

## *II. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*

# **PASSION, BODY AND SOUL AT JOHN THE SOLITARY AND ISAAC OF NINEVEH**

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**ABSTRACT.** The paper explores the relations between body, soul and passion from the perspective of two Syriac writers, John the Solitary and Isaac of Nineveh. According to them, the body and the soul are not in opposition since through them man contemplates the beauty of the outer and inner world. For this reason, we have three elements as parts of the human nature: the body, the soul and the spirit (the innermost part of the soul) and a threefold spiritual life: according to the body, to the soul and to the spirit. As regarding the body-soul-passion connection, both authors believe that passion can be good, bad or neutral and belongs to both body and soul. Ultimately, bad passions, as temptations, can be necessary for man's spiritual progress because God has put everything in the structure of man for its benefits. So, salvation refers to the totality of human, body and soul, and passions can be transformed into `wings` to facilitate our spiritual ascent.

**Keywords:** passion, body, soul, ascetic life, inner man, external man, anthropology, Syriac tradition

'Passion' is one of the essential concepts in the ascetical theology with a high presence in the Philokalic Fathers' writings. Yet, many times the expression of its relation with human had no uniformity, in particular in reference to its cause – body and/ or soul. So, one has at this moment two important relations – a first one, more elementary, between body and soul in relation with ascetic life and a successive one, between passion and body or soul/ body and soul, as generated by/ in them. In reference to the way of understanding these relations one may have different perspectives.

The pre-established and unilateral association between passion and body generated in different theological areas, for quite a long time, a negative

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perspective in reference to the body. It is the see of carnal desires that give birth to different passions. This occurred sometimes in detriment of the positive signification of the body in the ascetical conduct. Nowadays there is an increasingly interest and a return of the argument in the core of discussion, theologically as well as anthropologically. This stage is supported also by the interpellations other social sciences bring in the realm of religion and praxis, in general. This time, the perspective is mostly positive while describing body in terms of performance, transformation and progress and the world as the space for limitless progress.

In this paper, I will refer in particular to two very important authors from the Syriac milieu. The first one, John the Solitary, who is the ‘father’ of the Syriac ascetical spirituality, and Isaac of Nineveh, the very famous mystic writer of the VII-VIII century, a faithful follower of John the Solitary. There will be two important sections of the analysis – firstly I will focus on the relation between body and soul and, consequently, I will dwell on the problem of ‘passion’ and its colligation to body and soul.

## Body and soul

There is an entire argumentation John makes in his ‘Dialogue of the soul’<sup>1</sup>, in reference to human structure. The first point to start with is the structure of the world itself –as it has two dimensions (seen and mysterious), human too was created according to this double structure. John says that there is a double ‘ousia’, the first one that makes human capable to admire the beauty of visible things (sensible ousia of the bodies<sup>2</sup>) and a second one of the soul (the hidden ousia of the soul<sup>3</sup>) capable to identify the hidden mystery of creation.

The Syriac terms used to express the body are two: ܩܝܡܐ and ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ. If John the Solitary makes a distinction between the two terms – the latter one is in a way limited, referring more to the physical body, the ‘place’ of ‘pagro’<sup>4</sup>, the first one has a symbolical dimension<sup>5</sup> – Isaac is not systematic in stressing this

<sup>1</sup> Yoḥannan, *Dialogue sur l’âme et les passions des hommes*, trans. Sven Dederling and Irénée Hausherr, vol. 120, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* (Roma: Pont. Inst. Orientalium Studiorum, 1939); for the Syriac: Sven Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis. Ein Dialog Über Die Seele Und Die Affekte Des Menschen. Herausgegeben von Sven Dederling. Syr. Arbeten Utgivna Med Understödet Av Vilhelm Ekmans Universitetsfond, Uppsala 43* (Uppsala; Leiden, 1936).

<sup>2</sup> ܩܝܡܐ ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ.

<sup>3</sup> ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ.

<sup>4</sup> ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ ܩܝܡܐܝܬܐ.

<sup>5</sup> Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 62.

nuance<sup>6</sup>. The signification of the body is ambivalent: on one side, it is the context for a worldly material life, so it has a negative sense, on the other side, it is the fundament for asceticism, the basic instrument of manifesting the spiritual struggle. The soul is “a nature that is more subtle in its senses than all bodies”<sup>7</sup>, capable of identifying God’s presence in creation. John goes further in his argumentation asserting that, by the soul, human has the prominent role to rule and contemplate creation. He is “the king of all beings of this entire creation”<sup>8</sup>. The soul makes the difference between humans and other creatures<sup>9</sup> in reference to the capacity of understanding the divine wisdom within creation.

