and it is absolutely required reading for anyone wishing to understand the debate over the identity of the 'Assyrians'.

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HILARION ALFEYEV
The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian
Cistercian Studies Series 175
Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000
Pp. 321
ISBN 0879076755 (Hardcover)
ISBN 0879077751 (Paperback).

[1] Isaac the Syrian, or Isaac (Ishaq) of Nineveh, was a remarkable writer in a remarkable but largely neglected tradition of East Syriac writers. Many civilizations have experienced lamentably brief periods of intellectual florescence, golden moments, where great works of genius were produced: fifth and fourth century Athens, first century BCE Rome, the Song dynasty in China, Elizabethan England, to name a few. The reasons why these moments occurred are very difficult to discover, perhaps because of the great complexity of historical, sociological, and cultural factors at work. But mankind is much the richer for their having occurred. Isaac stands at the head of an intellectual florescence of the Syriac speaking culture in the seventh and eighth centuries of what is now Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and Qatar. His writings had such irresistible force that within about one hundred years after his death many of them had crossed the nearly impenetrable (for Easterners) political and theological divide between Eastern Christianity and Western (that is, Byzantine and Roman) in Greek translation. It is a credit to mankind, I think, that works of genius eventually gain widespread recognition, even when they are imbued with cultural expression and concerns that may seem foreign to many.

[2] The complete works of Isaac are only now becoming available in translation, and so we should welcome Alfeyev's introduction to Isaac's thought. Alfeyev's method is quite straightforward. He divides what Isaac writes into various subjects, e.g. prayer, humility, faith and knowledge, contemplation, and then adduces many passages where Isaac is allowed to express his views on these subjects. The result is that the reader obtains a rather good idea of

these views and some taste of Isaac's forceful style of writing. Perhaps this is the best method to use for an introduction to such a writer, but I feel it risks giving the impression that Isaac is a systematic writer. I think it can be argued that Isaac is a systematic thinker in the sense that his many views on many aspects of what is called the "spiritual" life (I use quotation marks because "spiritual" seems to have as many meanings as there are users of the term) are consistent with one another, but he does not treat his subjects in a systematic fashion. For the most part it is not the internal logic of the view that determines the course of his discussion, but the wealth of his personal experience and psychological insight. So reading Isaac is like venturing into the mind and life of a rather astonishing person. What one finds is not a carefully ordered treatment of subjects but a collection of views invested with the power of experience.

[3] Alfeyev seems to assume that we, readers living in the twenty-first century, will be able to make sense of and find interesting what Isaac writes about what he, as an ascetic of seventh century Persia, thinks is of greatest possible importance. Alfeyev seems to think that discussions of prostrations, rivers of involuntary tears, and awestruck states will attract our attention and we will not think that we are witnessing a form of lunacy. I mean to say that his introduction does not attempt to bridge the enormous gap between how ordinary people now think and lead their lives and how ancient Christian ascetics did so. There are, no doubt, deeply religious people nowadays who will not find Isaac's thought-world foreign, but such people are few. What about the rest of us? This complaint is part of a larger one. Alfeyev's introduction does not attempt to stand outside the ascetic tradition in order, for the reader's benefit, to provide critical assessment of Isaac's writings. Alfeyev tells us what Isaac says, but not why and not how we should approach this foreign world. Isaac himself makes no efforts in this direction, but there is an evident reason for this. His books were meant for fellow ascetics, for people who devote their every effort to being physically and mentally disassociated from the world we know and to being physically and mentally joined to another, very different world. It is a kind of accident that we can pick up a copy of Isaac as we idle away hours in a local bookstore. I doubt very much that Isaac ever foresaw this and I am uncertain whether or not he would be pleased. But since this is our present reality, it

would seem appropriate for an introduction to explain things which Isaac had no need to explain.

[4] So that my complaint not seem vacuous I shall briefly sketch a possible interpretative position that could help to form a bridge from our world to Isaac's. Take the analogy of a tightrope walker. Thanks to years of training the tightrope walker is able, slowly and carefully, to walk on a rope stretched high above the earth. He regulates every movement, every breath, guards every thought from distraction and fear. The slightest wrong motion, which on the ground would have no negative effect at all, may cause sudden death, while speedy correction of tiny mistakes brings strong feelings of relief, joy, and hope. So the tightrope walker, when on his or her rope, lives, one may say, in a different physical and psychological world than we do, one subject to different laws. Why must this be the case? Because human beings do not naturally walk on ropes; to do so is to push our meager abilities to their absolute limit. The ascetic closely resembles a tightrope walker: he or she does what human beings are not naturally suited to do. To accomplish this requires enormous psychological and physical effort and considerable training by others. This life at the extreme, as I think it may be appropriately termed, has its own dangers, its own laws, its own joys and fears. These are dictated largely by the kind of life it is (that is, complete concentration on the exercise of one of the mind's faculties, its "spiritual part") and how human psychology works. Isaac just assumes he is talking to ascetics (tightrope walkers), and is telling them, among other things, that if you see x and y, then prepare yourself for z. For example, "If you gain the grace of God and are deemed worthy to revel in the divine vision of God's judgments … prepare yourself, yea, arm yourself against the spirit of blasphemy" (Isaac I.4.33).[2] This instruction probably means little or nothing to most of us. We might even think that if Isaac is right, it shows that his version of the "spiritual life" is a kind of mental derangement. But we are not living at this particular extreme, or likely at any extreme; we do not know what is needed to remain alive and sane at this extreme. If we would like

[2] The references to Isaac's text in English translation are based on Alfeyev's scheme of reference, which has the volume number (the first translated by Dana R. Miller and the second by Sebastian P. Brock), followed by the chapter number and the page number. Vol II references have in addition a paragraph number after the page number.

to know, at least vicariously, we should read Isaac, ever bearing in mind what he is and what we are.

