

matis vinculis obligavit, et ille, ut mente conceperat, per imperialem potentiam, simulque falsos testes, eundem apostolicum patrem nequiter condemnavit, monachicis vestibus, et ad Pontias in exilium destinavit, sustentans eum pane tribulationis et aqua angustiae; ibique mortuus est ac sepultus, et confessor affectus est: ad cuius corpus infirmi sanabantur. Vigilius autem anathematis nexibus merito irretitus, insuper et homicidii crimine nominatim infamatus, nefario ausu se papam instituit. O ineffabilem Dei pietatem! Vigilius, qui iam desperatus erat, servatur ad poenitentiam. Anthimum scilicet haereticum patriarcham quem reconciliare spondederat, reconciliare nolens, longo exilio, longaque afflictione, maceratus, digna factis recepit, et sic demum procul a patria defunctus quievit in Domino. Ordinationes tamen eius, ut dictum est, in sua stabilitate manserunt. Haec enim quae de Silverio et Vigilio retulimus, partim in synodali decreto eiusdem Silverii, partim in Pontificali libro habentur.

congregavit, ubi auctoritate sancti Spiritus et apostolica potestate eum ut revera symoniacum et invasorem aecclesiae anathematis vinculis obligavit. Vigilius tamen, ut sacrilega mente conceperat, per imperialem potentiam datamque pecuniam et falsorum amminiculo testium predictum papam Silverium nequiter condemnavit, monachicis vestibus induit, et ad Pontias in exilium destinavit, sustentans eum pane tribulationis et aqua angustiae. Ibiq; felix papa ille confessor factus, defunctus ac sepultus est; ad cuius tumulum nonnulli sanabantur infirmi. Vigilius autem dignis anathematis nexibus irretitus, reus insuper homicidii, nefariis ausibus se papam instituit. Sed o inestimabilem divinae clementiae pietatem! Vigilius, qui iam desperatus erat ob culpam, servatur ad poenitentiam, Anthimum scilicet hereticum patriarcham, quem reconciliare spondederat, inthronizare noluit. Propterea longo detrusus exilio durisque afflictionibus maceratus factis digna recepit et sic demum procul a patria defunctus quievit in Domino. Ordinationes tamen eius, ut dictum est, in sua stabilitate permanserunt. Haec autem quae de Silverio Vigilioque retulimus partim in sinodali decreto eiusdem Silverii, partim in pontificali codice digesta leguntur.

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### ISAAC OF NINEVEH.

*Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, translated from Bedjan's Syriac text by A. J. WENSINCK. (K. Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, 1923.)

PROFESSOR WENSINCK, of Leiden, and the Royal Academy of Sciences in Amsterdam have conferred a great boon by this publication on all  
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who are interested in ascetical and mystical literature. It is a handsome quarto of 400 pages, and contains an English translation of the works of Isaac of Nineveh, a recluse who became Bishop of Nineveh (i.e. Mosul) about the year 650, but like Pope Celestine V resigned his office after five months. He returned to the desert to live for forty years more and write his treatises for Solitaries. Isaac was a Nestorian, but so greatly were his writings esteemed by all parties that the Jacobites produced a forged Life of him, which pretends that he lived in the Egyptian Desert, and the Orthodox monks of St Saba translated most of his writings into Greek. It is further claimed by Prof. Wensinck that his influence is to be traced in such Muslim mystical writers as Ghazzālī. His work is therefore of some historical importance in the history of thought, quite apart from its intrinsic value.

