

"Isaac the Syrian, who lived in the seventh century, is a writer who has the remarkable gift of being able to speak directly and relevantly over the centuries. In this splendidly imaginative presentation, Dr. Andrew Mayes offers an excellent guided tour to different aspects of his teaching on the spiritual life."

—Sebastian Brock, Oriental Institute, Oxford University

"This book began with the author's teaching in Bahrain, where for centuries the country's economy was based on pearl fishing. Isaac's pearling imagery resonates with us in our modern and postmodern world with wisdom, freshness, and depth. Canon Andrew Mayes makes the writings of this Gulf saint beautifully accessible for the wider contemporary Church, both for individual reflection and for group study."

—Christopher Butt, formerly dean, St. Christopher's Cathedral Bahrain

"The treasures to be found in these pages are many. Andrew's deep, thought-provoking 'questions for reflection' and imaginative 'prayer exercises' are suitable for individual readers, an excellent resource for spiritual directors, and helpful for supervision. For retreat leaders there is the gift of outlines for use of this material in quiet day and retreat settings. Dive away!"

—Maggie Le-Roy, retreats facilitator, Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf

"I was introduced to the works of Isaac the Syrian by Dr. Mayes and this material, and it led me into a deeper experience of prayer and of God than I had ever known before. I come back to *exploring* and *resting* in the ocean depths of God time and again, and am enlivened every time I apply Isaac's insights to my prayers. This book invites constant study, and constant application—I am immeasurably richer for it."

—Revd. Roy Shaw, bishop's external spiritual director for the Archdeaconry of Cyprus



MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER SIXTY-THREE

# Diving for Pearls

Exploring the Depths of Prayer  
with Isaac the Syrian

*Andrew D. Mayes*



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## PREFACE

This book invites you to a spiritual odyssey. It opens before you an itinerary for venturing forth with God. It is a handbook of the soul and a map for the journey. This practical resource brings ancient wisdom—long lost but recently rediscovered—into today’s Christian spirituality and discipleship.

When I served as Spirituality Advisor to the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, I led retreats and quiet days on these texts, including in Bahrain, in the very region where Isaac of Nineveh grew up and found inspiration in the natural environment around him. This gave me the opportunity to engage spiritually with texts that have hitherto received mainly scholarly attention and to explore how they resonate with our contemporary spiritual search, inspiring me to share their richness with others on the spiritual journey.

Through this resource, the seventh-century Isaac of Nineveh today invites us to become fearless and curious explorers of the spiritual life. He leads us to an ocean of grace teeming with mystery and wonder. He summons us to be expectant and ready to stumble on astonishing treasures in the depths of prayer. We fulfill Isaac’s own prayer: “Grant us to search unceasingly in wonder” (3/VII:42).<sup>1</sup>

1. See the Introduction, pp. 1–13, for the list of translations of Isaac’s works cited in this book, and for an explanation of the citation form in each case.

This book is a summons to a spiritual adventure. With the guidance of Isaac of Nineveh, its aim is to invigorate and inspire a search for something deeper in the spiritual life, as we progress in a journey of discovery. We will risk the depths, face the darkness, and make astonishing, transformative discoveries. This is a book for the curious, for the inquisitive—for people who sense that there is much yet to find in their spiritual quest.

*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matt 13:45).*

This key text becomes a seminal inspiration for Isaac of Nineveh. His imagery, drawn from the nautical world, is for us a powerful lens with which we can observe the spiritual life in greater clarity. Isaac was not a systematic writer, and approaching his texts can be an overwhelming experience, but this image of the pearl (and the ocean) provides a helpful focus and direct way into his teaching. We use the lens he offers to identify key movements and opportunities in the spiritual life.

This is a book to inspire preachers and teachers on prayer. It will stimulate and provide resources for spiritual directors and retreat-givers, and it provides material ideally suited to quiet days and retreats. But it is also for seekers, for those who want to leave the shallows and launch out into the deep in their spiritual journey.

A practical resource, it includes at the end of every chapter questions for individual or group reflection and a range of prayer exercises. It can be used as a course for a home group, or a study guide to introduce Isaac the Syrian or to introduce the concept of receptive, listening prayer. It becomes a handbook on contemplative prayer, highlighting key concepts in the mystical journey. It can be a useful element or module in spiritual-direction training. An appendix offers biblical backgrounds and ready-made outlines for retreat work.