[5] In general, Alfeyev does not try to explain Isaac's views, but there are at least three exceptions that I noticed. Isaac is not a theological writer; he just assumes a particular christological position, that of the Church of the East, and works within this framework, making few, if any, christological statements. But christology, even today, is the source of the divisions among the Eastern Churches and so Alfeyev tries to situate and explain Isaac's christological framework. This is helpful. But one would have wished for further discussion. For example, one might inquire whether or not the theological viewpoint of the Church of the East had any influence on Isaac's ascetic views. I myself doubt that it did—apart from recommending the reading of certain patristic authors rather than others—, but if that is right, it seems to me to be a fact that says something significant about the nature of Isaac's approach to the "spiritual" life.

[6] Second, Alfeyev gives a good treatment of what he calls "life in God," that is, Isaac's various discussions of the highest "spiritual" states (e.g. contemplation, wonder), which, for Isaac, constitute the goal and achievement of ascetic life. Here Alfeyev helpfully mentions the Evagrian tradition which Isaac continues. In fact, it is clear the Alfeyev has thought a good deal about this subject and I suspect the reader would wish to have been made privy to more of his thoughts on this, because what he says is insightful. Even so, I would like to question one claim that Alfeyev makes in the course of his discussion of "stillness of mind." Here he asks, reasonably enough, "Is that complete cessation of intellectual activity which Isaac calls 'stillness of mind' a migration beyond the borders of personal existence, a complete loss of personal self-awareness? No" (220). On what basis does Alfeyev answer "no"? He goes on to quote Isaac: "As soon as the governance and stewardship of the Spirit rule the intellect… then a man's nature is deprived of its free will and is led by another guidance… and is not able to direct the movements of the mind" (I.23.118; cited ibid.). That someone is deprived of free will and cannot direct the movements of his or her mind strongly suggests that there is a significant loss of personal self-awareness. Perhaps this loss is not "complete," but it seems to be a loss of the most important aspect of personhood, a cognitively directed will. Alfeyev then claims rather dogmatically that "on the

contrary, in the stillness of mind there is an intense personal communion between a human person and a personal God" (221). Isaac never says such a thing, so we need an argument why this is entailed by what Isaac does say. No such argument is provided. One might argue, for example, that the christology of the Church of the East, more than all other christologies, emphasizes the survival of the human person when it is united with the Divine, and so if Isaac were to some degree guided by this christology when writing, it would be likely that he would deny that the person is lost while under the influence of the Spirit. But this argument would only demonstrate a likelihood and I suspect that Isaac is guided here by personal experience rather than by theological commitment. So what did Isaac think about this oft-discussed question? I do not think there is an easy answer. It is not even clear what Isaac would understand by the term "person," thanks, to be begin with, to the subtle East Syrian distinctions between parsopa and qnoma.

[7] Finally, Alfeyev devotes the last chapter of his book to Isaac's startling claims about God's justice ("do not call God just" [I.51.250]), love, and the abolition of hell. This is the only properly theological subject Isaac discusses and here, rather uncharacteristically, he does so in the form of a protracted argument. Alfeyev, following his method, lets Isaac speak for himself, but he also goes at some length to explain Isaac's position, perhaps partly in an attempt to make it seem less controversial. His treatment is good, but because Isaac presents an argument, it seems to me that the reader should have been presented more explicitly with the form of the argument, that is, what the premises are, how they are plausible, and how they entail the conclusion. This is, after all, a very significant claim. Furthermore, the fact that Isaac resorts to rational argument is quite interesting. It is rather clear, I think, that Isaac is not being philosophical, he is not, as Socrates says, "following the argument" (Phaedo 107b7). Isaac has become convinced of the truth of his claim not by argument but by some other means, but because the claim is controversial, he sets out an argument for our sake, so that we might be persuaded. And persuaded we should be.

[8] In connection to the discussion of hell (gehenna) I have one further complaint. Alfeyev says, I think incautiously, that "gehenna is a sort of purgatory rather than hell" (290). I see no reason for

such a suggestion. To say that gehenna is a kind of purgatory suggests precisely what Isaac wishes to deny because it assumes that the suffering of the few that are committed, however briefly, to gehenna makes them better, cleanses them. As far as I can see Isaac never claims that punishment is necessary for certain beings, or that suffering is somehow a good, be it an intermediate good. What Isaac does claim is that gehenna is a "matter of mercy" like the Kingdom (II.39.172.22; quoted p. 291.) and that it is part of God's eternal plan. Why this is the case Isaac does not claim to know, but intimates only that perhaps it is a kind of pretext for a further manifestation of God's "immense grace that, like an ocean, knows no measure" (II.40.177.13).

[9] But putting aside the small complaints just elaborated, I think that Alfeyev's book is a good and useful introduction to Isaac's thought. We should wish that he will say more in future.

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