

***The theophany of “the back” of God in the cave (Exodus 33) according to Isaac of Niniveh in reference with “The life of Moses” by St. Gregory of Nyssa***

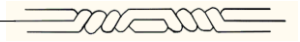
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**Abstract:** Among the East Syriac authors, Isaac of Nineveh occupies a prominent place – his works had almost an universal spreading in the entire Christian world. The originality of this author’s theological vision comes out of its synthetic character: between the Syriac and the Greek theological school, first one much more biblical, while the latter more philosophically oriented. This paper deals with what theology calls the “vision of God”, in particular the interpretation of the vision Moses had in the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33), according to Isaac of Niniveh and in reference with Gregory of Nyssa’s perspective and his mystical commentary on this biblical extract (“The Life of Moses”). Firstly, we will place the two authors in a historical, geographical and theological context, and then we will focus on the mystical interpretations they give to Moses’ third vision on the Sinai Mountain (Ex. 33,18-23). Last section will be dedicated to some conclusions vis-à-vis the methodological approaches proposed by the two authors, that will evidently come out from the research.

**Keywords:** *knowledge, vision of God, spiritual itinerary, Exodus*

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## Introductory aspects

Among the East Syriac authors, Isaac of Niniveh (7<sup>th</sup> century) occupies a prominent place – his works had almost a universal spreading in the entire Christian world<sup>1</sup>. The originality of this author’s theological vision comes out of its synthetic character: he brought together the Syriac (“third theological tradition”) and the Greek theological school, the first one much more biblical, while the latter more philosophical (one can speak also about a second synthesis between the school of Alexandria – Evagrius, and the School of Antioch – Theodore of Mopsuestia). If to synthesize his work, one could say that it represents a gnosiological ascetical itinerary: from the bodily level (ܐܘܪܘܟܐ ܕܥܡܘܣܐ), continuing with the psychological level (ܐܘܪܘܟܐ ܕܩܘܠܘܒܐ) up to the spiritual level (ܐܘܪܘܟܐ ܕܪܘܚܐ), with its aim – the vision of God Himself (ܕܘܨܘܒܗܐ). From this idea, we underline the key term for the theme we are going to deal with – the “vision of God” according to Isaac of Niniveh, in particular focusing on the interpretation he gives to the vision Moses had in the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33), in reference to Gregory of Nyssa’s perspective and his mystical commentary on this biblical extract (*Life of Moses*).

This research is divided into three chapters: first of all we are going to give a short bio-bibliography of Isaac of Niniveh, so that to place him in a historical and theological context; secondly, we are going to deal with the presence of Gregory of Nyssa’s works in the East Syriac theological ambient and in particular in Isaac’s works; and thirdly, we are going to deal with the mystical interpretations the two authors give to Moses’ vision on the Mount of Sinai (Ex. 33, 18-23). The last part will be dedicated to some conclusions vis-à-vis the approaches proposed by the two authors, that will come out of the research.

<sup>1</sup> For more details see: Sebastian Brock, *An ecumenical role played by monastic literature: the case of Isaac the Syrian*, in “One in Christ” 40 (2005) 3, pp. 53-58; Idem, *Crossing the boundaries: an ecumenical role played by Syriac monastic literature*, in Maciej Bielawski; Daniel Hombergen (eds), *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture*, in “Studia Anselmiana”, 140 (2004), pp. 221-38.

## 1. Isaac of Niniveh – short bio-bibliography

Available data to reconstruct the historical and spiritual itinerary of Isaac of Niniveh, one of the greatest Christian mystics, are relatively scarce. More specifically, for almost two millennia, his writings circulated without knowing almost anything about his background. The monks who used to read his homilies could know about him only what was written as the heading of the First Part of his work: he was bishop of Niniveh and his work was translated into Greek by Abbas Patrikios and Abramios, monks in Saint Sabba’s Laura in Palestine<sup>2</sup>. During the time, he was identified at least with three spiritual personalities: a certain brother of Mar Mattai Monastery (5th century), Isaac of Monteluca in the neighbourhood of Spoleto, correspondent of Pope Gregory the Dialogue, or a certain presbyter of Antioch, during the time of emperor Leon I (454-474).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought new information, different from the previous ones – it is about two notes: first of them is to be found in a history of monastic foundations, entitled “The Book of Chastity”, written by the ninth-century East Syriac writer, Ishodnah<sup>3</sup>, and the second one discovered by Patriarch Ignatios Ephrem II Rahmani (1848-1929) in a manuscript dated 1471-1472, published in 1904 in “*Studia Syriaca*”<sup>4</sup>. From these documents one can learn that Isaac was born in Beth Qatraye, on the western shore of the Persian Gulf. He studied the Holy Scriptures, became a monk and master of Christian teaching. Giwargis, Catholicos of the Persian Church (661-681), consecrated him bishop of Niniveh (Mosul); he led the diocese only for 5 months and, because he did not feel at ease in this position, he asked the patriarch to dismiss him. Then he came back to his original way of living; first he spent some time with