## Isaac the Syrian

Little known in the West, Isaac is one of the most loved saints of the Eastern church. Known as the Syrian, he never lived in Syria but wrote in Syriac (related to the Aramaic of Jesus' day), the language of the Church of the East.

Isaac's astonishing writings, which celebrate the all-encompassing love of God and the call to deeper prayer, have only recently been rediscovered and rendered into English. For more than a thousand years only the first volume (called the First Part) was known—translated from Syriac to Greek in the ninth century by the monks of Mar Saba, Palestine. This first volume was translated into English by Leiden Professor of Semitic Languages Arent Jan Wensinck, from Fr. Paul Bedjan's Syriac edition, and published in Amsterdam in 1923. It was known at that time that other parts of Isaac's writings must have existed, but they were feared long lost. Today we have Parts Two and Three to explore for the first time. They are a breath-taking assembly of materials, inspirational and life-changing writings expanding our appreciation of Isaac's wisdom and insight into the spiritual adventure.

The translations of Isaac's works that are available are expensive scholarly works, with detailed annotations. The purpose of this book is to make such precious translations accessible to the spiritual seeker—to allow Isaac here to speak for himself so that his words of wisdom may be received in the souls of those who read them and challenge and enrich contemporary practices of Christian spirituality. While scholarly articles and theses have been published, no work in English explores the implications for spirituality and the contemporary life of prayer from Isaac's Parts Two and Three. This book aims to meet that gap and to complement from the point of view of spirituality the popular and substantial theological study by Hilarion Alfeyev, *The*

*Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, CS 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), published before Isaac's Part Three became available in English. There are no resources published that relate Isaac's most recently discovered texts to contemporary spirituality.

This book has been written with the personal encouragement of Dr. Sebastian Brock, leading Syriac scholar and translator from the University of Oxford. He has spoken of the need to promote an appreciation of the Syriac tradition among an audience wider than specialists, so to help integrate awareness of the Syriac tradition as "the third lung" for the church. The Sankt Ignatios Theological Academy reminds us, "For the sake of Syriac's rich tradition and culture, Brock has called for a 'haute vulgarization' of the sources—historical, literary and theological—to broaden awareness and knowledge to a larger constituency."<sup>2</sup>

## Spiritual Relevance

A brilliant writer, Isaac has the gift to put into words and describe the inner movements of the human spirit and Divine Spirit in prayer. He addresses themes that have strong resonances in our postmodern world:

- the quest for the Divine,
- spirituality as a never-ending adventure and voyage,
- the need for courage, imagination, vulnerability, and expectancy,
- the theme of hiddenness in prayer: mystery, and things hidden that can be revealed,
- writings that spring from his spiritual experience,

2. <[sanktignatios.org](http://sanktignatios.org)>.

- cosmic breadth of vision,
- a capacity to stretch and expand us beyond usual limits and boundaries,
- a movement beyond conventional prayer practices into the Beyond,
- compassion for all humans and all creatures on the planet,
- ideas that are ecumenical and understandable by all traditions in the churches.

Dr. Brock has written of Isaac, “Although he wrote primarily with his fellow monks and solitaries in mind, almost all of what he has to say is applicable to all Christians in whatever walk of life.”<sup>3</sup>

## Ecological Relevance

Physicality and spirituality inter-relate, and one speaks to another. Working with these symbols of grace while thinking of the ocean will sensitize us to issues concerning the ecology of the ocean, so gravely under threat by contamination and pollutants today. As we reflect on the ecology of the soul and the treasures of the deep, we are alerted afresh to the urgency of preserving fragile undersea ecosystems, deepening our respect and reverence for the planet’s seas. Many in the West were first intrigued by the oceans through the pioneering work of Jacques-Yves Cousteau, a French naval officer, oceanographer, and film-maker, who shared his findings in *The Silent World: A Story of Undersea Discovery and Adventure*, published in 1953, and in the unforgettable

3. Sebastian Brock, “The Syriac Tradition II: St Isaac of Nineveh,” *The Way* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 1981): 68.

movie *The Silent World*, in 1956. More recently viewers have been captivated by the stunning photography of David Attenborough's BBC series *Blue Planet*. As we ponder the spiritual challenge of discovering the hidden depths of God's ocean of grace, we are reminded of today's ongoing exploration of the ocean and worldwide efforts at conservation. Isaac calls us to a sacramental way of seeing the world, appreciating the world as sacrament, the physical world revealing the Divine.

