Scottish Journal of Theology (2020), **73**, 225–238
doi:10.1017/S0036930620000344

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A creaturely wisdom: Suffering, compassion and grace in Isaac of Nineveh

Valentina Duca*

Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
*Corresponding author. E-mail: vale_duca@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the writings of Isaac of Nineveh, a seventh-century East Syriac solitary, one finds a profound compassion for every created being, including wild animals, heretics and demons. This article shows that this compassionate attitude towards external negative entities is rooted in the creature's relationship with its own condition of vulnerability. This vulnerability is distinctive of the human condition. Isaac conceives of the passions as attempts to remove this ontological condition, proposing that one can instead learn to deal with it and to 'take it on'. This occurs through a demanding exercise of relationship with one's suffering self, and only once this relationship has been discovered does grace reveal itself to the creature. Grace, therefore, emerges from Isaac's writings as something that never removes one's creaturely poverty, but reveals itself only to the person who has the courage to experience, 'bear' and 'take on' this poverty.

Keywords: compassion; grace; humility; Isaac of Nineveh; relationship; suffering

Isaac of Nineveh is a spiritual writer who belonged to the East Syriac tradition.[1] His church was the church of the Persian Empire, considered heretical by the imperial

[1]As an introduction to Isaac, see S. Brock, 'Isaac the Syrian', in C. G. Conticello (ed.), *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, vol. I/1 (Brepols: Turnhout, 2015), 327–72; H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000); S. Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita: Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002). See also P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); N. Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika: Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology* (Oxford: OUP, 2017); V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St. Isaac of Nineveh* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018). At present, we have three 'collections' of Isaac's writings regarding the authenticity of which there is scholarly consensus. These are often called 'parts' by scholars (*pālgutā* means 'part' in Syriac, and this is how the manuscript tradition labels the various 'collections'). These 'parts' are mostly composed of discourses dealing with spiritual themes, but also include letters addressed to fellow solitaries and questions and answers clarifying aspects of the solitary life. In addition, Isaac's *Centuries of Knowledge* also survive. This material, which is included in his *Second Part*, constitutes Isaac's most speculative writings. It consists of four groups of gnomic sentences of different lengths (each group comprised of c.100 sentences) dealing with the profoundest aspects of the inner life. Several East Syriac spiritual writers composed centuries, drawing inspiration from Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika*, the first work of this kind. Isaac's *First* and *Third Part* have been edited in full, while the *Second Part* is

(Chalcedonian) and miaphysite churches due to its acceptance of Nestorius' thought.[2] Isaac lived in the seventh century, at the time of the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia, and wrote in Syriac, an eastern form of Aramaic. Born in Qatar, he became Bishop of Nineveh in Iraq. After only five months, however, he decided to renounce this office, and went to live as a hermit in the mountains of Khuzistan on the border with Iran.

In the seventh and eighth centuries a blossoming of writers on the inner life occurred in the East Syriac Church.[3] They were all solitaries and influenced by the tradition of the Egyptian desert, Evagrius Ponticus (fourth century)[4] and the Syriac writer John the Solitary (fifth century).[5] Of these, Isaac is the best-known. Of the three 'parts' of his writings which survive today, the *First Part* was translated into Greek only about a

only partially edited. For the *First Part*, see *Mar Isaacus Ninivita De Perfectione Religiosa*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris/Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1909). For the edited portion (discourses 4–41) of the *Second Part,* discovered in 1983 by Sebastian Brock (manuscript syr. e 7, Bodleian Library, Oxford), see *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian). 'The Second Part', Chapters IV–XLI*, ed. S. Brock (Leuven: Peeters, 1995). For an English translation of the first two discourses, see 'St Isaac the Syrian: Two Unpublished Texts', trans. S. Brock, *Sobornost* 19 (1997), pp. 7–33. For a partial English translation of the third section (the *Centuries*) see G. Kessel, 'Isaac of Nineveh's Chapters on Knowledge', in M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. S. Al-Murikhi and H. Al Thani (eds), *An Anthology of Syriac Writers from Qatar in the Seventh Century* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015), pp. 253–80. For the *Third Part*, see *Isacco di Ninive. Terza Collezione*, ed. S. Chialà (Leuven: Peeters, 2011). All the translations from Syriac of Isaac's passages in this article are mine, taking into account the available translations in modern European languages.

[2]On East-Syriac christology, see S. Brock, 'The Christology of the Church of the East', in D. E. Afinogenov and A. Muravjev (eds), *Traditions and Heritage of the Christian East: Proceedings of the International Conference* (Moscow: Indrik, 1996), pp. 159–79; Brock, 'The "Nestorian" Church: A Lamentable Misnomer', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78/3 (1996), pp. 23–35.

[3]As an introduction to these writers, see R. Beulay, *La lumière sans forme: Introduction à l'étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale* (Chevetogne: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1987). See also S. Chialà, 'Les mystiques syro-orientaux: Une école ou une époque?', in A. Desreumaux (ed.), *Les mystiques syriaques* (Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 2011), pp. 63–78. For a bibliography on these writers, see G. Kessel and K. Pinggéra, *A Bibliography of Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011); G. Kessel, 'Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature: An Update (2011–2017)', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 20/2 (2017), pp. 435–88.

[4]Evagrius, disciple of the Cappadocians and later of Macarius the Egyptian and Macarius the Alexandrian, wrote extensively on the inner life. Condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), some of his works survive only in Syriac (esp. his *Kephalaia Gnostika*). For a bibliography on Evagrius, see http://evagriusponticus.net. On his influence on the Syriac tradition, see A. Guillaumont, *Les 'Képhalaia Gnostica' d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'Origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1962). On Evagrius' role in Isaac's writings, see S. Brock, 'Discerning the Evagrian in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: A Preliminary Investigation', *Adamantius* 15 (2009), pp. 60–72; S. Chialà, 'Evagrio il Pontico negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive', *Adamantius* 15 (2009), pp. 73–84; P. Géhin, 'La dette d'Isaac de Ninive envers Évagre le Pontique', *Connaissance des Pères de l'Église* 119 (2010), pp. 40–52.