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nikephoros Theotokis, *Tou hosiou Patros hemon Isaac Episkopou Ninevi tou Syrou. Ta eurethenta Asketika*, Leipzig, 1770, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jesudenah, évêque de Baçrah, *Livre de la chasteté composé par Jêsudenah, évêque de Basrah*, publié et traduit par J. B. Chabot, Rome, 1896, pp. 53-4.

<sup>4</sup> Ephrem II Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca*, vol. I, Beirut, Deir el-Sharf, 1904, pp. 32-33.



other hermits in the mountains of Huzistan before retiring to the monastery of Rabban Shabur. He read a lot, not only the Holy Scripture, but the works of the famous teachers of the Church too. Later, he lost his eyesight and dictated his thoughts to his brethren who, therefore, called him Didymos II. He died at old age, and yet the date of his passing away is not known.

So far, we have three collections of his works: the first one in 82 chapters, second one 41 chapters and the third one 17 chapters<sup>5</sup>. On what concerns the spiritual direction that Isaac takes in his writings, the scholars identify four favourite authors who mostly influenced him: Evagrius with his language on contemplation, prayer and anthropology<sup>6</sup>; Theodore of Mopsuestia, on Protology and Eschatology<sup>7</sup>; John the Solitary with the three levels of the spiritual life (of the body, soul and spirit), and the “mystic of hope”<sup>8</sup>; (Pseudo)Macarius with his “mystic of heart” and the “spiritual sensitiveness”<sup>9</sup>. Isaac also quotes, or mentions by name, a number of other earlier writings, many of which were translations of Greek authors. The only earlier Syriac writer whom he mentions by name is Ephrem, but at least on one occasion he quotes the fifth-century poet Narsai, without specifically naming him.

<sup>5</sup> Two homilies belonging to “The Fifth collection” have already been translated by Brother Sabino Chialà of Bose Monastery and will be published in “Orientalia Christiana Periodica”, as the translator informed us.

<sup>6</sup> See Sebastian Brock, *Discerning the Evagrian in the writings of Isaac of Niniveh: a preliminary investigation*, in “Adamantius” 15 (2009), pp. 60-72; Théophane Durel, *Sur la doctryne mystique de Saint Isaac le Syrien*, in “Contacts”, Paris, 156 (1991), pp. 246-261 (here 251-253).

<sup>7</sup> See Arthur Vööbus, *Regarding the theological anthropology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, in “Church History”, 33 (1964) 2, pp. 115-124; Jose Maria Lera, *Théodore de Mopsueste*, “Dictionnaire de Spiritualité” (DS), XV, coll. 385-400; Sabino Chialà, *Dall’ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita. Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa XIV, Firenze, Olschki, 2002, pp. 102-4.

<sup>8</sup> For more details see: Brad Bradley, *Jean le Solitaire (D’Apamée)*, “Dictionnaire de Spiritualité”, VIII, coll. 764-772; Irénée Hausherr, *Un grand auteur spirituel retrouvé: Jean d’Apamée*, in “Études de spiritualité orientale”, Rome, 1969, pp. 181-216.

<sup>9</sup> See Théophane Durel, *art. cit.*, pp. 254-6.

## 2. Gregory of Nyssa and the East Syriac theology

Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) spent his life in Cappadocia, in central Asia Minor. He was the most philosophically adept of the three so-called Cappadocians, who included his brother Basil the Great and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory was a highly original thinker, drawing inspiration from the pagan Greek philosophical schools, as well as from the Jewish and Eastern Christian traditions, and formulating an original synthesis that was to influence later Byzantine and possibly even modern European thought.