One can grasp two ways of ‘knowing’, reflecting the two components – the material, sensible knowledge and the inner, intelligible knowledge of the hidden things. In this line, based on Paul, he speaks about ‘external man’<sup>10</sup> and ‘inner man’<sup>11</sup> reflecting the two components. The first reality pertains to a bodily life, while the latter to a stage according to the soul with correspondent ascetical works. ‘The inner man’ is the connection between the visible realities and the life to come and anticipates the life after resurrection<sup>12</sup>.

Yet, human’s knowledge occurs as existing in the body and eventually human’s life means soul in the body with the things and works pertaining to it. For instance, as long as mind is connected with the body, it thinks in pictures.

<sup>6</sup> See *Mystic treatises by Isaac of Nineveh. Translated from Bedjan’s Syriac Text with an Introduction and Registers*. (Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam. Afdeling Letterkunde. Nieuwe Reeks D. 29 1), trad. Arent Jan Wensinck, Martin Sändig, (Wiesbaden, 1969), 288 (abbreviated I). For Syriac, Paul Bedjan, ed., *Mar Isaacus Ninivita: De Perfectione Religiosa* (Parisiis; Lipsiae: Otto Harrassowitz, 1909) (abbreviated B).

<sup>7</sup> ܘܢܫܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ ܕܘܫܘܬܐ ܕܘܫܘܬܐ.

<sup>8</sup> ܘܢܫܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ ܕܘܫܘܬܐ ܕܘܫܘܬܐ.

<sup>9</sup> Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis. Ein Dialog Über Die Seele Und Die Affekte Des Menschen*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> ܘܢܫܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ.

<sup>11</sup> ܘܢܫܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ, p. 23, 91; see also Paolo Bettolo, ‘Sulla preghiera: Filosseno o Giovanni?’, *Le Museon* 94, 1–2 (1981), 75–89, here 77. This expression is found also in Isaac of Nineveh. He equates the ‘inner man’ with ‘man of the Spirit’ (for details see II, 8,2,16/ for second part, abbreviated II, see: Isaac di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali: capitoli sulla conoscenza, preghiera, contemplazione sull’argomento della gehenna, altri opuscoli*, trans. Paolo Bettolo (Magnano: Qiqajon, 1990).; Syriac – Isaac of Nineveh (*Isaac the Syrian*): the second part, chapters IV–XLI, vol. 554, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptorum Syri 224, ed. by Sebastian Brock (Lovanii: Peeters, 1995).; translation – Isaac of Nineveh (*Isaac the Syrian*): the second part, chapters IV–XLI, vol. 554, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptorum Syri 225, trans. by Sebastian Brock (Lovanii: Peeters, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> For details see Sabino Chialà, *Dall’ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita: ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, vol. 14, Biblioteca della Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa. Studi (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2002), 152–53.

The body was made 'to see' the beauties of the visible world and the soul 'to perceive' what is behind the visible creation and beyond the earthly life<sup>13</sup>.

Lastly, I will evoke John's dichotomist anthropology. He speaks about human as body and soul and yet the spiritual life following three stages<sup>14</sup> – of the body, of the soul and of the spirit with correspondent works. Using Saint Paul's anthropology (1 Thessalonians 5:23) as a starting point, he counterparts the Greek terms *sarkikos*, *psychikos* and *pneumatikos* with the Syriac *pagrana*, *naphshana*, and *ruhana*, translated as 'on the level of the body, of the soul, respectively, of the spirit'.<sup>15</sup> Adding the suffix 'utha', he points to three stages: somatic (against nature), dominated by carnal passions; noetic, according to nature/natural, transitory to the spirituality of angels, which presupposes a rough physical and intellectual asceticism; and spiritual, above nature, which is communion with God, a foretaste of the future world. Here one deals with what John calls purity, limpidity and perfection.