Now it is time to take the plunge and allow ourselves to sink into the mysterious ocean of the spiritual life. We are becoming spiritual swimmers, divers, and explorers of the depths of God! Isaac is calling us to be open-hearted and intrepid pilgrims and seekers as we set sail on an unforgettable voyage guided by his wisdom and experience, which newly speak to us across the centuries.

## Outline of Contents

1. Becoming Explorers: an initial look at the Syriac tradition leads us to see what Jurgen Moltmann calls "mystic metaphors," which have the potential to open up to us astonishing discoveries in the spiritual journey.<sup>4</sup> We ready ourselves to accept Isaac's invitation and summons.

2. Quitting the Shoreline: we leave behind the securities of *terra firma* as Isaac shows us how the ocean becomes an image both of the Divine and of the human soul. We board the ship of the soul for a voyage of a lifetime!

3. Learning to Swim: we can go no further until we hear from Isaac his ideas about what makes a good swimmer and spiritual diver.

4. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 285.

4. *Risking the Depths*: we start to appreciate Isaac's imagery of going out into the deep, and we encounter a central paradox in prayer: God is both hidden and revealed, treasure buried and unearthed, concealed and awaiting our discovery.

5. *Facing the Currents*: we start to understand the conflicting currents of the deep as we discover Isaac's teaching on the stirrings of the soul.

6. *Embracing Transitions*: Isaac maps out for us the different levels of prayer, as we prepare to sink deeper into a silence that beckons, toward the Beyond. The extended prayer exercise in this chapter invites us to take the plunge into the mysterious waters of prayer and make fresh discoveries for ourselves.

7. *Diving Deep*: we delight at the sort of pearls we might discover in such depths of prayer. As we marvel at gifts of revelation, insight, and wonderment, we learn what pearls Isaac himself unearthed.

8. *Homecoming*: our closing chapter celebrates our arrival in the harbor of rest as we share Isaac's hopes of the Life of the Age to Come—what he calls the New World—which we can experience even here, below, as we live on the edge of eternity.

Appendix 1 offers biblical resources to which Isaac alludes to use in times of prayer or retreat.

Appendix 2 offers practical guidelines on leading a retreat or quiet day with this material. It outlines possible timetables for retreats of a day, one night, or two nights, with suggested prayer exercises and resources for worship. In addition, it shows how this material can also be adapted for a retreat in daily life, whereby the participant works with material and prayer exercises set by the prayer guide and subsequently meets with the guide for a time of reflection and discernment. For these different kinds of retreat, participants will benefit from purchasing the book.





# INTRODUCTION: FOUR SCENES

## **The Marketplace**

Glinting and glistening in the Middle Eastern sun, it caught the eye of Jesus the teenager. He had never noticed these before. He loved the Jerusalem markets in his annual Pass-over trips to the holy city, and he would always find time to explore the bazaar. His senses were assaulted by the sights and smells, the colors and textures of the goods on sale. He admired the ceramics, the shiny metalwork, the wooden crafts, the fresh smell of citrus fruits and vegetables. But today his eye alighted on something he'd never seen before, small but shimmering, strangely sparkling, glowing and gleaming with an otherworldly sheen, lustrous, radiant with light. He asked the trader where it came from. "Divers," he replied, "find them in the Red Sea. How much will you give for one?"

Later, while in Galilee in his thirties, Jesus uttered a parable that has intrigued generations: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt 13:45, 46). Jesus smiled as he recalled the merchant he had met in the marketplace in his teens. For him, the pearl seemed the perfect image to convey how precious is the Reign of God. The picture of a diver and a merchant intrigued and inspired him, as he thought of their determination, single-mindedness, full-hearted commitment, as he pondered the theme of the spiritual search, the

quest for truth, a sense of utter openness to fresh discoveries and adventure—what would they find? It seemed the perfect image to communicate to his hearers the need for alertness and for hearts that are seeking, an odyssey of the soul that stumbles on the greatest reality of all in the whole universe: the kingdom of God, the reign of heaven. Wow, says Jesus, we must be like an obsessive merchant who will never give up in his quest for the perfect pearl! We must stay ever open to fresh discoveries, new revelations of grace, even new epiphanies of the Divine, breaking out in unexpected places! Jesus loved the image of a buzzing marketplace where a person can either find great things or miss great things: “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you” (Matt 11:16, 17).