[5]For an introduction to John, see: A. de Halleux, 'Le milieu historique de Jean le Solitaire: Une hypothèse', in R. Lavenant (ed.), *IIIo Symposium Syriacum, 1980: Les contacts du monde syriaque avec les autres cultures (Goslar 7–11 Septembre 1980)* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1983), pp. 299–305; P. Harb, 'Doctrine spirituelle de Jean le Solitaire (Jean d'Apamée)', *Parole de l'Orient* 2 (1971), pp. 225–60; B. Bradley, 'Jean le Solitaire (d'Apamée)', *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, vol. 8 (Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1974), cols 764–72; for John's influence on Isaac, see: É. Khalifé-Hachem, 'La prière pure et la prière spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninive', in F. Graffin (ed.), *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis (1898–1968)* (Leuven: Impr. Orientaliste, 1969), pp. 157–73; Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 109–13; Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*, pp. 48–51; for John's tripartite scheme of the

century after Isaac's death,[6] and then from Greek into the majority of the languages of ancient Christianity.[7] Isaac became greatly valued within the Byzantine tradition, crossing geographical and dogmatic boundaries, and was later appreciated also outside monasteries, most famously in the thought of Dostoevsky.[8]

Sebastian Brock, who (re)discovered the *Second Part* of Isaac's writings a few decades ago,[9] has made a considerable contribution to the knowledge of Isaac over the last forty years. Thanks to his and others' efforts, today Isaac is known especially for his insistence on love and compassion.[10] These embrace sinners,[11] heretics[12] and, more radically, every suffering human being, but also wild animals, reptiles and demons – something that is particularly telling to contemporary sensibility: 'What is a merciful heart?', Isaac writes, '[It is] the burning of the heart for the whole creation: for human being[s], bird[s], wild animals, demons, and for all that is'.[13] However, *how* does Isaac arrive at this? From what *inner, personal experience* does this radical compassion develop?

spiritual life, see S. Brock, 'Some Paths to Perfection in the Syriac Fathers', *Studia Patristica* 51 (2011), pp. 77–94.

[6]In the late eighth–early ninth century, at the Chalcedonian monastery of Mar Saba near Jerusalem, the monks Patrikios and Abramios produced a Greek version of this 'part' (first printed edition: *Τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἰσὰακ ἐπισκόπου Νινευῖ τοῦ Σύρου, τὰ εὑρεθέντα Ἀσκητικά*, ed. N. Theotokis, Leipzig, 1770); recently critically edited: *Ἀββᾶ Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ Σύρου, Λόγοι Ἀσκητικοί*, ed. M. Pirard (Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Ἰβήρων: Ἅγιον Ὄρος, 2012). On Isaac's writings at Mar Saba, see S. Brock, 'Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba: The Translation of St. Isaac the Syrian', in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), pp. 201–8.

[7]See S. Brock, 'Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba'; Brock, 'Crossing the Boundaries: An Ecumenical Role Played by Syriac Monastic Literature', in M. Bielawski and D. Hombergen (eds), *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture* (Rome: Studia anselmiana, 2004), p. 223; Brock, 'From Qatar to Tokyo, by Way of Mar Saba: The Translations of Isaac of Beth Qatraye [Isaac the Syrian]', *ARAM* 11–12 (1999–2000), pp. 475–84; on the versions of Isaac's works, see Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 325–62.

[8]See S. Salvestroni, 'Isaac of Nineveh and Dostoyevsky's Work', in Metropolitan H. Alfeyev (ed.), *Saint Isaac the Syrian and his Spiritual Legacy: Proceedings of the International Patristics Conference, held at the Sts Cyril and Methodius Institute for Postgraduate Studies, Moscow, October 10–11, 2013* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), pp. 249–58.

[9]See n. 1.

[10]See S. Brock, 'Some Prominent Themes in the Writings of the Syriac Mystics of the 7th/8th Century AD (1st/2nd cent. H)', in M. Tamcke (ed.), *Gotteserlebnis und Gotteslehre. Christliche und islamische Mystik im Orient* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), pp. 49–60; Brock, 'Isacco il Siro: Giustizia e misericordia in Dio', in L. D'Ayala Valva, L. Cremaschi and A. Mainardi (eds), *Misericordia e perdono: Atti del XXIII Convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa, Bose, 9–12 settembre 2015* (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2016), pp. 169–90; S. Chialà, 'Trois thèmes majeurs de l'enseignement d'Isaac de Ninive', *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 69/4 (2007), pp. 321–40; Chialà, 'Le péché de l'homme et la miséricorde de Dieu dans l'enseignement d'Isaac de Ninive', *Buisson Ardent: Cahiers Saint-Silouane l'Athonite* 16 (2010), pp. 67–79; A. Louf, 'Pourquoi Dieu se manifesta, selon Isaac le Syrien?', *Connaissance des Pères de l'Église* 80 (2000), pp. 37–56.

[11]See I 2 14: 'Cover the sinner …; sustain the weak and the distressed with your word … so that the right Hand which supports everything might sustain you'. Or I 5 79: 'Love sinners but reject their works. Do not treat them with contempt because of their faults, lest you also be tempted by the same. Remember that you share the stink of Adam and that you also are clothed with his weakness.'

[12]See I 74 507.

