

**‘EXPLORING FINITUDE’:
WEAKNESS AND INTEGRITY IN ISAAC OF NINEVEH**

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the theme of human finitude, 'weakness', and suffering in the thought of Isaac of Nineveh, a 7th century East-Syriac writer from Qatar, who lived as a solitary monk in Western Iran. In Isaac, whose writings had a profound influence on Eastern Christian thought, the engagement with one's 'weakness' (*mḥilutā*, in Syriac) plays a major role, which scholars have not yet explored extensively. This 'weakness', in Isaac, has an ontological nature, and should be understood as the condition distinctive of being a human, which refers to the limited nature of body and mind, exposed to suffering. This thesis analyses this theme through a phenomenological and hermeneutical method, based on the study of Isaac's original edited and unedited writings. The analysis of the human condition in this 'world' reveals this condition as being marked by suffering and 'weakness'. These, when perceived, awake the creature to the quest for God, conceived as the consolation and meaning of existence. The solitary life takes the shape of learning to inhabit suffering and 'weakness', by encountering and taking them on through the initiatory process of *askesis*. The limitations of *askesis* force the creature to contact his/her suffering self and to learn to be in relationship with it and the passions, that Isaac conceives as defensive reactions against one's ontological condition of 'weakness'. From this relational exercise 'integrity' can be born, to be understood as a condition of rootedness and groundedness able to adhere to one's creatural status. The more one finds a relationship with one's suffering self, the more one becomes able to be in a relationship with God's mystery and other suffering creatures. The vital role of suffering and 'weakness' in Isaac is related to awakening the subject to this transformative process, through which the problem of human existence is experientially inhabited.

To M. Maddalena Pessina
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I.1. THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

This study examines the theme of human finitude, ‘weakness’, and suffering in the thought of Isaac of Nineveh, a 7th century East-Syriac writer who wrote extensively on the inner life.

In Isaac’s *corpus* of writings, finitude, ‘weakness’, and suffering play a major role, which has not hitherto been submitted to scholarly extensive examination. This thesis aims to explore these themes, which are essential with regard to Isaac’s understanding of the inner life.

Isaac was a solitary Christian monk, and wrote for other solitaries. All of his writings aim to guide his reader in the spiritual life, on the path of *askesis*, and in the quest for a relationship with God. His careful analysis of the functioning of the human psyche, his experiential approach, and his dealing with ontological and existential problems, however, result in his insights transcending the boundary of confessional belonging, and means they can still speak to a contemporary reader interested in the meaning of existence, in a completely different context.

This study examines these problems of universal significance, and considers Isaac’s understanding of the quest for God in light of these universal problems. Isaac understood this quest as being the centre of his life and writing, but this quest becomes understandable only in light of questions about the meaning of existence and of the universal human needs that lie at its root and precede it. These concern human existence as such, of believers and non-believers alike. Creatural suffering, in Isaac, is the starting point for all of these questions and needs.

I.2. ISAAC OF NINEVEH: LIFE AND WRITINGS

Isaac is the best-known of a group of monastic writers who, in the 7th-8th centuries, within the East-Syriac tradition, wrote extensively on the inner life (others include Simon of ʿAybuteh¹, Dadišo‘ Qaṭraya², Joseph Ḥazzaya³, and John of Dalyatha⁴)⁵. The precise connections between these authors are still not fully clear, but they all belonged, in one way or another, to a *milieu* connected to the memory of Abraham of Kaškar⁶, the 6th century reformer of the monastic life in the Church of the East⁷ who founded the monastery of Mount Izla (‘The Great Monastery’). Isaac, Simon, and Dadišo‘, who were virtually contemporaries, were all linked to the monastery of Rabban Šabur (first half of the 7th century)⁸, a monastic founder and teacher who, although not a direct disciple of Abraham, was strongly influenced by him and his rule. In the monastery of Rabban Šabur, in Beth

¹ Simon (late 7th century) is the author of the *Book of Grace*, of an *Homily on the Consecration of the Cell*, and of a few minor treatises. For a complete bibliography on all the authors mentioned above (listing edited, unedited works and literature), see G. Kessel – K. Pinggéra, *A Bibliography of Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature*, Eastern Christian Studies 11, Leuven/Paris/Walpole, MA, 2011 and G. Kessel, “Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature: An Update (2011-2017)”, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 20.2 (2017), 435-488.

² Dadišo‘ (late 7th century) was also born in Beth Qaṭrayē. His surviving writings are commentaries to Abba Isaiah and *The Paradise of the Fathers*, a treatise on stillness (or solitude), the *Letter to Abkosh* (also on stillness), and other minor works.

³ Joseph (8th century) was a convert from Zoroastrianism. He is the author of works on the spiritual life, the best-known of which being the *Letter on the Three Stages of the Monastic Life*. He also wrote *Centuries of Knowledge*.

⁴ John (8th century) is the author of a collection of discourses, letters, and of *Centuries of Knowledge*.

⁵ On these writers, see the classic study R. Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, Chevetogne, 1987; see also S. Chialà, “Les mystiques syro-orientaux: une école ou une époque?”, in A. Desreumaux (ed.) *Les mystiques syriaques*, Études syriaques 8, Paris, 2011, 63-78.

⁶ See Chialà, “Les mystiques syro-orientaux”, 67-69.

⁷ On the figure of Abraham, see S. Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità. La rinascita del monachesimo siro-orientale*, Magnano, 2005; F. Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse: la réforme d’Abraham le Grand, père des moines de l’Orient*, CSCO 622, Subs. 121, Leuven, 2008; *Ead.*, “Rabban-Šāpūr: un monastère au rayonnement exceptionnel. La réforme d’Abraham de Kaškar dans le Bēth-Hūzāyē”, *OCP* 72.2 (2006), 333-348.

⁸ For Rabban Šabur and his monastery, see J.M. Fiey, “L’Élam, la première des métropoles ecclésiastiques syriennes orientales”, *Melto* 5.2 (1969), 221-267, 247-248. See also J.B. Chabot (ed.), “Livre de la chasteté, compose pas Jésusdenah, évêque de Baçrah”, *Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire* 16.3-4 (1896), 35 (Syr.); 30 (FT); A. Scher (ed.) *Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, PO 13.4, no. 65, Paris, 1918, 459-461.

Huzayē /Khuzistan (current Western Iran; former Sasanian Empire) – whose site, at present, remains unidentified –, Isaac spent the last part of his life. All of these authors, moreover, had a strong interest in the solitary life, practising it themselves in different forms, and they refer to a common set of texts and authors who wrote on this form of life, on *askesis*, and contemplation.

I.2.1. LIFE

We know little about Isaac's life⁹, and what little we do know is due to two sources: Išo'dnaḥ's *Book of Chastity* (9th century), devoted to monastic figures and foundations mostly from the late Sasanian and early Arab period¹⁰, and an anonymous text, of unknown date and origin, published by the Syro-Catholic patriarch Ignatius Ephrem II Rahmani (1848-1929) in 1904¹¹. To these two witnesses, Isaac's brief mention in the *Catalogue* of 'Abdišo' bar Brikha (d. 1318) should also be added¹².

Isaac was from Beth Qaṭrayē (Rahmani)¹³, the region of the modern Gulf States (Qatar), which was still a strong Christian centre in the 7th century¹⁴. He was probably already a monk and teacher (Rahmani) when the catholicos George (r. 660-680), during his journey to Beth Qaṭrayē in 676, to resolve conflicts with local

⁹ For a thorough examination of Isaac's biography and sources, see S. Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica alla misericordia infinita. Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2002, 53-63.

¹⁰ For the note on Isaac, see Chabot, *Livre de la chasteté*, 63-64 (Syr.); 53-54 (FT).

¹¹ I.E. Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca* I, Charfet, 1904, 33 (Syr.); 32-33 (LT).

¹² J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, III.1, Rome, 1725, 104. On the (quite surprising) silence of Thomas of Marga on Isaac, see P. Bettiolo, "Congesture intorno a un'assenza: Tommaso di Marga, Isacco di Ninive e le tensioni interne alla chiesa siro-occidentale tra VII e IX secolo", in E. Coda – C. Martini Bonadeo (eds.), *De l'Antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge. Études de logique aristotélicienne et de philosophie grecque, syriaque, arabe et latine offertes à Henri Hugonnard-Roche*, Études musulmanes 44, Paris, 2014, 149-167, 158-167.

¹³ In these few observations, where the sources add something specific, the source is mentioned in brackets.

¹⁴ An as introduction to Syriac Christianity in Beth Qaṭrayē, see M. Kozah, "Introduction", in M. Kozah – A. Abu-Husayn – S.S. Murikhi – H. Al Thani (eds.), *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 38, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2014, 1-22.

bishops¹⁵, took Isaac with him and consecrated him a bishop, in the monastery of Beth ‘Abe (founded by Jacob of Lašom, a monk from Izla¹⁶). This is the only certain date we possess relating to Isaac’s biography.

Isaac did not remain a bishop for long, however, because he renounced his office “for a reason that is known to God [alone]” (Išo‘dnah)¹⁷, or “for the sharpness of his intellect and of his zeal” (Rahmani)¹⁸. He then moved to Mount Matut (Išo‘dnah), in the region of Beth Huzayē, where he led the solitary life with other hermits of this region, moving to the monastery of Rabban Šabur towards the end of his life, where he was also buried.

The sources state that Isaac composed books (Išo‘dnah) – five (Rahmani) or seven volumes (‘Abdišo‘) – on the solitary life (“on the conduct of the Spirit, on divine mysteries, and judgement and Providence”, according to ‘Abdišo‘). He either wrote these himself or dictated them to his disciples, and subsequently revised them, as was common in Antiquity. Both sources, in fact, affirm that Isaac went blind towards the end of his life – a fact that caused Sebastian Brock to hypothesise that these might have been dictated to disciples at that time¹⁹. Isaac’s thought gave rise to polemics: Išo‘dnah states that Daniel bar Ṭubānitā, a bishop of Beth Garmai, criticised him – possibly, as Sabino Chialà suggested, because of his radical teaching on God’s mercy²⁰.

Although Isaac’s writing activity took place only a few years after the fall of the Sasanian Empire (651) and the beginning of Muslim rule over that area

¹⁵ In order to achieve his goal, George summoned a synod in 676 (synod of Dayrin), whose canons can be read in the *Synodicon Orientale*: see J.B. Chabot (ed.), *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens*, Paris, 1902, 215-226 (Syr.); 480-490 (FT). For an analysis of these events and of the East-Syriac Church in the 7th century, see Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 27-33.

¹⁶ On Beth ‘Abe, see J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, I, Beyrouth, 1965, 236-248.

¹⁷ Chabot, *Livre de la chasteté*, 63 (Syr.); 53 (FT).

¹⁸ Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca*, 33 (Syr.); 32 (LT).

¹⁹ See S. Brock, “St Isaac the Syrian: From Tehran to Iviron” in *Friends of Mount Athos: Annual Report 2014*, Milton, Banbury, 2014, 35-44, 36.

²⁰ See Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 59-63.

following three decades of political instability, he never mentions these events in his writings, nor refers to any other political or ecclesiastical events²¹.

Isaac wrote for solitaries, who shared, in different forms and measures, his own way of life²². In his *corpus*, we find letters, questions and answers, and Isaac often addresses his reader/s as ‘brother/s’, or ‘beloved’. When we speak of solitaries, or hermits, however, in Isaac’s context, we do not generally speak of monks living in complete physical detachment from human relationships. Isaac contemplates this possibility but, generally, the solitude he describes involves a certain amount of human contact – with an elder who guides the solitary, but also with others who share the same way of life²³. In our terms, this life might be described as semi-eremitical, involving a previous formation in communal life (Isaac often refers to this stage in his *corpus*), a gradual entrance into solitude, and connections to the main community for liturgical celebration, even when one lives alone in the cell. The form of monastic life distinctive of Abraham of Kaškar’s reform²⁴ should be kept in the background when imagining Isaac’s audience, while Dadišo’s treatise *On Stillness*²⁵ also provides a good point of reference²⁶.

I.2.2. WRITINGS

According to the sources mentioned above, Isaac wrote “five” or “seven” volumes. Today, however, we have only three ‘parts’ (ܩܘܬܒܐ, ‘part’) or

²¹ For a description of the political and ecclesiastical situation in Isaac’s time, see P. Bettiolo, “Historia salutis, desiderium unitatis e chiesa in Isacco di Ninive”, *Cristianesimo nella storia* 37.2 (2016), 273-322.

²² For Isaac’s monastic context, see Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 48-50.

²³ See Chapter III.

²⁴ See Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar*, 65-74.

²⁵ See A. Mingana (ed.), *Woodbrooke Studies Vol. 7: Early Christian Mystics*, Cambridge, 1934, 201-247 (Syr.); 76-147 (ET); F. Del Río Sánchez (ed.), *Los cinco tratados sobre la quietud (šelyā) de Dādišō ‘Qatrāyā*, Aula Orientalis Supplementa 18, Barcelona, 2001.

²⁶ Dadišo describes the practice of retiring in solitude for seven weeks, and then coming back to a life which implied more communal aspects. However, he also often refers to the different forms of monastic life and provides a description of this life in his days and *milieu*.

‘collections’, which can be attributed with certainty to Isaac²⁷. Two discourses from a *Fifth Part* do not appear to be genuine²⁸. This study is based on the three ‘parts’ about whose authenticity there is scholarly consensus. They have been examined both in critical editions and, in the case of the hitherto unedited texts, through the study of the main manuscript witness, Oxford Bodleian syr. e 7.

The *First Part* of Isaac, edited by Paul Bedjan and published in 1909²⁹, includes 82 discourses. It is based on eight manuscripts (the oldest of which are the East-Syriac 10th century BL Add. 14632³⁰ and the 11th-12th century BL Add 14633³¹), although complete new manuscripts, recently listed by Gregory Kessel (who also provided a table of the extant manuscripts of all Isaac’s works³²), emerged after Bedjan edited the text³³, so we have 20 manuscripts in total today, plus treatises and fragments from miscellanies³⁴. This ‘collection’ is the only collection of Isaac’s writings to have been translated into Greek, by Patrikios and Abramios, two monks from the Chalcedonian monastery of Saint Saba (in the Judean desert, near Jerusalem), in the late 8th-early 9th centuries³⁵. This Greek version is a rare example of a translation from Syriac into Greek in the early Arab period³⁶, and it is from this Greek version (or translations from it) that Isaac,

²⁷ A few discourses are duplicates: I 54-55 = II 16-17; I 22-40 = III 14-15; II 25 = III 17.

²⁸ See below. It should also be added that the division adopted by ‘Abdišo’ and Rahmani’s notice might not correspond to the division adopted by the manuscript tradition. There are also some spurious works attributed to Isaac: see Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 73-77.

²⁹ P. Bedjan (ed.), *Mar Isaacus Ninivita De Perfectione Religiosa*, Leipzig, 1909.

³⁰ W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired since the Year 1838*, II, London, 1871, no. 695, 576-581.

³¹ Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 694, 569-576.

³² See G. Kessel, “The Manuscript Heritage of Isaac of Nineveh: A Survey of Syriac Manuscripts”, in *The Syriac Writers of Qatar*, 71-92.

³³ The oldest are Vat. Sir. 367 (8th-9th century, East-Syriac), see A. Mai, *Scriptorum veterum nova collection e vaticanis codicibus edita. Tomus 5*, Rome, 1831, 42; and Sinai syr. 24 (8th-9th century, Melkite), see A.S. Lewis, *Catalogue of the Syriac Mss. in the Convent of Saint Catharine on Mount Sinai*, London, 1894, no. 24, 41.

³⁴ See Kessel, “The Manuscript Heritage”, 72-80.

³⁵ See S. Brock, “Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba: The Translation of St. Isaac the Syrian”, in J. Patrich (ed.) *The Sabaitic Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 98, Louvain, 2001, 201-208.

³⁶ See S. Brock, “Syriac into Greek”, 201-202.

crossing geographical, cultural, and dogmatic boundaries, as Brock remarked³⁷, was translated into the majority of the languages of ancient Christianity³⁸. Even in our age, the Greek version provided the basis for translations into modern languages³⁹.

From this translation, which was edited by Nikiphoros Theotokis in 1770⁴⁰, 14 discourses are lacking, others are combined, and one also finds five texts which are not by Isaac: four homilies by John of Dalyatha, and a letter by Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523)⁴¹. This Greek version, which has been recently re-edited according to modern scientific criteria by M. Pirard⁴², has been enormously influential within the Orthodox tradition, which considers Isaac one of the most revered teachers on the inner life. Although not included in the *Philokalia* of Macarius of Corinth and Nikodimos Aghioritis (1782)⁴³, possibly because Theotokis' edition had only

³⁷ See S. 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. Atti del simposio "Testi e Temi nella Tradizione del Monachesimo Cristiano" per il 50° anniversario dell'Istituto Monastico Sant'Anselmo; Roma, 28 maggio – 1° giugno 2002*, Studia Anselmiana 140, Analecta Monastica 8, Rome, 2004, 221-238. This phenomenon occurred within the Syriac tradition itself, so that one finds manuscripts of Isaac's works (not exclusively of the *First Part*) of Syrian Orthodox and Melkite provenance: see S. Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian). "The Second Part", Chapters IV–XLI*, CSCO 554-555, Scr. Syri 224-225, Louvain, 1995, CSCO 555, xvi-xvii; CSCO 554, xxxi; *Id.*, "Crossing the boundaries", 222-223; 225; *Id.*, "From Tehran to Iviron", 36-37; G. Kessel, "New Manuscript Witnesses to the 'Second Part' of Isaac of Nineveh", *Studia Patristica* 64.12 (2013), 245-257; *Id.*, "The Manuscript Heritage", 80-84.

³⁸ See Brock, "Syriac into Greek", 207; *Id.*, "Crossing the boundaries", 223; *Id.*, "From Qatar to Tokyo, by Way of Mar Saba: The Translations of Isaac of Beth Qatraye (Isaac the Syrian)", *ARAM* 12 (1999-2000), 475-484; on all the versions of Isaac's works, see Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, 325-362.

³⁹ See Brock, "From Qatar to Tokyo", 479-480; *Id.*, "Syriac into Greek", 208; Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, 363-364.