### The Beach

As a child growing up in the seventh century Isaac loved the warm waters and the soft sand that fringed the coastal villages of Beth Qatraye on the islands of Qatar and Bahrain on the northeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula, an important center of Christianity at that time.<sup>1</sup> While flat rocky deserts stretch inland, the coast is edged with sandy dunes and, in places, beautiful mangrove forests. Like any child he delighted in splashing and playing in the inviting seas. But as he grew up, he realized that the sea was not only a playground; it was a place of industry. The crystal-clear waters that embrace Qatar enfold a diversity of treasures

1. See Mario Kozah, Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, and Saif Shaheen Al-Murikhi, eds., *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014). Extracts are to be found in Brain E. Colless, *The Wisdom of the Pearlers: An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism*, CS 216 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008).

to be discovered. Azure waters teem with a huge variety of species, such as barracuda, kobias, shari, and snappers. Isaac would watch as the fishermen beached the boats and hauled in their great catches.

But he was especially intrigued by the divers. They went out into the open sea, and they had no nets among their cargo. At a distance, he could just see them plunging into the warm waters, where they seemed to disappear for ages without a breath, exploring the undersea world with their fingertips. Occasionally, but not often, as they returned to the surface they let out a great cheer and held aloft some precious find. These cries of excitement and exhilaration remained with the young Isaac all his life. As he grew up, he learned that what they had retrieved were precious iridescent pearls, hidden away like gems in a rockface, not easy to find but by their rarity and translucent beauty a delight and joy to the searcher.

With the enigmatic saying of Jesus resonating and reverberating in his soul, as Isaac's faith deepened and matured, he realized that the waters of the deep held many secrets and parables for the spiritual life. Later, when he sought the solitary life of a monk at Beth Huzaye (Elam), in the mountains of Khuzistan (today in southwestern Iran), after a brief time serving as bishop of Nineveh (present-day Mosul) in the 660s, his mind and heart returned to this childhood scene. The waters of the deep would yield to him rich treasures of imagery as he sought to put into words the wonders and discoveries of the spiritual adventure. Though finding himself amid desert and mountain, such memories repeatedly met in a creative interplay with imagination and accumulated wisdom, to produce some of the most inspirational spiritual treatises ever composed, treatises that retain their power for spiritual searchers today.

After a few years spent in solitude Isaac stayed in the community of the monastery of Rabban Shabur. Here he

experienced a creeping loss of vision, resulting from his long hours studying texts of Scripture, so monks from Rabban Shabur wrote down prayers he had created and conversations they had had with him. They also stored his works for many years, guarding them as a treasure of their monastery. The value placed by Persian monasteries of the time on reading and writing is recorded from accounts in *The Book of the Governors (The Monastic History)* by Thomas of Marga (840), saying that many Persian monasteries at this time restricted admission to novices who were literate and could read. Jules Leroy explains the implications of this rule: "This arrangement meant that by the Middle Ages the Nestorian [Church of the East] monks had a passion for anything written. The libraries of the coenobia were always well stocked, not only with books of the scriptures or of the liturgy, generally in rich bindings, but also in ascetic and even profane literature . . . the numbers varied from library to library, depending on the monastery, its importance, site, the generosity of the faithful, and the diligence of its copyists. No catalogue of a complete monastery library has been preserved."<sup>2</sup>

## The Mountains

Yaroo M. Neesan was born in 1853 in the village of Katoona in Northwestern Persia (Iran). Because of vicious attacks by Kurdish peoples he was forced to flee as a child, with his family, to Urmia, where he lived on a farm. There was a significant Assyrian Christian population in this town, with churches and monasteries, and Urmia was also the site of the first American Christian mission in Iran in 1835.

2. Jules Leroy, *The Monks and Monasteries of the Near East* (London: Harrap & Co., 1963), 162.

As a young man Yaroo came under the influence of Presbyterian missions in the area and committed himself as a Christian. Working as a teacher at Tabriz and helping out on missions as an evangelist, he found his gifts and potential recognized, and the door opened for him in 1882 to study at the General Theological Seminary in New York. Ordained into the Episcopal Church in 1888, he was invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to take a leading role in the Archbishop's Mission to the Assyrian Peoples. The archbishop began this venture in 1886, moved by the desperate plight of Syriac Christians belonging to the Church of the East in Persia, who were suffering appalling persecution and suffering.