[13]I 74 507. Isaac also writes (507–8): 'At their remembrance and sight, his eyes let tears fall, due to the vehement mercy that is pressing on his heart. For because of [his] great compassion, his heart is brought low, and he cannot bear to hear or observe any damage or small suffering of anything in creation. For this reason, he offers prayer with tears continually even for irrational [animals], for the enemies of truth (i.e. the heretics), and also for those who harm him, that they be protected and strengthened – even for the reptiles

This article explores the role of suffering in Isaac's corpus.[14] It is impossible to understand what Isaac means by compassion unless we analyse his vision of the creature's passing through suffering. It is within this experience that a subject who is able to open up him- or herself to God and the other takes shape. This theme plays a fundamental role in Isaac's writings.

The 'luminous love for human beings', Isaac states, is born only from 'the sweet and inebriating love of God'.[15] This, however, arises only from an 'experiencing', in which the self is at stake. This 'experiencing' touches personal existence, and involves suffering. Isaac, in his writings, traces a rigorous phenomenology of this 'experiencing'.

This article will outline some of the essential traits of this phenomenology through the analysis of several fundamental texts of Isaac. From this analysis, it will appear how Isaac's interest focuses on the *internal relationship* of the subject with his or her suffering, before considering any external attitude; and how this *internal relationship* is essential for developing a relationship with God in his alterity from the creature.

Isaac conceives the solitary life as a *place of mystery*, in which one carries out, as it were, an *initiatory process*. 'The honourable practice of stillness is a haven of mysteries',[16] the cell is 'the cave of hard rock, where God spoke with Moses (cf. Exod 33:21–23)';[17] the solitary life is the 'furnace' of Babylon,[18] where one is tried 'like gold'.[19] This mystery is for Isaac associated with one's vulnerability and God. In his writings, these elements are radically connected.

Isaac speaks of the choice of the solitary life as a 'going out to suffer'.[20] In the solitary life, he explains, one experiences manifold conditions of 'affliction' (*ulṣānā*). Isaac speaks of encountering evils, difficulties, adversity, poverty and sickness; he uses phrases such as 'toils of the struggle',[21] 'harsh and grievous temptations',[22] 'difficult afflictions',[23] 'gloomy darkness',[24] 'dangerous tempest',[25] 'intolerable burden'.[26] He describes

[he prays], because of the great compassion that is poured out in his heart without measure, in the likeness of God'.

[14]The first author to notice the importance of the theme of suffering in Isaac was Irenée Hausherr, who compared Eastern Christian views on this theme with John of the Cross' concept of 'night'. See I. Hausherr, 'Les Orientaux connaissent-ils les "nuits" de saint Jean de la Croix?', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 12 (1946), pp. 5–46. For a first analysis of this theme in Isaac and its relationship to his understanding of the figure of Christ, see my 'La passione secondo Isacco di Ninive', *Adamantius* 21 (2015), pp. 341–52.

[15]II 10 34 40 (Syr.); 49 (ET): 'Nobody has ever been able to draw near to the luminous love for human beings without having first been made worthy of the sweet and inebriating love of God.'

[16]See I 66 467.

[17]I 24 178. Isaac adds 'according to the word of the fathers'. This might refer, as Bettiolo and Gallo note (*Isacco di Ninive. Discorsi ascetici 1*, trans. M. Gallo and P. Bettiolo (Rome: Città Nuova, 1984), p. 217, n. 3), to a saying of Anthony: 'Abba Anthony said that the cell of the solitary is the furnace of Babylon (cf. Dan. 3:49–50), where the three young men found the Son of God, and the pillar of clouds [from] where God spoke with Moses (cf. Exod. 40:34–38)'. See P. Bedjan *Acta martyrum et sanctorum, tomus septimus vel Paradisum Patrum* (Paris/Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1897), p. 463, no. 54.

[18]I 3 38. Cf. Dan 3:49–50.

[19]See I 36 279.

[20]See I 35 233.

[21]I 24 182.

[22]I 3 38–9.

[23]I 77 532.

[24]Centuries I 30 25r.

[25]I 35 242.

[26]I 66 468.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fasting as 'prolonged hunger',[27] and the struggle for chastity as the 'struggle of blood'.[28] The creature who chooses the solitary life remains in the 'fearful desert', in which, 'dwelling with savage animals, [one] remains in the fearful struggles of the demons for forty or fifty years';[29] in 'a waste region, in which great penury reigns'.[30] There one seeks a path in 'the difficult conduct of the solitary life',[31] in 'the rough sea of stillness',[32] lived-in by marine beasts,[33] in which one should – and can – learn the art of 'diving'[34] and 'sailing',[35] as Isaac puts it. It is clear that Isaac is far from every idealisation of the quest for God, and that this quest is for him a matter of life or death, in which one can slip at any instant into a loss of oneself. Isaac describes this risk in its many nuances: one can falter and despair due to the afflictions of solitude;[36] one can become prey to sadness,[37] and leave 'the stadium';[38] one can even lose one's mental balance.[39] Isaac is well aware of the destructive power of suffering, as emerges from the powerful language he uses, as well as from his frequent descriptions of the conditions of difficulty that one has to face:

> Even those whose sight is sound and full of light, and [who] have grace as [their] guide, are in danger night and day, while their eyes [lit: pupils] are full of tears and they apply themselves to prayer and weeping night and day because of the fear of the journey, the difficult precipices that they encounter, and the appearances of truth which are frequently found along the path …[40]

The path is peopled by 'rapacious beasts',[41] by 'invisible natures, incorporeal powers' (the demons),[42] or simply by human beings who cause wounds in relationships through refusal and calumny,[43] one of the greatest labours: 'That a person might remain under (lit: in) calumny without affliction [is] because [his] heart begins to see the truth', Isaac writes.[44]

[27]Centuries IV 45 91v.

[28]I 30 209.

[29]Centuries I 64 51v.

[30]Centuries II 33 40v–41r, 40v.