Gregory was not very quoted by the East Syriac authors, but this does not mean he was not read and used in their theology. Alphonse Mingana asserts that there are only two places where Gregory is quoted by name by the East Syriac writers Simone Taibuteh<sup>10</sup> and Dadisho Qatraya<sup>11</sup>. Anyhow, one can surely say that almost all his works were translated into Syriac: *Homily on the Song of Songs* (oldest manuscript 6<sup>th</sup> century), *On the Beatitudes* (oldest manuscript 6<sup>th</sup> century), *On Our Father* (oldest manuscript 6<sup>th</sup> century), *On the Hexaimeron* (oldest manuscript 9<sup>th</sup> century), *De opificio hominis* (oldest manuscript 6<sup>th</sup> century), *Dialogue with Macrina* (oldest manuscript 9<sup>th</sup> century), *Contra Eunomium* (oldest manuscript 9<sup>th</sup> century), *Treaty on Virginity* (oldest manuscript 9<sup>th</sup> century), *Catechetical Discourse* (oldest manuscript 9<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>12</sup>.

At this point one can add that some important original Gregorian themes have been transmitted and used by the posterior Syriac authors by the means of intermediaries: (Pseudo) Macarius

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<sup>10</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Cambridge, Woodbrooke Studies VII, 1934, p. 287, col. 2, cf. Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme. Introduction a l'étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*, Chevetogne, 1987, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *op. cit.*, p. 225, col. 2.

<sup>12</sup> For more details see Robert Beulay, *op. cit.*, p. 127-8; Gregory Kessel; Karl Pinggéra, *A bibliography of Syriac ascetic and mystical literature*, Peeters, Leuven-Paris-Walpole, MA, 2011, pp. 98-101 (this study offers also an important bibliography around these translations).



and (Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>13</sup>. I will mention in short some of them: the difference between charity and dilection (ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ / رُبُوع and رُبُوعِيَّة), the limitless progress in the vision/ knowledge of God (ἐπέκτασις), the searching of God inside oneself, the cloud and the darkness<sup>14</sup> (it is difficult to trace the origin – Gregory or Dionysius), the unknowledge (holy ignorance)<sup>15</sup>, the ecstasy (surpassing of the senses and going out from oneself by the elevation beyond the human nature in the grace of the Holy Spirit)<sup>16</sup>, the image of the mirror as describing the vision of God inside the soul (the inner person)<sup>17</sup> and lastly

<sup>13</sup> I will not detail it, for more information see the synthetic articles with the indicated bibliography: Mariette Canevet, *Grégoire de Nysse, DS VI*, coll. 971-1011 (here 1008-1011); Cirillo Sorsoli; Lorenzo Dadrino, *Gregorio di Nissa*, “Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità”/ 2, Roma, Città Nuova, pp. 1222-1226; Antoine Guillaumont, *Macaire L’Égyptien, DS X*, coll. 12-3; Alfonso Rayez, *Densys L’Areopagite (Le Pseudo-), DS III*, coll. 244-318 (here 300-311).

<sup>14</sup> Isaac uses these themes as follows: the cloud (سُحَاب / νεφέλη) descending upon the tabernacle as image for the absorption of the thought inside the soul (Mar Isaacus Ninivita, *De perfectione religiosa*, ed. by P. Bedjan, Paris, 1909 [hereinafter Bedjan], p. 480; *Isaac of Nineveh, Translated from Bedjan’s Syriac text*, transl. J. A. Wensinck, Wiesbaden, 1969 [hereinafter Wensinck], p. 322); the thick (dark) cloud (سُحَابٌ سَكُوتِيئَاتَاوَس) in reference, on one side, to the contemplation of the judgement and providence and, on the other side, to spiritual contemplation (Bedjan, p. 193, Wensinck, p. 131; Bedjan, p. 117, Wensinck, p. 147); the darkness (ظُلْمَةٌ / γνόφος ἢ σκότος) has a double sense: first in reference to the apophatic knowledge (God’s sainthood is covered with darkness, Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, transl. S. Chialà, CSCO, vol. 639, tom. 248, 2011/ III 7,7) and second in a negative sense: problems, temptations (Bedjan, p. 14, Wensinck, p. 10).