I confess that I do not find Isaac of Nineveh inspiring. He represents that complete abandonment of the world, which handed over the Orient to Islam, to barbarism, and to stagnation. And when we examine the reasons for this renunciation it appears to be very little but selfishness based on superstition. There is very little in Isaac of the practical wisdom of St Benedict, or of the ardour of St Bernard, to say nothing of St Francis. The task of life, as Isaac saw it, is 'continual meditation on the order of things to come: . . . excellence consists that a man in his mind be a void as regards the world' (p. 1). 'The first impulse that by divine mercy befalls a man, which draws the soul toward life, strikes the heart concerning the transitoriness of this Nature: to this thought naturally follows contempt of this world. And then begin in the man all the beautiful emotions that educate him for life' (p. 225). 'The way towards life and light consists in two things: abiding in one and the same place, and constant fasting' (p. 188). 'In a full stomach there is no knowledge of the mysteries of God' (p. 34). When 'the distraction of intercourse with men has assailed thee . . . and the fervour of thy deliberations has become cold', then 'tears and beating the head during prayer and fervent self-humiliations quicken again their warm sweetness in the heart' (p. 90). The whole aim of the solitary's life seems to be a perpetual *crescendo* of self-induced emotion; there is none of the Western advice to attend to work during work-time, that the mind may come back refreshed afterwards to contemplation.<sup>1</sup> 'Do not think that there is any work more profitable

<sup>1</sup> The disciple asks: 'Which meditation and occupation should a man have in his solitude, lest his intellect should be found occupied with accidental deliberations?' The teacher answers: 'What should be the meditation of him that is dead to the world in his cell? Should a man whose soul is awake ask what his work should be? What is the meditation of the solitary in his cell but weeping?' (p. 169). A picture of the ideal solitary ('the pride of Christ's church') is given on p. 81. When he does sit down for a little rest he faces East (p. 370).

than that of vigils' (p. 91). If you have 'a thought of relaxation', if you are ill or tired, desist from your prayer, from your Psalms—but 'do not sleep', 'do not make your heart thick and dark by sleep' (p. 94). What wonder that outraged Nature takes a heavy toll and the solitary is troubled by what we are now learning to call 'repressed complexes'? (see pp. 160, 277, 284). And when the desired state of 'apathy' was reached, it appears to me not so much the highest philosophy, as Isaac would believe, but something nearer idiocy, like that Father who could not remember whether he had eaten, or that other who 'had become so pure and simple and had reached such a perfection and serenity; that he was nearly as a babe' and had to be watched (p. 168; see also p. 261).

And what was the reward of this deliberately unnatural life, apart from 'the glory of the world to be, the hope preserved for the righteous of a life excited in spirit wholly originating in God' (p. 171)? The reward comes in occasional states of ecstasy, and the special merit of Isaac's dreary treatises seems to me to consist in this, that he describes these states of ecstasy in great detail. Here are a few of them. 'When thou art occupied in solitude with the beautiful work of humility, when thy soul is near unto coming forth from under the darkness, this will be thy sign: thy heart will burn and glow as with fire, night and day, so that thou wilt esteem all earthly things as ashes and dung. It will not even please thee to touch food . . . Then, of a sudden, the fountain of tears will be given thee . . . with all that thou doest tears will stream. If thou observest this in thyself, take heart, thou hast passed through the sea' (p. 63). 'Sometimes from prayer a certain contemplation is born which also makes prayer vanish from the lips. And he to whom this contemplation happens becomes as a corpse without soul, in ecstasy. This we call sight during prayer and not an image or form forged by phantasy, as fools say' (p. 112). 'By these insights the emotion of prayer ceases, the mind is absorbed in ecstasy<sup>1</sup> and the desire of its prayer is forgotten. The impulses are drowned (or baptized) in a heavy drunkenness and man is no longer in this world. Then there is no longer any discrimination of body or of soul' (p. 117). From time to time there arises in the solitary 'that sweetness of God and the flame of His love which burns in the heart and kindles all the affections of body and of soul. And this power he will perceive in all the species (*līf.* natures) of the creation and all things which he meets. From time to time he will become drunk by it as by wine; his limbs will relax, his mind will stand still and his heart will follow God

<sup>1</sup> *Bthahrā haunā methbla'*, i. e. the sane mind is swallowed up in a maze. Elsewhere the mind (*haunā*) is regarded as the king, the governor of the senses (p. 325). But consistency of thought or language is hardly to be expected from Isaac.

as a captive . . . He that reaches this from time to time will not remember that he is clad with a body, nor will he know that he is in the world' (p. 226).