[31]In III 13 24 110 (Syr.); 152 (IT).

[32]See I 66 467.

[33]See II 34 4 136 (Syr.); 148 (ET).

[34]See II 34 12 137–8 (Syr.); 149 (ET). In II 34 4 136 (Syr.); 148 (ET), Isaac writes: 'If the diver found a pearl in every oyster, everyone would easily become rich; if he brought [a pearl] up as soon as he dived, … pearls would be more frequent and numerous than pebbles.' Isaac came from the Persian Gulf, where pearl diving was an important activity. 'To dive', in Syriac, also means 'to be baptised', and this use recurs in Ephrem, where is also found the idea of Christ as the Pearl, which Isaac also uses; see Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome: CIIS, 1985), pp. 106–8.

[35]Cf. Centuries IV 41 90v; I 66 467.

[36]See e.g. Centuries IV 55 94v–95r, 94v.

[37]See e.g. Centuries II 29 40r–40v, 40r and II 34 1 134 (Syr.); 146 (ET).

[38]Cf. Centuries IV 23 86r.

[39]See e.g. Centuries III 86 78v–79r. On this theme, see my 'Pride in the Thought of Isaac of Nineveh', *Studia Patristica* 92 (2017), pp. 137–47.

[40]I 2 16.

[41]Cf. I 53 386.

[42]I 51 365.

[43]Cf. I 53 386.

[44]I 5 75.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Suffering, Isaac thinks, is inevitable if one looks for God. It is connected to the attempt to free oneself from the passions, which are the inner movements that distance the creature from God.[45] Passions like anger, envy and pride, before being moral deficiencies, are described by Isaac as being 'dense substances',[46] which prevent one from seeing what is true and so keep one from the 'knowledge' of God,[47] whom Isaac regards as truth itself.[48] They are obstacles that have an ontological nature: they alter one's perception of the real.

Isaac has an original understanding of how the passions arise. He believes that sin, which derives from the passions, is born from the fear of one's mortal and vulnerable condition,[49] which is as such from creation.[50] This seems distant from the perspective of Paul, for whom death is an effect of sin (Rom 5:12) – an idea, however, that Paul formulates in a different symbolical horizon. Isaac believes that it is from one's ontologically passible and mortal condition that sin develops, through fear: 'We did not become mortal because we sinned, but because we were mortal, we were pushed to sin';[51] and 'The body becomes a companion of sin because it fears afflictions, of being tormented and dying to its life'.[52] In this perspective, the passions, from which sin arises, function as 'defensive flights' from experiencing and facing one's original exposure to suffering and death. Under the push of fear, the passions distance the subject from the encounter with this creaturely condition of vulnerability and, by removing him/her from the perception of his/her real state, darken the visual capacity of the soul.

The suffering that Isaac describes, which is experienced both through *askesis* and through the involuntary 'afflictions' of life, exposes the subject to radical limitation and to the problem of frustration, which ultimately concern *the negation of oneself*. Therefore, Isaac does not conceive this encounter with 'affliction' as aiming at a performance of virtue,[53] at expiating one's sins,[54] nor at voluntarily inflicting pain on

[45]See A. Solignac, 'Passions', *DS* 12/1 (Paris, 1984), cols 339–48.

[46]I 67 472: 'While natures are things which are intermediate, distinguishable for vision by the light [of the mind], passions are like dense substances which, when placed between the light and that which is seen, prevent it from discerning things. Purity is the cleansing of the noetic air, in whose bosom the spiritual nature [which is] in us takes wing'.

[47]That is, from encounter with God. On 'knowledge' in Isaac, see especially I 51 360–77. See P. Bettiolo, 'Povertà e conoscenza. Appunti sulle Centurie gnostiche della tradizione evagriana in Siria', *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988–9), pp. 107–25; Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 119–41; Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, pp. 217–68; S. Seppälä, 'The Idea of Knowledge in East Syrian Mysticism', *Studia Orientalia* 101 (2007), pp. 265–77; Hagman, *Asceticism*, pp. 181–9: Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, pp. 77–138.

[48]See Centuries IV 77 102r–v; Centuries II 35 41r; Centuries II 36 41r.

[49]See Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, 169–70. Hagman also stressed the role of fear in Isaac in *Asceticism*, pp. 112–19.

[50]The idea that the human being has been created mortal is already present in Theodore of Mopsuestia, who is considered the highest theological authority in the Church of the East: see W. F. Macomber, 'The Theological Synthesis of Cyrus of Edessa, an East Syrian Theologian of the Mid Sixth Century', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 30 (1964), pp. 14–23; Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 95–9; N. Kavvadas, 'Some Observations on the Theological Anthropology of Isaac of Nineveh and its Sources', *Scrinium* 4 (2008), pp. 150–3; Kavvadas, 'On the Relations between the Eschatological Doctrine of Isaac of Nineveh and Theodore of Mopsuestia', *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010), pp. 245–50.

[51]Centuries III 2 59v. See also Centuries III 78 103v.

[52]I 35 267.

[53]Isaac often highlights the fact that the aim of the solitary life is not 'virtue' in itself, which can remain merely exterior, but one's access to a state more inner and higher than 'virtue' ('becoming dead also to virtue'). See Centuries II 43, 43r–v.

[54]Isaac does not speak of the expiation of guilt through suffering, but interprets the solitary life, which implies suffering, as the choice to undergo an exigent process of education. On this 'pedagogical' understanding of difficulties, see e.g. Centuries III 71 75r–v: 'If God is truly a Father … rational beings his

oneself.[55] He links it instead with the possibility of having *experientially* access to the problem of *the negation of oneself*, to the reactions it triggers (i.e. the defensive mechanisms of the passions), and to 'how' to handle it. Suffering, in this perspective, emerges as a dialectic element, which awakens the subject, and *experientially* places him/her before the original problem of his/her creaturely vulnerability. The aim of the ascetic life, then, in Isaac, is to favour contact with this ontological condition, and to provide a space in which the subject can learn to handle its presence without fleeing into those passions which are nothing but a flight from it. From this process alone, Isaac believes, an encounter with God can be born.

