

The Ascetical Way of Life in St Isaac the Syrian's Writings

AGAPIE CORBU 

"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad

E-mail: agapie.corbu@uav.ro

Abstract

The present study deals with a theme of spirituality frequently found in the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian, namely the idea of "way of life" (Syr. ܕܒܪܐܝܐ – *dubara*). Essential to understand the whole of his theology, this theme is treated in a manner little used until recently, but which is now becoming established in current academic research on Isaac, namely by appeal to his Syriac texts. This is achieved practically by pointing out the meanings of the Syriac term *dubara* and its Greek translation by *politeia*. The paper makes important clarifications of Isaac's terminology, and the novelty is that it highlights the connection between the text and the ascetical practices to which it refers. To this end, the study also presents the ideational synonyms of the Syriac term in question, as well as the various theological expressions in which it appears.

Keywords: Isaac the Syrian, monasticism, Syriac mysticism, ascetical terminology, degrees of spiritual life, patristics

Introduction

ALTHOUGH HE IS ONE OF the most translated authors spiritual authors, St Isaac the Syrian hides behind his work, since there is very little information about his life. We know that he was born in Beth Qatraye, in the Persian Gulf region. Living as a hermit in his native region, he was elected bishop of Nineveh (c. 676) and ordained at the monastery of Beth Abe. After only five months, he left the bishopric to retire as a solitary in the Qardu Mountains of the Beth Huzaye region. Because of his intense reading, towards the end of his life he became blind and most of his writings seem to have been dictated to a scribe. He died and was buried

in the Monastery of Rabban Shabur.¹ Today, the authenticity of three collections of writings ascribed to him is recognized. The First Part or Collection was translated into Ancient Greek at the beginning of the ninth century at the Great Lavra of Saint Sabbas in Palestine, while the other two were recently discovered and published.

His writings represent an important stage in the crystallization of East-Syriac spiritual terminology. The Syriac noun ܕܒܪܐ (dubara), on which this study focuses, is very common in the ascetical writings of East-Syriac authors. In such a context, it primarily designates the general way in which a monk lives at a certain point in his life. In the particular case of St Isaac's writings, it is also a synonym for spiritual 'stage' or 'step', indicating the inner spiritual measure the monk has reached. Its rendering into modern languages poses problems for translators, since in ascetical and mystical writings it acquires particular meanings.² But before we turn to the term *dubara*, it is necessary to make a few clarifications regarding the specifics of St. Isaac's ascetical terminology.

1. St Isaac's Ascetical Terminology

The analysis of the terminology of any spiritual author is fundamental for the knowledge of his spiritual universe, especially if this knowledge will not stop at the classifications operated by language. We invite the reader not to register an original nomenclature of terms, but to take a personal foray into the world of the key words used by Saint Isaac to capture the realities and processes of the spiritual life. In other words, the technical terms used by Isaac delineate ways of the spiritual life experienced in the complex spiritual processes and states named by them.

In order to understand the specifics of the term in question, we need to keep in mind some peculiarities of Isaac's writing. Thus, for example, he is averse to rigid, definitive explanations and to being stuck in the pseudo-language of clichés. His language is poetic, musical, metaphorical, which sometimes makes it difficult to understand. Often, if someone follows an idea throughout Isaac's work, he finds that the Syrian hermit has the habit of formulating and reformulating the same idea in several ways, of approaching it from different angles and giving answers whose background coincides behind an obvious (and sought-after?) fluidity of expression. If

¹ The most complete and reliable source of information concerning the life of Isaac of Nineveh is *The Book of Chastity*, a collection of short biographical notes on the famous monks of Syria, composed by Bishop Ishodenah of Basra between 860-870. For further information, see *Le livre de la Chasteté* composé par Jésusdenah, Évêque de Baçrah (ed.) J.-B. Chabot (Rome, 1896), chap. 124.

² In modern languages the Syriac *dubara* was rendered by 'way/mode of life', 'ascetic conduct' (English), 'conduite' (French), 'modo di vivere', 'pratiche ascetiche' (Italian), 'viețuire', 'petrecere', 'conduită' (Romanian).

properly understood by the reader, Isaac's terminology involves him – alongside Isaac – in a tireless reprise and deepening of the great spiritual themes. The challenge of understanding Isaac's texts is to master the game of his terminology.