<sup>15</sup> رُبُوعِيَّةٌ / ἄγνωστία (Bedjan, p. 175, Wensinck, p. 118) what is beyond the knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> Isaac uses two terms to describe the ecstasy (ἔκστασις): رُبُوعِيَّةٌ and رُبُوعِيَّةٌ – amazement and stupor (according to André Louf, these two aspects represent two levels in the divine knowledge, first one connected more with human actions – meditation, prayer –, while the latter one more with God’s action of shadowing, cf. “*Temha*” – stupore e “*tahra*” – meraviglia negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive, in *La grande stagione della mistica siro-orientale (VI-VII secolo)*, Centro Ambrosiano, 2009, pp. 93-117). See Bedjan, pp. 155, 164, 174; Wensinck, pp. 105, 111, 117.

<sup>17</sup> رُبُوعِيَّةٌ / κατόπτρον (Bedjan, pp. 455, 520, Wensinck, pp. 305, 349).

the teaching on apocatastasis (ἀποκατάστασις)<sup>18</sup>.

### **3. The theophany of God in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 33, 19-13)**

The key term that characterises the writings of both the authors is knowledge. Both of them present two possible spiritual gnosiological itineraries (γνώσις/ ܠܥܠܡܐ) which have their fulfilment in the vision of God. This is called in apophatic vocabulary “unknowledge” (*holy ignorance*), in the sense that the divine knowledge stands beyond the normal intellectual way of knowing and can never be brought to an end (completed): what can be known about God is His glory or works (energy), but never His essence. The major difference in the approaches they propose is that Gregory creates a more systematic itinerary in his endeavour of spiritually interpreting the life of Moses, in a way that can be almost called “academic”/ “scientific”, while Isaac’s intention is far away from that – he touches some aspects from Moses’ life so that to support the spiritual advice he offers to his monastic audience.

The second aspect to be mentioned in this frame comes out in connection with the steps one can observe in this gnosiological process. Gregory as well as Isaac is tributary to the Alexandrian School. Therefore, they speak about two major levels in knowledge: practical (πρακτική) and gnostical (γνωστική), and the latter one with its two moments – natural contemplation (φυσική/ second and primary) and the vision of God (θεολογική). At this point it would be interesting to underline the original synthesis Isaac makes in his approach: the Alexandrian (more philosophically oriented) comes next to the Syriac one (much more biblical, reflecting the Pauline vision – 1 Tes. 5,23):

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<sup>18</sup> Isaac is more indebted to Theodore of Mopsuestia’s and Diodor of Tarsus’ Eschatology than to Gregory of Nyssa’s (Bedjan, p. 189, Wensinck, p. 128; Isaac of Niniveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, transl. S. Brock, Lovanii, CSCO, vol. 555, tome 225, 1995/ II, 39-41). For more details see: Nestor Kavvadas, *On the relations between the Eschatological Doctrine of Isaac of Niniveh and Theodore of Mopsuestia*, in “Studia Patristica”, XIV, pp. 245-250.



he speaks about three states – according to the body (against de nature), according to the soul (conform to the nature) and according to the spirit (above the nature) – and then he integrates the *πρακτική* of the Alexandrian school into the second state (of the soul/ἡ ψυχή) and the *γνωστική* into the third state (of the spirit/ἡ νοῦς)<sup>19</sup>.

As I have already mentioned above, Isaac only touches some aspects from the life of Moses. In his three collections which have been published so far he quotes the book of Exodus 44 times (I, 8 times; II, 15 times; III, 21 times) in reference to themes common to Gregory: ascension without ending (II, 3,2,70), the names of God (II, 3,4,3); the dark cloud (III, 11,31; II, 10,17; I, 5,1).

In the next few lines we will refer concretely to the passage of Moses' life known as the "vision of the back of God in the cleft of the rock" (Exodus 33, 18-23) in the interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa, followed by Isaac's commentary. The starting point of this episode is a contradiction that Gregory takes into consideration: after Moses had already seen God "face-to-face" (33,11) now he wants to see Him as for the first time<sup>20</sup>. So that to solve the problem Gregory proposes a spiritual interpretation whom he calls *epektasis*. He supports his argumentation underlining that the language used here is metaphorical: God does not really have a back (or face), which would imply a dimension, and, consequently, limitation, corporality and corruptibility. Read in a spiritual key, this means human's ascent to God has no limit, because God is unlimited by nothing and eternity is an everlasting progress in knowing and loving God. Each step is a fulfilment and a new beginning of this process simultaneously<sup>21</sup>. The second aspect to be dealt with is: how can be the Life cause of death?

<sup>19</sup> The body level/ἡ σάρξ describing the state of being subordinated to the passions, is not part of the ascetic itinerary, but precedes it.