This, as I say, is the reward—a state of mind in which everything appears as a great and almost perceptible harmony. God is not unjust, and it would be hard if those who had violated every instinct of Nature in a whole-hearted attempt to attain non-material rapture should not sometimes get a taste of it. But at what a cost, to themselves and to the world of men which they have abandoned! And, at the end, do they get a truer vision and insight than Richard Jefferies, who also (in the words of Abbot Butler) used to try to enter into himself and get into touch with higher realities? 'All that was behind me', says Jefferies—'the house, the people, the sounds—seemed to disappear, and to leave me alone. Involuntarily I drew a long breath, then I breathed slowly. My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation. This only lasted a very short time, perhaps only part of a second, and while it lasted there was no formulated wish. I was absorbed; I drank the beauty of the morning; I was exalted. When it ceased I did wish for some increase or enlargement of my existence to correspond with the largeness of feeling I had momentarily enjoyed.'<sup>1</sup>

Here we have, out of the lips of a Pantheist and a lover of nature, very much the same sort of experience as the 'consolations' of Isaac the Nestorian Christian and hater of matter and perceptible form. Ultimately it seems to me the expression of an experienced synthesis, a vivid perception that everything together makes a Harmony, larger, grander, more beautiful and impressive than the mind can put into words, and that if there be things outside this Harmony they are of no importance and do not really exist. There is also this resemblance between Richard Jefferies and Isaac of Nineveh, and probably also all the great mystics whether cloistered or uncloistered, viz. the practice of Solitude. To think profoundly, as distinct from thinking quickly and brightly, one must be often alone. The mistake that Isaac and his school made seems to me to be that they thought they would attain to better results by being nearly always alone. It was all very well for Arsenius to spend forty years in the Desert in silence and solitude, for he had the memories and the experience of a previous forty years at the very centre of affairs. But those who have taken nothing in have very little to give out.

It remains to notice one or two points of interest in Isaac's treatises apart from their main theme, and to touch upon certain defects in Wensinck's otherwise excellent work. The tolerance of Isaac is note-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Jefferies in Butler's *Western Mysticism* p. 334.

worthy: he warns his solitaries against reading books 'that accentuate the differences between the confessions with the aim of causing schisms' (p. 34), and says that the true solitary 'offers prayer even for the enemies of truth and on behalf of reptiles' (p. 34r): no wonder Isaac had the veneration of Monophysites and Greeks as well as of his own Nestorians. On p. 49 there is a reference to 'bound natures', a term used by Ephraim (Mitchell ii p. clxi). On p. 51 is a reference to Noah's Cedars: see Ephr. *Rom.* iv 147 E and the Note in *Anecdota Oxoniensia* (Relics, 1896), p. 99. On p. 109 occurs the notable statement that 'revelation is not the exact truth': i. e. 'it is not necessary that every one to whom a revelation is imparted or who is influenced by a consoling [divine] action, must know the truth and the exact knowledge concerning God; for many are those to whom such things were imparted, yet knew God as children only'.

On pp. 114, 134, 'spiritual prayer' is considered, i. e. a state of mind in which the thought is rapt into a sort of contemplation of God and reality, without conscious wishes or petition. This state comes by God's grace, not at all by an act of human will—as the Messalians say (mentioned pp. 116, 333).

We may note also (p. 128) that 'Sin, hell and death do not at all exist with God. For they are facts, not persons.' And again 'Those who are scourged in Hell are tormented with the scourgings of love. . . . It is evil for a man to think that the sinners in Hell are destitute of love for the Creator' (p. 136). Finally, there is a meditation on the whole Universe on p. 172, too long to quote, but interesting both in itself and also as a genuine ancient parallel to the concluding pages of Flaubert's *Tentation de St. Antoine*.