2. Syriac etymology of *dubara*³

Before presenting the meanings that the term acquires under Isaac's pen, let us dwell for a moment on the etymological perspectives it opens up. First, let us say that the noun ܕܒܪܐܝܐ (*dubara*) is a derivative of the verb ܕܒܪܐ (*dbar*), whose meanings are 'to lead a flock', 'to shepherd', 'to lead', 'to guide', 'to govern'. Since the pastures of Syria are in fact vast deserts in which vegetation is present only occasionally, especially along the river valleys, the action of shepherding a flock is linked in the Syrian mind to the desert, to the wilderness which, paradoxically, is one of the few sources of food for the Assyrian people.

In this semantic context, the verb *dbar* has developed a participial noun in the form Pael meaning precisely 'wilderness', 'desert' (ܡܕܒܪܐ – *madbra*), a term used in this sense in the translation of the New Testament.⁴ With the ascetical literature, the noun "wilderness" gave the derivative "desert" or, when it has adjectival value, "hermitical" (ܡܕܒܪܝܐ – *madbraya*).⁵ We see, therefore, that the idea of lifestyle expressed by the term *dubara* is intimately linked to the image of the wilderness and of solitude in general. So dear to the Syrians, the life in the desert is understood as the totality of external and internal conditions which ideally facilitate the fulfilment of the promises of Baptism and monasticism. This is however made possible only to the extent that there is a personal commitment which implies the cultivation of an interior and direct relationship with angels, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, with the Holy Trinity.

3. Greek meanings

The sketched etymological context allows us to distinguish the connotations of the Syriac ܕܒܪܐܝܐ from those of πολιτεία, its most frequent equivalent in the Ancient Greek version.⁶ This Greek term, without conveying a false

³ From here, the study takes up and develops the ideas in our introduction to Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte ascetice* (*Cuvintele I-XXX*), vol. 1., bilingual edition, Greek text established by Marcel Pirard, Romanian translation, introduction and commentaries by hieromonk Agapie Corbu, *Philocalica Syriaca* 4 (Arad: Sf. Nectarie, 2022), CVI-CXI.

⁴ See, for example, Mark 1:3, 4, 13 and Acts 7:30, 38, 42, 44.

⁵ See Payne J. Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), *s.v.*, and Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), *s.v.*

⁶ Sometimes, the same ܕܒܪܐܝܐ is rendered in Isaac's Greek version by διαγωγὴ or τάξις.

meaning, nevertheless belongs to a lexical field diametrically opposed to the Syriac one.

It is natural for the noun πολιτεία, since it to come from the denominative verb πολιτεύομαι ('to be a citizen', 'to participate in the running of the city', and later, 'to take care of', 'to behave in a certain way', 'to live in a certain way', 'to live according to the law', verb derived from the noun πόλις, 'city'), to denote 'the state of citizenship', 'the assembly of citizens', 'the republican constitution' (as opposed to monarchy, tyranny and oligarchy). Its connection with the city is so close that even in modern translations of the New Testament it has been rendered by 'citizenship' (Eph. 2:12), 'cité'⁷, 'droit de cité'⁸, 'commonwealth'⁹, 'membership'¹⁰, 'cittadinanza'¹¹, 'petrecere'¹², while the old Syriac translation renders it by *dubara*, 'manner or way of life'. The link between the social organization of a group of people and the form of living that the legislation of that social group requires of its members, the citizens, is therefore obvious. This is why, in the Greek mind, the wilderness itself, through the settlement of monks in it, became a city, a *polis*, the term πολιτεία implying to this day the idea and practice of being part of a social system, be it of a monastic nature.

The etymological considerations raised by the two terms show the paradoxical nature of the choice of the Greek translators, as well as the inadequacy of the term chosen, which confirms once again that the terminology of St. Isaac must be studied in the original Syriac. Therefore, in what follows we will try to decipher the content of the term *dubara* as it emerges from the writings of Isaac, taking into consideration the fragments in which some theological synonyms of the term appear.