During this ministry Yaroo became aware of the precious heritage of the Syriac Christians, represented in ancient manuscripts and parchments kept in monasteries and stored in forgotten cupboards in churches. He realized that these were in danger of being lost forever, because ferocious marauding tribes and bandits from the Kurdish peoples repeatedly ransacked the monasteries and burned down churches and libraries. It is not known from which monastery he rescued the document we now call Part Two of Isaac's corpus. What attracted him to this thousand-year-old document, which dates from the tenth century? What hardships did he suffer in order to bring this astonishing text to safety? Certainly considerable risk was involved. *The Christian Herald* contains testimony about one such rescue in the 1870s:

He was invited to join a [Presbyterian mission party] . . . into the Koordish Mountains, where they were going with money, clothes and books to relieve the prevailing distress amongst the Koords consequent upon the famine and to preach the gospel and distribute Christian books. . . . The assistance of Mr Neesan was especially valuable . . . on account of his familiarity with the language of the Koords.

One night when the party was encamped in two tents on the outskirts of a village, a deacon of the mission church came out to them and spent the evening. As darkness fell, the alarm, sadly familiar to Mr Neesan's ears from his childhood, was given "The Koords are coming!" Instantly he was upon his feet to protect his charge. He had two old-fashioned pistols and an axe, and with these he advanced upon the brigands. The deacon and the cook came to his assistance and the Koords received a warm reception. The deacon soon fell, shot in the back, and the cook was wounded in the head, but the young student continued to fight against the robbers. The sound of the shooting was heard in the village and a number of the villagers came to the scene of the struggle. Not knowing in the darkness how many brigands might be engaged, they deemed it the wisest course to remove the ladies [missionaries] and the wounded deacon to the village for safety. They were accordingly hurried away. They could not find Mr Neesan and feared that he must be killed.

Returning upward of an hour afterward they were rejoiced to find him in the tent. He was a pitiable sight. For three hours he had maintained his fight in the dark and was badly bruised and wounded. One wound in the jaw was bleeding profusely, and his hands and face and clothing were covered in blood.

In their alarm they begged him to return with them to the village, but having succeeded in beating off the robbers, he was disinclined to leave the mission property as a prey, in the event of their return. He therefore picked up the most valuable part and sent it onto the village by the men and bade them return as quickly as possible for another load which he would have ready for them when they came back. On their return they found the Koords again advancing on the tents, and they proposed to stay still until the brigands came close, when they might kill them. Mr Neesan, however, interfered. That was not the missionary method, he

said. . . . The party therefore fired their guns in the air, and the robbers realizing that their intended victims had been reinforced, were scared away. The work of transporting the contents of the tent was then continued, and Mr Neesan remained until the last bundle had been packed and was safely on the way to the village. Then he followed and his wounds were dressed . . . [they] completed their journey under the protection of a guard of Persian soldiers whom the Shah had sent to put down the brigands.<sup>3</sup>

This account gives testimony to Neesan's sacrificial efforts in safeguarding sacred books in the most testing and taxing of conditions. The article goes on to record how he retrieved and rescued a copy of the New Testament in Syriac, dated 1207 and written on parchment bound in ancient wooden covers. It also resonates strongly with a narrative written by Ernest Budge regarding his visit to Rabban Hormuzd monastery, a hundred miles or so southwest of Urmia in 1890, testifying to the vulnerability of such manuscripts:

The library of the monastery formerly contained a number of very valuable manuscripts but about the year 1844 the Kurds swooped down upon the monks and pillaged and set fire to the buildings and murdered all who opposed them. The monks succeeded in removing about 500 manuscripts to a house or vault on the side of a hill nearby, but unfortunately, a heavy flood from the rain from the mountains swept them and their hiding place away and nothing more was seen of them. A large number of manuscripts were also destroyed by the Kurds, who cut and tore them up before the eyes of the monks and who having destroyed

3. *Christian Herald* 9, no. 51 (Dec. 23, 1886): 802. See also J. F. Coakley: "Yaroo M. Neesan, a Missionary to His Own People," *ARAM* 5, nos. 1, 2 (1993): 87–101.

various portions of them hurled them down into the stream which flows down from the mountain on one side of the monastery. [Even today the monks] in the mountains are threatened by destruction by marauding hill tribes which rob and plunder unchecked by any.<sup>4</sup>