<sup>20</sup> Gregorio di Nissa, *La vita di Mosè*, a cura di Manlio Simonetti, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1996, § 220.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Patrick F. O'Connell, *Double journey in Gregory of Nyssa: The life of Moses*, "GOTR", 28 (1983), p. 318.



(Ex. 33,20) Gregory deals with this issue taking into consideration that “he who thinks God is something to be known does not have life because he has turn from true Being to what he considers by sense perception to have being” (§ 234). The knowledge of God means for him knowing that He is incomprehensible in His essence (§ 163).

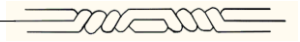
Gregory’s vision becomes much more clear if we take into consideration four key terms: the rock and the cleft (cavity), God’s hand which covers Moses and God’s back. One can easily observe that his discourse is evidently done in a Christological key. Firstly, the rock (πέτρα) is Christ (1 Co. 10,4 in reference to Ex. 17,6)<sup>22</sup>, the absolute virtue, and, from here, one who stands more steadfast and unmoveable on this rock (in Good) completes faster the course (§ 244). We find here a paradox or maybe an oxymoron that stands at the very base of the spiritual life: only remaining steadfast in Christ the dynamism of everlasting progress takes place. We might call this “stable dynamism” which, in a way, expresses the ineffability of the mystical experience<sup>23</sup>.

The second key term that stands in a strong connection with the former one is the cavity/ χώρημα (the place of God’s vision). If the rock (Christ) is the fundament of any ascetic endeavour, the cavity refers to the scope, to the reward of those who stand fast in Good: garden of delights, eternal tent, dwelling next to the Father, patriarch’s bosom, land of the living, refreshing water, celestial Jerusalem, kingdom of heaven, the trophy of the chosen, crown of grace, crown of delights, crown of beauty, mighty tower, festive banquet, dwelling with God, throne of justice, illustrious place, hidden tent (§ 247). “This place” is the reward Christ will give to those who had wan the contest in the stadium/ στάδιον (2 Tim. 2,5) – the crown of justice (§ 246).

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<sup>22</sup> “The rock” as the type of Christ: Irineus of Lyon, *Contra haereses* IV 20, 9; Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum* 231.

<sup>23</sup> See coincidentia oppositorum (Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Doctrine spirituelle du Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris, 1944, p. 274).



The place does not imply an end, but it is the resort that on the immutability of the rock pushes ahead in an endless ascending (§ 245). One can find here a qualitative difference in knowledge: this vision is the highest form of revelation in Gregory's commentary. If the previous theophanies were mostly revelations around the nature of God, the latter one describes the concrete participation in this reality, in Christ, who becomes a sharer of the mystery.

The third element – the hand of God (χείρ) – is interpreted in the same Christological key: Christ is the right hand of the Father, who created all things (§ 249). And the “the back” of God (ὀπίσθος) describes the way of seeing God – by standing behind Him (§ 251), by following Him (Deut. 13,5; Lk. 9,23)<sup>24</sup>. If we are to apply the same Christological key interpretation, “the back” represents the kenosis of Christ and “the face” His divinity<sup>25</sup>. One could read here the two dimensions of the spiritual life: contemplative experience and apostolic commitment<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, it is Christ Himself who speaks with Moses asking to follow Him (see the use of κῶπιος).

I will synthesize saying that, for Gregory, Christ is the “rock” for those well established, the “house” for those who are resting, the “place” for those who run and the “way” for those in the course (§ 249). The method used by Gregory (specific to the theological school he belonged to) is allegorical and typological; it is what he calls “a spiritual reading”. In regard with Isaac's interpretation of this biblical passage we will observe that the method is quite different – mostly biblical (symbolic/ in the line of John the Solitary) and literal (in the line of Theodore of Mopsuestia/ Antiochian school).

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<sup>24</sup> For this theme see Philon of Alexandria, *De migratione* 131; Origen, *Commentarium in Ioannem* VI, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate* II, 17,28-31; Philon and Gregory of Nazianzus use the image of the “back” and “the face” of God to express the relation between the essence of God (incomprehensible) and His traces (works/energies) in the world in the spiritual knowledge (Philon, *De specialibus legibus* 1,41-50; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratione* 2, 3).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Patrick F. O'Connell, *art. cit.*, pp. 319-320.