⁴⁰ N. Theotokis (ed.), *Τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἰσαὰκ ἐπισκόπου Νινευῖ τοῦ Σύρου, τὰ εὐρεθέντα Ἀσκητικά*, Leipzig, 1770 [reprint: I. Spetsieris, 1895].

⁴¹ See Brock, "Crossing the Boundaries", 226; *Id.*, "Syriac into Greek", 204-205.

⁴² M. Pirard (ed.), *Ἀββᾶ Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ Σύρου, Λόγοι Ἀσκητικοί*. Κρητική ἔκδοσι, Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Ἰβήρων, Ἁγίου Ὁροῦ, 2012. See M. Pirard, "Critical Edition of the Greek Version of 'The Ascetic Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian' (Monastery of Iviron, 2012)", 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, 2015, 51-57. M. Pirard – B. Kindt Cental, *Concordance of the Greek Version of the Ascetical Homilies by Isaac of Nineveh*, Concordances of the GREgORI Project 1/2, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2015.

⁴³ Macarius of Corinth and Nikodimos Aghioritis (eds.), *Φιλοκαλία τῶν ἱερῶν νηπτικῶν*, Venice: A. Bortoli, 1782.

recently been published⁴⁴, Isaac is included in the Russian *Philokalia* of Theophane the Recluse (1884)⁴⁵.

As an appendix to his 1909 edition, Bedjan published extracts from what became known as Isaac's *Second Part*⁴⁶. Bedjan edited these texts on the basis of a manuscript from the Urmia region (current Iran), and also mentions another fragmentary manuscript (Bibliothèque nationale de France syr. 298, 9th century⁴⁷), thereby attesting to the existence of a 'Second Part'. The Urmia manuscript was unfortunately lost, during World War I. However, in 1983, Sebastian Brock discovered, in the Bodleian Library (Oxford), a Syriac manuscript, syr. e 7, containing the whole *Second Part* of Isaac, which includes 41 discourses⁴⁸. This manuscript, dated by Brock to the 10th-11th centuries, is almost complete, and it formed the basis of his edition of chapters 4-41⁴⁹, which also considers other incomplete witnesses⁵⁰. Brock provided an English translation of chapters 4-41, as well as the first two discourses⁵¹, and Paolo Bettiolo and collaborators are in the course of editing these and the third section. The third section is particularly significant, consisting as it does of Isaac's four Centuries (ܟܦܠܐܝܐ, i.e. *kephalaia*) of

⁴⁴ Brock, "Syriac into Greek", 207.

⁴⁵ Theophane (ed.), Добролюбъе, II, Moscow, 1884. It was also more recently included in the Romanian *Philokalia* of Dumitru Stăniloae, who devotes to Isaac the entire tenth volume: D. Stăniloae (ed.), *Filocalia, sau culegere din scrierile sfinților părinți care arată sum se poate omul curăți lumina și desăvârși, X. Sfântul Isaac Sirul, Cuvinte despre sfintele nevoințe*, Bucharest, 1981. As an introduction to the theme of Isaac in the different *Philokalia*'s editions, see Chială, *Dall'ascesi*, 349-350.

⁴⁶ On pp. 582-600. See S. Brock, "Lost and Found: Part II of the Works of St. Isaac of Nineveh", *Studia Patristica* 18.4 (1990), 230-233, 231.

⁴⁷ J.-B. Chabot, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale acquis depuis 1874 (No. 289-334)", *Journal Asiatique* IX. 8 (1896), no. 298, 242-245.

⁴⁸ See Brock, "Lost and Found"; *Id.*, "Isaac of Nineveh: Some Newly Discovered Texts", *Sobornost* 8.1 (1986), 28-33.

⁴⁹ S. Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*.

⁵⁰ For a list, see Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 555, xiii. For a description, see *Id.*, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 554, xii-xxxv.

⁵¹ S. Brock, "St Isaac the Syrian: Two Unpublished Texts", *Sobornost* 19 (1997), 7-33.

Knowledge. These are his highest speculative writings, consisting of brief chapters written under the inspiration of Evagrius' work, the *Kephalaia Gnostika*⁵².

Recently, Gregory Kessel pointed out the existence of three new witnesses to the *Second Part*⁵³, including an important manuscript of East-Syriac provenance now in Cambridge University Library (Oriental 1144)⁵⁴, which proved to belong to the same codex of the Paris manuscript mentioned by Bedjan⁵⁵. This codex has not been used in this study, but is of great importance for any future critical study of Isaac's manuscript heritage.

In late 1980s or early 1990s Michael von Esbroeck, during a visit to Tehran, was able to photograph several manuscripts in the library of the Chaldaean Bishop Mar Issayi. Among these, a manuscript with a copy of a 'Third Part' of Isaac was found⁵⁶. On the basis of this manuscript (Issayi 5, copied between 1900 and 1903), Sabino Chialà produced a critical edition of the *Third Part* in 2011⁵⁷. The *Third Part*, consisting of 17 discourses⁵⁸, includes a metric discourse which does not appear to be by Isaac (III 10)⁵⁹, and one discourse, III 11, that might give rise to doubts⁶⁰. Overall, however, Chialà's opinion that the work derives from Isaac has been persuasive, because of both the themes discussed and the language used.

⁵² The writing of 'Centuries' was common also among other East-Syriac writers on the spiritual life.

⁵³ See Kessel, "New Manuscript Witnesses", 245-257.

⁵⁴ J.F. Coakley, *A Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in Cambridge University Library*, Cambridge, 2018, 62-64.

⁵⁵ Kessel, "New Manuscript Witnesses", 251-252.

⁵⁶ Brock, "From Tehran to Iviron", 41. For a description of this manuscript, see Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 554, xxxi-xxxii; S. Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive. Terza Collezione*, CSCO 637-638, Scr. Syri 246-247, Leuven, 2011, CSCO 637, viii-xviii. For other partial witnesses, see pp. xviii-xxvii.

⁵⁷ S. Chialà (ed.), *Isacco di Ninive*.

⁵⁸ For duplicated discourses, see footnote 27.

⁵⁹ See Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, xix-xxiv; the discourse is attributed to Ephrem in certain manuscripts. For a description of all of the discourses, see xiv-xxiv.

⁶⁰ See Bettolo, "Historia salutis", 317-318. Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, xix; P. Hagman, "St. Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians", in M. Tamcke (ed.), *Mystik-Metapher-Bild. Beiträge des VII. Makarios-Symposiums, Göttingen 2007*, Göttingen, 2008, 55-66, footnote 36, 64-65.

Chialà recently published two discourses drawn from what the manuscript tradition refers to as the ‘Fifth Part’ of Isaac⁶¹. They are very different from the rest of Isaac’s *corpus* (consisting mainly of Biblical quotations), as the editor himself remarks⁶² and, at first sight, it seems that, although the themes treated might be connected to Isaac’s thought (particularly the idea that both good and evil come from God, an issue which this study also explores), the style and the method of argumentation is quite different from Isaac’s. So these discourses have not been used in this study.

Two new fragments have also recently been translated, due to Brock’s efforts. They seem close to Isaac’s language and thought, but a few doubts remain⁶³. Therefore, this material was also excluded from this study.

Isaac’s *corpus* does not provide internal elements for dating the material or for tracking the evolution of his thought. If the *Second* and *Third Part* seem to offer more systematic discourses, the themes treated are also present in the *First Part*.

A last remark on Isaac’s thought and writings concerns his sources. As Beulay demonstrated in his *La lumière sans forme*, the 7th-8th century East-Syriac writers on the inner life were strongly influenced by a set of common sources:

⁶¹ S. Chialà, “Due discorsi ritrovati della Quinta parte di Isacco di Ninive?”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 79.1 (2013), 61-112.

⁶² S. Chialà, “Two Discourses of the ‘Fifth Part’ of Isaac the Syrian’s Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?”, in *The Syriac Writers of Qatar*, 123-131, 127-128.

⁶³ See S. Brock, “Four Excerpts from Isaac of Nineveh in Codex Syriacus Secundus”, *Parole de l’Orient* 41 (2015), 101-114. The manuscript is a Melkite: see K. W. Hiersemann, *Katalog 500*, Leipzig, 1922, no. 3, 6-7.

Evagrius⁶⁴, the Pseudo-Macarian *corpus*⁶⁵, John the Solitary⁶⁶, Gregory of Nyssa⁶⁷, the Pseudo-Dionysius⁶⁸, and ‘Nestorian’⁶⁹ theology. Apart from Gregory of Nyssa,

⁶⁴ Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), disciple of the Cappadocians and later of Macarius the Egyptian and Macarius the Alexandrian, wrote extensively on *askesis* and the spiritual life. He wrote in Greek, and was soon translated into Syriac, becoming an essential reference for this tradition. Due to the Fifth Ecumenical Council’s condemnation of (a supposed form of) Origenism in 553, many of Evagrius’ works in Greek were lost, while others survived under different names, so that his thought continued to influence the Byzantine tradition. In Syriac, also, his more speculative works survived under his name (especially the two versions of his *Kephalaia Gnostika*). The literature on (and by) Evagrius is particularly vast and, due to the efforts of Antoine Guillaumont, Gabriel Bunge, and other scholars, the interest in his thought has increased in the last few decades. For a detailed bibliography, see <http://evagriusponticus.net>, by Joel Kalvesmaki. On his influence on the Syriac tradition, see the classic A. Guillaumont, *Les “Képhalaia Gnostika” d’Évagre le Pontique et l’histoire de l’Origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens*, Patristica Sorboniensia 5, Paris, 1962. For a brief overview of the literature and issues related to Evagrius’ influence on Syriac spiritual writers, see A. Camplani – E. Fiori, “Origen and Evagrius in Syriac Culture: History, Doctrine, and Texts”, in *Adamantius* 15 (2009), 6-8; also see S. Brock, “Discerning the Evagrian in the writings of Isaac of Nineveh: a preliminary investigation”, *Adamantius* 15 (2009), 60-72; S. Chialà, “Evagrio il Pontico negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive”, *Adamantius* 15 (2009), 73-84; P. Géhin, “La dette d’Isaac de Ninive envers Évagre le Pontique”, *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 119 (2010), 40-52.

⁶⁵ ‘Pseudo-Macarius’ is an anonymous spiritual writer from Mesopotamia or Asia Minor (late 4th/early 5th century). His Greek *corpus* of writings, which greatly influenced both Eastern and Western Christian spirituality, was generally attributed to the Egyptian monk Macarius the Great, the 4th century founder of the monastic settlement of Scetis. For an introduction to Pseudo-Macarius, see V. Desprez, “Macaire”, *DS* 10, cols. 20-27; 39-43; M. Canévet, “Macaire”, *DS* 10, cols. 27-38. Macarius the Great’s authorship was rejected by modern scholars after Villecourt listed similarities between the Pseudo-Macarian writings and condemned Messalian passages: see L. Villecourt, “La date et l’origine des ‘Homélies spirituelles’ attribuées à Macaire”, *Comptes-rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 64.3 (1920), 250-258. For the relationships between these writings and Messalianism, see Desprez, “Macaire”, *DS* 10, cols. 23-25, 27; H. Dörries, *Symeon von Mesopotamien. Die Überlieferung der messalianischen “Makarion”-Schriften*, TU 55.1, Leipzig, 1941; C. Stewart, “Working the Earth of the Heart”. *The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford, 1991. ‘Macarius’ wrote in Greek and, about a century later, some of his writings were circulating in a Syriac translation, which influenced all 7th and 8th century East Syriac writers on the inner life: see Beulay, *La lumière*, 35-94. Although based on the Greek, the Syriac version differs from the original Greek version, and includes not only writings of Pseudo-Macarius, but also writings of other provenance. This study will generally avoid the use of the term ‘Pseudo-Macarius’ and other possible designations in favour of simply ‘Macarius’, to point to the Syriac *corpus* as a unit.

⁶⁶ For an introduction to John, a 5th century Syriac writer who profoundly influenced the Syriac spiritual tradition, 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)*, OCA 221, Rome, 1983, 299-305; P. Harb, “Doctrine spirituelle de Jean le Solitaire (Jean d’Apamée)”, *Parole de l’Orient* 2 (1971), 225-260; B. Bradley, “Jean le Solitaire (d’Apamée)”, *DS* 8, cols. 764-772; 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), fondateur et directeur de L’Orient Syrien, 1956–1967*, Louvain, 1969, 157-173; Chialà, *Dall’asceti*, 109-113; J. Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh’s Ascetical Eschatology*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford, 2017, 48-51; for John’s tripartite scheme of the spiritual life, see S. Brock, “Some Paths to Perfection in the Syriac Fathers”, *Studia Patristica* 51 (2011), 77-94, where it is contrasted with the bipartite scheme of the *Liber Graduum*.

⁶⁷ ca. 335-395

⁶⁸ Fl. ca. 500.

⁶⁹ i.e. of the Church of the East. The dissatisfactory nature of this term was pointed out in S. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78.3 (1996), 23-35.

who did not have a direct influence on Isaac (who mentions Basil, however), all of the other authors were important references for him: he did not write in a vacuum. To these writings, others should also be added: the *Apophthegmata* and, more generally, the literature included in ‘Enanišo’s *Book of Paradise* (commissioned by the catholicos George, who also ordained Isaac a bishop, and including the *Lausiac History*⁷⁰), Mark the Monk⁷¹, Abba Isaiah⁷² (besides early Syriac literature, such as Ephrem), and Paul of Tarsus. Scholars have begun to explore these writings’ role in Isaac’s thought, and this will definitely prove fruitful for the future.

I.3. SECONDARY LITERATURE

The theme of suffering, finitude, and ‘weakness’ in Isaac, which is the object of this study, has been only marginally touched upon by scholars, so this thesis marks the first attempt to examine these issues in depth. Nevertheless, several studies have alluded to the presence and value of these themes in Isaac. These studies, which played an important role in stimulating this research, are mentioned in this section and also throughout this study.

After Brock’s discovery of the *Second Part*, growing attention to Isaac’s *corpus* developed. This led to the publication of two comprehensive studies on Isaac, several new translations of his works⁷³ (previously known in the English-speaking world only in the translation by the Dutch scholar Wensinck, based on Bedjan’s

⁷⁰ Besides the *History of the Monks in Egypt*.

⁷¹ Greek monastic writer (early 5th century?).

⁷² Greek monastic writer of uncertain identity (5th century); author of the *Asceticon* (CPG 5555).

⁷³ Among Isaac’s translations: [D. Miller], *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Boston, 1984 (ET, *First Part*, based on Greek with reference to the Syriac; revised reprint: 2011); P. Bettiolo, *Isacco di Ninive. Discorsi spirituali: Capitoli sulla conoscenza, Preghiere, Contemplazione sull’argomento della Gehenna, altri opuscoli*, Magnano, 1985 (IT, *Second Part*, *Centuries* and other treatises; reprint: 1990); G. Kessel, “Isaac of Nineveh’s Chapters on Knowledge”, in M. Kozah – A. Abu-Husayn – S.S. Al-Murikhi – H. Al Thani, *An Anthology of Syriac Writers from Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 39, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2015, 253-280 (ET, *Second Part*, selection of *Centuries*); M. Hansbury, “Isaac the Syrian: The Third Part”, in *An Anthology of Syriac Writers*, 281-440 [ET, *Third Part*].

edition of the *First Part*⁷⁴), a remarkable number of articles, and three monographs devoted to particular aspects of Isaac's thought⁷⁵. These advanced the study of Isaac, that Bedjan's edition and the studies of Hausherr⁷⁶, Khalifé-Hachem⁷⁷, and Brock⁷⁸ had already helped to bring to academic attention. Among these early studies, Hausherr's "Les Orientaux connaissent-ils les 'nuits' de saint Jean de la Croix?" identified the importance of the theme of suffering in Isaac⁷⁹.

Two comprehensive studies on Isaac appeared in the early 2000s. Hilarion Alfeyev's *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*⁸⁰ is a thematic introduction to Isaac's world, based on the *First* and *Second Part*. This study is rich in quotations, and introduces the theme of 'abandonment', that this thesis examines in Chapter V. Sabino Chialà's *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita*⁸¹ (2002) is also devoted to exploring Isaac's major themes, and pays particular attention to Isaac's sources, manuscript tradition, and posterity. In his study, Chialà examines several limitations that the ascetic encounters on his/her journey, among which the author

⁷⁴ A.J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Amsterdam, 1923.

⁷⁵ This brief overview of the secondary literature does not aim to be comprehensive. Unfortunately, given my extremely poor knowledge of German and complete ignorance of Russian, Modern Greek, and Arabic, studies written in these languages were (almost) not incorporated into this research. Other studies not listed here have been mentioned in the course of this thesis, where necessary. For a complete list of the publications on Isaac and translations of his works, see the classic bibliography Kessel – Pinggéra, *A Bibliography*; Kessel, "Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature". See also Sergey Minov's online *A Comprehensive Bibliography on Syriac Christianity* (<http://www.csc.org.il/db/db.aspx?db=SB>).

⁷⁶ I. Hausherr, "Un précurseur de la théorie scotiste sur la fin de l'Incarnation: Isaac de Ninive (VII^e siècle)", *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 22 (1932), 316-320; *Id.*, "Par delà l'oraison pure, grâce à une coquille. A propos d'un texte d'Evagre", *RAM* 13 (1932), 184-188; *Id.*, "Les Orientaux connaissent-ils les 'nuits' de saint Jean de la Croix?", *OCP* 12 (1946), 5-46 (republished in *Id.*, *Hésychasme et prière*, OCA 176, Rome, 1966, 87-128).

⁷⁷ É. Khalifé-Hachem, "La prière"; *Id.*, "Isaac de Ninive", in *DS* 7.2, cols. 2041-2054; *Id.*, "L'âme et les passions des hommes d'après un texte d'Isaac de Ninive", *Parole de l'Orient* 12 (1984-1985), 201-218.

⁷⁸ S. Brock, "St. Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac Spirituality", *Sobornost* 7.2 (1975), 79-89; *Id.*, "Secundus the Silent Philosopher: Some Notes on the Syriac Tradition", *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 121 (1978), 94-100.; *Id.*, "St Isaac of Nineveh", *The Way* (1981), 68-74; *Id.*, "The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition", *Sobornost* 4.2 (1982), 131-142.

⁷⁹ See Chapter III.

⁸⁰ H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series 175, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2000.