Neesan lived in Urmia in the nineteenth century, when it became the center of a short-lived Assyrian renaissance, with many books and newspapers being published in Syriac. Around 1900, Christians made up more than forty percent of the city's population. However, in 1918 most of the Christians fled because of World War I's Persian Campaign and the Ottoman Empire's Armenian and Assyrian genocides; thousands of ancient manuscripts, an inestimable part of the Syriac heritage, were destined to be burnt and utterly destroyed. During that period Neesan served on the archbishop's mission for almost twenty years, until 1918.<sup>5</sup> It was to be a taxing task. Toward the end of the First World War, in August 1918, he led 100,000 Assyrian Christians across the Persian sands to British protection in Baghdad. The refugees faced appalling massacres on the way; only half of them survived the journey.<sup>6</sup>

A few years before, however, Neesan had taken from Urmia a mysterious ancient manuscript with a provenance from the region of northern Mesopotamia, secreting it in a place of safety. Where did he take this precious document? What was its destiny? What was its identity?

4. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-Idta* (London: Luzac, 1902), xxiii.

5. See J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

6. *New York Times*, September 25, 1937: 17.



## **The Library**

The scholarly silence of the library was for a long moment shattered. Normally broken only by the shuffling of papers and hushed, whispered requests and restrained, reverential conversations with the librarian, now it was disturbed by a deep gasp, a sharp intake of breath. The scholar rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

In 1898, while Neesan was on leave in England, he had deposited the precious Syrian manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, where it remained unread for almost a hundred years. The Bodleian, the main research library of the University of Oxford, founded in 1602, has over twelve million items. In April 1983 Professor Sebastian Brock, Reader in Syriac Studies at the University's Oriental Institute, requested from the archives of this vast treasury a document that intrigued him, identified only as MS. syr.e.7. As he looked at the manuscript, he could hardly believe his eyes, slowly beginning to realize that he held before him a work that scholars feared had been long lost:

I was there collating a manuscript against a printed text for someone and had got rather bored. Seeing that I needed a break, I leafed through the card index of uncatalogued Oriental manuscripts in the Bodleian. My eye caught on one that had something like "Isaac of Nineveh, c.11th century." It was probably the early date that primarily suggested to me it would be fun to order it up. I wondered: it might have a colophon [an inscription at the end of a manuscript] saying where it was written. It did! An hour or so later it appeared, a small tightly bound volume on parchment in an East Syriac hand, of the approximate date on the card. It had lost its beginning, but I saw that in the colophon it said it was "the second half" of Isaac's writings. I could not at the time remember which half

was already known, so it was not till I got home and looked the details up that I found out that it was indeed the lost part—that had sat in the Bodleian for just about a century undetected!

Needless to say, it was one of those rare exciting moments of discovery that I have been fortunate enough to have had with manuscripts. Of course, if one makes such an exciting discovery, one is really obligated to do something about it, so as much as possible of vacations for the next ten years were spent preparing the edition and translation. Familiarizing myself with Isaac's writings and with the related East Syriac monastic literature was a wonderful opportunity for me to discover the riches of this tradition. Once the edition and translation were out, this put me in touch with quite a number of wonderful people, especially from different Orthodox Churches, who were interested in translating the new text into other languages. I find that Saint Isaac is one of the few monastic Fathers who is able to speak over the centuries in a relevant way.<sup>7</sup>

Now for the first time, English readers could discover for themselves the treasures that Isaac had penned in the seventh century.

### **Third Part**

In another library, three thousand miles from England, in Iran, just a few years after Dr. Brock's discovery, an astonishing find was made, even further expanding knowledge of Isaac's writings. In a Jewish antiquarian bookshop in Teheran, the Chaldean archbishop of Teheran, Monsignor Yuhannan Samaan Issayi, a noted writer, linguist, hymnist,

7. I am grateful to Dr Brock for this account, which has not been published before.

and pastor, stumbled upon the Third Part of Isaac's writings. This new material was a 1903 copy of a manuscript probably from the fourteenth century, itself now long lost. Thus this copy was for decades considered unique, as the only known surviving version of Isaac's third volume.<sup>8</sup> After the archbishop's death in 1999, Fr. Michel van Esbroek, SJ, discovered this manuscript of the Third Part of Isaac's works in the archbishop's personal library in Teheran. Fr. Esbroek, an Oriental scholar and linguist from Belgium, had an insatiable hunger and keen eye for precious manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

Fr. van Esbroek photographed the manuscript he had found in the archbishop's library and sent microfilm copies to various scholars in the field. Eventually Fr. Sabino Chialá, of the Community of Bose, Italy, edited and translated it; as he had earned a doctorate at Louvain la Neuve on the manuscript tradition of Isaac's known works, he was an ideal person to carry out this project. Later Mary Hansbury, who had close ties with a different Italian religious community, used his edition and Italian translation to render Isaac's Third Part into English for the first time, publishing it in 2016.