Due to this crucial role of the experience of negation, Isaac uses expressions which might appear ambiguous if read out of context, as when he affirms that God 'desires' that those who love him 'be in affliction in [this] world'.[56] This ambiguity lessens when one considers the structure of the experience that he outlines, which appears to understand suffering as *a provoker of the relationship with oneself*.

Suffering, in fact, by putting the subject to the test, activates him/her, and in this perspective, Isaac affirms: 'It is impossible that God might cause [a person] who desires to be with him to profit [or grow] apart from bringing him trials for the sake of truth',[57] because when facing these, the soul becomes watchful, draws near to wisdom,[58] and learns to 'proceed amidst things which oppose it'.[59] As it will shortly emerge from this analysis, accessing a non-passional condition means developing a capacity for a relationship with one's original vulnerability, which implies developing a capacity for a relationship with the possibility of negation, that makes this original vulnerability known. Only through accessing this relationship can one decipher Christ's saying, dear to Isaac, 'Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted' (Matt 5:4).[60]

The dynamic of the discovery of this relationship appears clearly in discourse 8 of the *First Part*, and in several Centuries of the *Second Part*. Through the analysis of some of these passages, it will be possible to deconstruct a certain possible reading of the creature–grace relationship, which understands God's grace as having the function of filling the insufficiency and poverty of the human condition. 'Aid',[61] which,

children, this world the type of a school in which he instructs our childishness [in] knowledge and corrects [it] in proportion to [its] folly, the world to come the inheritance for the time of the fulfilment of the stature [of maturity], and there will be [a time] when those children will become [adult] men, [then] by all means the Father will also transform the outer aspect of correction into happiness, in the world of [adult] men.' This conception is influenced by Theodore of Mopsuestia; see Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, p. 96.

[55]See e.g. I 59 416 and I 65 448.

[56]I 60 424. I discussed this issue in my 'La passione secondo Isacco', pp. 345–6.

[57]I 59 416.

[58]Cf. I 60 423.

[59]I 59 416.

[60]Cf. Centuries IV 74 101r–102r. 'Those who mourn' – the Greek οἱ πενθοῦντες – in Syriac reads *abile*; and *abilā* ('mourner') is the word that also indicates the monk in the Syriac tradition, because the monk is devoted to *eblā*, which has the same meaning as the Greek πένθος, 'mourning' (still another variant, *abilutā*, indicates the entire monastic life). Isaac reads the Gospel's saying with these resonances in mind. For 'mourning' and repentance in eastern Christianity, see I. Hausherr, *Penthos: La doctrine de la componction dans l'Orient chrétien* (Rome, 1944). For a perspective on Isaac, see H. Hunt, 'The Soul's Sorrow in Syrian Patristic Thought', *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997), pp. 530–33; Humt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), especially pp. 129–59; Hunt, 'The Monk as Mourner: Isaac the Syrian and Monastic Identity in the Seventh Century and Beyond', in Alfeyev, *Saint Isaac the Syrian and his Spiritual Legacy*, pp. 147–54.

[61]See e.g. I 8 105.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

together with 'consolation',[62] is for Isaac another way of referring to the encounter with grace, does not mean a removal of the experience of the relationship to oneself as vulnerable. On the contrary, Isaac conceives of the capacity for acknowledging and welcoming grace as something which arises precisely from the acceptance of 'sustaining' one's ontological condition of limitation – of 'sustaining', so to speak, a certain 'place of absence' or 'deficiency' within oneself.

Throughout his writings, Isaac calls the ontological condition of vulnerability that characterises the creaturely state by a Syriac term meaning 'weakness', *mḥilutā*. This theme evokes the Pauline theme of 'weakness' in which grace reveals itself,[63] and Isaac explicitly connects the 'thorn in the flesh' mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians, which reveals to him his 'weakness', to the afflictions of the ascetic path.[64] 'Weakness' in this perspective reveals itself to consciousness only through the experience of suffering, and a suffering which touches one's flesh and blood, like Paul's 'thorn'. Isaac states: 'If [a person] is not allowed [to be] a little imperfect, [if] a small act of negligence does [not] occur to him, or [if] the tempters do [not] surround him with the pains of the body and the suffering of the soul, a person cannot *perceive* (*margeš*) his weakness (*mḥilutā*).'[65] This 'perceiving' indicates a powerful contact with oneself as vulnerable. It is not only a matter of cognitive awareness, but something known through living experience – 'the pains of the body' and 'the suffering of the soul'.

Once one's 'weakness' has been 'perceived' due to contact with negative conditions, a process which Isaac describes as 'knowing' one's 'weakness' begins.[66] Isaac also describes it as 'being made humble'. The Syriac term that Isaac employs for this process, *mukākā*, is often translated, in language which might prove misleading today, as 'humiliation'.[67] It implies the fact of being made low, of descending, and in this sense, of *becoming* humble.[68] It is a descending *towards contact with oneself* through the encounter with 'the negative' – a term that, in this article, indicates every possible experience of suffering, limitation, imperfection and frustration. 'Being made humble', in this perspective, refers to the process of experiencing the weight of negation, *up to reaching contact with oneself*.

[62]See e.g. I 48 339; 340.

[63]Cf. 2 Cor 12:7–10: 'So that I might not boast of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn was given to me in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to buffet me so that I might not be exalted. Concerning this, I asked the Lord three times, that it might depart from me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is accomplished in weakness [*krihutā*; Harklean: *mḥilutā*]" … For, when I am weak [*krih*; Harklean: *mḥil*], then I am strong.'