⁸¹ Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*.

mentions ‘weakness’. Both Alfeyev and Chialà’s studies were important sources at the beginning of this research⁸².

Three monographs devoted to specific aspects of Isaac’s thought were published recently. They do not deal with the themes of suffering and ‘weakness’, but should be mentioned here because they represent a new stage in the research on Isaac, devoted to exploring specific themes within his thought. The first of these monographs to appear was Patrik Hagman’s *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*⁸³, that examines Isaac’s view of the ascetic life. The approach of this work is remarkably distant from that adopted in this study, since it reads Isaac in a close dialogue with modern interpretations of asceticism (mostly read as ‘ascetic techniques’) and suggests (as Hagman also does in his articles⁸⁴) a reading of the ascetic life as a radical criticism of ‘society’ and as an inspiration for political theology. Nevertheless, Hagman’s attention to existential questions (the issue of fear, especially) represent an important attempt to connect Isaac’s thought to questions of wider scholarly and human significance.

Nestor Kavvadas’ *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika*⁸⁵ is a systematic study of the theme of knowledge in Isaac and his pneumatology, based (albeit not exclusively) on his unedited *Centuries of Knowledge*. The author pays particular attention to the difference between mediated knowledge and immediate knowledge, i.e. the knowledge that is a gift of the Holy Spirit, radically other than all that belongs to this world. This study highlights particularly Isaac’s debt to

⁸² For a general introduction to Isaac, also see S. Brock, “Isaac the Syrian”, in C.G. Conticello (ed.), *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition. Tome I/1*, Turnhout, 2015, 327-372.

⁸³ P. Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford, 2010.

⁸⁴ P. Hagman, “Asceticism and Empire: Asceticism as Body-politics in Isaac of Nineveh and Hardt & Negri”, *Studia Theologica* 65.1 (2011), 39-53; *Id.*, “Asceticism as Political Theology: The Ascetic as Sacrament in St Isaac of Nineveh”, in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 259-269.

⁸⁵ N. Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika: Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 128, Leiden/Boston, 2015.

Theodore of Mopsuestia, a theme that Kavvadas also examines in his articles⁸⁶, and is a serious theological exploration of Isaac's thought.

Jason Scully's *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology*⁸⁷ analyses several of Isaac's essential sources (Evagrius, Theodore via Narsai, John the Solitary, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Pseudo-Macarius) in order to understand Isaac's eschatological view and his understanding of the transformations of the mind which encounters God. The study pays particular attention to Isaac's Syriac sources, that have received insufficient attention hitherto, especially John the Solitary, whose thought profoundly influenced Isaac.

A last study recently appeared⁸⁸, that unfortunately I had no opportunity to read in its post-doctoral form. It is the fruit of the doctoral research of Valentin Vesa⁸⁹, that examines Isaac's understanding of knowledge from a theological and historical perspective.

In addition to these monographs, several articles have appeared during the last few decades. Many of these explored Isaac's manuscript heritage and sources⁹⁰, while others focussed on specific themes, such as prayer and silence (especially Bitton-Ashkelony's "The Limit of the Mind"⁹¹, where creatural limitation in prayer

⁸⁶ See especially N. Kavvadas, "Some Observations on the Theological Anthropology of Isaac of Nineveh and its Sources", *Scrinium* 4 (2008), 147-157; *Id.*, "Theodore of Mopsuestia as a Source of Isaac of Nineveh's Pneumatology", *Parole de l'Orient* 35 (2010), 393-405.; *Id.*, "On the Relations between the Eschatological Doctrine of Isaac of Nineveh and Theodore of Mopsuestia", *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010), 245-250.

⁸⁷ Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*.

⁸⁸ V. Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St. Isaac of Nineveh*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 51, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2018.

⁸⁹ V. Vesa, *The Doctrine of Knowledge in Isaac of Nineveh and the East Syriac Theology of the 7-8th Century*. Università degli Studi di Padova, 2015 [PhD thesis].

⁹⁰ See above.

⁹¹ B. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (ΝΟΥΣ): Pure Prayer according to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity* 15.2 (2011), 291-321.

is discussed)⁹², repentance and tears (especially Hunt’s explorations of mourning)⁹³, and love and radical mercy (especially Brock’s contributions⁹⁴, Chialà’s articles⁹⁵, and Louf’s suggestions⁹⁶)⁹⁷. Louf’s allusions to the theme of ‘weakness’ in Isaac, and to its connection to the theme of humility, although never explored systematically by the author, should also be mentioned here, as the first attempt to discuss these issues in Isaac⁹⁸. Salvestroni’s remarks on the role of Isaac in Dostoevsky’s thought also deserve attention, because they show that the issue of suffering and ‘weakness’ was essential in stimulating Dostoevsky’s interest in

⁹² É. Khalifé-Hachem, “La prière”; H. Alfeyev, “Prayer in St Isaac of Nineveh”, in P. Allen – R. Canning – L. Cross (eds.), *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, Brisbane, 1998, 61-79; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, “Theories of Prayer in Late Antiquity: Doubts and Practices from Maximus of Tyre to Isaac of Nineveh”, in B. Bitton-Ashkelony and D. Krueger (eds.), *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries*, London/New York, 2017, 10-33; *Ead.*, “‘Reduced to a state of silence’: Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyatha on Self-transformation”, in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 169-180; S. Chialà, “Prayer and the Body according to Isaac of Nineveh”, in *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities*, 34-43; *Id.*, “L’importance du corps dans la prière, selon l’enseignement d’Isaac de Ninive”, *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 119 (2010), 30-39; S. Brock, “Psalmody and Prayer in Isaac the Syrian”, in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 29-37.

⁹³ H. Hunt, “The Soul’s Sorrow in Syrian Patristic Thought”, *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997), 530-533; *Ead.*, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*, The Medieval Mediterranean 57, Leiden/Boston, 2004, 129-168; *Ead.*, “The Monk as Mourner: Isaac the Syrian and Monastic Identity in the Seventh Century and Beyond”, in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 147-154; D.A. Lichter, “Tears and Contemplation in Isaac of Nineveh”, *Diakonia* 11 (1976), 239-258; P.T. Mascia, “The Gift of Tears in Isaac of Nineveh”, *Diakonia* 14 (1979), 255-265; G. Panicker, “Prayer With Tears: A Great Feast of Repentance”, *The Harp* 4 (1991), 111-133; D. T. Bradford, “Mystical Process in Isaac the Syrian. Tears, Penthos, and the Physiology of Dispassion”, *Studies in Spirituality* 26 (2016), 59-104.

⁹⁴ 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*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca 38, Wiesbaden, 2011, 49-60; *Id.*, “Isacco il Siro: Giustizia e misericordia in Dio”, in L. D’Ayala Valva – L. Cremaschi – A. Mainardi, *Misericordia e perdono: Atti del XXIII Convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa, Bose, 9-12 settembre 2015*, Magnano, 2016, 169-190.

⁹⁵ S. Chialà, “Trois thèmes majeurs de l’enseignement d’Isaac de Ninive”, *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 69.4 (2007), 321-340; *Id.*, “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), 67-79.

⁹⁶ A. Louf, “Pourquoi Dieu se manifesta, selon Isaac le Syrien?”, *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 80 (2000), 37-56.

⁹⁷ W. Hryniewicz, “Universalism of Salvation: St. Isaac the Syrian”, in H. Gerny – H. Rein – M. Weyermann (eds.), *Die Wurzel aller Theologie: Sentire cum Ecclesia. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Urs von Arx*, Bern, 2003, 139-150.

⁹⁸ A. Louf, *Isaac le Syrien. Oeuvres Spirituelles-II*, Spiritualité orientale 81, Bégrolles en Mauges, 2003, 25-26; 33-34; 56-61.

Isaac⁹⁹. Brock's study of the theme of 'overshadowing'¹⁰⁰ was also essential for certain explorations of this thesis concerning the role of the Holy Spirit¹⁰¹.

Lastly, Bettiolo's many contributions to the study of Isaac and his sources deserve attention. Although the Italian scholar never discusses systematically the theme of 'weakness', suffering, and the creatural limited condition, a special focus on these themes shines through his articles. Creatural 'poverty' alone can receive the Mystery, for Isaac, he suggests in his "Povertà e conoscenza"¹⁰²; in his "Avec la charité comme but", he alludes to the value of 'humiliation' in relation to abiding in one's creatural state¹⁰³; and in "Prigionieri dello Spirito", he devotes attention to the distance separating creature/Creator¹⁰⁴. These are allusions and suggestions, but were fundamental for stimulating certain reflections found in this study.

I.4. QUESTIONS

Examining the theme of suffering in Isaac means standing at the crossroads between two foci of interest. On the one hand, it means examining his view of the human ontological condition, which is marked by passibility, mortality, and what he calls 'weakness'. On the other, it means looking at his understanding of the solitary life as the place in which one encounters this ontological problem, where a

⁹⁹ S. Salvestroni, "Isaac of Nineveh and Dostoyevsky's Work", in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 249-258. This article is based on a previous publication, in Italian: *Ead.*, "Isacco il Siro e l'opera di Dostoevskij", *Studia Monastica* 44.1 (2002), 45-56.

¹⁰⁰ S. Brock, "Maggnānūtā: A Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background", in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont. Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux*, Cahiers d'Orientalisme 20, Genève, 1988, 121-129.

¹⁰¹ See Chapter IV and V.

¹⁰² P. Bettiolo, "Povertà e conoscenza. Appunti sulle Centurie gnostiche della tradizione evagriana in Siria", *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988-1989), 107-125, 123-124.

¹⁰³ P. Bettiolo, "'Avec la charité comme but': Dieu et création dans la méditation d'Isaac de Ninive", *Irénikon* 63.3 (1990), 323-345, 334.

¹⁰⁴ P. Bettiolo, "'Prigionieri dello Spirito'. Libertà creatural e eschaton in Isacco di Ninive e nelle sue fonti", *Annali di scienze religiose* 4 (1999), 343-363 [reprinted in S. Gasparri (ed.), *Alto medioevo mediterraneo*, Firenze: University Press, 2005, 15-40].

process of relationship with it occurs, and from where a new way of dealing with it can be born.

The interconnection between these two themes within Isaac's thought gives rise to several essential questions, which this study addresses: 1) What is the ontological condition of human beings, according to Isaac? 2) What is the meaning of the ascetic choice, in light of this condition? 3) What is the role of negative states and experiences in awakening the subject to the quest for interiority and for God? 4) How does Isaac understand this God, in relation to the ontological problem of suffering that leads the creature to search for him? 5) How does the creature pass through suffering, difficulties, and negation, which are essential factors of the solitary life? 6) How does one remain whole, during these? 7) What meaning does faith assume for the creature who knows suffering and negation in his/her concrete existence? 8) Can suffering be transformative and, if so, how?

Each chapter of this thesis attempts to answer some of these questions.

In Chapter II, the ontological condition of the human being is analysed, together with the origin of the solitary choice. What is the world, and what is the human being, who experiences suffering? What is the relationship between body and soul, which for Isaac are both radically limited and creatural in nature? How does he interpret passibility, mortality, and sin, in relation to this limited condition? Why does one abandon life in 'the world' in order to enter the solitary life? What role does becoming aware of one's ontological condition of vulnerability play in this choice, that Isaac reads as a search for consolation and life? Exactly what does Isaac mean when he speaks of 'weakness', a pervasive theme within his *corpus*, that alludes to human exposure to suffering of the body and soul?

Chapter III examines the role of suffering in the solitary life. Why, if the choice of looking for God means seeking consolation of suffering, does the solitary

life imply the encountering of various forms of suffering? What does Isaac's conviction that God 'desires' his creature to encounter suffering mean, and how is it possible to relate the suffering of the solitary life with that of every human creature? If Isaac suggests that the solitary life is a transformative process, what does this imply? If this transformation involves contact with suffering and one's original vulnerability, can we speak of the way of the solitary as an attempt to learn to be in a relationship with these? Lastly, if this is true, what is the role of the suffering human being in this process?

Chapter IV is devoted to Isaac's understanding of *askesis*, or 'practice'. Isaac never openly states that the ascetic path aims to discover a relationship with one's vulnerability. He speaks, instead, of a quest for purification from the passions, of a path of crucifixion/mortification, and of a way leading to contemplation. How should we interpret these concepts, relating them to the quest for a relationship with suffering which seems so essential for Isaac? In order to understand this, the role of the subject in *askesis* is analysed; the close interconnections between contemplation and finding the meaning of one's path are explored; and 'integrity', a term that, in this study, designates a condition of deep rootedness in oneself, which is the threshold to contemplation, is examined. What does finding 'integrity' imply? Isaac suggests that *askesis* is a profound encounter with limitations and the negation of oneself: can we regard 'integrity' as the fruit of a process of relationship with these? If this is possible, can we conceive of *askesis* as the way through which the capacity to be in relationship with one's ontological 'weakness' is forged?

Chapter V explores this hypothesis further. First of all, it examines 'weakness', that Isaac describes as the condition distinctive of being a human, which contact with limitations and negation reveals. How does the creature react when he/she encounters 'weakness'? Isaac suggests that one can flee it, through the

passions. What is pride, then, the worst of all passionate flights? What is humility, if pride is a flight from encountering ‘weakness’? How can one be in a relationship with ‘weakness’? How can one sustain contact with one’s suffering self, without negating the real weight of this contact? What does Isaac mean when he speaks of ‘bearing’ suffering? Is it merely a matter of resignation and endurance? Or can we regard this, as this study suggests, as the most profound transformative experience of the creature, which can lead him/her to ‘integrity’? If this is true, can we speak of humility as a profound, accomplished relational capacity, capable of being in a relationship with all of the forms of negativity that the creature encounters?

Chapter VI examines a specific form of suffering, that of a possible loss of faith, in light of the themes that emerged in Chapter V. How can one be in a relationship with this extreme form of suffering? What is Isaac’s understanding of faith? What is its relationship with trust? In this light, who and what is Isaac’s God? Can the creature’s attempt to ‘bear’ the absence of faith and trust be an act of faith and trust? If this interpretation is possible, what does this mean for our understanding of Isaac’s concept of faith? What is the role of the human being before God’s Mystery, which includes his possible absence? Can we relate the creature’s attitude within this form of suffering to something specifically Christian? Lastly, what emerges after this experience? Isaac is convinced that, by Grace, the encounter with God is mysteriously born from it. What is Grace, then, for the creature who has passed this difficult journey?

I.5. METHODOLOGY

As one can see from this set of questions, Isaac deals with themes which concern human existence and experience. In his writings, Isaac often speaks in the first person, or to the ‘you’ of his reader-disciple. When he discusses problems in a

less personal, more general way, Isaac also always relates these problems to either practices of life or the meaning of existence, and his wisdom aims at practically helping the reader-disciple to “sail” across “the rough sea of stillness”¹⁰⁵, as he describes the solitary life.

Although related to a different context and with different aims, Pierre Hadot’s observations concerning philosophy in Antiquity, to be conceived as ‘a way of life’¹⁰⁶, might be broadly applied to Isaac’s approach: the ascetic path is a way of life; the theology implied in Isaac’s writings is related to the human being who searches for consolation and meaning; and its aim is transformative. Isaac’s approach, moreover, is always attentive to the personal experience of the single human being, his own or his reader’s, which adds to his style of writing a warmer tone, far distant from mere doctrinal statements – even when he speaks, as he sometimes does, of doctrine. As the passages quoted in this study will demonstrate, Isaac is always attentive to individual, concrete experience, and this does not diminish the strength of his reasoning, but supports it.

Isaac, however, does not deal with the issue of ‘weakness’ and vulnerability systematically. He did not produce a methodical analysis of these themes, nor wrote theological treatises in which he discusses his position and ideas. This specific approach of Isaac led this study to make a continuous effort to connect, interpret, and bring to light ideas that are indeed intimately related, but that might not be immediately apparent from a superficial reading. This thesis approaches the questions and themes listed above by following a phenomenological and hermeneutical method, attentive to the existential meaning implied in Isaac’s

¹⁰⁵ See I 66 467.

¹⁰⁶ See P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Malden, MA/Oxford/Melbourne/Berlin, 1995.

reflections. This is an attempt to remain loyal to Isaac's own approach, as described above. These terms should not be read as pointing to the adoption of a specific philosophical perspective (such as that of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, or Gadamer, for instance). They simply aim, instead, to describe the approach adopted in this study as attentive to the subject's perspective and existence, as based on the analysis of the structures of experience that Isaac himself rigorously describes, and as focussing on the dynamics that, for him, one concretely experiences in the inner life. This study not only describes but also interprets these structures of experience and inner dynamics, in an attempt to show respect for Isaac's own approach, context, and goals. This is an aspect, in fact, of the attempt to be attentive to the perspective of the subject, that Isaac himself adopts.

Although Isaac is a Christian spiritual writer, whose works continue to be read in communities and monasteries around the world, across many Church traditions, this study does not embrace a confessional perspective, in the sense of adopting a point of view based on ecclesiastical belonging. If this work is theological, it is theological in the sense described above: it is an attempt to bring to light Isaac's perspective, which is a faith perspective, but a faith perspective that arises from problems that are born from experience and existence, and that are universal. It also aims to create a dialogue between this perspective and questions which concern, even today, experience and existence.

All of this implies attention to the question about God, and about the Christian God, because, for Isaac, this question concerns human existence and its meaning.

As a consequence of adopting this specific methodological approach, this study does not make use of the abundant literature on asceticism produced in recent years, which examines the ascetic phenomenon from a sociological,

anthropological, and historical perspective¹⁰⁷. This literature has not been ignored, when choosing how to approach Isaac's writings, just as the study of Isaac's historical context, theological tradition, and monastic *milieu* have also been taken into consideration. The main focus of this thesis, however, finally centres on the study of Isaac's own texts, read and translated from the original Syriac¹⁰⁸. It takes the form of focussing on Isaac alone, in an attempt to understand his thought in depth in a close dialogue with his original writings. At the end of each chapter, a brief synthesis of the themes examined is provided.