The present book now for the first time explores the implications for contemporary, lived spirituality from the seventh-century writings so recently rediscovered.

Isaac himself saw the composing of such precious documents as a metaphor for the spiritual life:

8. Grigory Kessel, "The Manuscript Heritage of Isaac of Nineveh: A Survey of Syriac Manuscripts," in *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, ed. Mario Kozah, Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, and Saif Shaheen Al-Murikhi (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014).

9. For example, during 1976 he spent four months in the USSR visiting the libraries of Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi, and Yerevan, bringing back to the Bollandist Library in Brussels some 150 packages of books and some 7,000 manuscript photos.

Dealings in this world resemble a copy of a book which is still in rough draft. What a man desires or whenever he wishes, something can be added to or taken from it, and so he may alter his writing. Future dealings resemble documents drawn up as bonds, provided with the seal of the king, to or from which it is not allowed to add or subtract anything. As long as we are in the place where altering is possible, let us observe ourselves; and while we have authority over our life-book and our book is still between our hands, let us zealously add acts of beautiful behavior, and let us scratch from it the loss of the old behavior without freedom. We are allowed to scratch out faults, as long as we are here. And God will take into account every alteration we make in it. May we be deemed worthy of life everlasting before we appear before the king, and He puts His seal on the book. (1/LXII:292)

## Sources and References

### *First Part*

*Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Trans. Dana Miller. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984; revised 2nd ed., 2011. Cited as, for example, [Part] 1/ [chap.] 62: [page] 301.

*Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*. Trans. Arent Jan Wensinck. Amsterdam: Nieuwe Reeks, 1923.

This translation is based on Paul Bedjan's Syriac text and is available online at [archive.org](http://archive.org) and [atour.com](http://atour.com). Cited as, for example, [Part] 1/ [chap.] XX: [page] 109.

### *Second Part*

*Isaac of Nineveh: The Second Part, Chapters IV–XLI*. Trans. Sebastian Brock. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Leuven: Peeters, 1995.

Cited as, for example, [Part] 2/ [chap.] X: [paragraph] 32.

### **Third Part**

*Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works*. Trans. Mary Hansbury. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016.

Cited as, for example, [Part] 3/ [chap.] XX: [paragraph] 4.

Note: Isaac was writing in the first instance for male monks, so he frequently uses the male pronoun, though his teachings are in fact fully gender-inclusive and for all.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What are the origins and sources of your spiritual practice?
2. What is the most precious part of the tradition—that is, what has been “handed on” to you—that you would cherish and preserve at all costs, so it could never be lost or forgotten?
3. What is your experience of Eastern Christians so far?
4. What do you know about the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Church of the East?
5. What do you know of persecuted Christians in the world today?
6. How do oppressed believers preserve their inheritance of faith?
7. What do you know of the present churches in Iran and Iraq?



# 1. BECOMING EXPLORERS

*My beloved ones, because I was foolish, I could not bear to guard the secret in silence, but have become mad, for the sake of your profit. . . . Oft when I was writing these things, my fingers paused on the paper. They could not bear the delight which had fallen into the heart. (Isaac the Syrian, 1/LXII:288)*

## What Are You Looking For?

Above all else, Isaac invites us to become explorers of the Divine. His key theme and desire is *movement*—he longs for us to keep going forward in our spiritual search and encounter an ever deeper knowledge of the Divine. He summons us to a transformative life-changing journey that leaves behind inherited theoretical, rational knowledge of divine things and leads us into firsthand experiential knowledge—knowing God, not just knowing about God. The former way of knowledge is discursive, enjoying discussion; the latter is intuitive and leads to silence and wonderment. The first is focused on gaining information, but the second is about being in formation, reshaped by God’s grace. The first is marked by external debate, the latter characterized by receptivity to God’s gifts of revelation and inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Isaac’s

1. See Valentin-Cosmin Vesa, “The Doctrine of Knowledge in Isaac of Niniveh and the East Syriac Theology of the 7–8th Century,” dissertation, University of Padova, 2015.

life states his priorities. He did not want to throw himself headlong into the christological controversies of his time and the Nestorian debates in the Church of the East. He wanted to seek God in prayer.

