syrian acknowledged the Jesus Christ, also the spiritual and theological interrelationship with the all former theological tradition of his time, and of course, the influences exerted in the entire Eastern tradition till the contemporary Fathers. Through this assumed method of researching, I have tried to point off the historical and theological analysis, connecting to the former thematic researches from the Eastern and Western theology as to the dogmatic and experimental way of thinking of the Church. On the bottom of the historical and theological analysis were first of all the isaachian texts sustained by the reflection of the Holy Fathers of the Church and the vision of a few newer theologians regarding to the isaachina theology.

In the first part of this paper, I have defined the historical and ecclesiastical context of living and thinking of the Saint Isaac the Syrian, emphasizing vital aspects regarding to the life – starting to the analysis of those three sources: *Liber castitatis*, belonging to the bishop of Barsa, Isho'denah; an anonymous text published by Rahmani about we do not know exactly either the data or the origin and the short note which is dedicated to Abdisho from Nisibis: “Isaac from Nineveh composed seven tomes: about the living of spirit, about holy sacraments, about judgment and about providence -, the writing, whereby we are knowing for the moment three parts of his “words”, partial edited, two fragments from a fifth one, as well as some prayers and others doubting writings belonging to isaachian way of thinking -, and the contemporary ideas of Saint Isaac the Syrian with the theology of the Greek Fathers and a ecclesiastical writers. As in the case of the majority of well known spiritual authors, there are few uncertain writings pretending to belong to Isaac the Syrian. The reasons could be: on the one hand, the existence in the ascetic Syriac society of a several authors with the name of Isaac, on the other hand the appearance in the same period and in the same circumstances with Isaac, of others authors who left very similar writings with his, as well as topics as through contains. Regarding to the Romanian manuscripts we are specifying that they are discovered eleven manuscripts in the Library of Romanian Academy which contain integral Part I of writings belonging to the Saint Isaac. The manuscripts which contain partly texts from the entire work of Isaac the Syrian are 41 preserved in the Library of Romanian Academy. To these, it is adding another 5 manuscripts

preserved in the Library of Holy Synod (1), in the Library of Moldavian Mitropoly (3), and in the Library of Neamt Monastery (1). There are also a number of 5 manuscripts preserved in the Library of Prodromu from the Mount Athos. As recording the assumption of the Saint Isaac's writings into the Philokalia corpus which succeeded over the centuries starting with the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Greek medium, also Romanian and Slavonic we have specified that this fact happened under the a strong neoisihasm movement initiated by a few complex and exemplary personalities from the Mount Athos.

According to this, we have identified his seeds of theological thinking, also extraordinary similarity between Saint Isaac the Syrian and Theodore of Mopsuesthie, Evagrie the Pontic and John the Solitary. Synthesizing the way of thinking of those three Fathers reflected not only in the writings of the Saint Isaac but in the all syro-oriental theological thinking, we can admit that their teachings discover an eschatological mystical thinking and also baptismal and pnevmatological. The eschatologist and the radical ascetic accent pointes the baptismal and pnevmatic experience, explains the particularity of this theology as well as the fascination and outward inaccessibility of this ascetic bishop.

Among the writings and the authors which are cited frequently by him are: *The Monkish History from Egypt*, *The apophthegms of the Fathers*, *The Lausiatic History*, *The Fathers' Heaven*, *The Life of Saint Anthony*, written by Atanasios the Great, Basil the Great, Diodor from Tarsus, Ephrem the Syrian, Macarios the Egyptian, Narsay, Marcus the Ascet, Avva Isaiah, Avva Amoniou and Dionysius the Aeropagian. According to the syro-oriental authors from the same period, such as Abraham from Natpar, Shimon d'Taibuteh and Dadisho' Qatraya, it is putting to the issue the influence problem but it is not decided in which direction.

We consider that through the historical contextuality and ecclesiastically of the isaachian theology it can illustrate more clearly his contribution to the development and the thoroughgoing study of the Eastern spirituality without forgetting the controversial part of the Christian Syrian history. The period of the 7<sup>th</sup> century when Isaac the Syrian had lived, was an obscure period from the political point of view such as for Syria but also for the Mediterranean Basin and Persia, where wars and important political changing's took place in that area which also had a great impact above the ecclesiastical life from that region. To these political and social troubles it is adding miscellaneous problems belonging to the Syro-Oriental Church, some of them with a theological character, others organizational ecclesiastical problems, the climax of these problems were during the catholicos Isho'yahb III (649-659) and to his predecessor George (661-680).

