

ISAAC OF NINEVEH: THE PERSIAN MYSTIC

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As long as a man is negligent, he fears

The hour of death... [b] ut when he reaches true knowledge by... the apperception of God's mysteries and becomes confirmed in future hope, he is consumed by love... He that has reached the love of God, does not desire to stay here any more.

(A. J. Wensinck, *The Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Amsterdam, 1923, p. 288.)

When Isaac of Nineveh, the author of this quotation, sought to explain the means by which to attain God's love in A.D. 7C, Islam was in its nascence. But, Isaac of Nineveh was not a Muslim; rather he was a Christian and, indeed, had once been a bishop of the Nestorian Church. Nor was Isaac of Nineveh a lone voice, for Persia in A.D. 7C -- 8C saw a flowering of Nestorian mysticism, whose influences were still being felt in A.D. 13 C. However, Isaac of Nineveh was the outstanding representative of this movement which gains sway amongst the solitaries and ascetics.

Isaac of Nineveh may, indeed, be termed the Persian Mystic. Whilst he was born in Qatar, his life appears to have been spent in the realms of Persia. Yet the only, definite chronological fact about Isaac of Nineveh is his consecration as the Bishop of Nineveh (modern Mosul) by Catholicus George I between A.D. 660-680. After only five month's incumbency, Isaac of Nineveh relinquished his seat to retire to the Mountains of Khuzistan in "S.W. Iran in order to lead an anchoritic life. For forty years he devoted himself to writing at the monastery of Rabban Shabbour, where he was buried.

The *Mystic Treatises*, or *De Perfectione Religiosa*, was the most important work of Isaac of Nineveh.¹ It transcended the ecclesiastical barriers which separated the Nestorians from the Monophysites.² Furthermore, the *Mystic Treatises* found its way into the Orthodox Church when, in A.D. 9C, monks of the monastery of St. Saba in Palestine translated it into Greek.³ Nor was its influence contained only within Christianity, for the writings of al-Ghazali show concordance with the *Mystic Treatises*.⁴ Its widespread circulation was a testimony to the universality of its mystical message.

It is the intention of this paper to provide a brief introduction to the teachings of Isaac of Nineveh's *Mystic Treatises*. By this expose, it is hoped to cast another perspective on the milieu in which the Sufic traditions arose. A linear connection is not necessarily advocated, for the two traditions may have developed *pari passu*.⁵ But, as Wensinck commented, "[a]s long as the sources of Christian mysticism are as little accessible as they are at present, even the study of Sufism must necessarily remain defective... for the latter cannot be considered... without... knowledge of the former".⁶

The overriding theme of the *Mystic Treatises* was the attainment of God's love, the consummate union between man and God. To achieve this ecstasy, an aspirant had to acquire a spiritual, rather than an intellectual, knowledge since he should "in his mind be a void as regards the world".⁷ The *Mystic Treatises* described the way via the three stages of repentance, purification and illumination which have also been designated the corporeal, psychic and spiritual levels of man.⁸ Not that Isaac of Nineveh organised his thoughts systematically, for they were like the three stages; intertwined.⁹

Repentance was to be attained through ascetic practices and solitude. Vigils,

mortification and fasting were advocated since only the anchoritic life could combat the distractions which were produced by man's affections. Indeed, the "love for riches; gathering of possessions; fatness of the body...; love of honour... pride and haughtiness...; folly; glory among men ...; bodily fear", allowed Satan to enter the soul.¹⁰ In this capacity, solitude became the prime means of overcoming the distractions of these affections, for it fostered concentration on God – through prayer.

Indeed, prayer provided the vehicle for the soul to progress from the corporeal to the spiritual states. Tears during prayer signalled repentance and that man was worthy of entering the second stage; purification.¹¹ Not that this transition was achieved without difficulty as this sensitive analogy reminds us: "A young bird without wings in the mind that has lately left the bonds of affections, by the means of the work of repentance. At the time of prayer, it strives to exalt itself above earthly things, but is cannot. For it creeps still on the surface of the earth..."¹²

By his purification, the original, divine nature of man was revealed and culminated in his illumination. This attainment of spirituality was indicated by various signs of 'grace' during prayer.¹³ In such a state of ecstasy, "a fervent heat burns in the heart and unspeakable joy arises in the soul. Further sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exaltation makes the mind drunk; inexplicable consolations are received by the soul; hope supports the heart and strengthens it. Then it is to him as if he dwelled in heaven"¹⁴ At this stage, paradoxically, man passed beyond prayer.