Isaac wants us to rejoice in our God-given capacity for the Divine. He wants us to realize that the human person has a faculty for receiving revelations and fresh vision. There is a fluidity in his terminology: through our heart, through our intellect / mind, and through the practice of contemplation or *theoria*, we are able to welcome life-transforming insights into God and ourselves. In Isaac the words of Evagrius of Pontus (346–399) come true: “The one who prays is a theologian; a theologian is one who prays.”<sup>2</sup> Prayer becomes perception: we start to see things differently, and life will never be the same again.

At the same time that Isaac was writing, in the Byzantine tradition Maximos the Confessor was affirming, “When the intellect (*nous*) practices contemplation, it advances in spiritual knowledge . . . the intellect is granted the grace of theology when, carried on wings of love . . . it is taken up into God and with the help of the Holy Spirit discerns—as far as this is possible for the human intellect—the qualities of God.”<sup>3</sup> As Maximos explains, such knowledge is transforming: “The intellect joined to God for long periods through prayer and love becomes wise, good, powerful, compassionate, merciful and long-suffering; in short, it includes with itself almost all the divine qualities.”<sup>4</sup> Later

2. *Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger, CS 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 65.

3. Maximos the Confessor, “Four Hundred Texts on Love,” in *The Philokalia*, translated by George E. H. Palmer, Phillip Sherrard, and Kalistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 2:69.

4. *Philokalia* 2:74.



traditions will speak of “relocating the mind to the heart.”<sup>5</sup> In his own way, Isaac will show us how this is possible.

## **A Sense of Adventure**

Isaac’s teaching on the three phases of spiritual journeying is the subject of chapter six. For the moment, let’s celebrate his view of our capacity and potential to make progress as we enter different intensities, and three deepening forms of knowledge. He begins with the basics, and a working knowledge of human weaknesses and passions: this is discursive philosophical knowledge. But we can advance to the stage of soul and enjoy the deepening of our knowledge of God through contemplation, which becomes a form of perception: here knowledge is more intuitive and experiential. His third step approaches the fullness of divine knowledge, a foretaste of heaven, whetting our appetite for the Life of the Age to Come:

Excellent is that one who remains alone with God: this draws him to continual wonder at what is in His nature. . . . Also concern increases for the new world and care for future things, earnest meditation on these things and continual migration, which is the journey of the mind to these things. (3/I:8)

5. Later Simeon the New Theologian writes of moving or relocating the mind to the heart: “The mind should be in the heart . . . . Keep your mind there (in the heart), trying by every possible means to find the place where the heart is, in order that, having found it, your mind should constantly abide there. Wrestling thus, your mind will find the place of the heart” (“Three Methods of Attention and Prayer,” in E. Kadloubovsky and George E. H. Palmer, *Writings From the Philokalia* [London: Faber & Faber, 1977], 158).

Isaac's idea of "continual migration" conveys a sense of journeying and movement in the spiritual life. In the same opening chapter of Part 3 he raises the great themes of searching and discovery:

There is nothing which is capable of removing the mind from the world as converse with hope; nothing which unites with God as beseeching His wisdom; nothing which grants the sublimity of love as the discovery of His love for us. There is nothing which lifts the mind in wonder, beyond all which is visible, to abide with Him far off from the worlds, as searching the mysteries of His nature. (3/I:16)

There had been caution in the Syriac tradition about the idea of a spiritual search, but Isaac is its fearless advocate. Isaac wants us to wake up and become alert to new possibilities of grace. He sees that the process of knowing God is an evolution and a progression, as we develop our spiritual faculties and become ever more open to the Divine.<sup>6</sup> But how can he communicate these life-changing truths and discoveries?

## **Communicating the Mysteries of the Soul**

How can we describe to others what is happening to us on our spiritual journey? How can we depict, for the benefit of ourselves and for others, the spiritual road that we are taking: experiences of prayer, transitions that we travel through, impediments that we face? William Barry and

6. See also Serafim Sepälä, "The Idea of Knowledge in East Syrian Mysticism," *Studia Orientalia* 101 (2007): 265–77; Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute / SEERI, 1989); Patrik Hagman, *The Ascetism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).