Comparative work is also present in this study. In order to understand Isaac's world and ideas, the writings of several of the authors who had a fundamental influence on him, or who belonged to the same *milieu* and epoch, have been read, both in translation and often in the original Syriac (and Greek). Among Isaac's Greek sources (that he read, with all probability, in Syriac, since we have no evidence, to date, that he knew Greek), particular attention has been paid to Evagrius, the *Apophthegmata*, the *Historia Lausiaca*, Mark the Monk, Abba Isaiah, and the Syriac Pseudo-Macarian *corpus*, together with the Letters of Paul of Tarsus. Among his Syriac sources, John the Solitary has been the obvious reference while, among his contemporaries, attention has been paid to Dadisho Qaṭraya and Simon of Ṭaybuteh, but also to 8th century writers – Joseph Ḥazzaya and John of Dalyatha. The main references found in this study, however, finally refer to Paul, Evagrius, John the Solitary, the *Historia Lausiaca*, and Pseudo-Macarius alone.

¹⁰⁷ The studies of Peter Brown are essential in this regard: see P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkley, 1982; *Id.*, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York, 1989; Foucault's study on what he calls 'technologies of the self' should also be mentioned here, although far distant from the approach adopted in this study: M. Foucault, *Technologies of the self: a seminar with Michel Foucault*, L.H. Martin – H. Gutman – P.H. Hutton (eds.), Amherst, 1988. For an introduction to several contemporary interpretations of asceticism, see Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 1-24.

¹⁰⁸ This, taking into account also translations in modern European languages.

This comparative work does not aim to be exhaustive, but merely signals the connection between certain core issues in Isaac and other authors, whose distinctive thought on these issues should be examined *per se*. This small comparative work aims to invite further research, both on Isaac and also on these other writers.

Often, the closeness of the themes examined here to issues of relevance in contemporary theological and psychological reflection has been noticed by readers of the draft of this thesis. These connections could not be explored in this context, nor am I competent to evaluate these suggestions. However, I was happy to discover that Isaac's insights might resonate far beyond the boundaries of Syriac literature and the study of the so-called mystical literature. I hope that this study might stimulate others to explore these connections further, which concern life and knowledge in the living space of the present.

CHAPTER II

THE CREATORIAL CONDITION AND THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

In this chapter, the human condition in the world and the problems it raises are analysed. The aim is to understand what Isaac means when he speaks of the 'human being' and the relationship of 'this human being' with suffering.

First, the chapter explores Isaac's view of the human condition, as an ontological condition, and how it is experienced before the decision to search for God. The creature emerges from this analysis as marked by structural limitations. Secondly, the chapter examines the choice of the solitary life and its meaning, in light of the issues that the ontological, creatorial condition poses.

The problem of suffering emerges as the main element of Isaac's phenomenology of the 'human', both as the ontological problem which lies at the root of human existence and as what urges the search for God in the solitary life. Isaac understands the ascetic quest as an attempt to answer this problem: it is not merely a series of techniques, but a close confrontation of the problem of oneself.

Regarding these issues, Isaac offers a specific interpretation which will now be explored.

II.1. THE WORLD

Isaac, who certainly acknowledges the beauty of creation¹⁰⁹, calls the world a "house of lamentation"¹¹⁰ and "prison"¹¹¹, and insists on a separation from it.

¹⁰⁹ On this theme, see S. Chialà, "Bellezza e pienezza di vita nell'insegnamento di Isacco il Siro", *Parola, spirito e vita: quaderni di lettura biblica* 45.1 (2002), 173-180.

¹¹⁰ I 79 543.

¹¹¹ I 14 125.

What is the reason for this insistence, which is so challenging for a contemporary reader?

‘World’ is a concept which is difficult to delimit in Isaac’s writings¹¹². However, it is a central concept, and it is essential to analyse it in order to understand the condition of the creature. ‘World’, in all its senses, means for Isaac a space of limitation and estrangement, because within it suffering is experienced. At the same time, ‘world’ is the original context of the creature’s existence. For this reason, the world can be questioned only after having been experienced, i.e. ‘suffered’.

Isaac uses the term *ܐܠܡܐ* (*‘ālmā*) in many senses, which are connected and overlap¹¹³:

- 1) ‘World’ as matter, physical reality, an ensemble of objects
- 2) ‘World’ as the totality of the passions
- 3) ‘World’ as ‘this’ *katastasis* (*ܟܬܘܫܬܐ*)¹¹⁴
- 4) ‘World’ as the space of the secular, other from the desert

The first sense of the term ‘world’ indicates the objective reality, independent from the inner universe of the subject and his/her reactions. Although the world as matter is a structural element of Isaac’s idea of the world as ‘this *katastasis*’, he often insists on the world as matter independently. Recent scholarship has focused mainly on the second meaning listed here, that of ‘world’ as the totality of the passions. This is a fundamental use of the term in Isaac, and a concept particularly attractive to contemporary sensibility because it seems to imply a positive evaluation of the world as matter as distinct from the universe of the

¹¹² See Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, footnote 18, 6; see also Brock, “St. Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac Spirituality”, 81-82; Bettiolo, “Avec la charité”; Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 94-111.

¹¹³ For a different categorisation, see Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 95.

¹¹⁴ See e.g. Centuries III 70 74v-75r: *ܟܬܘܫܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ*, “this *katastasis* of now”.

passions. However, for Isaac, the problematic nature of the world is not only connected to subjective reactions, i.e. the passions, but also concerns the objective physical world, to which Isaac links the problem of the passions¹¹⁵. Therefore, in his writings, one can find both meanings of the term ‘world’, although in two instances he affirms that ‘world’ means the passions – in particular, “in the examination of theoria”¹¹⁶, that is the vision of the real nature of things. However, in an article from 1986, Bettiolo had already underlined that it is from the world itself as created reality that one seeks liberation – from “the *earth*, the beautiful earth of God, our mother”¹¹⁷.

Isaac looks at reality according to a conceptual framework which interprets reality as hierarchically structured, being formed of “gross”¹¹⁸, ‘material’, i.e., in Syriac, “corporeal”¹¹⁹ realities, and “subtler”¹²⁰, ‘immaterial’, i.e. “incorporeal”¹²¹ realities – up to God, who lies beyond both. ‘Corporeal’ realities are the frail element in creation. This distinction is shared in different modalities and with different nuances by all the authors who influenced Isaac¹²², especially Evagrius, with his (broadly speaking) Platonic categories, but also, among others, John the Solitary, with his distinction between an inner and outer dimension of things¹²³, and

¹¹⁵ For an introduction to the concept of the passions, see A. Solignac, “Passions”, *DS* 12.1, cols. 339-348.

¹¹⁶ I 2 18.

¹¹⁷ See Bettiolo, “Avec la charité”, 330; 324.

¹¹⁸ Or “thick”: see e.g. I 40 304: ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܘܫܐ, “the grossness of the body”; II 10,17 35 (Syr.); 43 (ET): ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ, “grossness” of human beings (in contrast with the angels); Centuries III 40 66v: the “incorporeal (ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ) world” contrasted with “the irrational and gross [world]”: ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ.

¹¹⁹ See e.g. Centuries I 84 32r and Centuries IV 86 106r: ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ; see also I 5: ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ.

¹²⁰ See e.g. Centuries IV 86 106r: ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ, the angels are “subtler” both in nature and dwelling than us.

¹²¹ See e.g. Centuries III 40 66v: ܘܚܘܫܘܬܐ, the “incorporeal” world.

¹²² For an overview on these authors, see Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 85-114.

¹²³ See e.g. John’s discussion of this theme in S. Dederig (ed.), *Johannes von Lykopolis. Ein Dialog über die Seele und die Affekte des Menschen*, Arbeiten utgivna med understöd av Vilhelm Ekmans Universitetsfond, Uppsala 43, Uppsala, 1936, 1-5. For John’s influence on the Syriac spiritual writers of the 7th-8th century, see Beulay, *La lumière*, 95-125; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, “‘More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue’: John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20.2 (2012), 303-331; Khalifé-Hachem, “La prière”; Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*,

Paul – at least according to the sense in which Isaac receives and reads Pauline thought¹²⁴. ‘World’ as an ensemble of visible, perceptible, extended objects, i.e. as “visible matter”¹²⁵, means therefore, structural limitation, multiplicity, mutability, transiency, instability, and corruptibility.

The world means multiplicity, because it is composed of partial realities¹²⁶. It is like a stormy sea, “the sea of this world”, full of waves, “the agitated waves of the appearances of [this] age”¹²⁷. The diverse and partial realities of the world are a source of both pleasure and pain: “Evils are not at all far from you”,¹²⁸ and there are, in the world, “desirable beauties”¹²⁹. Both possess a limited nature, and the world is conceived as a prostitute who attracts with her beauty, which, however, enslaves the person¹³⁰. Pleasure (ܠܫܘܢܐ) lies “between disgust and bitterness”¹³¹, and “after every rest (ܠܫܘܢܐ) a vexation is placed, and [after] every vexation, a rest”¹³².

None of the world’s realities are permanent: “Everything in this world is mutable (ܠܫܘܢܐ)”¹³³. The world is the place of “change (ܠܫܘܢܐ)”: the continuous alternation of external objects, of the effects they have on the subject, and, to eyes which understand this, of God’s action, between “war” and “the help of Grace”¹³⁴. The ‘changes’ that Isaac lists include cold, heat, casual events,

109-113; 150-162; 223-236; G. Kessel, “‘Life is short, the Art is long’: An Interpretation of the first Hippocratic Aphorism by an East Syriac Monk in the 7th century Iraq (Isaac of Nineveh, Kephalaia Gnostica 3,62), *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 19.1 (2015), 137-148.

¹²⁴ See Rom 7:22; Eph 3:16; Gal 5:16.

¹²⁵ See e.g. I 1 2: ܠܫܘܢܐ ܠܫܘܢܐ.

¹²⁶ See III 5,11 29 (Syr.); 46 (IT): “The multitude of the partial realities of creation”.

¹²⁷ I 45 325.

¹²⁸ I 5 70.

¹²⁹ I 35 229.

¹³⁰ See I 35 227.

¹³¹ I 30.

¹³² I 30 212.

¹³³ I 30 212.

¹³⁴ II 22,9 107 (Syr.); 119 (ET)

occasions, illness, and weakness of the body¹³⁵. “There is nothing in creation which escapes change”¹³⁶, and in this sense, “there is no truth in the creature”¹³⁷.

The world, from this point of view, has “an unsteady constitution”¹³⁸. It is a ‘corporeal’ world and, for this reason, subject to suffering, *ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܘܢܐ*, “a passible world”¹³⁹. “Its course has an end” and “the things which enter it” are characterised by “impermanence”¹⁴⁰ – “this transient world” and “its transient things”¹⁴¹. Therefore, “visible things” means “corruptible things”¹⁴², mortal things. For this reason, life in the world is “a sad and corruptible life”¹⁴³, like things, “corruptible and fleeting life”, apart from “the true and spiritual [life]”¹⁴⁴.

This does not identify matter as evil: Isaac thinks it is God’s creation. However, for him, it means limitation and insufficiency. Seen in itself, independently from God and oneself turned to God, ‘the corporeal world’ indicates the real considered in its dimension of appearance, immediate visibility, measurability, as if it had no dimension of depth. In this sense, it is a world of objects and it ‘objectifies’. It is “visible matter which is a hindrance to that which is interior and cannot be perceived”¹⁴⁵. To the one who reads reality in the light of oneself and God, however, reality will no more appear “according to an order deprived of soul”, i.e., for Isaac, according to a “halved dimension”¹⁴⁶ – but this is a perspective different from one based on the mere ‘objectuality’ of things.

¹³⁵ See I 17 137.

¹³⁶ I 5 64.

¹³⁷ I 5 64.

¹³⁸ I 35 228.

¹³⁹ II 14,14 60 (Syr.); 71 (ET); the term can also mean ‘subject to passions’.

¹⁴⁰ See I 35 228.

¹⁴¹ II 30,7 123 (Syr.);135 (ET): *ܩܘܪܘܢܐ*. See also e.g. Centuries II 55 47v.

¹⁴² Centuries IV 64 97v.

¹⁴³ Centuries II 17 37v.

¹⁴⁴ I 11 120.

¹⁴⁵ I 1 2. ‘Matter’: *ܩܘܪܘܢܐ*.

¹⁴⁶ See I 26 190.

Looking at the physical world in these terms is not the only possibility for Isaac. The theme will be discussed in Chapter IV, but here let it suffice to say that the fact that Isaac conceives of the world as unstable and transient does not negate the fact that, in it, there exist harmony and beauty¹⁴⁷. So, in Isaac's writings, there are passages in which he contemplates the beauty of things and the human being in his/her very physical structure¹⁴⁸. In particular, in 'second natural contemplation', a state of deliverance from the passions which will be examined in Chapter IV, the harmony of creation reveals itself to consciousness. However, even beauty and harmony should be ultimately left behind.

Isaac defines 'the world' as the totality of the passions and affirms that it stops when the passions stop¹⁴⁹. He sees a structural connection between the rise of the passions and the physical structure of the visible world. This connection, which Khalifé-Hachem first explored¹⁵⁰, authorises Isaac to call 'world' the physical world, the passions, and the space of secular life. Of the connection between the passions and the world and of the passions as world, Isaac says two things, which should be kept in tension: 1) 'World' is both "the passions engendered by distraction"¹⁵¹ and "the common name which indicates the passions"¹⁵²: here the concept of 'world' refers to the passions, i.e. to human reactions; 2) "[the passions] are provocations placed in the things and affairs of this world"¹⁵³: these reactions are structurally connected to objective reality. Are, then, the passions, due to the physical world's structure or not? Are they inscribed in it or do they belong to the subject's universe? Isaac thinks that they do not belong to a single pole, but that

¹⁴⁷ God is "Beauty creator of all beauty": I 25 187.

¹⁴⁸ Centuries III 74 76r.

¹⁴⁹ I 2 18.

¹⁵⁰ See Khalifé-Hachem, "L'âme et les passions".

¹⁵¹ I 46 332.

¹⁵² I 2 18.

¹⁵³ I 62 432.

they rise at the intersection between the subject and the object. The passions are an inevitable part of the world's course¹⁵⁴, understood as the physical world *and* the human being in it, a human being who is body and soul. This connection exists because the human being is part of this world – but this theme will be explored in greater detail in the next section.

The concept of *katastasis*, ܟܛܘܫܬܐ, which means 'state, condition, constitution' (from the Greek κατάστασις), a concept which goes back to Theodore of Mopsuestia, indicates the current state of the world in a dialectical relationship with the future, eschatological state¹⁵⁵. Isaac quotes Theodore as follows: "Now then, while we are in this *katastasis* (ܟܛܘܫܬܐ), we live in this region, i.e. within this visible sky and the earth; but in the future *katastasis* (ܟܛܘܫܬܐ ܕܥܡܪܘܬܐ) (...) we will all live in heaven"¹⁵⁶. This *katastasis* is 'the current era' and all that belongs to it: the physical world, the human being and his/her passions, human history from creation to now, and the present state of spiritual beings, angels and demons. This ܟܛܘܫܬܐ is marked by mortality, passions, sin, 'inclination'¹⁵⁷, and a distinction between the movements of the soul and body, and indicates a temporal and ontological distance from the future, which, however, in the Incarnation started to happen in the present. The experience of the physical world and of oneself in it is experience of this limited ܟܛܘܫܬܐ, life in incompleteness, always to be referred to a

¹⁵⁴ See I 2 18.

¹⁵⁵ On this and the new *katastasis*, see e.g. Centuries I 19 22v-23r; I 91 33v; II 19 38r; III 70 74v-75r. For an analysis of the concept of the two *katastaseis* in Theodore, see W.F. Macomber, "The theological Synthesis of Cyrus of Edessa, an East Syrian Theologian of the mid sixth Century", *OCP* 30 (1964), 6-18; S. Zincone, *Studi sulla visione dell'uomo in ambito antiocheno (Diodoro, Crisostomo, Teodoro, Teodoreto)*, Quaderni di studi e materiali di storia delle religioni NS 1, L'Aquila, 1988, 21-27; P. Bettiolo, "Lineamenti di patrologia siriana", in A. Quacquarelli (ed.), *Complementi interdisciplinari di patrologia*, Roma, 1989, 572-575. For Isaac, see Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 106-109; N. Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, 58-66; for a discussion of Theodore's influence on Isaac, see Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, 92-101.

¹⁵⁶ Centuries I 19 22v-23r.

¹⁵⁷ See section II.2.2.1 below.

dimension other than it. So, this world as incomplete is always in tension with a future horizon, and in this respect the concept of the two *katastaseis* in Isaac joins with John the Solitary's idea of a life 'at the level of the Spirit' after the resurrection, which is completely different from the limited dimension of 'here'.

The last meaning of the term 'world', i.e. 'world' as the space of the secular, or of non-monastic life, is linked to conceiving of this life as an inevitable belonging to the present condition of things, to the dimension of the 'here'. "As long as the senses have to do with things, the heart cannot rest from the imaginings concerning them. Without desert and solitude the passions cannot cease, and the evil thoughts cannot disappear"¹⁵⁸. The secular, for this reason, is conceived as a condition of immersion in multiplicity, limitation, and transiency, in blindness to the passional state which, in Isaac's view, derives from this.

For the reasons examined, Isaac conceives of "serving the world" as living "in the same kind of life (ܠܗܘܢܐ) as those living in the world"¹⁵⁹. Although Isaac does not consider it absolutely impossible to live in the space of the secular without "serving the world", this is not the norm for him. For instance, he notes the example of the martyrs¹⁶⁰, apostles, and Paul. However, for him, Paul's path is not the common one: Paul "was only one"¹⁶¹, unique, and living in the space of the secular without being oblivious to God would require a strength that is extremely rare in human beings.

The meaning of the contrast between secular and monastic space, which is not immediately understood today, already troubled Robert Beulay who, in an

¹⁵⁸ I 1 2.

¹⁵⁹ See I 14 125.

¹⁶⁰ See e.g. III 12,44 102-103 (Syr.); 142-143 (IT).

¹⁶¹ See I 18 152-153.

article of 1980¹⁶², highlighted the gap between the view of the solitary life as a necessary prerequisite for the blossoming of the spiritual life, shared by all 7th-8th centuries East-Syrian spiritual writers, and certain current theological conceptions. This idea, at least in Isaac’s case, should be connected to his conviction that the monastic context, in the form that he knows and practices, facilitates access to an experience of solitude before God, of being face-to-face with God, in the single direction of one’s gaze at him. This ‘solitariness’, for Isaac, needs to be experienced in the flesh, and not only as an inner or symbolical dimension. In this perspective, ‘world’ is not simply the space of the secular, but “the inhabited world”¹⁶³, the world of “the many”¹⁶⁴. It is the ‘non-desert’, other from the ‘desolate places’, or ‘solitudes’, where the solitary dwells¹⁶⁵.

