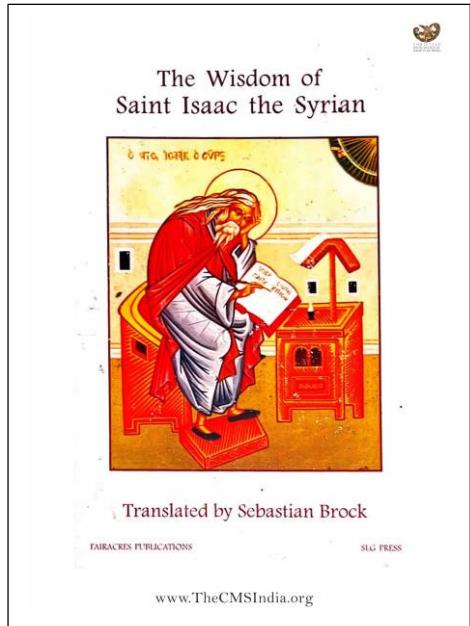


## The Wisdom of Saint Issac the Syrian



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# The Wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian



Translated by Sebastian Brock

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Sebastian  
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Translated by Sebastian Brock

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*Cover illustration:* Icon of St Isaac the Syrian which hangs in the Chapel of St Isaac's Retreat, Opononi, New Zealand.

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## INTRODUCTION

St Isaac of Nineveh, or St Isaac the Syrian as he is often known, is a figure full of paradox. A hermit of the Assyrian Church of the East who lived in the seventh century, he is in the present century perhaps more influential than at any other time in history. In recent years his writings have been translated into a dozen or more different languages. On Mount Athos his works remain favourite monastic reading, and in Egypt their inspiration lies behind the monastic revival in the Coptic Orthodox Church during the last few decades. Through modern translations into English, French and Italian his writings have also become known to, and appreciated by, many outside the monastic circles for which St Isaac originally intended them.

Reactions to his teaching, however, have not always been favourable. Not long after his death some quarters within his own Church took objection to certain aspects of his teaching, and in the present century one eminent scholar dismissed his writings with the words, 'We see in him a milestone on the melancholy road whereby the Orient lapsed from Christianity into an unprogressive, uninventive barbarism, in which not even philosophy continued to flourish.'<sup>1</sup> Yet for many people today St Isaac clearly does have the ability to speak directly over the span of thirteen centuries. Eloquent testimony to this is given by a young Greek Orthodox monk, whose words are quoted by Archimandrite Vasileios, of Stavronikita Monastery on Athos:<sup>2</sup>

I am reading St Isaac the Syrian. I find something true, heroic, spiritual in him; something which transcends space and time. I feel that here, for the first time, is a voice which resonates in the deepest parts of my being,

## FURTHER READING

### MAIN TRANSLATIONS OF ST ISAAC

#### First Part

##### (a) Complete (82 chapters)

A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam, 1923; reprinted Wiesbaden, 1969). [From Syriac]

[D. Miller], *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, 1984). [From Greek; contains an excellent introduction. It should be noted that the order of chapters in the Greek is quite different from that of the Syriac; a useful concordance can be found in this volume]

J. Touraille, *Isaac le Syrien. Oeuvres spirituelles* (Paris, 1981). [From Greek]

##### (b) Selections

E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia* (London, 1954), pp. 183–280. [Excerpts translated from the Russian *Philokalia*]

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, 1987), pp. 242–301. [First Part, ch. 22; Second Part, ch. 14–15; and short extracts from both Parts]

M. Hansbury, *St Isaac of Nineveh, On Ascetical Life* (Crestwood NY, 1989). [Ch. 1–6]

A. M. Allchin, *The Heart of Compassion* (London, 1989; Japanese translation, 1990). [60 short excerpts]

M. Gallo and P. Bettiolo, *Isacco di Ninive: Discorsi ascetici* (Rome, 1984). [Ch. 1–38]

#### Second Part (41 chapters)

Ch. 1–2: S. P. Brock, 'Two unpublished texts by St Isaac the Syrian', *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 19 (1997), pp. 7–33.

Ch. 3 (Four sets of 'Kephalaia'): P. Bettiolo, *Isacco di Ninive: Discorsi spirituali* (Magnano, 1985; 2nd edition, 1991). [The second edition contains some further excerpts from the Second Part]

Ch. 4–41: S. P. Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part', Chapters IV–XLI* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri 225; Louvain, 1995).