The first observation to be mentioned around Isaac’s interpretation is that his vision is deeply influenced by Theodore of Mopsuestia’s theory of the two *catastasis* (كاستاس): the first one, from the beginning of creation up to Incarnation, and the second inaugurated by the birth of Christ and continued in eternity. For Isaac, Incarnation, the event that anticipated the entrance into the second *catastasis*, represents the border between two different qualitative eras from the gnosiological point of view (the old and new world). In the first one God revealed Himself only by intermediaries (angels<sup>27</sup> from up to down: God – angels – humans<sup>28</sup> in the “dark cloud”<sup>29</sup>, in an incomplete way). The knowledge before Incarnation was “of the children”, while the knowledge after the Incarnation is “of the grown-ups”<sup>30</sup>. The Israelites could not hear the voice of God, but after Incarnation everybody could not only hear His voice, but more, see Him clothed in human garment, “speaking with us, while being in us”<sup>31</sup>. In this line, the vision Moses had on the mountain it was sensible (at a material level), while the vision of God in Christ is intellectual (inner)<sup>32</sup>.

Isaac’s symbolic method uses these images so that to describe the new type of knowledge inaugurated by Incarnation, perceived as a personal spiritual journey in the ascetic life. First of all, in connection with the book of Exodus, he uses the image of “the cloud” (سُحُب), the “dark cloud” (سُحُبٌ ظُلْمَةٌ) and the “darkness” (ظُلْمَةٌ) so that to describe the apophatic knowledge which takes place in the amazement and stupor before God, beyond the prayer itself, during the state of the soul and more during the spiritual state, which is the intellectual feeling of God’s

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<sup>27</sup> II, 5, 1.

<sup>28</sup> In the line of Pseudo Dionysius on the three triads of angels.

<sup>29</sup> II, 10, 17, 24; III, 7, 7.

<sup>30</sup> III, 11, 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Wensinck, pp. 384-5.

<sup>32</sup> II, 3, 1, 36; *Intellectual* refers not to a rational-philosophical knowledge, but to a theological-spiritual one. Isaac uses a “rational” terminology borrowed from Evagrius to express the spiritual processes that take place at the inner level.



mysteries<sup>33</sup>.

We will deal now specifically with the interpretation Isaac gives to God's theophany in the cleft of the rock. One has to be aware that Isaac's writings were written by a hermit and addressed to a monastic audience. Therefore they have a profound monastic character. In this line, for Isaac the cavity where Moses saw "the back of God" is the cell of the monk: "The cell (ܩܠܒܐ) of the solitary (ܡܫܘܠܡܐ) is the cave (ܡܫܘܠܡܐ) of the rock (ܩܠܒܐ) in which God spoke with Moses, as the Fathers say"<sup>34</sup>. Sabino Chialà shows that Isaac quotes here an ancient abbas: "La cella del monaco è la fornace di Babilonia dove i tre fanciulli trovarono il Figlio di Dio; e la colonna di nube dalla quale Dio parlò a Mosè"<sup>35</sup>.

There are few key terms to deal with at this moment. The cell (the cave) implies first solitude (ܡܫܘܠܡܐ) and silence (ܩܠܒܐ). It is important to observe that in Syriac language the same word is used for solitude and a hermit (not the same for a monk in a convent - ܡܫܘܠܡܐ) and it can be understood in the sense of the Greek *μοναχός* (one, alone), but it can be also interpreted as "to be unified". The latter meaning stands in a strong connection with perceiving the cell as the space where it takes place the struggle for achieving inner unity so that to become deem for seeing God. In this sense the cell requires the stability<sup>36</sup>, on one side, which offers, on the other side, the everlasting dynamism and ascension to God. The cell is the stadium (theme present in Gregory too) where the hermit struggles with the "world" and exercises his patience: "these are different stages in the course run, in divine fashion, by the intellect in the stadium (ܩܠܒܐ) of this world,

<sup>33</sup> II, 3, 1, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Wensinck, p. 121; Bedjan, p. 178.

<sup>35</sup> One can find the same idea at St. Anthony (See Sabino Chialà, *op. cit.*, 2002, footnote 182, p. 325), cf. Paul Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum VII*, Parisiis-Lipsiae, Harrassowitz, 1890-7, p. 463).