With illumination, "there arises in him that sweetness of God and the flame of His love which burns in they heart".¹⁵ Whilst F.C. Burkitt disparagingly described this acme as a "perpetual crescendo of self-induced emotion", man returned to the original Paradise of God's love, garbed in humility.¹⁶ There he ate the heavenly bread for the vision of God's love was seen as the continual Eucharist. But, participation in this union was a rare achievement, with only one man in, 10,000 being deemed worthy of receiving spiritual prayer and hence, of realising God's love.

Whilst the Mystic Treatises incorporated the theologies of both the Mesallian and Origenist traditions, its widespread distribution was undoubtedly engendered by its non-sectarianism.¹⁷ Rather than being a theological synthesis, the Mystic Treatises was essentially a practical guide to attain God's love. And whilst it was a product of the ascetic-mystic stream of the Nestorian Church, the Mystic Treatises was stamped by the personal experience of Isaac of Nineveh. Each of these three factors contributed to the influence of the Mystic Treatises on Sufic writings.

No more is the legacy of Isaac of Nineveh recognised, than in the writings of Gregory Bar Hebraeus, otherwise known as Gregory Abu'l Faraj. This outstanding Monophysite literary figure of A.D. 13C, combined the mysticism of Isaac of Nineveh and the philosophy of al-Ghazali in *The Book of the Dove* and *The Ethikon*.¹⁸ In these two works, Bar Hebraeus acknowledged the mutuality of the Nestorian mystics of Persia and the Sufis. And also, the dominance of Isaac of Nineveh whose influence, spanning half a millennium, linked Muslim mysticism with the Christian expression.

Notes and Reference

¹ The Syriac texts of Isaac of Nineveh bore no distinct title, but were edited as *De Perfectione Religiosa*, by P. Bedjan in 1909. This edition was translated by A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh*, (Verhandelingen der Kon. Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Afd. Letter-kunde Nieuwe Greeks, XXIII 1, Amsterdam, 1929).

² Khalife-Hachem, E. Isaac de Nineve', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite*, v. 7:II, col. 2052, summarises the efforts of

the Monophysites to expurgate references to Nestorian theologians from the writings of Isaac of Nineveh. Similarly, a false biography was fabricated, whereby Isaac of Nineveh bore the appellation of Isaac of Syria and also became a recluse in the Egyptian desert.

³ Brock, S. 'St. Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac Spirituality' *Sobornost*, 7:2 (Winter, 1975), p. 81 discusses the irony of this development since the translation of Isaac of Nineveh's works unwittingly re-introduced the Origenist tradition that had been condemned by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553. Khalife-Hachem, loc. cit., notes the influence of Isaac of Nineveh in the Slavonic Church.

⁴ Wensinck, op. cit., p. LIV.

⁵ Colless, B. 'The Place of Syrian Christian Mysticism in Religious History', *Journal of Religious History*, 5 (1968), p. 10.

⁶ A. J. Wensinck, *New Data Concerning Syriac Mystic Literature*, Amsterdam, 1923, p. 1.

⁷ Wensinck, (1929), op. cit., p. 515.

⁸ Khalife-Hachem, op. cit., col. 2043.

⁹ Wensinck, (1929), op. cit., p. XV–XVI, discusses the relative sequences of the Greek and Syriac texts and notes that the latter "taken as a whole" has nothing to do with the real composition. Here Isaac of Nineveh contrasts with both Gregory Bar Hebraeus and al-Ghazali who were very systematic in their writings.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. XXIX.

¹¹ See, Khalife-Hachem, E. 'La priere pure et la priere spirituelle selon Isaac de Nineve', *Memorial Mgr. G. Khouri-Sarkis*, (Louvain, 1969), pp. 157–173 for further elaboration on this point.

¹² Wensinck, (1929), op. cit., p. XXXVI.

¹³ Brock, op. cit., p. 83, quotes several passages illustrating the signs of 'grace' that occur during prayer.

¹⁴ Wensinck, (1929), op. cit., p. 372.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁶ F. C. Burkitt, 'Isaac of Nineveh', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 26 (1925), p. 82.

¹⁷ Brock, op. cit., pp. 80-81 briefly discusses the two traditions and mentions the writers who were subsequently influenced. For a more detailed study of the influence of Origenism on Syriac mysticism see G. Widengren, 'Researches in Syrian Mysticism: Mystical Experiences and Spiritual Exercises', *Numen*, VIII (1961), pp. 161–198.

¹⁸ A. J. Wensinck, *The Book of the Dove*, Leydon, 1919. The *Ethikon* was edited by P. Bedjan, Leipzig, 1898.