Prof. Wensinck's translation is a very creditable piece of English for a foreigner, but on p. 187 Isaac does not really assert that the true and elect feed upon 'drugs': the word should have been 'roots' ('*eḡḡārē*'). On p. 307 I think he has missed the sense: he reads 'Be instead of an avenger, a deliverer; . . . instead of one who delivers (*mashlmānā*), a martyr; instead of a plaintiff (*mkawnānā*), a defendant (*mpīsānā*)'. Here the last clauses should read 'instead of a traitor,<sup>1</sup> a martyr; instead of a reprover, a persuader'.

On the same page (p. 307) the Biblical reference is not to Isaiah lxi 1, but to Lk. iv 18 f, and it goes down to the word 'forgiveness'. On p. 309, 'Sheol shall wither their form and they shall be bereft' is not a reference to Job xiv 20, but is the Peshitta text of Ps. xlix 14<sup>b</sup>.<sup>2</sup> As a rule Isaac quotes accurately from the Peshitta, but there are at least two notable exceptions. On p. 191 the solitary is told, 'What hast

<sup>1</sup> See Lk. vi 16.

<sup>2</sup> On p. 261, note 5, 'Ps.' is a misprint for 'Is.', i. e. Isaiah.

thou to do with the ways of Egypt and with drinking water from the Nile (Syr. *Gihōn*)?' This sentence, not recognized as a quotation by Wensinck, is Jerem. ii 18 according to the LXX. As a matter of fact Isaac's text (*Bedjan* 287) agrees exactly with the Syro-Hexaplar version, but it is not likely that Isaac used this Jacobite work. More probably the whole passage is a quotation from some translated Greek ascetical work.<sup>1</sup> Again on p. 181, 'Cursed is every one who performs the work of the Lord without diligence, restraining his hand from bloodshed' is Jerem. xxxi 10 (= xlvi 10 Heb. and Syr.) according to the LXX; this is followed by Psalm lxxxv 9<sup>2</sup> (but with 'help' for 'salvation'), and by Deut. ii 24<sup>b</sup>, 25, according to the Peshitta. Here again it is likely that Isaac is reproducing, at least in part, some translated Greek work.

Certainly the various anecdotes of Ascetics, which occur up and down the treatises are not personal reminiscences but extracts from the *Apophthegmata*, mostly (so far as I am able to judge) from the translation of 'Ananisho'. Even the story of the unnamed Bishop on p. 167, which Prof. Wensinck regards as autobiographical (Intro. p. xx), is nothing more than the story of Abba Apphy, bishop of Oxyrhynchus (Migne *P. G.* lxxv 133), called in Syriac *Apos* (Budge's '*Anān-Isho*' i 598). All the stories on pp. 206 ff, 376 ff, come out of the *Apophthegmata*, no doubt by way of 'Anānisho'. It would be a useful task to collect all the references to this literature in Isaac, and indeed it must be done before we can properly estimate his position as an independent thinker or mystic. There is a difference that I feel between Isaac and the Egyptian Fathers, of whom we read in Palladius and all that first stage of ascetical literature. Then the movement, with all its faults, was new and (so to speak) oecumenical. It not only attracted distinguished personages, like Arsenius, as personal exponents, but also a whole train of visitors and pilgrims like Palladius and Rufinus. Wise or foolish, it was the characteristic impulse of the day. By the time of Isaac, on the other hand, the whole thing was stereotyped, and the novice learnt from books what he ought to do and feel. The defects of hermitism had already by Isaac's time been perceived in the West, and St Benedict's rule and personal influence had done much to turn Monasticism into a bulwark of civilization. Isaac lived a century later, but he, like the East in general, was utterly untouched by St Benedict and his reforms, and we see in him a milestone on the melancholy road whereby the Orient lapsed from Christianity into an unprogressive, uninventive barbarism, in which not even philosophy continued to flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> It appears not to come in '*Anānisho*'.

<sup>2</sup> Not Psalm cxlv 19, as Wensinck.