So as to this present writing to have an genuine character, I have pointed off the various modalities where and whereby, the isaachian theology was received and thoroughgoing studied

by the modern theology researching, from the receiving of historical perspective of a isaachian writings to the phenomenological receiving of his theology. For this reason, we have given points to the contributions of a few theologians and savants such as: Irénée Hausherr, Iustin Popovici, Élie Khalifé-Hachem, Dana R. Miller, Sebastian Brock, Paolo Betiolo, , Ilarion Alfeyev, Dom André Louf, Sabino Chialá, Marcel Pirard, Ioan I. Ică jr., etc.

In the second part of the present paper which contains three chapters, fallowed by numerous subchapters, we have tried, through a theological analysis of an isaachian texts to define the ascetic-mystic profile of the Saint Isaac the Syrian. Therefore, in the first chapter from the second part, we have analyzed the isaachian vision regarding the human addictions, the manifestation, the sharing and its consequences. In the way of thinking of the Saint Isaac the Syrian, the human addictions are understood first of all like the powers which are lying in human being. The various nuances of the meaning which the addiction have had in his writings, gave us the conclusion that the addictions are in the same time “illness” and “powers” of the soul and the body; ways to death but also to spiritually increase. At the same time we have pointed out the importance of the mind and the heart during the humans fight against the addictions, emphasizing in the isaachian theology spirit the ascetic-mystical capacities of the human to get up above the addictions. Avva Isaac did not let us specific descriptions or definitions as regards the intellect; he dignifies only “the empty intellect” from a “second intellect”. Although, he insists on the way of perception of the intellect which, in his opinion, is situated on three stages (educated, accomplished and wreathed). The heart theology to the Saint Isaac outmatches with a few centuries the isihast theology of vision of uncreated light and the heart prayer. Also to the Saint Isaac as to the Saint Gregarious Palama we are finding expressed the biblical principle, intrinsic to the Eastern tradition, according to which the purifying of the heart from the addictions shares by the mystery of God presence, and the man contemplates the God in light.

The analysis of the isaachian texts from the second chapter, reviled a variety of ascetic practices as well as the main purpose of the asceticism, which for we have pointed out that the fruit of the asceticism means an integration of the human being in the mystical experience of God. The asceticism has dominant role according the passing through the addictions. For the ascetic bishop any ascetic doing whom the monk is dedicated, it must have an interior side dimension to embrace the intellect and the heart. The ascetic exercise it is possible only in freedom, and the freedom, on its turn, it is possible only through ascetic exercise. The accomplished point towards the ascetic life of the solitaries are going through also all Christian life, is to acquire the love. Thence, the final purpose of the ascetic life is love; love with its various forms: love for the brothers, love for the God and especially love of God whose

experience, the solitary has to do for getting power in the battle. There is although, only one element which can truly establish and sustain the asceticism: the fact to be done this experience of God's love. As for the ascetic exercise, the blessed Avva Isaac enrolls in the Eastern spiritual tradition, consigning in several times different ascetical practices which have proved efficient instruments in the ascetical struggle. Thus, he reminds about fasting, reading, night prayers which are actually arms of the solitary or "instruments of fight" as they are called by S. Chiala. We spoke about an "ascetic fruit" in the isaachian writings, concept found by the researcher S. Chiala whereby there are making the distinction between fruit and reward, fundamental distinction for the thinking of the ingenious ascetic. According to him, the ascetics and Christian life do not have a rewarding. The idea of rewarding itself is out of his vision because man can be active only push by God's love.

In the third chapter from the second part, our analysis focused above a few main themes which are getting out from the isaachian texts. Thus, we have pointed out the ascetic program assumed by the Saint Isaac the Syrian, taken after the former Fathers, characterized by: loneliness and escaping from the world; the quietness and the silence; keeping in mind the death idea; the tears; the humility; the prayer and the spiritual prayer. These realities of the ascetic life are always associated in the isaachian theology with the freedom, the love and the discernment. For the tears subject we have conferred more pages according with the predilection developed by avva Isaac in his writings for this subject. And we have concluded that the *penthos* is the way of life and the resurrection for all and in all, contrary with the self-satisfaction. The way of tears is the way of love. And the way of love is the way of tears. Pouring out the tears is connected by the vision of God, and both are actually, two sides of the same process of gradually transfiguration of a human being. We couldn't mention during our analysis about humbleness subject. For the Isaac the Syrian, the humbleness is not properly a virtue, but a way, the only one, which the man it has on his disposal to be faithful to his human vocation; there is the Christina path in his truth. The humbleness discovers the real humanity, fallows this way of humanization through the decentness from our false self-esteem towards our true. In this intellectual journey about the humbleness, we are meeting one of the most fascinating, terse and profound definition from the all ascetic literature related to the humbleness; the holy ascetic identifying the humbleness with the God Himself, he is defining it as being " the raiment of God" because in this the Word togs Himself being a man. The prayer is the last theme analyzed in this chapter which in fact concludes also the second part reserved isaachian ascetical teachings. Besides the various aspects detached from the writings of the ninevehtian bishop, we have showed up and analyzed a fascinating concept related to the prayer, the spiritual prayer or how we meet in the isaachian