[64]I 61 428: 'Then they learn the weakness of [human] nature and the assistance of the divine Power, when God first withholds his Power from them, when they are amidst trials. [In this way], they will perceive the weakness of [human] nature, the strength of temptations, and the wickedness of the Adversary … Through all of these things, they acquire humility … From where could they have acquired all of these things if they had not received the experience of the myriad of evils that God allowed to be in their midst? As it is written: "So that I might not exalt myself due to the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger from Satan (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7)"'.

[65]I 8 104.

[66]See I 8 104.

[67]For a discussion of the relationship between 'humiliation' and 'humility' in crucial places of the Christian reflection on the inner life (including desert monasticism, the rule of St Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the writings of Christian de Chergé OCSO), see J. Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015).

[68]The original meaning of the root *mak*, from which *mukākā* derives, is in fact 'to lay flat, to lower or humble oneself'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This process inevitably implies acknowledging that one is being put to the test by the experience of negation. This experiential awareness leads to prayer, which becomes meaningful only for that creature that has *previously* perceived him- or herself as vulnerable. 'When [a person]', due to the pressure exercised by afflictions, 'realises that he is in need of divine aid, he multiplies [his] prayer[s], and, when he has multiplied [his] entreaties, [his] heart is made humble', Isaac writes.[69] Only a rigorous loyalty to the experience of oneself as a human can enable one to acknowledge God as the partner in a dialogue.

God, however, does not manifest himself while the subject is in this process of 'being made humble'. When invoked, he remains before the subject as the evoker of meaning and horizon of the *future*. The *present*, however, for the creature, is not the actual presence of God, but the process itself. The subject, during this process, seeks a relationship with his/her own creaturely 'weakness', *alone*.[70]

It is in this solitude, within the process of 'being made humble', that the creature learns to 'bear' 'the negative'. The idea of 'bearing', which Isaac often invokes using a range of Syriac terms, refers in this article to the creaturely act of sustaining the weight of 'the negative'.[71]

This 'bearing', according to Isaac's descriptions, does not point to endurance alone, although this is necessarily involved. It has the shape, instead, of *remaining in contact* with 'the negative' and with oneself subject to it, while enduring. If this is an exercise in stability during the storm, this involves above all the effort of *remaining perceptive*, aware of the presence of the difficulties which 'press' upon the self. It implies *a non-removing* of one's perception of one's 'weakness', *a being sensitive* to it.

There exist numerous descriptions of the exercise of this attitude in Isaac, but it is particularly in one century that one can appreciate its entire weight. In this century, the way of sustaining the passions, which are conceived as a form of suffering, is described as follows:

> Believe me, my brothers, listlessness, dejection, heaviness of the limbs, tumult and confusion of the mind, and the other sad things which are allowed [to occur] to ascetics while they sit in stillness, are *the perfect practice of God*. Do not think that luminosity in the office, cleanliness of mind, delight and exultation of the heart, the consolation of sweet tears, and limpid converse with God alone are divine practice. I speak truly and according to my conscience: the thoughts of blasphemy, vainglory, and the hateful movements of fornication, which with violence are used to press heavily upon solitaries in stillness, and the suffering for them, even if the solitary is sometimes still found [to be] weak before them, but he endures, not going out of his cell, also this is reckoned [to be] a pure sacrifice and holy and divine practice – except for pride alone. Because he perseveres in the struggle of the Lord in all things, [those] of the right and of the left … (i.e. positive and negative).[72]

[69]I 8 105.

[70]On this theme, Alfeyev draws a parallel with the experience of Abba Anthony, left alone by God so that, alone, he might struggle with the demons. God, however, was secretly there. Cf. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* in *The Book of Paradise, Being the Histories and Sayings of the Monks and Ascetics of the Egyptian Desert*, ed. E. A. W. Budge (London: W. Drugulin, 1904), II 18 (Syr); I 21 (ET). See Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, p. 101.

[71]Isaac often uses the verbs *ṭ'en* and *sbal*, which mean 'to bear', but he also employs other verbs, such as ܬܩܦ, 'to endure, hold fast, persevere', and *saibar*, 'to endure'.

[72]Centuries IV 23 85v–86r.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sustaining contact with 'the negative', here, implies developing *a relationship* with oneself, subject to negation. Through experiencing oneself both as the one who perceives negation (in the passage above, the violent negation of the emergence of the passions) and as the one who is exposed to it, one discovers that one is, at the same time, the one who can 'bear' one's suffering self and this suffering self that 'is borne'. This means developing a reflective attitude towards one's vulnerability, a *relationship* with oneself exposed to suffering.

This relationship implies both strength and 'weakness'. It requires *an active stand of the subject*. This takes the shape of dwelling firmly in a place of oneself which is *lower* than the negation experienced or, in other terms, of placing oneself under the burden of 'the negative' and *from there* 'bearing' it.