Isaac of Nineveh is faithful to his master John and yet he uses his anthropology in a personal manner, as a result of a synthesis with other two important authors – Theodore of Mopsuestia and Evagrius. Regarding the structure of human being, Isaac speaks about body,<sup>16</sup> soul<sup>17</sup> and spirit<sup>18</sup> / or occasionally mind<sup>19</sup>, the final adding in the line of Evagrius. Despite the apparent tripartite spiritual constitution, he expresses a dichotomical anthropology – body and soul – while the spirit is the innermost part of the soul, the locus or the state of perfect communion with the Holy Spirit.

When speaking about body, Isaac seems to have a positive attitude – "a high theology"<sup>20</sup>, generated by the general idea that accompanies his entire perspective – everything is given for the best use of human. To understand his anthropology, it is useful to interpret it within the larger history of human and creation, in general. At the beginning, everything was good, so the body – the physical body. It was meant for him to see the beauties of creation. The good was something natural (according to the order of the nature), what appeared

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<sup>13</sup> Werner Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea*, vol. 11, *Patristische Texte und Studien* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 152–153.

<sup>14</sup> ܡܘܬܗ.

<sup>15</sup> Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis. Ein Dialog Über Die Seele Und Die Affekte Des Menschen.*, 13–14.

<sup>16</sup> ܢܘܦܫܐ.

<sup>17</sup> ܪܘܚܢܐ.

<sup>18</sup> ܢܘܫܐ.

<sup>19</sup> ܢܘܡܘܫܐ.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Hunt, 'Praying the body: Isaac of Nineveh and John of Apamea on Anthropological integrity', *The Harp* 11–12 (1998-1999), 153–158, here 158.

bad afterwards is called accidental. Yet human was not perfect, but a child to become mature by progressing in the divine knowledge. Thus, physical body means, on one side, something useful and necessary in this progress – symbol for ascetical life (*asceticism as training*), but also symbol for passions coming from outside (body of passions), described in negative terms (*asceticism as purification*). In this transformation, the body has to be always in obedience to the soul, the spiritual component of human structure, while the spirit, a mysterious ‘place’, is destined to the highest spiritual experiences.

The bishop of Nineveh does not speak very often about the three elements as parts of human structure, but more in the context of existing a threefold spiritual life: according to the body, to the soul and to the spirit and three specific conducts. Isaac names the three orders<sup>21</sup>: against nature (somatic),<sup>22</sup> natural (psychic),<sup>23</sup> and supernatural (spiritual),<sup>24</sup> corresponding to their own service. More specifically, he returns to the pattern of John the Solitary in the Second Collection, the 20<sup>th</sup> discourse. There he speaks about the ‘understanding’ of the one who is at the level of the body (ܦܚܝܬܐ), fearful and concerned with bodily things. The second category refers to the one who lives at the level of the soul (ܦܨܘܠܐ), performing intelligible activity and reflection on resurrection. And, finally, he lists the level of the spirit (ܦܨܘܚܐ), when one attains real knowledge and experiences divine joy. Implying the consecrated biblical expression ‘I know a person...’, Isaac describes some mystical forms while picturing the spiritual conduct: ‘stirrings of Spirit’<sup>25</sup>, ‘particular mystical insights’<sup>26</sup>, when one perceives hidden joy and consolation<sup>27</sup>.

In parallel, Isaac also speaks about three conducts<sup>28</sup> integrated within the three stages we are dealing with. If the first order – against nature – presupposes a state when the body and the soul are conditioned by material and intellectual passions<sup>29</sup>, the bodily conduct<sup>30</sup> refers already to an ascetical life, expressed in a negative language as purification of passions. It is integrated

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<sup>21</sup> ܦܚܝܬܐ.

<sup>22</sup> ܠܥܝܢܐ ܗܘܐ ܦܚܝܬܐ.

<sup>23</sup> ܦܨܘܠܐ.

<sup>24</sup> ܠܗܠܐ ܗܘܐ ܦܨܘܠܐ.

<sup>25</sup> ܐܝܩܘܢܐ ܕܦܨܘܚܐ.

<sup>26</sup> ܫܩܘܠܐ ܕܦܨܘܚܐ.

<sup>27</sup> II, 20, 13-19.

<sup>28</sup> ܦܨܘܠܐ.

<sup>29</sup> Bodily life is for those who have no knowledge of God or spiritual matters (for John the Solitary, see Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis. Ein Dialog Über Die Seele Und Die Affekte Des Menschen*, 20–21.).