‘World’ in this sense extends much further than being the simple opposite of a sociological belonging to the monastic institution. The opposite of the world intended as outlined is not this level of belonging, but the belonging to God alone. The story of Arsenius (4th-5th century), the well-known desert father who left a brilliant career at the imperial court for the desert, who Isaac often mentions, is used in I 41 to illustrate this concept¹⁶⁶. When Arsenius obeys the inner injunction which says: “Flee human beings and be saved”¹⁶⁷, he leaves the space of the secular. He flees again, however, obeying a command that, this time, with the same words,

¹⁶² R. Beulay, “Doit-on, avec les Syro-Orientaux, considérer la vie monastique comme la condition nécessaire de l’expérience mystique?”, in *Le Monachisme Syriaque aux premiers siècles de l’Église, IIe – début VIIIe siècle*, I: Texte français, Patrimoine syriaque, Actes du Colloque V, Antélias, 1998, 235-241.

¹⁶³ ܠܘܟܘܠܐ, “inhabited place”: Centuries IV 53 94r.

¹⁶⁴ For this language and the expression “the many (ܠܘܟܘܠܐ)”, see especially Centuries IV 53 94r. See also: Centuries III 43 43r-43v; IV 88 106r.

¹⁶⁵ This topic is central in Centuries IV 50-54 94r-94v. In Centuries IV 53, Isaac says: “When we are in an inhabited place (ܠܘܟܘܠܐ), we have the thoughts of the inhabited place, and when we are in a desolate place (or desert: ܠܘܟܘܠܐ), we have the thoughts of the desolate place. When we are with many (ܠܘܟܘܠܐ), we have the thoughts of the many, and when we separate (lit.: ‘become alone from’: ܠܘܟܘܠܐܘܢܐ) from everything, we acquire a solitary mind (ܠܘܟܘܠܐܘܢܐ ܠܘܟܘܠܐܘܢܐ)”.

¹⁶⁶ See I 41 307-313.

¹⁶⁷ I 41 310.

separates him from the community of ascetics, leading him deep into solitude and silence¹⁶⁸. Isaac remarks that Arsenius said of himself, “I died to the world”¹⁶⁹.

‘World’, then, in Isaac, indicates the suffering of a distance from God.

II.2. THE HUMAN BEING: THE MYSTERIOUS “UNION” OF BODY AND SOUL

Who is the human being, who suffers this distance from God¹⁷⁰? In this section, Isaac’s way of conceiving the creature is analysed, together with his view of the human condition, which he regards as marked by limitation and suffering. The human being is considered here in his/her ontological aspect of finitude and vulnerability.

Human nature is radically limited, for Isaac¹⁷¹. Human creatures have a short, fleeting life¹⁷², that is mutable; their condition is impoverished and their state low¹⁷³. The human being wavered and fell, enclosed within “the prison of ignorance”, in a “place of darkness” – “Sheol of ignorance”¹⁷⁴. In general terms, Isaac speaks, in language close to that of Paul, of the “infirmity (ܪܕܝܘܡܝܬܐ) of my nature (cf. Rom 5:6; Heb 4:15)”¹⁷⁵, of “my wretched nature”¹⁷⁶, and of a “humble state (ܪܘܚܢܐ) of my nature”¹⁷⁷. “I, who am dust and ashes”¹⁷⁸, he says like Abraham

¹⁶⁸ I 41 311.

¹⁶⁹ I 41 310.

¹⁷⁰ On Isaac’s anthropology, see Chialà, *Dall’asceti*, 150-158; Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 52-63; Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*.

¹⁷¹ On this theme, see Chialà, *Dall’asceti*, 158-171; Bettolo, “Povertà e conoscenza”.

¹⁷² II 5,21 11 (Syr.); 15 (ET).

¹⁷³ See e.g. II 1 17v.

¹⁷⁴ II 1 18r.

¹⁷⁵ II 5,16; 10 (Syr.) 13 (ET).

¹⁷⁶ II 5,11 8 (Syr.); 11 (ET).

¹⁷⁷ I 34 223.

¹⁷⁸ II 5,8 7 (Syr.); 9 (ET), cf. Gen 18:27.

speaking to God; “our nature of dust”¹⁷⁹; “dust of the earth, a mute nature”¹⁸⁰, like the nature of Adam before God breathed life in him.

For Isaac, there is a radical distance between *this* human being and God. The human being is a creature – a “being who became”, who lives at a great distance from the Mystery that is his/her origin: “Truth¹⁸¹ is hidden in his being from all that he created, and rational beings (خلقه) who became because of him live at a great distance from him”¹⁸². The knowledge of the Mystery exceeds the capacity of human nature: Bettolo, who analysed this theme, speaks of the centrality, in Isaac, of an “intranscendable ignorance” of the human being before God¹⁸³. Human beings are full of “contradictions”¹⁸⁴, which narrate their difference from God.

Isaac defines the human being as a “united essence”¹⁸⁵, a mysterious “union”, a being composed of body and soul, which were “intertwined by the Wisdom which cannot be investigated”¹⁸⁶. His anthropology is based on the body-soul distinction, and in the soul, he underlines the capacity of gazing, the noetic openness to God, although he does not conceive this capacity as distinct from the soul¹⁸⁷. There is a single human *حصة*, but it is characterised by “duality”¹⁸⁸, so Isaac sometimes also uses the term “nature”¹⁸⁹ to refer to two substances (of the body or soul) with different characteristics.

¹⁷⁹ III 11,23 89 (Syr.);126 (IT).

¹⁸⁰ II 1 16v, cf. Gen 2:7. For similar expressions, see II 14, 42 70 (Syr.); 80 (ET); II 40,14 167 (Syr.); 178 (ET).

¹⁸¹ I.e. God.

¹⁸² Centuries I 2 20v.

¹⁸³ Bettolo, “Prigionieri”, 26.

¹⁸⁴ See Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 167.

¹⁸⁵ Centuries III 76 76v.

¹⁸⁶ I 3 27.

¹⁸⁷ For the background, in the East-Syriac tradition, of Isaac’s conception of the soul, see V. Berti, *L’au-delà de l’âme et l’en-deça du corps. Morceaux d’anthropologie chrétienne de la mort dans l’Église syro-orientale*, Paradosis 57, Fribourg, Suisse, 2015, 67-70.

¹⁸⁸ I 2 15.

¹⁸⁹ See I 3. Isaac himself suggests an analogy with East Syrian Christology, which merits further study: see I 3 24.

Both dimensions, body and soul, describe human identity. Both are marked by limitations and sufferings, so that the human condition synthesises that of all created beings: the animals suffer in their passible bodies¹⁹⁰, and the angels, pure noetic natures, are afraid of falling and groan with human beings¹⁹¹ “for the weight of the visible body in which we are”¹⁹², though the news of Christ consoles their sadness¹⁹³. However, if animals and angels are “not conjoined [creatures]”¹⁹⁴, human beings, who are “united [creatures]”, also know the suffering of the weaving together of body and soul.

Human beings are limited by many factors, to which they are structurally sensitive in their body or soul: illness, poverty, wild beasts, wars, evil people, demons¹⁹⁵ – “the opposing [power]”¹⁹⁶ who opposes what is human. To all that, one should add the limitations which are intrinsic to human beings themselves, and the interconnections between all of these elements. Of this condition of structural limitation, Isaac writes:

[God] made your nature a receptacle of accidents (ܡܚܬܠܐ ܕܥܘܩܒܐ), and in the world, in which he created and left you, he multiplied the causes of accidents and trials. He made your nature a small receptacle of these things. Evils are not far from you, not very far at all. They sprout from within you at his sign, and from below your feet, and from the place where you are. As the [upper] eyelid is close to the [lower] eyelid, so trials are close to human beings [...]. [God] did not make you *impassible* (ܠܐ ܡܨܘܒܐ) [...]. And he did not make your soul *not subject to inclination* (ܠܐ ܡܨܘܒܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ)¹⁹⁷.

The human condition implies suffering, then, in Isaac’s eyes.

¹⁹⁰ Isaac is attentive to compassion for the animal world: see I 74 507-508; II 10, 35 40 (Syr.); 50 (ET).

¹⁹¹ Centuries III 72 15r.

¹⁹² I 35 256.

¹⁹³ Centuries III 80 18r.

¹⁹⁴ See I 29 206-207.

¹⁹⁵ See e.g. II 19,3 92-93 (Syr.); 103 (ET).

¹⁹⁶ See e.g. II 17,1 80 (Syr.); 91 (ET).

¹⁹⁷ I 5 70-71.

II.2.1. *HUMAN CREATORIALITY: THE BODY*

Human vulnerability is, in the first place, connected with the body, which is the starting point of every reflection on the human condition. Isaac's affirmations about human mutability, sinfulness, and the nature of the soul are all to be related to the embodied condition of the creature. The body is an essential junction in Isaac.

In his conception, the 'body' is the human dimension that is an integral part of the 'corporeal' world – material, made of sensible objects, a weak body in a weak world. The human being is taken from the earth, like Adam, which indicates the structural connection of the body with 'the earthly'¹⁹⁸. The body is made up with "the power of the elements" of the world¹⁹⁹; it is the 'visible' dimension of the creature. Created before the soul in accordance with the Biblical narrative²⁰⁰, the body shares all of the characteristics of the physical world previously described. When Isaac speaks of the body – although the concept of 'corporeality' and the associated 'corporeal way of life' is far broader –, he always refers, in the first place, to *this* physical body taken from the earth.

The body means matter or, rather, living matter. It is matter that perceives through the senses, which are linked to the soul, naturally opened to the world, and called the "second habit of the intellect"²⁰¹. The body, like all material realities, is subject to 'change', because it is receptive through the senses of the mutability of external things²⁰². Sensible perception is its modality of relationship with reality: being in contact with things, the body is subject to pleasure and pain. The life of sensible perception, subject to this inevitable alternation and its attractions and

¹⁹⁸ See I 28 203. Cf. Gen 2:7.

¹⁹⁹ I 28 203.

²⁰⁰ See I 4 40.

²⁰¹ I 3 31.

²⁰² See e.g. I 1 4.

repulsions is animal life, an ‘irrational’ life²⁰³ similar to that of animals, which Isaac considers “irrational beings (ܐܢܝܡܐ ܘܢܘܪܐܝܝܢ)”, “mute creatures”²⁰⁴, i.e. deprived of ܐܘܪܘܚܐܢܐܘܬܐ, which in Syriac means the faculty of both speech and reason.

From all of Isaac’s writings emerges a particular focus on the body’s vulnerability. The body is poor, frail, and becomes tired²⁰⁵. It is passible²⁰⁶, it grows old²⁰⁷, it becomes ill, and Isaac often mentions illness in his *corpus*. In an autobiographical passage, he narrates how he visited a brother’s cell and “lay down in a corner”, so that the brother might take care of him “out of love for God”, because he was ill and “in these regions” he “had nobody”.²⁰⁸ Throughout Isaac’s writings shines a sensitivity to the immediacy of physical frailty, visible in his choice of language and descriptions, especially his prayers. In one prayer, he writes: “May those who suffer from harsh illnesses and grievous infirmities of the body also be remembered before you, my Lord. Send them an angel of compassion and soothe their souls which are so tormented by the vehement afflictions (ܐܘܪܘܚܐܢܐܘܬܐ) of their body”²⁰⁹. The human being, then, is *exposed* to suffering primarily in the body. This, however, touches the soul, which suffers with it.

The “outer man” is “corruptible and dense”²¹⁰, and the body has a quality of heaviness connected to its materiality²¹¹. “The saints cry out because of the weight of the body (ܐܘܪܘܚܐܢܐܘܬܐ), they groan and, in suffering (ܐܘܪܘܚܐܢܐܘܬܐ), address their

²⁰³ II 18,13 89 (Syr.); 99 (ET); II 20,2 96 (Syr.);107 (ET); I 44 319. Sensible perception (ܐܘܪܘܚܐܢܐܘܬܐ) is not evil in itself, but radically limited (it is the case of animals who “do not possess a discerning and rational soul”): see II 18,18 99 (Syr.);101 (ET).

²⁰⁴ Centuries II 53 47v.

²⁰⁵ See e.g. II 14,25 64 (Syr.); 74 (ET).

²⁰⁶ See e.g. I 35 263: ܐܘܪܘܚܐܢܐܘܬܐ.

²⁰⁷ See e.g. Centuries I 90 33v.

²⁰⁸ I 18 138-139.

²⁰⁹ II 5,27 14 (Syr.); 27 (ET).

²¹⁰ I 80 562.

²¹¹ I 40 305; I 51 375.

prayers to God”²¹², almost torn asunder between two worlds, pressed by the body against the ground and the earth. The body, in fact, suffers, desires, and then becomes corrupt – the human being becomes “again, from what he is, as when he was not”, “with no memory, name and remembrance”²¹³, in “the humiliating silence” of death, “forgetful deprivation of everything”²¹⁴. The creature, as a single, unitary subject, is mortal and this touches the soul itself. However, mortality means, in the first place, the body’s corruptibility: the mortal body is conceived as a “body of humiliation”, according to Paul’s words to the Philippians quoted in the *Centuries*²¹⁵, and the human condition as “enslavement to corruption”, another expression found in Paul’s letter to the Romans²¹⁶. The passible body calls for compassion in Isaac, but it can engender at the same time a deep unease, as that of ‘the saints’ just mentioned.

Chialà’s study highlighted the central place occupied by the theme of death in Isaac²¹⁷. The connection between the body’s mortal condition and its passibility is a structural connection in his writings. Every form of suffering of the body constitutes the possibility of experiencing death, and death is for Isaac the ultimate revealer of an original frailty which belongs to the creature in his/her body. Isaac uses, then, the concept of ‘death’ as a metaphor for every condition of suffering of the frail body, which finds fulfilment in the event of dying. Suffering, in turn, evokes dying because it forces a living perception of one’s finitude. Suffering, then, is always in relation to death, evoking the body’s frailty which culminates in death. Isaac interprets suffering as ‘a death while existing’, an ‘experiencing’ of the loss

²¹² I 6 94.

²¹³ *Centuries* II 84 56r.

²¹⁴ *Centuries* III 74 76r.

²¹⁵ *Centuries* III 74 76r. Cf. Phil 3:21.

²¹⁶ I 35 256. Cf. Rm 8:19-21.

²¹⁷ See Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 169-171.

of oneself while still alive. At the same time, however, the event of death also has a value which is independent of suffering. It forces one to face the fact that no attempt to forget one's finitude can provide a solution.

This connection between dying and suffering represents one of the conditions of Isaac's interpretation of the ascetic life. In his conception, the human being was originally created mortal. From this arose sin, and this position, which is already present in Theodore of Mopsuestia²¹⁸, is very different from Paul's conception, who wrote that death came from sin²¹⁹, although Paul's reflection originates from a different context. Isaac states: "We did not become mortal because we sinned, but because we were mortal, we were pushed to sin"²²⁰. In a second passage, he attributes the same function to suffering, to the 'being afflicted' of the body: "One of the saints said: 'the body becomes a companion of sin because it fears afflictions, of being tormented and dying to its life'"²²¹. The original state of limitation, then, acquires two faces: the absolute one of death, and that '*in fieri*' of suffering. Both mean exposure, in the body, to the loss of oneself.

The fact of looking at the body's corruptibility as inscribed in the order of creation establishes the ontological precedence of 'the negative' over all other human experiences. In other words, a problematic element precedes positive elements, in Isaac's understanding of creaturalty. This should be read symbolically, as corresponding to experience, and not only to an origin situated in time, i.e. in Adam. Viewing creation as including mortality, and Adam's fall as being connected to it, symbolically expresses the conviction that, at the root of every human experience, in one's body, is not inscribed a perfection, but an imperfection, a

²¹⁸ See Macomber, *The Theological Synthesis*, 14-23; Chialà, *Dall'ascesi*, 95-99; Kavvadas, "Some Observations"; *Id.*, "On the Relations".

²¹⁹ Rom 5:12.

²²⁰ Centuries III 2 59v. See also Centuries III 78 103v.

²²¹ I 35 267.

deficiency, and that there is, prior to every experience, the precedence of ‘the incomplete’. The fact that behind the creature there is no condition of pure positivity, i.e. a state of ontological perfection, means that every human experience *arises from a state of limitation*.

This approach recurs at every level in Isaac’s thought. In the condition of things outlined, he sees a deeply positive purpose, in the sense that ‘the negative’ originally comes from God, who placed it at the beginning with the aim of educating human beings, according to his ‘pedagogical’ conception of existence, which scholars have already highlighted²²². However, this positive purpose never appears immediately to consciousness, and its presence does not mean that the state of creatural limitation is directly perceived as good in factual experience. This would be God’s perspective, but in the creature’s living experience, there is no immediate awareness of this.

According to the passages quoted above, sin would have arisen from one’s mortal condition or, given the connection between mortality and passibility, from one’s condition of limitation and frailty, inscribed in the body. However, as the second quotation clarifies, the link between limitation and sin is not exactly this, as if sin were the automatic fruit of one’s limited condition. As Chialà underlined²²³ and Hagman further discussed²²⁴, the real reason for sin is not mortality *per se*, but the fear of death. For this reason, in the second quotation, Isaac states that sin arises from one’s fear of bodily suffering rather than from the suffering itself, connecting,

²²² Chialà, *Dall’asceti*, 96; 265-278; Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, 61-66.

²²³ Chialà, *Dall’asceti*, 169-170.

²²⁴ Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 112-119. Hagman describes fear as “the main existential motive Isaac gives for taking up an ascetic life”.

as John the Solitary had already done, the problem of fear to the nature of the body²²⁵. Fear causes the passions and, from the passions, sin arises²²⁶.