4. St Isaac's use of *dubara* and its synonyms

Of the many meanings with which the Syriac noun *dubara* is used in the writings of St Isaac¹³, the most important, technical, complex and

⁷ Bible de Jerusalem.

⁸ Louis Segond.

⁹ The Holy Bible, Authorised Version.

¹⁰ Bible of Jerusalem.

¹¹ Bibbia CEI (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana).

¹² Biblia 1914.

¹³ In the present study the writings of Isaac the Syrian will be abbreviated as follows: Isaac the Syrian I = *The Ascetical Homilies* or *The First Part*, (ed.) P. Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1909); the Greek translation used in the present study: *Ἰσαάκ τοῦ Σύρου, Λόγοι Ἀσκητικοί* [critical edition of the Greek text, confronted to the Syriac text], (ed.) Marcel Pi-rard (Mount-Athos: Holy Monastery of Iviron, 2012); English translation in *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, translated by Dana Miller (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 20112); Isaac the Syrian II = *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI* (ed.) Sebastian Brock, CSCO 555, Syr. 223 (Louvain: Peeters, 1995); Isaac the Syrian, KG = *Chapters on*

representative is that of 'stage of the spiritual life'. With its help, Isaac describes the spiritual journey from the perspective of the ways of life specific to each stage of the ascetical and mystical ascent, synthetically expressing the way in which the connection with God is lived and understood. In general, we can say that each moment in the life of a monk is characterized by a specific way of life, in which case the term takes on the meaning of the totality of the ascetical works performed. Therefore, according to the tripartite division of the spiritual life, there is a bodily one, one according to the soul, and a spiritual way of life.¹⁴

For the stages called "ways of life" we also find, surprisingly, the name "order" (ܩܪܕܐ – *takes*, a rendering of the Greek *τάξις*)¹⁵, also three in number: of the beginners, of the middle and of the perfect. This division describes the spiritual progress from the perspective of the capacity of the members of each order to know God. The kind and extent of the knowledge of God thus defines the spiritual step on which one stands.

Also, as a partial synonym for way of life Isaac uses the term "peak" (ܩܡܩܐ – *aqma*), a formal and semantic calc of the Greek *ἀκμή*. The spiritual vision on which Isaac's choice of terminology is based affirms that the peak represents the summary of the conduct whose culmination it represents. Each spiritual stage reaches full realization and maturity only when it touches its peak, in a dynamic of development impossible to capture through a punctual and rigid approach to the "moment". The peak becomes, in turn, an *initium* for the next stage, the transition from one way of life to another being gradual. Within the hesychast or hermitic life there are three peaks to be conquered.¹⁶

The main criterion by which a monk can judge the step he is on, *id est* "the measure of his way of life" (ܩܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܩܪܕܐ – *mšuhṭa d-dubara*)¹⁷, is not the ascetical deeds he performs, but the thoughts he has in his mind. Therefore, a monk may live outwardly "as a hermit", but his inward "measure" may be that of a cenobite or of a layman. The way in which one should pray is, in Isaac's thinking, closely related to one's own spiritual measure: "Let your prayer fit your ascetical conduct"¹⁸ he writes, urging

Knowledge, Ms Oxford, Bodleian Library, syr. e 7; English translation by S. Brock in *St Isaac of Nineveh, Headings on Spiritual Knowledge (The Second Part, Chapters 1-3)*, Popular Patristics Series 63, (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2022); Isaac the Syrian III = Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, (ed.) S. Chialà, CSCO 637-638; Syr. 246-247 (Louvain: Peeters, 2011); English translation in *Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works*, English translation by Mary Hansbury (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016). I translated myself all the text of the First Part used here. For The Second and Third Part I usually quoted existing translations, modifying the technical terms, is necessary, for the sake of uniformity.

¹⁴ See Isaac the Syrian *KG* 4, 42.

¹⁵ Isaac the Syrian I, 13, 1.

¹⁶ See Isaac the Syrian *KG* 4, 42.

¹⁷ Isaac the Syrian I, 2, 214-228.