writings – *ad literam* – “the non-prayer”. We have noticed the very relevant findings of the erudite monk S. Chiala related to this matter and we are starting from the fact that this conception is absolute genuine as well as in the Syro-oriental mystical milieu as those Byzantine and Occidental. The originality of this conception as well as some texts from Evragius the Ponticus determined on the Jesuit theologian Irénée Hausherr, to have some doubts about his understanding. Isaac could formulate this concept wrongly interpreted or rather wrongly translated the term of *ginomene* from the evragian writings. Later, this matter was reconsidered in a rigorous study of Khalife-Hachem, who demonstrates that the teaching of Isaac about non-prayer is in harmony with entire isaachian system and in continuity with the syro-oriental monasticism style of thinking.

In the third part of the paper, structured in three chapters, we have resumed and deepened in a general way but also in a particular the relationship between the asceticism and mystic in the Eastern Christianity and in the isaachian theology. The various theological accents and experienced settle down by the Fathers of the Church during by the patristic period about the asceticism-mystical rapport and especially to the way whereby we can live God, does not mean at all a disunion in the unitary vision of the Fathers as regards the communion of the man with God. In this unitary and single vision in the meantime the Saint Isaac the Syrian can be also integrated in it, who develops in a profound theology the essential themes from the mystic way of thinking from the Eastern. These themes perfectly integrated in the Church’s experience are: the lack of addictions; purifying the mind; the ecstasy; the contemplation; seeing the uncreated light. In the identification and thoroughgoing study of these dominant themes from the mystical isaachian thinking, we have used the same methodology with helped us for the approaching to the ascetic themes, showing the similarities and also the distinctions, the differences of point, but never the disjunction between the Saint Isaac the Syrian and the others Eastern Fathers. For instance, the theological analysis prosecuted, led us to numerous similitude between the isaachian theology and isihast theology, regarding the experience of God in light and the theology of light proper to the Saint Simeon the New Theologian. The theological thinking and the experience of the Saint Isaac the Syrian does not stop at the influences on the isihast theology but it perpetuates till the theology and experience of contemporary Fathers in neoisihasm. Therefore in the third chapter from the third part we have pointed out the echoes of the isaachian theology and experience, in theology and experience of athonits fathers: Joseph the Isihast, Paisios the Aghiorite and Sophronius Saharov. The entire theology and spirituality of the avva Isaac can be found in the dogmas of the Church so difficult to understand them but clear formulated by some of the Fathers such as: Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Aeropagian, Maximus the Confessor. But these

truths are not explicitly formulated in words but refined in the experiences of the great mystic because the ascetic living preceding the dogmatic essentialization from this point of view, avva Isaac being a truly orthodox. The same mystic experiences we find also to the contemporary Fathers we have spoken about in this chapter; this is one of the similitudes which gave birth to this chapter. The effulgence of his writings and his spirituality in the Holy Mount, finding a special place in the spiritual experiences of this holy place, the lines of force of his theological way of thinking we can refer them to the great spiritual Fathers which are connected with the rebirth of the isihasm – the Saint Joseph the Isihast and all his disciples, father Vasilios the Ivirian – made us to pay attention on these great spiritual personalities, all three of them belonging to the blessed Eastern Chalchidia peninsula.

The necessity of this study is imposed by the spiritual personality of the Saint Isaac the Syrian himself, by his play in the ascetic and mystical Eastern development and the response of his theology till today. His work resets in connection the great themes of the Eastern spirituality, as well as the essential aspects of the dogmatic thinking of the Church. Suddenly, in the same text, we meet in a clear plaiting the dates of the Revelation with the experience of the Church, the anthropology with the gnoseology and triadology, as well as the christology with soteriology and eschatology. These references which sheer from the isaachian theology corpus, reveal us the figure of a Father fully integrated in the spiritual tradition of the Church, as well as the profile of a theology born in the fire experience of the Eastern Church. Avva Isaac the Syrian remains through his theological texts one of the most influential Fathers of the Church, but also one of the fathers who managed to infuse in his experience and theology cupel, the important ascetic-mystic themes of the Christian East, sending them then, in a pure Orthodox form.

For the Romanian theology, in its various expressions, from the patrology to the dogmatic and spirituality, the Saint Isaac the Syrian remains very little explored and turned to account. Assimilated mostly in the monastic environment through the instrumentality of translations, more than the academic environment, avva Isaac and his theology represents a treasure integrated in the Church thesaurus what is expecting the discovery of the profound implications for the contemporary theology. In the present doctoral thesis, we have tried to render something valuable from this treasure through a scientific method, carefully selected bibliography and an enthusiasm inspired from the ascetic-mystic ascent suggest by avva Isaac.