What Isaac outlines, therefore, is a particular status of fear, and of the sin which derives from it. On the one hand, for him, there is a gap between the ontological state of limitation and exposure to suffering, distinctive of creaturalty, and the experience of fear: the first is intranscendable, while fear is not. Isaac even states that, while the body is naturally passionate, the soul is naturally non-passional and turned to God, so that the soul, in following the passionality of the body, betrays its being. On the other hand, however, Isaac thinks that not only the body's vulnerability but also fear contains a degree of necessity, due to the intimate connection between the body and soul. In this perspective, Isaac conceives of fear as a natural reaction of the body before the possibility of a loss of integrity – something which leads, as it were, to a spontaneous 'dodging'. This possibility of loss of integrity is inscribed in the condition of the body, which is originally vulnerable, so that this ontological condition and fear appear to be intimately related.

As emerges from these observations, Isaac's discourse, which regards the body and soul as two different substances (although he neither employs technical terms nor follows a formal philosophical approach) does not seem to refer to a simple juxtaposition of elements, nor to a mere conflict between 'parts' of oneself, but are attempts to articulate the subject's experience of him/herself. How should we interpret this, then? The following subsection explores what Isaac means when he structurally connects the passions to the corporeal. The next section, which is

²²⁵ On fear in John, see Dederling, *Johannes*, 81-84.

²²⁶ See I 46 332.

devoted to the soul, will outline a possible interpretation of ‘non-passionality’ as a characteristic of the soul.

II.2.1.1. *The Body and the Passions*

Isaac states, at least once, that ‘fear’ is also a passion, and includes it within a list of passions²²⁷. Fear may be interpreted as the original passion, which directly derives from humans’ limited physical state, a passion from which all of the other passions develop. Just as fear is born as a natural reaction by the body to suffering, so also all of the other passions, for Isaac, are connected to ‘earthly corporeality’. In I 28, he compares the passions to “thorns” that “grow in us from the seed which is in the body”, which, like “a briar”, naturally sprout from the earth²²⁸. Although Isaac affirms, like Evagrius, that there are passions of the body and passions of the soul²²⁹, he ultimately connects them all to the earth and the body.

Isaac never provides, as does Evagrius, a structured list of the passions. Some of these, however, are very common in his writings. Among the passions of the body, Isaac includes “desire, anger and love for vain converse”; among those of the soul “envy, vainglory, pride and the rest”, which are a “wandering without knowledge”²³⁰. In I 70, he distinguishes between passions which wage war by means of “provocations” and passions which only cause “affliction”: “sloth, listlessness, and sadness”²³¹. In I 2, he presents a list of passions: “Love for riches,

²²⁷ Cf. Dederig, *Johannes*, 81-82.

²²⁸ I 28 204-205.

²²⁹ For the occurrences in Isaac, see: Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, footnote 8, 84. Cf. Evagrius *Praktikos* 36-37 (Greek: 35-36) BL Add. 14578 6r col. a, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449. See the discussion of this topic in A. Guillaumont – C. Guillaumont (eds.), *Evagre Le Pontique, Traité Pratique*, SC 171, Paris, 1971, 580-583. Guillaumont notices that, while the Greek states that the passions of the soul have their origin in relationships (“from human beings”), the Syriac states: “the passions of the soul are born from the soul; the passions of the body from the body”.

²³⁰ Centuries IV 27 86v-87r.

²³¹ I 70 485.

gathering of goods, fattening the body, from which the passion for sexual union [develops], love of honours, which is the source of envy, leadership of government, boast and pomp of power, adornment, human glory, which is the cause of animosity, fear of the body”²³² – the original fear.

Despite these distinctions and connections between the passions²³³, Isaac is constant in connecting the concept to the corporeal dimension. If the ‘passions of the body’ naturally belong to the body, those ‘of the soul’ only figuratively belong to it, and so constitute an addition to its nature. This idea of the soul as ontologically above passions, which is already present in John the Solitary²³⁴, has been studied by Khalifé-Hachem especially on the basis of I 3²³⁵, where the body and soul are described as realities with contrasting interests, and problems arise when the soul “follows” the body or, vice versa, when the body “follows” the soul²³⁶.

The reasons for the body-passions connection in Isaac are complex. However, one can trace them back to two ways of interpreting how passions arise, which are inter-connected:

- 1) According to a first level of reading, in Isaac’s phenomenology of the origin of the passions, the initial role is played by sensible perception, as Khalifé-Hachem underlined²³⁷. Through the senses, one encounters, in the world, “all sorts of occurrences” and “change”²³⁸ and, habitually, “the encounters of the senses” cause

²³² I 2 18-19.

²³³ Isaac does not insist much on links between the passions. However, sometimes he mentions some of these links, the most common being that between vainglory, pride, and lasciviousness: see e.g. Centuries II 25 39v.

²³⁴ See Dederling (ed.), *Johannes*, 13-14: “The nature of the soul is more exalted than evil works and shameful thoughts, but is moved through partaking them because of the body”.

²³⁵ Khalifé-Hachem, “L’âme et les passions”.

²³⁶ See I 3 25.

²³⁷ Khalifé-Hachem, “L’âme et les passions”, 214.

²³⁸ I 30 210.

the “heart” to fall ill, i.e. passionality²³⁹. The passions develop from this contact of the senses with “the rays of things”²⁴⁰, starting from the body’s receptivity. Through sensation, that which Isaac calls “love for the world”²⁴¹, or “love for the body”²⁴², enters and dwells in the human being²⁴³. “Love for the self precedes all passions”²⁴⁴. This “love for the self/body/world” provokes a “desire” for the transient, which Isaac also interprets as the search for “pleasure (كسرة)”²⁴⁵. This understanding of the origin of the passions goes back to Evagrius (*Praktikos*)²⁴⁵, and Isaac himself refers to Evagrius when he states that “perception of the senses [...] naturally gives birth to desire”²⁴⁶.

This mechanism is marked by immediacy and automaticity, and alludes to a relationship with things that is devoid of any ‘reflective mediation’. Isaac conceives of “desire” for objects as an automatic movement of attraction which arises in the contact between the body and things, and is intrinsically powerful: “the sight of things and luxuries, and their presence, will awaken in him the great flame of desire for them”²⁴⁷. “Desire”, just as “love for the self”, refers then to a relationship with things whereby one immediately responds to a stimulus with a reaction. The ‘body’, in Isaac’s conception, is a human dimension which, when considered in isolation, implies an ‘adherence’ of the subject to objects. This ‘adherence’ happens through sensation.

²³⁹ See I 6 90.

²⁴⁰ See I 4 46.

²⁴¹ See e.g. I 35 226: كسرة العالم. Cf. the opposite movement in I 35 227: كسرة النفس.

²⁴² See e.g. I 1 1; I 38 291: كسرة الجسد.

²⁴³ See I 35 226.

²⁴⁴ I 79 339.

²⁴⁵ *Praktikos* 4, BL Add. 14578 2v col. b, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449, cf. Guillaumont – Guillaumont, *Traité*, SC 171, 502-503.

²⁴⁶ I 1 4.

²⁴⁷ I 35 234.

The experience of sensation impresses itself on the mind in the form of representations of sensible objects. Isaac refers to these representations by various terms: “impressions (ܐܘܨܬܐ)”,²⁴⁸ “forms (ܫܦܬܐ)”,²⁴⁹ “images (ܫܘܒܪܐ)”,²⁵⁰; and, “phantoms/imaginings (ܫܘܒܪܐ)”,²⁵¹ (“of things, of the body, of the senses”, etc.)²⁵². From a “conversation” with these representations, Isaac thinks, pushed by “desire”, the “web of thoughts” develops, in a growing complexity – and where “there is darkness and the web of thoughts, there, there are also the passions”²⁵³. “Show me one of the evil passions which arises in the intellect devoid of the images of objects”²⁵⁴, Isaac asks, and: “The demonic thought cannot show itself outside the materiality of vision”²⁵⁵, i.e. outside the vision which bears traces of the objects.

Isaac does not clarify further the mechanism for the formation of the representations and their relationship to desire. In any case, for him, the passions always develop in a state of mental confusion, of non-lucidity, due to the crowding together of sensations and representations. The mind, in this state of confusion, ‘converses’ with them, i.e. follows²⁵⁶ them, abandoning that position which Isaac considers its natural position²⁵⁷. The body, then, is the origin of the process in many

²⁴⁸ E.g. I 6 93.

²⁴⁹ E.g. I 6 93; II 20,6 97 (Syr.); 108 (ET).

²⁵⁰ E.g. II 29,7 120 (Syr.); 132 (ET).

²⁵¹ E.g. Centuries I 61 29r.

²⁵² This theme is already Evagrian: also for Evagrius, objects impress their shape and form on the mind through representations (νοήματα). The theme is vast, and its analysis lies beyond the scope of this study. As an introduction to this problem, A. Guillaumont – C. Guillaumont – P. Géhin, *Évagre le Pontique, Sur les Pensées*, Sources Chrétiennes 438, Paris, 1998, 14-28; F. Refoulé, “Rêves et vie spirituelle d’après Évagre le Pontique”, *Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle* 59 (1961), 470-516; C. Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9.2 (2001), 173-204; W. Harmless – R. Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind: the *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus”, *Theological Studies* 62.3 (2001), 498-529 (with a translation from Greek into English of the *Skemmata*); and the more recent hypothesis of Kathleen Gibbons, “Passions, Pleasures, and Perceptions: Rethinking Evagrius Ponticus on mental Representation”, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity* 19.2 (2015), 297-330.

²⁵³ I 63 438.

²⁵⁴ Centuries II 34 41v.

²⁵⁵ I 24 182.

²⁵⁶ Like, in I 3 25, the soul was ‘following’ the body.

²⁵⁷ See below II.2.2.2.

senses: it is connected to the world and is receptive; it desires without ‘reflective mediation’; and it is the source of the rising of the “images”.

In light of the above discussion, we can now better understand why Isaac describes the passions as “provocations placed in the things and affairs of this world which push the body [to look for] what is necessary [for it]”²⁵⁸: he is referring to the subject’s desire for immediate, ‘irreflective’ pleasure, which arises from the contact between the body and objects. When Isaac affirms that ‘the world’ means the passions, then, he refers to the *objective* links between the material body, sensible and desiring, and the ‘corporeal’ world that is composed of objects, which are, however, experienced by *a subject*. He does not refer to the fact that the passions are merely *subjective* mental activities, independent of the material structure of the real. These links, in fact, remain until the end of creation, because the mechanism of their happening is inscribed within human beings’ relationship with the world. This is what Isaac means when he states, after having said that ‘world’ is “a common name” for the passions, that they are “part of the running of the course of the world”²⁵⁹. To follow them means following “a corporeal way of life (לפי צרכי הבשר)” and having “a mentality of the flesh (לפי צרכי הבשר)”²⁶⁰, i.e. based on the ‘non-reflectivity’ of the body and exteriority, intended as the ‘objectual’ dimension of things.

- 2) This theory, although it highlights the functioning of the process, does not state *the reason* for the existence of the desire for pleasure and the clinging to the transient. To grasp this, the vision exposed above should be read in the light of the ontological

²⁵⁸ I 62 432.

²⁵⁹ I 2 18.

²⁶⁰ I 2 19.

priority of the vulnerability connected to the body previously discussed. In Isaac's thought, this limited condition is always conceived as more original. This is a second level of reading the problem. Of the rise of desire, in this light, sensation is only the occasion, a pre-condition, but the real reason for its activation is rooted in the fear of one's finitude and suffering. The creature suffers his/her limited state, fears, and, without being conscious of this, *for this reason*, desires. The desire for pleasure would then be regarded by Isaac not only as an impulse of attraction inscribed in the nature of 'the sensible', but also as the place where the subject flees from a possible encounter with his/her own finitude. Pleasure would not simply be a distancing from God through immersion in 'the sensible', but also a distancing from experiencing oneself as a limited, passible, and mortal creature.

The fact that the mechanism of passionality may arise from a flight from this original problem clearly emerges in I 51, within Isaac's description of the development of "the first degree of knowledge", the degree of knowledge 'of the body'. It is this knowledge which, in tying itself to the desire for the transient, gives rise to the passions.

Isaac, in general, interprets 'knowledge' as a modality of being in relationship with oneself and the outer world which always derives from a state of fear, a fear which can be 'of the body', i.e. a fear of the loss of one's physical integrity described above, or 'of the soul', i.e. a fear of sin and God's judgement²⁶¹. 'Knowledge' constitutes an attempt to overcome fear by the use of discursive rationality: "Fear is always followed by doubt; doubt, by inquiry; inquiry, by

²⁶¹ This is not true of the 'knowledge of the Spirit', i.e. the highest form of 'knowledge', which is union with God, as Isaac explains in I 51 361.

stratagems; stratagems, by knowledge”²⁶². ‘Knowledge’ is born, then, as an attempt to protect oneself from something. However, it is not always successful, so that “it is always needy”²⁶³, both when it concerns the body and when it concerns the soul, since the possibility of suffering and failure always threatens the creature, although he/she attempts to protect him/herself through its many “stratagems”. The creature, in fact, is ontologically finite. “Often difficult occurrences and things filled with peril happen [to a person], wherein knowledge and the stratagems of wisdom are unable to offer help, whose difficulty defies the entire power of the limits (محدودة) of human knowledge”²⁶⁴, states Isaac. The human being then, in his/her attempt to know, would be limited not only in a vertical direction, due to his/her “intranscendable ignorance” of God’s mystery, but also in a horizontal direction, due to the fact that knowledge is insufficient to protect the self adequately.

This is particularly evident in the attempt to comprehend “the artifices of demons”: “Trust me, my brother, believe my word, you are not sufficient to understand all the power of the demons, and your knowledge is not sufficient to support yourself before their artifices”²⁶⁵. Knowledge, then, is always liable to failure: “How could human knowledge be sufficient to help in open conflicts against the invisible natures, the incorporeal powers, and many other things?”²⁶⁶.

This is particularly true regarding “the first degree of knowledge”, i.e. ‘knowledge of the body’. This ‘knowledge’, for Isaac, ignores God and his Providence, implying that a human being attributes to him/herself every “preservation from harmful things” and “protection against difficult occurrences

²⁶² I 51 364.

²⁶³ I 51 364.

²⁶⁴ I 51 365.

²⁶⁵ I 58 413.

²⁶⁶ I 51 365.

and the many adversities which secretly and openly accompany our nature”²⁶⁷: it is an attempt to protect oneself from the possibility of suffering. Under this pressure, this knowledge

cleaves²⁶⁸ to the love of the body, [and] it gathers these provisions: riches, vainglory, honour, adornments, pleasures of the body, stratagems to protect the body’s nature from adversities, the assiduous exercise of rational wisdom, which is useful for the government of this world and which is the source of new findings in the arts, doctrines, and similar things that crown the body in this visible world²⁶⁹.

If one refers to the list of passions of I 2 previously mentioned, and compares it with this one, it is clear that those things which Isaac lists here are also passions. The passions, then, arise from the ‘cleaving’ of knowledge to the “love of the body”, in an attempt to avoid something hostile, whose presence fear signals. With the image of the “cleaving” of knowledge to the “love of the body”, Isaac indicates that discursive rationality, which is a function of the soul²⁷⁰, unites with the search for pleasure, i.e. to the immediate movement of flight that is natural to the body, as previously shown. The passions arise *in this place of intersection*, and this is the sense in which one should interpret the soul’s ‘following’ of the body, mentioned in I 3, from which subjection to the passions develops.

This knowledge, which strenuously attempts to preserve the body, appears to be a subject’s attempt to control the real. However, the creature who attempts to preserve him/herself will never be able to control the real completely, because it includes ‘the unknown’, the ‘greater than oneself’. This ‘unknown’ places a limit on the creature’s being. For this reason, the ‘knowledge of the body’ throws on the human being an impossible weight: the dominion of ‘the unknown’, the exorcising of ‘the ineliminable’.

²⁶⁷ I 51 369-370.

²⁶⁸ Or ‘follow’.

²⁶⁹ I 51 369.

²⁷⁰ See section II.2.2.

Taking all of these elements into account, the passions take the shape, in Isaac's writings, of attempts to *defend* oneself from one's original vulnerability inscribed in the body, and attempts to *control* the real. These attempts ultimately try to *defend oneself from the most passible part of oneself*. Also for this reason, and not simply because they are rooted in 'the sensible', they are connected to 'the realm of the body', which is vulnerable. They are attempts, however, that, being grounded in oblivion and flight, i.e. in the removal of the subject from the perception of his/her original state of limitation, cannot really offer a solution, and have, therefore, an illusory, ultimately damaging nature. In fact, they are grounded in a bypassing of one's ontological *status*. They end up, rather than actuating a real defence, actually worsening the previous situation.

The passions fail in their attempt to defend the creature. The uncontrollable remains uncontrollable, and the passible, passible. Whoever is prey to the passions remains *de facto* prey to a continuous oscillation between calculation and setback, between attempt to protect oneself and wound. Isaac outlines this dynamic of oscillation in I 51, proceeding in his analysis of the mechanisms of knowledge. After mentioning the passions quoted above, Isaac adds that, despite them, the human being cannot free him/herself from "the continuous anxiety and fear for the things of the body"²⁷¹. The inevitable exposure to failure of this 'knowledge', on the contrary, causes the sensation of fear to increase. As a consequence, fear assumes different, new forms – other passions and fears: "faintheartedness, sadness, desperation, dread of the demons, fear of human beings, rumours of thieves, reports of plagues, thoughts of illnesses, preoccupation about a lack of food, agitation over

²⁷¹ I 51 370.

death, fear of suffering and wild animals, and similar things, which [make this knowledge] a sea troubled by waves at all times of the day and night”²⁷².

As a reaction to these multiplying fears, the human being makes further attempts to control the real and defend oneself: knowledge “increases itself”, and new, more complex passions arise. Among these, Isaac mentions the lack of love (connected to the belief about possessing a knowledge of good and evil), investigating the faults of others and their weaknesses, disputation, and crafty contrivances, as well as boasting and pride, which is the most serious of the passions²⁷³. One may note, here, how these reactions become increasingly distant from the primary quality of the first passions mentioned, more connected to physical immediacy. One may also note how the dimension of calculation becomes increasingly present: the aim of any calculation is always self-preservation. Also moral evil, machinations, and the use of others to serve one’s own ends, then, arise for Isaac due to an incapacity to cope with a problem which is *ontological*, more than merely moral, rooted in the primary flight from a confrontation with limitation.