¹⁸ Isaac the Syrian I, 3, 317.

monks not to try to pray in a way that either does not yet fit or no longer fits their spiritual age and assumed life. Therefore, the hesychast should not do in the wilderness those things of the cenobites, such as singing a lot, serving the sick, giving alms, guiding the laity, etc.¹⁹

5. Dubara expressing the spiritual journey

a. The bodily way of life (ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܥܡܘܬܐ – dubara pagranaya)

The life of bodily stage is sometimes presented by St. Isaac in disparaging terms, calling it “the world in its totality and the contemplation of the flesh”²⁰, implying that in this way of life man has no spiritual knowledge. The inner traits of those in the bodily stage are not so much a life stained by manifest sins as sorrow at the thought of death and fear of it, that is attachment to the transitory life.²¹ The departure from this way of life through asceticism is accompanied by deep sorrow and sharp pains at the remembrance of sins²², the monk on this stage having to read the Psalms and Scripture at length, to torment his body with prolonged hunger, to exert himself in bowing his knees and in other kinds of labors which humble the body.²³

b. The way of life according to the soul (ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ – dubara napšanaya)

Saint Isaac avoids systematic approaches and almost every reference to bodily way of life is made in the perspective of the passage to the higher stage, called, as the case may be, “way of life” or “practice according to the soul or mind”²⁴, “the middle peak”²⁵, “the middle measure or degree”²⁶, “the step of meditation”²⁷. The painful repentance of the bodily life begins to change into joy, without the will of the monk, who “is vigilant and in fear lest it [this second stage] be an illusion”.²⁸ The sign of the gradual transition from the life of the body to the life of the soul is the appearance of comforting impulses which give rise to thoughts of joy and make the mind gather itself with ease. When the

¹⁹ See Isaac the Syrian I, 6, 157-179.

²⁰ Isaac the Syrian I, 2, 209.

²¹ See Isaac the Syrian I, 1, 208.

²² See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 42.

²³ See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 45.

²⁴ Isaac the Syrian I, 4, 10; I, 32, 23; II, 20, 10; KG 4, 47.

²⁵ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 42.

²⁶ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 92.

²⁷ Isaac the Syrian II, 10, title.

²⁸ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 43.

monk observes these changes, especially when sweetness begins to overcome the bitterness of repentance, making the ascetical labors and prayer desirable and pleasurable, he should lessen the former labors, devoting himself more to prayer and unceasing meditation on the divine things.²⁹

**c. The spiritual way of life (ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ – *dubara ruhana*³⁰;
ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܪܘܗ – *dubara d-ruh*³¹)**

The third peak of the hesychast conduct is called by Isaac “spiritual way of life” and the monk enters it through wonder.³² By persisting in the inner practice of the spiritual life, the monk receives, at a certain moment and unexpectedly, the grace of wonder before God, which introduces him into the third stage or spiritual life. The passage is beyond man’s will, the movements³³ of the mind being changed into wonder, and ordinary thoughts disappearing altogether, sometimes for several days. The mind contemplates God and learns a different kind of knowledge from that which it has previously had.

The sign that the monk is approaching the entrance into spiritual life is the gathering of the mind (ܕܘܫܘܒܐ ܕܪܘܗ – *kunaša d-re’yana*), experienced during the period of soul-life during the time of the offices performed in the monastery and during the particular prayer in the cell, to the extent of keeping the stillness and avoiding encounters with many people. The teaching on the gathering of the mind is taken by Saint Isaac, as he himself confesses, from John of Apamea, who speaks of the existence of a partial gathering of the mind, lived at the liturgical services and during prayer, from which grows as from a seed the full gathering of the mind, proper to the spiritual stage.³⁴ When this seed of partial recollection sprouts, the monk feels that, while reading or meditating on Scripture or praying, he is “struck

²⁹ See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 46-47.

³⁰ Isaac the Syrian II, 7, 2.

³¹ Isaac the Syrian II, 20, 6, 19; 32, 4; KG 4, 12-15.