<sup>30</sup> ܦܚܝܬܐ ܕܦܨܘܠܐ.

in the second order – the natural state – followed by the soul’s conduct<sup>31</sup>, described as intelligible ascetical purification. And, lastly, the spiritual conduct<sup>32</sup> pertains to the spiritual order (supernatural).

The process of knowledge itself is dependent on human’s double structure. It begins from a more bodily oriented perspective up to a spiritual knowledge, reflecting the Pauline relation ‘external’ and ‘inner man’<sup>33</sup>. In other terms, one can speak about the knowledge of the senses and the noetic knowledge, in the line of Evagrius. In fact, Isaac often deals with the second type that begins with a material practice, continues with a noetic practice and ends in what he calls ‘spiritual knowledge’ (*theoria*). In the first centuria we can identify this succession of stages and the corresponding works for each moment: “Tutta la conoscenzadunque si divide in due parti, in una parte sensibile e in una parte intelligibile. La prima è chiamata pratica, che è la virtù, e la seconda contemplazione. E la prima parte, ancora, si divide in due altre parti: in una pratica materiale e (in una) immateriale. La materiale si compie tra le altre persone, l’immateriale è quella che uno compie in se stesso”<sup>34</sup>.

### Passion, body and soul

It is useful and necessary to dwell at short on the understanding of ‘passion’ by Isaac. The term he uses – *hasha*<sup>35</sup> – is ambivalent, it refers either to a natural capacity of the soul that can be directed towards both good and evil or to a sinful desire of the body or soul. Passions, in the negative sense, are ‘additions’ to nature, which came forth as a result of human sin<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, body as well as soul, initially were pure, together created in a perfect state so as to be able to reflect God’s glory in the world and to participate in the divine knowledge. In the line of John the Solitary’s ascetical theology and of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s pedagogical history, Isaac states that, as a good pedagogue, God finally applies all measures for the benefit of humans, so even passions are inserted in God’s providentially work: “All the existing passions were given to be of help to each of the natures to which they naturally belong and they were given by God for the growth of these natures”<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> The knowledge of the soul – *ἡ γνώσις τῆς ψυχῆς*.

<sup>32</sup> *ἡ γνώσις τῆς ψυχῆς*.

<sup>33</sup> II, 8,2,16.

<sup>34</sup> II, 3.1,56; II, 3.1,29.

<sup>35</sup> *ἡ ἡσῆ*; its radical means ‘to suffer’, analogous with the Greek *παθος*; other related terms: *ἡ ἀσθενία* (weakness), *ἡ πειρασμός* (temptation).

<sup>36</sup> I, 3, p. 15 (B, 22).

<sup>37</sup> I, 3, p. 15 (B, 25).

The next important issue regarding passions is the cause that generates them. John the Solitary commences from the idea that passion can be good, bad or even neutral; its direction being generated by the inclination towards what preoccupies every human. Naturally, they belong to the body and presumably to the soul, given its incarnated ethos. In fact, while using the concept of passion, John is quite generous, describing different movements<sup>38</sup> within human's body and soul. In the 'Dialogue' with Eusebios, he lists some *passions of the body* as: sleep, hunger, thirst, lust and gluttony and some *of the soul*: anger, discernment, jealousy, love of power, pride, boastfulness and even love<sup>39</sup>. Three among these are, in fact, the three powers of the soul, part of the platonic tradition – love/power of concupiscence, irascibility/ anger and discernment<sup>40</sup>. Those of the soul, he argues, are resulting from the soul being joined to the body; otherwise, there will be of no use for the soul alone, such as jealousy or envy. He mentions also the idea of existing of some 'good passions'<sup>41</sup> and among them he lists, in the line with Galatians 4:19, love, humbleness and sweetness<sup>42</sup>. The soul cannot be naturally the cause of the passion, otherwise God would be responsible for the existence of passion, John argues. He identifies mostly general influences from outside pertaining to the body or by the means of the body<sup>43</sup>. Yet, the soul too participates in this process by its will (Galatians 5:17), often contradictory to the body. This is why he speaks about the necessity of purifying the soul so to reach its limpidity<sup>44</sup> described as 'the light of its science'.