Ch. 5: 'The prayers of St Isaac the Syrian', *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 16 (1994), pp. 20–31.

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1. The ladder to the Kingdom is hidden within you, and within your soul. Dive down into yourself, away from sin, and there you will find the steps by which you can ascend.

[Hom. 2, B 12]

2. Do not test out your mind on the grounds that you are examining what seductive and impure thoughts look like, imagining that, as you do this, you will not be overcome by them. Even the wise have in this way been thrown into confusion and become infatuated.

[Hom. 2, B 14]

3. Do not be inept in the requests you make to God, otherwise you will insult God through your ignorance.

[Hom. 3, B 32]

4. When someone asks a human prince for a load of dung, not only will that person be despised as a result of his despicable request, but he has also offered an insult to the prince by means of his stupid request. Exactly the same applies when someone asks for the things of the body in prayer.

[Hom. 3, B 32]

5. If God is slow in answering your request, or if you ask but do not promptly receive anything, do not be upset, for you are not wiser than God.

[Hom. 3, B 33]

6. Anything that is easily found is also easily lost, whereas what is found after much labour will be guarded with vigilance.

[Hom. 3, B 34]

7. Thirst for Jesus, so that he may inebriate you with His love.

[Hom. 3, B 34]

8. Without temptations, God's concern is not perceived, nor is freedom of speech with Him acquired, nor is spiritual wisdom learnt, nor does the love of God become grounded in the soul.

[Hom. 3, B 36]

9. Make sure you see to small things, lest otherwise you may push aside important ones.

[Hom. 4, B 44]

96. A person receives illumination in accordance with the quality of his conduct before God. [Keph. I.12]
97. Do not dispute over the truth with someone who does not know the truth; but from the person who is eager to know the truth, do not withhold words from him. [Keph. I.14]
98. With a person who is unable to profit from spiritual knowledge, benefit him instead with your silence, rather than with words about such knowledge. [Keph. I.15]
99. Do not consider a long time spent in worship before God to be wasted. [Keph. I.20]
100. Those who just grab at knowledge are themselves grabbed by pride: the more they study, the more darkened they become. [Keph. I.25]
101. Those who rush at knowledge, without working for it, are the people who grab at it; in other words, instead of the truth, they grab at a semblance. [Keph. I.26]
102. Whenever it is a time of battling with Satan and of darkness, one should spend extra time in prayer and in kneeling on the ground. [Keph. I.30]
103. In the case of thoughts, we have the authority to bridle them—that is, if we are extremely alert; but over the body's functioning we do not have authority. Accordingly, anyone who says that he is without any passion when he fills his belly, or is continuously involved in material spectacles, has gone completely astray. [Keph. I.31]
104. Impassibility does not consist in not being aware of the passions, but in not accepting the passions. [Keph. I.33]
105. For someone to say to his brother 'Love God' is very easy, but what is necessary is to know how to love Him. [Keph. I.36]



144. In love did God bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during its temporal existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things. In love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised. [XXXVII.2]

145. Just because the terms 'wrath', 'anger', 'hatred' and the rest are used of the Creator in the Bible, we should not imagine that He actually does anything in anger, hatred or zeal. Many figurative terms are used of God in the Scriptures, terms which are far removed from His true nature. [XXXIX.19]

146. Among all God's actions there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and end of His dealings with us.

[XXXIX.22]

147. God's love is not a kind of love which has its origin in events which take place in time. [XL.2]

148. God has a single caring concern for those who have fallen, just as much as for those who have not fallen. [XL.3]

149. It is God's wish that each day we should be renewed and start up again with a virtuous change of will, and with a renewal of mind. [XL.9]

150. God's holy nature is so good and compassionate that it is always seeking to find some small means of setting us right. [XL.12]

151. God's mercifulness is far more extensive than we can conceive. [XL.17]

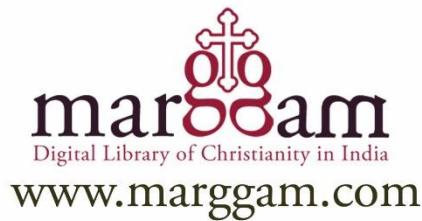
152. On the subject of God, it is right that only someone worthy of God because of his virtue should speak. [XLI.1]

153. In your heart act as a priest to God, offering up a pure sacrifice. [XLI.2]



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