³² To deepen Isaac’s use and theology of ‘wonder’, see Adrian Pirtea’s last contribution on the topic: ‘ōDivine Incomprehensibility and Human Wonder: Tehrā/Temhā in Isaac of Nineveh and Early Syriac Ascetical Literature’, in *Der Mensch als Bild des unergründlichen Gottes. Von der Theologie zur Anthropologie und zurück* (eds.) Georgiana Huian, Beatrice Wyss and Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 259-284. Another enlightening study on the same subject is by Mary Hansbury, “‘Insight without Sight’: Wonder as an aspect of Revelation in the Discourses of Isaac the Syrian”, in *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008): 60-73.

³³ The Syriac ܕܘܫܘܒܐ (*zaw’a*), ‘movement’ or ‘stirring’ has also particular meanings in the ascetical writings of the East Syriac mystics, and we’ll analyze in a further study its importance for the spiritual life. For some preliminary considerations, see our introduction to Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte ascetice*, vol. 1, XC-XCV.

³⁴ See John the Solitary, *On the Soul*, English translation by Mary Hansbury (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013), 28.

with wonder before God³⁵ and therefore unexpectedly falls silent, remaining motionless for a long time.³⁶

At the same time, in the spiritual life all fear disappears from the soul, and the mind moves in a way proper to the future world, having, by grace, the life of the new man and the inner stirrings of the Kingdom of heaven.³⁷ On the peak of the third stage, the monk further reduces the labors of the second stage, the main ascetical labor now being meditation and prayer of the heart (ܠܒܐ ܕܠܒܐ – *sluta d-leba*).³⁸ Only the latter two are still up to the will and choice of the hermit who has come to the spiritual life. As soon as he begins to pray or meditate on the Scriptures, he is led by grace as a servant to things beyond the knowledge accessible to men, and the mind no longer acts by its own will.

According to the theology of Saint Isaac, the spiritual life includes three kinds of spiritual movements of the mind (*hawna*), positioned on the map of the inner man beyond the purity gained in the way of life according to the soul. These movements are: “second natural knowledge” (ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ ܕܬܪܬܝܢܐ – *ida'ta kyanaita d-tartain*), in which the mind is taught by grace; “first natural knowledge” (ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܕܡܝܬܐ ܘܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ – *ida'ta qadmaita w-kyanaita*), in which the mind is perfected, and “the knowledge of the worshipped Trinity” (ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܬܠܝܬܐܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ – *ida'ta d-tlitayuta sagidta*), in which the mind is crowned. Every movement of the mind is, for Isaac, a certain kind of passive knowledge, produced either by angels or by the Holy Spirit, as the term used by Isaac indicates.³⁹

Therefore, the spiritual life does not mean a continuous rapture in contemplation, but a full availability of the mind to listen to grace, to let itself be taken up without deceit to the heights. Strictness in bodily asceticism is even less than in the life of the soul, “a little Scripture and a few psalms being henceforth sufficient”, for as soon as the monk begins to say the psalms and to pray, he is led as a slave to the knowledge of the spiritual things.⁴⁰

Conclusion

We have had the opportunity to see in the above lines that the terminology used by the Philokalical authors in general and by St. Isaac the Syrian in particular has a technical character. These terms are for the reader interested in spiritual progress like a map for a traveler. Therefore, understanding

³⁵ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 47.

³⁶ See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 93.

³⁷ See Isaac the Syrian II, 20, 10-11.

³⁸ Isaac the Syrian I, 29, 171; II, 22, 3; III, 9, 14.

³⁹ The noun ܐܕܐܝܬܐ – *mettzy'anuta*, ‘movement’, derived from the Ettaphal infinitive of the verb ܬܘܠܐ ‘to move’ (Isaac the Syrian KG 3, 100).

⁴⁰ See Isaac the Syrian II, 22, 6.

them in the context of each author's theology and placing them correctly on the map of the spiritual life is essential for passing from theory to practice. In the case of Isaac the Syrian, it is necessary to know his Syriac terminology, which, as we have seen in the case of the noun *dubara*, has specific meanings in Syriac. Once translated, the term ceases to convey the whole of the author's intended teaching, in some cases even generating misunderstandings.

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