Coming back to Isaac, he makes a synthesis between John, Theodore of Mospuestia and Evagrius. As for Theodore, exclusively the body is the source of passions, while Evagrius accepts the existence of passions of the body and soul, but not of *nous*. Isaac gives nuances to John's generous understanding of passion. He interprets it more in a negative key in the line of Evagrius, accepting undoubtedly as belonging to the body, as well as to the soul, despite the fact that, initially, he asserts that the soul was not generator of passions, because human was not created subject to passions. Therefore, in the original state, soul was without any passion<sup>45</sup>. Passion is an illness that comes accidentally in the life of human. There is one category of passions of the soul as connected with the body, but he also accepts the existence of a category of simply passions of the soul,

<sup>38</sup> ܩܘܕܝܐ.

<sup>39</sup> Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis. Ein Dialog Über Die Seele Und Die Affekte Des Menschen*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> ܩܘܕܝܐ/ܩܘܕܝܐ (τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν); ܩܘܕܝܐܝ (τὸ θυμοειδές); ܩܘܕܝܐܝܐ (τὸ λογιστικόν).

<sup>41</sup> ܩܘܕܝܐܝܐܝܐ.

<sup>42</sup> ܩܘܕܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐ; ܩܘܕܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐ; ܩܘܕܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐ.

<sup>43</sup> Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis. Ein Dialog Über Die Seele Und Die Affekte Des Menschen*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> ܩܘܕܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐܝܐ.

<sup>45</sup> 1, 3, 22.

influenced by Evagrius, such as anger, rage<sup>46</sup>. Isaac shares the opinion that there are three categories of passions: those which belong to the nature of the body, those which belong to the soul and those belonging to the soul “in a secondary way”<sup>47</sup>. The third category is given by the soul being joined to the body<sup>48</sup>.

Isaac boldly declares that God has put everything in the structure of human for its benefit. Only after Adam’s fall it appeared an enmity between body and soul. Quoting Paul (Galatians 5, 19), in the same manner as John the Solitary, he affirms that in the fallen state often what the flesh desires harms the soul and the other way round. This occurs as long as ‘the soul is clothed with the flesh’<sup>49</sup>.

In the line with his pedagogical ascetic theology, Isaac goes further arguing that even ‘bad passions’ are ultimately not bad for human, but necessary for its progress, interpreted as temptations<sup>50</sup>. This last significant might be considered a third category of passions next to good and bad or, better, an ascetical interpretation in the line of the pedagogical understanding of history and, more specifically, each independent personal itinerary. God is a pedagogue that teaches his disciples so that to reach the state of perfection.

## Conclusion

Both the authors, John the Solitary and Isaac of Nineveh, have a positive vision regarding body and human in general. In the original state was no perfection but human was called to reach plenitude along with an ascetic itinerary in the synergy with God. The body had sometimes a negative sense not because of a deficiency in the very platonic sense, but more because of the lack of this plenitude. At the beginning, both body and soul were included in ‘everything was good’ of the Genesis, sin and passion appeared accidentally afterwards as coming from outside, in connection with the body and by means of the soul’s decision, and yet this reality is not natural for the original state. It is accepted by both the authors partially as ‘natural’ for the body, but not for the soul, if not only by the situation as being joined to the body. It is also true that

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<sup>46</sup> I, 80, 550.

<sup>47</sup> *Ḥikmah* / I, 3, 17-18 (25-26).

<sup>48</sup> I, 3, p. 16 (B, 23); for the list of the passions see II, 3.4, 27. The ascetic life observes a succession pertaining to this division – the beginners are more preoccupied with the bodily labors (conduit of the body), while the ascetics more experienced with the labors of the soul (conduit of the soul).

<sup>49</sup> I, 3, 27 (*ḥad ḥad*).

<sup>50</sup> I, 3, 35.

Isaac nuances this position with a final, but not easy, acceptance of the idea of passions belonging also to the soul, by making a synthesis of John's vision with that of Evagrius. The last important element here is to include the itinerary of the fallen human within God's providential action that takes us to the conclusion that even passion is part of the divine plan for leading human to the plenitude of his life. From here, one can grasp the visible 'high theology' we spoke about at the beginning of this paper. Finally, salvation refers to the entire human, soul and body, in this way valuing human in its fullness.

The optimistic anthropology of both the authors leads us to the understanding of asceticism in its transformative role. They speak about new world and new body in the sense of continuation, not interruption of what was created good by God. It is, on one side, a confirmation of the creation made by God good, by searching for its original beauty. In addition, on the other side, it is about the completion of history by achieving an anticipatory experience of the life to come. This means changing the horizontal world-view with a holist-vertical reading of reality.

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