<sup>36</sup> Not to leave the cell even in the case of somebody's brother death: "If I go out my pure heart will not be pure before God" (Wensinck, p. 208).

each person having his gaze fixed on his crown (1 Co. 9, 24-5)<sup>37</sup>. Here the intellect, in its steadfastness, takes off the old man and clothes into the new one; it is the “place” and the “colour” where God revealed Himself in mountain; that is the vision of the Holy Trinity in the spiritual state:

Steadfastness of mind is the highness of intelligible apperception which resembles the colour of the sky over which rises, at the time of prayer, the light of the Holy Trinity... When the mind puts off the old man and puts on the new one by grace, then it also sees its steadfastness at the time of prayer, resembling sapphire or the colour of heaven, as the place of God was called by the elders of Israel to whom it appeared in the mountain (Ex. 24, 9-11)<sup>38</sup>.

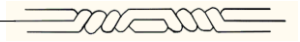
This passage offers an example of the coexistence of the stability and the spiritual movement together. In the same time it describes the cell as the place of revelation of God Himself. I will point to a last passage where Isaac speaks about the highest level of seeing God on the earth (ഭിന്നഭിന്ന):

Bodily discipline in solitude purifies the body from the material elements in it. Mental discipline makes the soul humble and purifies it from the material impulses that tend towards decaying things, by changing their affectible nature into motions of contemplation. And this will bring the soul near to the nakedness of the mind (ഭിന്നഭിന്ന) that is called immaterial contemplation (ഭിന്നഭിന്ന); this is spiritual discipline (ഭിന്നഭിന്ന). It elevates the intellect above earthly things and brings it near to primordial spiritual contemplation; it directs the intellect towards God by the sight of unspeakable glory and it delights spiritually in the hope of future things, [thinking of] what and how each of them will be... sight will be spiritual sight. Personal contemplation he uses in the sense of contemplation concerning the primordial creation of nature. From there one is easily moved onwards toward what is called solitary knowledge<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> II, 10, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Wensinck, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> See above the idea of inner unification.



(*ἡ ἐκστασία ἐν τῷ θεῷ*) which is, according to a clear interpretation, ecstasy (*ἡ ἐκστασία*) in God, this is the order of that high future state which will be given in freedom that lives in immortality, in that way of life which will be after the resurrection<sup>40</sup>

At the end, one can say that Isaac uses the passage of Moses' vision of God as image for the life in solitude and silence (specifically for monastic ambient), where the ascetic struggle takes place by exercising the patience and longing for stability so that to be given in grace the vision of God Himself at the intellectual (spiritual) level, which means anticipating the Kingdom of God on earth, fully experienced in the life after resurrection.

#### 4. Final remarks

We will conclude this paper with few observations that come out from the analysis above, regarding the parallels one can grasp in the approaches of the two authors. The first observation refers to the method. It is evident that Gregory reads the passage from a Christological perspective – the episode prophetically sends to a reality that was to be fulfilled in the Incarnation. Every element is, in an allegorical way, a sign/a metaphor for a reality that was to come and be fulfilled in Christ. On the other side, Isaac proposes a literal reading – one cannot speak about a direct knowledge of God in the Old Testament – it offers images for expressing a superior knowledge given in the Incarnation of the Son of God (symbolic language).

The second observation refers to the style of the discourse: Gregory has what we would call today a narrative style. That is interpreting a biblical account evidencing a red line up to its very end. On the other side, Isaac's style is spontaneous/ episodic; he does not intend to build a systematic commentary on this specific account, but he uses it so that to give a biblical fundament for the spiritual theme he wants to express.

The third observation touches the content of the

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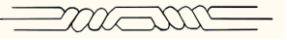
<sup>40</sup> Wensinck, pp. 202-3 (also in Bedjan, p. 304).

commentary. Gregory is primarily a theologian and a philosopher by excellence. His writings represent, in scholastic terms, the highest theology, close to speculation. Instead, Isaac is more than a theologian an ascetic hermit (with a high education) which interprets the concrete situations in the spiritual ascetic life by the means of the biblical images (using Evagrius’ gnosiological terminology).

Finally, despite the fact they use a different language and a different method, there is a common ground that makes them real close one another – each of them proposes a spiritual itinerary, a spiritual journey, that aims to reach the same experience: seeing God as He is (θεωρία/ ܩܝܩܝܘܢܐ). This experience has no end and implies an ascetic work at both bodily and intellectual level up to the communion in love with God. This is the idea that transcends from their writings and in my opinion it is the best summary and conclusion one can express about their mystical theology.

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