In accordance with this vision, Isaac connects the passionate state not only to the search for physical wellbeing or personal power, but also includes in it things which current sensibility would not tend to consider negative, like the structuring of society, the development of arts and ideas, and the man-woman relationship. What all of the elements that Isaac mentions share in common, beyond every moral evaluation, is that they lighten the encounter with the weight of one’s finitude. The problem which interests Isaac is, again, *ontological* in nature. It regards meeting the weight of one’s finitude. Being ontological, this problem’s solution cannot be found

²⁷² I 51 370.

²⁷³ See I 51 370-371. On pride, see section V.3.3.

at the mere level of an effort to maintain moral rectitude. It concerns oneself on an existential level.

II.2.2. *HUMAN CREATORIALITY: THE SOUL*

In previous sections, the dimension of the soul has been evoked. But what is the ‘soul’? If the body is structurally vulnerable, what is its condition? And, in this light, to which experience does the soul-body distinction refer, in Isaac? To understand this, Isaac’s understanding of the soul should first be examined.

The ‘soul’, *ܠܘܗܐ*, is the aspect of the human being that is ontologically opened to God and his image within him/her²⁷⁴, invisible, immaterial, and ‘rational’. In this, the soul is other than the body and “superior”²⁷⁵ to it. It is the ‘invisible’, inner dimension of the creature. Since the term *ܠܘܗܐ* also means ‘oneself’, being the Syriac reflexive pronoun, when translating Isaac, one must at times choose between two possible meanings which, for him, would not have been alternatives, but both present to his consciousness: the ‘soul’ evokes, immediately, ‘oneself’.

Of the soul, Isaac identifies the structural functions, some of which are connected to its relationship with the world, and others, which also belong to it independently of the world. Isaac systematically outlines this structuring in *Centuries* III 76-78. “Five are the powers of the soul, which the rational soul possesses in the united essence: natural desire (*ܠܘܗܐ ܝܘܨܝܢܐ*) [...] of the soul; the irascible power (*ܠܘܗܐ ܡܪܝܘܬܐ*), its helper [...]; the movement of vitality (*ܠܘܗܐ ܡܘܘܘܢܐ*), which moves within it without ceasing; simple rationality (*ܠܘܗܐ ܡܘܘܢܐ ܡܘܘܢܐ*), and

²⁷⁴ I 3 21-22.

²⁷⁵ I 46 331.

composite rationality (ܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ)²⁷⁶, i.e. intuitive, and discursive rationality. Isaac continues:

Two of the five powers of the soul cease with its separation from the body, in a complete abolition: they are the irascible power, and composite rationality. Neither of them is needed in the future way of life: there, there is nothing that the voice should proclaim, nor anything opposed to good things, against which zeal (ܘܘܪܘܬܐ) might be useful. Another two of them are kept without stirring until after the resurrection, i.e. until the use of the world to come: in them is all the use of that way of life which is in heaven. One is simple rationality, i.e. the gnostic intellect (ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ) through which [the soul] is moved to the contemplation of that Essence that is the entire end of the kingdom of heaven, and within whose wonder is kept the intellect of all rational beings, first and last; [the other] is the desire of its nature, by which is moved the pleasure of the great love for the Creator, who then will make perfect the entire nature of human beings, together with the angels, and the demons [...]. There remains only one of all of the natural [powers] of the soul which, alone, stays with it in its separation from the body, until [the time when] it will receive again its companion at the mighty sign of the Creator: it is the moving of vitality. This alone remains with [the soul] here, and with it, it girds [itself] for the other world²⁷⁷.

This distinction into five ‘powers’ is influenced by the evolution of Aristotelian concepts, mediated by Neoplatonist interpretations, in the East-Syriac milieu²⁷⁸. Elsewhere, Isaac mentions the three classical functions of Platonic anthropology: the irascible, the concupiscible (or desiring), and the rational²⁷⁹. However, in another passage, he specifies that, although there is only one ‘reason’, it possesses two ‘properties’ or ‘powers’, i.e. the discursive (ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ) and the intellectual (ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ)²⁸⁰, as in the first quotation. ‘Reason’, then, is, for Isaac, a fundamental

²⁷⁶ Centuries III 76 76v.

²⁷⁷ Centuries III 77 77r.

²⁷⁸ On the East Syriac conception of the soul and the afterlife, see: Berti, *L’au-delà de l’âme*, in particular 47-100. Also Timothy I connects the problem of the soul’s ‘powers’ to that of death (99).

²⁷⁹ See II 19,1 92 (Syr.); 103 (ET): ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ; II 17,1 80-81 (Syr.); 91 (ET), where Isaac speaks of ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ/ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ and ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܘܚܘܪܘܬܐ; for an overview of Isaac’s terminology and roots (in particular, but not exclusively, Evagrius), see Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 554, footnote 2, 17. The tripartite soul is a Platonic concept: Cf. Plato, *Republic* IV. Plato’s works do not appear to have been translated into Syriac: no manuscripts survive. On Plato in the Syriac tradition, see H. Hugonnard-Roche, “Platon syriaque”, in M.-A. Amir-Moezzi, – J.-D. Dubois – C. Jullien – F. Jullien (eds.), *Pensée grecque et sagesse d’Orient. Hommage à Michel Tardieu*. Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études, Sciences religieuses 142, Turnhout, 2010, 307-322.

²⁸⁰ See I 29 207.

characteristic of the soul: “Your love not only brought us into being, but [caused us also] to be capable of reason, so that we might perceive and rejoice in the delight of intelligence and in the pleasure of the vast gift of insight”²⁸¹. But what is his understanding of ‘reason’?

For Isaac, to lay emphasis on ‘reason’ does not mean to lay emphasis on cognitive or procedural ability, but, when ‘reason’ functions in an adequate way, to lay emphasis on the union between cognitive-discursive ability and intuitive rationality, where the first is subject to the guidance of the second, and both are ontologically turned towards the good, of which God is the source. Every use of discursive rationality that is not oriented in this direction fails to respect its ‘natural’ functioning, as is the case with the ‘knowledge of the body’ previously examined. In distinguishing between “simple rationality” and “composite rationality”, Isaac is not always consistent regarding his use of terminology, but is absolutely consistent from a conceptual point of view. He connects the idea of ‘voice’, as above, to the functioning of discursive reason, because it gives names to objects, and discerns them, and connects to intuitive reason the capacity of vision, of gazing – the noetic sight. This ‘gazing’ is the modality of the relationship to God in the world to come, and it is active also ‘here’, although, in the present condition it is generally united to discursive rationality. There is an “eye of the soul”²⁸², also defined as “the head of the soul”²⁸³, which is both the receiver of knowledge and the ‘direction of the gaze towards’, apart from composite rationality. Isaac calls this function ܠܘܥܢܐ and ܠܘܢܐ, ‘intellect’ and ‘mind’, terms which are employed to translate νοῦς in the

²⁸¹ II 18,18 90 (Syr.); 101 (ET).

²⁸² II 34,3 135 (Syr.); 147 (ET). The concept is common in Plato and is found in Ephrem: see Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 555, footnote 3, 147; footnote 2, 152.

²⁸³ II 5,21 11 (Syr.); 14 (ET).

Syriac versions of Evagrius²⁸⁴. At times, he also employs ܠܘܘܘܬܐ and other locutions, or calls it ܠܘܘܬܐ, the ‘heart’²⁸⁵. In its purest state, turned to God, this faculty is “gnostic intellect”, intellect that knows the Truth.

When Isaac intends to refer explicitly to intuitive rationality as the ‘guide’ to the other activities of the subject, he usually employs the term ܠܘܘܬܐ, the ‘intellect’. From this, it emerges that, for him, the intellect plays a role not only in contemplation, but also in the relationship with the world. When the soul is in its proper state, one’s ܠܘܘܬܐ guides perception and composite rationality, which follow it: it is “the ruler of the senses”²⁸⁶, which “orders senses and thoughts”²⁸⁷. When this way of being is established in the subject, one’s intellect ‘reigns’, like David in his own house²⁸⁸. ‘Intellect’ is ܠܘܘܬܐ, the ‘helmsman’, or ܠܘܘܬܐ, the ‘steersman’²⁸⁹, of the entire subjective life. The breadth of Isaac’s concept of reason, which will become visible throughout the course of this thesis, can be appreciated already here: when he defines the areas of competence of the soul’s functions, Isaac attributes to the intellect “the luminous faith of the heart”, hope, and attention to God’s wisdom²⁹⁰.

In the life of this *katastasis*, as seen above, the intellect operates, when it functions ‘naturally’, in union with discursive reason, zeal, and the desire “of the soul”, i.e. the desire of God. However, in the life to come, the functions of the self

²⁸⁴ See A. Guillaumont, “Les versions syriaques de l’œuvre d’Évagre le Pontique et leur rôle dans la formation du vocabulaire ascétique syriaque”, in R. Lavenant (ed.), *III Symposium Syriacum, 1980: Les contacts du monde syriaque avec les autres cultures (Goslar 7–11 Septembre 1980)*, OCA 221, Rome, 1983, 35-41, 39.

²⁸⁵ Although this term also seems to assume other connotations in Isaac, related to ‘internal perception’, he uses it to indicate volition, i.e. a rational act, or the subject of reflection: see II 29,7 120 (Syr.); 131 (ET).

²⁸⁶ I 22 170; I 70 484: ܠܘܘܬܐ ܐܝܢ ܠܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܘܬܐ.

²⁸⁷ I 22 170.

²⁸⁸ See I 70 485.

²⁸⁹ II 17,12 83 (Syr.); 94 (ET).

²⁹⁰ II 19,4 93 (Syr.); 103 (ET).

necessary for the relationship with creatures will disappear, because the human being will exist in the relationship with God alone. Discursive reason will end, and also zeal, the “watchdog”²⁹¹ of the soul which struggles against the passions, because, in the world to come, there will be no opposition to ‘virtue’. The desire for God, however, will not disappear in the new world²⁹². It will remain, together with vitality and the intellect. The soul, in fact, is also vitality, and this vitality is the function which never ceases operating, even in that state which, according to the tradition of the Church of the East, is interposed between death and resurrection. ‘Vitality’ is the continuity of the soul.

The soul then, in its ultimate state, is not only conceived as the capacity for contemplation but as a *living*, dynamic unity which, through desire and gaze, has a relationship with God.

II.2.2.1. *The Soul: Limitations*

Although Isaac conceives of the soul as the noblest aspect of human beings, he also describes it as ontologically limited. This section examines this element of his thought.

First, for Isaac, the soul is not immortal in the sense that this term implies in other contexts. After death it ‘sleeps’, and vitality is the only trace of the self which remains when one dies. The soul does not become corrupt, like the body, but is not active in its full being until God reawakens it at the resurrection, when it will be reunited with the body and *live* as desire and simple rationality. Isaac speaks of “the

²⁹¹ See II 17 3 81 (Syr.); 92 (ET).

²⁹² II 19,2 92 (Syr.); 103 (ET).

mighty sign of the Creator”²⁹³: the reawakening of the soul is only due to God, and this highlights the soul’s creatural, limited condition.

Another element which makes the soul subject to limitation is that which Isaac calls *حى اللصه* (*meṣṭalyānutā*), ‘inclination’. Isaac conceives of the soul as characterised by freedom/freewill, which derives from its rationality: “Reason (*حليله*) is the cause of freedom (*لصه*), and the fruit of both is inclination (*حى اللصه*). Without the first there is not the second, and where the second is lacking, also the third is bound with bridles”²⁹⁴. Literally, ‘inclination’ indicates the possibility that the subject possesses to ‘incline’ towards good or evil. It is a concept distinctive of Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Antiochene tradition²⁹⁵, which means the human being’s capacity to decide for him/herself. In Isaac’s writings, however, it also indicates the instability of deciding, and therefore the exposure to mutability: “The [mind’s] mobility follows freedom, and mental commotions follow inclination”²⁹⁶. For this reason, the term sometimes also assumes the meaning of a tendency, an ‘inclination’ to evil, as if the presence of this mobility itself would imply a non-reliability of choice, and therefore error.

‘Inclination’ as the possibility of deviating from the good concerns not only an instability in the concrete choice of goodness but also concerns the activity of gazing towards God, since it is a quality of reason. The possibility of falling away from directing the gaze towards God, for Isaac, is always present, as an ‘obscure possibility’ distinctive of the creatural state. Therefore, ‘inclination’ is the possibility of change²⁹⁷, an ontological limitation not due to the body, but due to

²⁹³ Centuries III 77 77r.

²⁹⁴ I 1 3. See also I 26 191.

²⁹⁵ See Macomber, *The Theological Synthesis*, footnote 1, 6; Bettiolo, “Avec la charité”, footnote 53, 337; *Id.*, “Lineamenti”, 572.

²⁹⁶ I 1 6.

²⁹⁷ See e.g. Centuries III 22 63r-63v.

the very structure of the soul itself. This means that the human being does not fall away from God due to the body alone, due to sensation, or the distraction engendered by the images of the objects, but also due to this ontological limitation of the soul. Even the angels, who are purely noetic natures, are subject to ‘inclination’²⁹⁸. For both humans and angels, turning themselves to God is the fruit of continuous effort.

A last essential element of Isaac’s conception of the soul as limited is its receptivity, which also is a mark of its creatural status. The soul is naturally receptive of the experience of the life of the body; it is other, but sensitive to it. It has an openness to the body’s perceptions: the terrible sufferings of the sick body “torment” it²⁹⁹; the fear of the loss of the body’s integrity touches and discourages it; it “suffers and rejoices with the body”.³⁰⁰ The soul is also receptive of ‘change’, of the ‘forms’ or ‘images’ of objects, and generally Isaac calls the ‘mind’ the place of this happening.

The soul’s receptivity is made possible due to its connection with the body through the senses, which are receptive to the outer world. This receptivity, which includes the soul’s sensitivity to the body’s vulnerability, forms part of the soul’s nature, because God created the human being as a union of body and soul. In this sense, although different from passionality, it is a pre-condition of passionality. Nevertheless, Isaac does not conceive of the soul’s receptivity as something negative, and it is through receptivity that one’s openness to the spiritual world also occurs: the soul is, ontologically, *مستلم*, a ‘receiver’, ‘receptive’ of the Mystery, “receptacle of the blessed Light”³⁰¹.

²⁹⁸ See e.g. Centuries III 22 63r-63v.; Centuries III 80-81 77v-78r; I 72 481. See Bettiolo, “Prigionieri”, 30-37.

²⁹⁹ II 5,27 14 (Syr.); 27 (ET).

³⁰⁰ See I 3 22.

³⁰¹ I 3 22.

Isaac's emphasis on the soul's structural limitations, does not imply a depreciation of its role in human existence. The soul remains the noblest aspect of the subject. However, Isaac's insistence on the soul's limitations excludes every possible automatism of 'kinship' between the soul and God. The soul remains radically creature.

II.2.2.2. *The Soul: Passions*

Different from the ontological limitations described above is the soul's subjection to passionality. This can be understood as the specific vulnerability of the soul, distinct from the vulnerability of the body. Unlike the vulnerability of the body and the other limitations of the soul, this form of vulnerability does not possess the same degree of necessity of these limitations. According to Isaac's most frequent and most studied definition, which has been discussed above, the soul is naturally non-passional. Nevertheless, it suffers *de facto* a submission to the passions, and to the fear-desire mechanism from which they are born.

For Isaac, the soul, in the condition in which the creature usually lives before the ascetic choice, always experiences this form of suffering unconsciously, and never fully operates according to its proper way of functioning. The fact of not acknowledging the existence of this suffering is the central problem of life in the world. More difficult to recognise, this suffering of the soul is not evident, like that of the body: to notice it, one must undergo a process of deconstruction of what is known and is considered normal.

To speak of passionality as the soul's suffering, Isaac employs several recurrent metaphors. These metaphors should not be read as an alternative to the dynamic of the formation of the passions previously examined, but as a description of the same problem from the point of view of subjective experience. They should not be

regarded as technical descriptions, but rather as analogies which bring experience to light.

In addition to the frequent metaphor of the passions as ‘agitation’, which causes the loss of serenity and peace, the most common metaphor that Isaac employs to describe the soul’s subjection to the passions is that of illness. This metaphor, rooted in Stoicism, is also employed in Evagrius’ *Praktikos*³⁰², and by John the Solitary³⁰³. In I 3, Isaac writes: “If virtue is the natural health of the soul (صحة النفس الطبيعية), the passions are illnesses, which happen to affect [human] nature, and deprive it of its health. But it is evident that, in nature, health precedes eventual illness”³⁰⁴. The metaphor transmits the idea of the soul as a whole place, whose integrity should necessarily precede illness, i.e. the passions, even for illness to be conceivable. This originally whole place suffers damage, with the passions.

Another frequent metaphor is that of division. Isaac describes the effect of the thoughts on the soul (thoughts from which the passions derive) as something which ‘divides’ the soul, ‘dominates’ it, “taking [possession] of it as through violence”³⁰⁵. There is, here, the breaking of an integrity, but this time the accent is not on its ontological priority but rather on an act of violence which causes a loss of autonomy and an invasion, so that the soul is dispossessed of itself. Both this metaphor and that of illness evoke a state of suffering.

A metaphor that throws further light on the other is that of the ‘entrance’ of the passions into the soul³⁰⁶, which recurs in Isaac in many forms. He employs the language of ‘entrance’ not only regarding what concerns the passions, but for all

³⁰² See in particular Guillaumont, *Traité Pratique*, SC 171, 56, 630-633. In the footnote, the author highlights the Stoic background of this idea.

³⁰³ See Dederling, *Johannes*, 28-29.

³⁰⁴ I 3 24.

³⁰⁵ See I 69 480.

³⁰⁶ See e.g. I 3 20.

adverse realities: there is an ‘entrance’ in the soul of thoughts³⁰⁷, sin³⁰⁸, demons³⁰⁹, and Satan³¹⁰, whom Isaac says can open “a breach” in the soul³¹¹. It is after this “entrance”, after this violation of space, that the taking possession of the soul can happen, or illness imposes itself on health. The ‘soul’ is, then, conceived as the space of the ‘inside’, which should be protected from the intrusiveness of an ‘outside’: “When foreign waters do not enter the source of the soul, the waters of its nature spring from it, those wonderful intuitions which move towards God at all times”³¹².