Within this 'bearing', under the burden, which is the centre of the process of 'being made humble' (*mukākā*), one can *discover* a condition of 'humility' (*makikutā*).[73] For Isaac, this 'humility' is not a merely ethical virtue; he describes it as being a vital necessity if one wishes to find a way to be in contact with suffering without being destroyed. Isaac in fact affirms:

> Fill your mouth with tears, sprinkle your head with dust, and do not lift your head from the ground, until God has taken pity on you and caused you to pass away from this life by dying or has taken mercy on you and given humility (*makikutā*) to you. Do not still your mourning until you perceive within your soul that you have received [humility].[74]

Only 'humility' protects one from 'the precipices' of the path, Isaac's words suggest.[75] It is not something which might be brought about in oneself through effort. Instead, it arises by grace from the process which has been outlined, in which the subject works through suffering, inhabiting it and patiently remaining in contact with it. One 'perceives', in fact, that one has 'received' humility.[76] As Isaac writes, one cannot cause it to appear through *askesis*, which has only the value of leading one to the process of confrontation with suffering through which humility can be *discovered*. In this sense, humility is already a form of grace in Isaac, and not merely its precondition. It is a mysterious reality, where an encounter between the 'creatural' and its 'beyond' occurs, away from every 'virtue' and 'work'. For this reason, Isaac states:

> Virtue [i.e. *askesis*, where the contact with suffering occurs] is the mother of adversities, from adversities humility is brought forth, and for humility a gift is given. Therefore, a reward is not given for virtue, nor for sorrows for its sake, but for humility, which is brought forth by them. If this is lacking, the former are in vain.[77]

[73]*Makikutā*, like *mukākā*, derives from the *mak*. On humility in Isaac, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, pp. 111–28; Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 236–43; G. Mansour, 'Humility According to St. Isaac of Nineveh', *Diakonia* 28 (1995), pp. 181–6; Hagman, *Asceticism*, pp. 189–96; Bettiolo, 'Avec la charité', pp. 331–6.

[74]I 58 413.

[75]I 2 16.

[76]Cf. I 58 413.

[77]I 58 408–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As the end of the process of 'being made humble', this 'humility' indicates that a 'taking on' of one's ontological 'weakness' has occurred. Isaac, in fact, conceives of 'humility' (which he describes as 'armour'[78]) as being the real defence from faltering under the burden of suffering or fleeing into the passions: it is what emerges in their place in the person who has undergone the process of 'being made humble'. The creature who through the difficult exercise of 'bearing' has learnt to inhabit his or her creaturely condition *discovers* a new relationship with it other than the defensive flights of the passions, and *this* is 'humility'.

André Louf, who first alluded to the presence of the theme of 'weakness' in Isaac, detected a connection between 'knowledge of weakness' and 'humility' in his writings.[79] Sabino Chialà also hinted at this connection,[80] and spoke of humility in Isaac as 'a path of truth, of descent in our truth of creature'.[81] In light of the process of 'bearing' outlined above, this connection between 'weakness' and 'humility' becomes transparent, and the existential dynamics which lie at its root are revealed. 'Humility' emerges from Isaac's writings as an accomplished capacity for 'bearing the negative' and one's exposure to suffering – and in this sense as both a complete relational capacity with 'the negative' and a capacity for wholeness within negation. 'When humility will reign upon your observances, your being will be subject to yourself, and with it, all [will be subject to yourself], because in your heart the peace which [comes] from God will be born.'[82]

When Isaac in his corpus describes 'humility' as that which 'tames' wild animals and demons, transforming 'their fury', this can occur only because the creature has first 'tamed' his/her own 'negative', becoming 'acquainted' with his/her 'weakness' through being in relationship with his or her self, which is exposed to suffering.[83] If the passional defences indicate a non-relational attitude, 'humility' indicates a profound capacity for *a relationship with oneself*.

For this reason:

> The humble person approaches destructive beasts, and as soon as their gaze rests upon him, their fury is transformed. […] If he comes near to deadly reptiles, he rubs them between his hands as [if they were] locusts. And if he approaches human beings, they look at him as [they look] at the Lord. And why do I speak of human beings? Because the demons, with all of their wickedness and bitterness, and [with] all of the pride of their minds, when they come to the humble person, they become like dust. All of their harshness grows weak, their stratagems are dissolved, and their contrivances come to an end.[84]

[78]See II 5 26 13–14 (Syr.); 17–18 (ET): 'And to those who are engaged in difficult battles with the demons, … send succour, Lord, and overshadow them with the cloud of your grace … and clothe them in the armour of humility …'

[79]See A. Louf, *Isaac le Syrien. Oeuvres Spirituelles-II* (Bégrolles en Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2003), pp. 25–6, 33–4, 56–60. It should be noted, here, that Louf did not focus on the ontological nature of 'weakness', but tended to interpret it as moral insufficiencies and failures in *askesis*. However, his allusions detect a fundamental aspect of Isaac's thought, and were a source of inspiration for my research.

[80]See Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 159–60.

[81]Ibid., p. 236.

[82]I 34 224.

[83]See Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, pp. 241–2.

[84]I 82 577–8. Isaac's understanding of a 'humility' which, by placing itself below all to 'bear' it, discovers a relationship with all, can be read together with this Apophthegm: 'A brother asked Abba Timothy and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is from the capacity for a relationship with negation, then, that the love for one's enemies, wild beasts and demons develops. Just as one discovers a way for being in relationship with one's suffering self, so also one discovers a wider capacity for relationship: with the suffering self of others, with 'the negative' experienced by others and even with the negation one receives from others. One can then 'partake', as Isaac writes, 'in the suffering of every human being, both the righteous and sinners'.[85]

'Humility', therefore, emerges from Isaac's writings as a *new relational capacity*: the capacity for dealing with one's vulnerable nature, and with the negation and frustration that reveal it. It takes the shape, also, of a profound belonging to oneself, of a capacity of dwelling within oneself, concentrated and gathered within oneself: 'The heart does not cease from wandering until it is made humble. Humility gives collectedness to the heart.'[86]

This possibility of belonging to oneself without dispersion outside oneself indicates that one has accepted oneself in one's condition of deficiency *without 'wandering' any longer in search of something which might fill this deficiency*. One has 'taken on' one's creaturely poverty, one's ontological weakness.

Isaac believes that only when this 'taking on' of oneself has occurred, in the assumption of a 'void' which is part of oneself, does the alterity of grace show itself: '*After* a human being has been made humble' – that is to say, after a human being, while 'bearing', has accepted being made humble – 'mercy immediately surrounds and embraces him'.[87] *Only after*. Before one's passing through this process, 'the divine aids do not come near' to the creature. 'God's grace stands continually at a distance and watches the human being'; only 'when a thought of humility is moved in him' does it draw near to him.[88] In this distance which grace keeps, there is all the space of the unfolding of the difficult process of the relationship with oneself outlined above.

The profound sense of belonging to oneself that is distinctive of 'humility' is thus the place within which grace mysteriously 'rises', or 'dawns' – an Evagrian expression that Isaac often employs.[89] Within it, a transformation occurs. Isaac describes it as being a 'germination', mysterious like the birth of the plant from the seed:

> After much converse with the Scriptures, continuous supplication and the acknowledgement of his weakness, with his gaze extended unceasingly towards God's grace, after great dejectedness in stillness, *from here*, little by little, some spaciousness of heart is born in [a person], and a germination which gives birth to joy *from within, although* [*this*] *has no origin from that person himself* by the

said: "I can see myself that I continually remember God [lit: that my continual remembrance is before God]". The old man said to him: "It is not a great thing that your thought is with God. This, instead, is great: if you see yourself below every creature"". Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, 477, I 570 (Syr.); II 751 (ET).

[85]I 65 457.

[86]I 8 105.

[87]I 8 105.

[88]Cf. Centuries III 18 62v.

[89]Isaac quotes Evagrius in I 22 174: 'The stability of the intellect is the summit of intelligible realities; it resembles the colour of the sky upon which rises (ܫܪܐ), in the time of prayer, the light of the Holy Trinity'. Cf. *Pseudo-Supplement* 4, in W. Frankenberg (ed.), *Euagrius Ponticus* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1912), pp. 426–7. The Syriac verb *dnaḥ*, 'to rise', indicates the rising of the sun, and can also mean 'to shine through', 'to appear'. Isaac uses it as a technical term to indicate the revelation of something *new*, *other*, coming from elsewhere: 'theoria' (Centuries I 29 24v); 'grace' (Centuries III 44 66v–67r, 67r); 'faith' (I 51 376).

> beginning of some kind of thought. He is aware that his heart is rejoicing, but *does not know the reason why*. For a certain exultation takes hold of the soul, at whose delight everything that exists and is seen is despised, and the mind sees, through its power, whence comes the foundation of that rapture of thought, but *why, he does not understand*. […] There is no one who can understand the nature of these things which occur with him as a result of God's grace. [This] alone [can be said]: blessed [the person] who, out of hope for God's grace, has endured the dejectedness which is a hidden trial of the mind's virtue and growth. [It is] like winter's sadness, which causes the hidden seed to grow as it disintegrates under the ground, at the harsh changes of the blustery weather.[90]

Isaac's metaphor of the seed, which disintegrates under the ground while the darkness of the winter and the 'harsh changes of the blustery weather' pass over it, describes well the work of 'bearing'. It is a descent, a 'dwelling below', a 'staying under': 'under' the winter, under atmospheric changes, under the ground, within one's own disintegration; and nevertheless remaining whole within it.

The mysterious 'germination' that Isaac describes, in fact, has 'no origin from the person': one 'does not know the reason why' and 'does not understand why'. It is a matter of grace alone. There is, nevertheless, a profound connection between this mysterious transformation and the creature's experience: the 'germination' emerges *from within*, as the plant from the seed. It emerges *from the process one has passed through*: it is intimately one's own.

Isaac's words 'blessed the person who has known his weakness!',[91] which he writes in his discourse I 8, express well the idea outlined above: the use of the past tense ('to have known') alludes to the whole process which one has experienced, which is now part of oneself.

In light of these observations, Isaac's understanding of the meaning of grace emerges. Grace, in his writings, is not a kind of material substance that fills the 'void' of the creaturely condition (i.e. its insufficiency, deficiency and poverty). It is not something which exempts the subject from the demanding process of looking for a relationship with his or her limits, nor can it be used as a consolatory tool to avoid the encounter with one's suffering self. On the contrary, grace reveals itself only to the creature who had the courage to 'know' his or her weakness, to 'bear' its weight and to take charge of it.

The miracle can happen – that the 'power of God' (who is the Spirit, in Isaac) takes away from the creature even his/her suffering[92] – but this is not deserved. It is *grace*, and

[90]II 34 2–3 135 (Syr.); 146–7 (ET). The last sentence follows Brock's elegant translation.

[91]I 8 104.

[92]Isaac often describes this experience. See especially Centuries II 63 51r–v: 'Some of the martyrs were seeing this [power] in a perceptible way, and at the time of the vehemence of the torments, it was appearing openly to many of them. … At this sight, not only were they acquiring courage, but they were [also] becoming completely insensible to all of the torments … Many times, also, the suffering of the body was taken away from them, as one of them said, when they were amputating and throwing away most of the limbs of his body. As every limb was torn asunder from him, he was filled with exultation, and was raising a hymn of joy to God … When it happened that they amputated one of his inferior limbs, which was the knee, in this limb *he suffered*. And when they asked him why, during their amputation of all of [his other limbs], he was quiet and exultant, [but] at this he raised [his] voice … he told them something which is true: "You should know that, when you were amputating all of my other [limbs], I did not suffer, and my mind was wholly in

therefore up to God alone. What the creature can do is to inhabit his or her creaturely self, his or her untranscendable poverty. 'Blessed the person who has known his weakness!' means, then, blessed is the person who has passed through this process.

heaven, but for this [limb], I was allowed to suffer now, *so that I may know that I am a human being*, and [that] it was not a power of [my] nature which [supported me] up to now".'

Cite this article: Duca V (2020). A creaturely wisdom: Suffering, compassion and grace in Isaac of Nineveh. *Scottish Journal of Theology* **73**, 225–238. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000344