According to this metaphor, the passions apparently belong to the space of the soul; in reality, instead, they invade it from the outside. They are comparable to what is other than the soul itself; first of all to the body, from which Isaac thinks the space of the soul is easily distinguishable:

If these [passions] are considered natural for the soul, because it is moved by them due to the body, then also hunger, thirst, and sleep would belong to the soul, because through them the soul suffers and rests with the body; also, the amputation of limbs, fever, pains, illnesses, and the rest because, due to its communicating [with the body], the soul suffers with the body when it suffers, it is moved to joy when the body feels joy, and it is distressed when the body is tormented³¹³.

Therefore, for Isaac, “even if the soul is moved by [the passions], it is evident that is moved by something external to its nature”³¹⁴.

Isaac suggests a gap exists here, a difference between the soul and all that which, of the self, can become an object of experience. There is an ‘excess’ of the soul over all that it ‘sees’, ‘perceives’, and knows of subjective life.

³⁰⁷ See II 17,10 83 (Syr.); 93 (ET).

³⁰⁸ See I 9 114.

³⁰⁹ See I 30 210.

³¹⁰ See I 9 114; I 16 130.

³¹¹ I 9 114.

³¹² I 3 20.

³¹³ I 3 22.

³¹⁴ I 3 22.

If one analyses the elements that Isaac mentions, to which he compares the passions, this becomes clear. It is the possibility of being receptive, distinctive of the soul, that makes evident its alterity from all of the other elements that Isaac mentions. This appears from the verbs he employs, all of which allude to a passive dimension: the soul 'is moved', 'suffers', and 'rests from'. It is therefore evident that, for Isaac, there is a reality of the soul which is other from all that 'moves it', 'causes it suffering', and 'gives it rest'. Therefore, if the passions also 'move it', like the other elements he mentions, they are other from the place in which they are experienced, i.e. the receptive soul.

Isaac, therefore, evokes an 'excess' of the self over and above the self, an 'excess' of oneself over oneself. He seems to identify a subjective and objective dimension of the self in the human being's experience of him/herself. This implies, as a consequence, the possibility of saying 'you' to oneself, i.e. to that 'oneself' who is experiencing or has experienced the passion. It implies the possibility of developing a reflective attitude, a relationship with one's inner world. The metaphors of illness, invasion, dispossession, and entrance, speak, therefore, of a darkening of the subjective dimension of oneself by the objective dimension: the body, states of mind, and passions.

For Isaac, this is elementary. It is transparent. He does not need to explain explicitly the existence of a subjective and objective dimension of the self. For him, most of the time, it is enough to say that 'the passion' is other than oneself, that it is 'unnatural' to the soul.

'Soul', in this perspective, indicates what, in oneself, can never become completely a 'you'.

'Soul', in this perspective, is not a mere 'part' of oneself, an object, objectifiable like the rest of oneself. It is, instead, the place of one's deepest belonging to oneself,

of the presence to oneself. This, in its accomplished form, is non-passionality. The passions, darkening the subjective dimension of the self, darken this deepest belonging, this deepest presence to oneself.

It is not accidental, then, that Isaac describes the soul as the union of life, desire, and gaze, i.e. life in relationship, in its being turned to God. God, Isaac states, “does not impress” the soul with “matters”³¹⁵, and therefore can never be a mere object, unlike every other element of oneself and the world.

The problem, then, not only of the passions, but, in a wider sense, of the ‘life at the level of the body’, is the problem of the soul confusing itself with what can be called the ‘you’ of oneself: with one’s own body, in the first place, and with all the experiences which arise from it. In this sense, the three ‘levels’ of the spiritual life – ‘of the body’, ‘of the soul’, ‘of the Spirit’ –, which Isaac received from John the Solitary, were not understood by him solely as levels of perfection, but as levels of the experience of oneself. It is the soul as the subjective dimension of the self which is darkened by the objective dimension of the self in the ‘life at the level of the body’, and which starts to operate properly in the ‘life at the level of the soul’.

The conception of passionality as the suffering of a non-belonging to oneself emerges with a particular intensity in Isaac’s writings. Speaking of pride, for instance, Isaac attributes to this passion the role of an agent, making it the subject of the verb used in the sentence, attributing to pride itself the behaviour of the person who is its prey: “Pride cannot perceive that it walks in darkness and it cannot know understanding and wisdom. In its thoughts, it lifts itself up above everything,

³¹⁵ See Centuries II 36 41r: “Every meditation which exists imprints in the intellect the object concerning which it is moved. The Truth however, being without image, does not imprint in the intellect [...] any matter and composition of thoughts. Well has been spoken by a gnostic, a man clothed in God: ‘the intellect which gazes at God is free from impressions (ⲉⲛⲥⲓⲛⲧ) and from matters (ⲉⲗⲁⲓⲙⲟⲩ)’”.

but is poorer and lower than everything”³¹⁶. Having ‘entered’, as it were, into a space which is not its own, pride acts in the subject’s place, superimposing itself and darkening the subjective dimension. To affirm that fear, the original passion, transcends its proper sphere and influences the space of the soul, as previously seen, refers to the same mechanism of ‘entrance’ and ‘darkening’.

From this perspective, the functions of the soul of Platonic origin examined above (zeal, desire, and reason) assume a new light. They become understandable as functions, which makes it possible to articulate the ‘you’ of oneself, the relationship of one’s subjective with one’s objective dimension. Isaac affirms, for instance, speaking of developing this relationship: “Without distractions, Satan has no opportunity to enter the soul. Therefore, the solitary should always remain before God’s presence [...] if he wants to seize quickly the small points which throb in him and to learn to discern in the peace of mind [the thoughts] which enter and go out”³¹⁷. Here, all the elements considered so far are present: the threat of an ‘entrance’, the soul’s receptivity (the fact that the “small points [of thoughts]” “enter and go out”, here, should be intended in this way), and discernment, which sees.

From this analysis one can see how the ‘soul’, in Isaac, is not an immobile substance. It is the place of the presence to oneself, which is exposed to the risk of a ‘darkening’, which is its suffering. The categories that Isaac employs – soul/body; soul/sensations; and above all non-passional soul/passional body – do not imply a dichotomy or conflict, but attempt in the first instance to decipher the experience of oneself, to describe the possibility of developing a relational, reflective attitude

³¹⁶ I 16 133.

³¹⁷ I 16 130.

towards oneself, and to identify the necessity of a belonging to oneself that Isaac conceives as profound, real freedom.

The relationship with God, in Isaac, is not independent of these issues.

II.3. TRANSCENDING?

From the analysis which has been traced so far, it emerges that Isaac conceives of the ontological human condition and the usual life in the world as being marked by suffering. Faith, the quest for God, and the choice of *askesis* are not understandable without comprehending this. This is so central that Isaac, in the *Centuries*, describes the ‘New World’ not only as “fulfilment” and “renewal”, but also as “liberation from suffering”: “All will receive fulfilment when our Lord will rise from heaven, above all, and he will raise us up from the dust, and will give renewal and liberation from suffering to us and to the whole of creation, and will make all ascend with him to the heavenly dwelling”³¹⁸.

To look for God, in Isaac, means to look for a liberation from suffering.

For Isaac, the quest for God, which can have various motivations³¹⁹, arises from disillusionment concerning the nature of the world and one’s ontological condition. Starting from the observation of the transiency of everything, this disillusionment leads to the realisation, on the human being’s part, that he/she will also ‘pass’. Isaac connects to this disillusionment, which he considers the beginning of a disclosure of an objective vision of reality, the possibility of faith itself, which *follows and does not precede* this experience, in the phenomenology he outlines³²⁰.

³¹⁸ *Centuries* III 82 78r-78v.

³¹⁹ Isaac describes these reasons in III 12,1-2 93 (Syr.), 130 (IT); 3-4 94 (Syr.), 131 (IT); 6-11 94-95 (Syr.); 131-133 (IT).

³²⁰ On ‘faith’, see Chapter VI.

In Isaac's words, from the crossing through the experience of disillusionment originates a "love for oneself" or, according to another possible translation, for "one's own soul", to which a 'doubting' of the world and its bonds is closely connected³²¹. It is within this experience of the crossing through suffering that the soul emerges as one's own new pole of attention, and the possibility of God – in this order –, assumes meaning in the eyes of the subject. First one awakens to the soul, i.e. to oneself, and then one opens oneself up to God. The soul and God are discovered only through suffering, and the entrance into the ascetic life follows this experience of suffering and disillusionment.

Isaac describes the structure of this experience in these terms:

First of all, nature throws into him a discerning movement, which indicates to him, in silence, the non-firm constitution of the world, and the end which its course has, and the impermanence of all the things which enter into it, because he sees that this world is set like a place of crossing for those who enter into it [...]. Behold! They sleep in Sheol for many years as for a single night! [...] And *also* I will pass, like one of them. Accursed are riches and pleasures! At this thought, a great *consternation* falls into his heart, *suffering* fills his mind, and for the *burden of suffering* he shed *tears* in great *sadness*. Since then, he despises the world and *weeps* for his life and makes *lamentation* over his soul [with] various bitter *lamentations*, and with *groans* he says to [his soul]: where [will you go], my poor soul? Where will you be found after my death? Perhaps also this thought will be stirred in him: if only I had not entered creation and had not come out of the womb! And with this kind of *lamentations*, he sheds sweet *tears* [coming] from the *groaning* of his heart, and moistens his garment with *tears*, and therefore, in his eyes, this world becomes like a prison, and the previous sweetness more bitter than all bitterness, and the love of his own life and its desirable beauties like a type of Sheol³²².

The human being, then, "doubts" the world.

For Isaac, by observing the world in an objective way, one grasps its unstable and corruptible structure, and understands that one belongs to it, that one is mortal.

³²¹ See I 35: Isaac speaks of a mind which "doubts (شكك) of the world" and of a "doubt (شك) concerning it": "Disciple: [...] What is the initial movement by which the mind begins to doubt of the world? [...] Teacher: When the thought of the love of [his own] soul has been moved within him, this movement of the thought begins to make odious the world in his eyes [lit: before him], and to create in him a doubt concerning it".

³²² I 35 228-229.

One does not ‘despise’ the world *a priori*, due to some supposed evil quality, but one *perceives* its objectively transient nature. In the passage from this realisation to the realisation of one’s mortality, from the observation of things to seeing oneself, a previously unknown attention is born. Disillusionment with the world implies the practice, for the first time, of the exercise of reason according to its nature³²³. Isaac, therefore, interprets disillusionment as the beginning of the adequate functioning of discursive rationality, which applies itself to discern the problem of one’s ontological status. The radically limited state of the body, of which death makes the human being conscious, comes to light, in front of oneself.

This ‘standing in front’, which is a consequence of the exercise of observing, indicates the birth of a reflective attitude which begins to deconstruct that which has been previously described as ‘adherence’ of the body to objects, from which the passional movement also is born. One begins to say ‘you’ to oneself, and the first ‘you’ one says is to one’s mortal body. It is not accidental, then, that Isaac connects to this possibility the discovery of one’s ‘soul’, an awakening to this dimension, and the interrogation about it: “Where [will you go], my poor soul?”³²⁴.

With different language, through the exercise of seeing oneself as mortal, reason begins to stop ‘following’ the ‘irreflective’ movement of the body, and the automatism of which existence was woven is interrupted³²⁵. This allows one to say ‘you’ to oneself as a mortal body, i.e. to *see* oneself. This, however, does not happen through the exercise of reasoning alone.

The admission of being mortal, in fact, is the admission that the problem of the structural limitation of things *concerns oneself*. It is within the fact of suffering

³²³ Cf. I 44.

³²⁴ I 35 229.

³²⁵ Cf. I 44 361.

one's own limit, of suffering one's passible condition, that the question of the soul arises. The centrality of this suffering is evident in Isaac's language: consternation, suffering, burden of suffering, tears, sadness, weeping, lamentations, groans.

Within suffering, a contact with oneself of extreme depth, which is not reflection, takes place. Starting from this 'knowing in the flesh' the limit, arises the necessity of saying 'you' to oneself. This necessity arises almost forcefully, through suffering.

Only then, the human being "comes to Scripture", reads, and *sees* what before he/she was not able to see. He/she was not seeing it because before he/she was not suffering. It is at this point, that he/she *believes*: he/she believes "the faith in the resurrection", "the fulfilment, which will happen to all the realities of this world". One believes in a *consolation* of suffering. However, only the one who suffers accesses this faith. Because of the "flashes" of this faith, "the eye of the mind is illumined and the discernment of nature shines"³²⁶.

It is at this point that the human being leaves the world, in a separation³²⁷ that Isaac conceives as a necessary awakening to the need to "take care of oneself/one's soul"³²⁸. This 'taking care', however, should not be misunderstood. It takes the form, initially, of a tension to transcend oneself, the self of the 'here', limited and passional, to search for the consolation where there will no longer be any suffering. "Take care of oneself" is conformity to 'God's commandments' and this, if followed, means abandoning the realities of the 'here', obeying a desire which is

³²⁶ See I 35 230: "Then, with his mind, he comes to Scripture, which moves in him the faith in the resurrection, and the fulfilment which will happen to all the realities of this world, and the promises which are written in it for those who lived well in the world, the divine judgements [...]. From there, like one who encounters a light, he throws away from himself the burden of sadness and a great joy is moved in him, as one who has found an excellent, firm hope. These and similar things, [human] nature cannot show by a movement which [arises] from itself. *Only through faith are they understood*, from what is written in Scripture".

³²⁷ See e.g. III 12,2 93 (Syr.); 130-131 (IT).

³²⁸ I 35 230.

“more excellent” than that of ‘the sensible’³²⁹. Isaac insists on the necessity of such a ‘transcendence’, of such a ‘going beyond’ the passions, but also the use of the body and that which concerns it, to access the encounter with God.

Entrance into the ascetic life implies, then, trust in the value of a radical abandoning of the world, of the concrete possibility of overcoming its attraction, of a fundamental separation from everything which belongs to the world³³⁰. Not only should one detach oneself as much as possible from the physical world, but all thoughts connected to the reality ‘world’ should finally be abandoned, if one looks for an encounter with God³³¹: “this weak world and the memory of its things” should be forgotten³³², in the attempt to be, in Isaac’s words, “above the body, continually”³³³.

Isaac, in I 1, clarifies that it is not a matter of leaving the body itself behind, but its “affairs”³³⁴. This, however, does not mean an imaginary detachment, and Isaac, also using expressions such as “going out of the body”³³⁵, insists on a concrete abandonment of objects themselves. “Let all good and bad occurrences which happen to the body be considered by you like dreams”³³⁶; “release from matters precedes the bond with God”³³⁷.

However, the condition of physical vulnerability cannot be surpassed at a human level. This *katastasis* does not end with one entering the desert. Also

³²⁹ See I 35 230-231.

³³⁰ See e.g. I 1 2: “It is impossible to come close to God unless one renounces the world”; III 7,21 49-50 (Syr.); 75 (IT): “O Ocean, who sustains the world, draw me out of the ocean of many waves”; Centuries II 55 47v.

³³¹ See e.g. I 1 2: “This is virtue: that a person, in his mind, becomes empty of the world. [...] The passions do not cease, nor the evil thoughts disappear without desert and solitude”; Centuries I 84 32r: “My Lord, who caused me to go out sensibly from the world, by the power of your holy right, make me worthy of an intelligible exit, in the stripping off of the movements of the corporeal world”.

³³² See e.g. I 77 500.

³³³ II 21,15 105 (Syr.); 117 (ET).

³³⁴ See I 1 2.

³³⁵ Centuries II 81 55r.

³³⁶ I 1 10.

³³⁷ I 4 40.

‘inclination’ remains, and the passions do not cease, because they are connected to the structure of the body.

This means that a transcendence, at least in an ideal form, is impossible. An awareness of this impossibility shines through all of Isaac’s writings. In them recur, with the same frequency as the first affirmations about the desire to transcend the reality of the ‘here’, affirmations of this kind: “Since [human] nature has not yet been raised above the order of mortality and the weight of the flesh, it cannot be completely in [that] spiritual state, which is above inclination”³³⁸; “as long as we bear the image of Adam, it is [also] necessary [to bear] his passions; it is impossible for the earth to stop causing [thorns] to grow, because it does this according to its nature”³³⁹; “because of the infirmity of the flesh [the soul] cannot be completely free from the passions, as long as it is clothed [in the flesh]”³⁴⁰; “the provocations [of the passions] do not cease until the world exists”³⁴¹; “there is no perfect freedom, in an imperfect world”³⁴².

This whole condition of ‘the human’ (the nature of the passible and mortal body, solicitation of the world through sensation, subjection to ‘inclination’, the limitations of the soul, and the possibility of the passions) is identified by Isaac as the ontological condition of ‘weakness’, *ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ* (*mḥilutā*). This term, which recurs frequently in Isaac’s writings, is a technical term, indicating the common condition of “the weak rank of human beings (*ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ*)”³⁴³. The term designates the creatural condition or, rather, not the creatural condition *tout court*, but the ontological creatural condition that is *exposed to suffering*, of body and soul.

³³⁸ I 51 375.

³³⁹ I 28 204.

³⁴⁰ I 3 26-27.

³⁴¹ I 62 432.

³⁴² I 51 376.

³⁴³ III 7,6 46 (Syr.); 70 (IT).

In this sense, ‘weakness’ also includes the possibility of being subject to the passions. This, like fear, can be considered as ontological because it is strongly connected to the ontological human condition of frailty. In Isaac’s writings rare are the discourses that make no reference to ‘weakness’.

The concept of ‘weakness’, whose presence in Isaac was first identified by André Louf and Sabino Chialà³⁴⁴, should not immediately be understood in the light of contemporary categories, and should not be taken as synonymous of what, in current language, is often indicated by phrases such as ‘human weaknesses’. Isaac’s *ضعف* is ontological, in fact: it is “the weakness and misery of nature with which [human beings] are clothed”³⁴⁵, that evokes far more radical problems than any single insufficiency. How the presence of this intranscendable element of existence might be related to the desire for transcendence, previously mentioned, is a central problem of the solitary life, which will be analysed in Chapters IV and V.

To this problem, another problem is related, that is even more radical: God himself, who was believed to be the source of consolation of suffering, seems to be other than that. This problem is synthesised in the affirmation, which recurs in Isaac, according to which God “desires” – this is the literal term that Isaac uses – the affliction of “his saints”³⁴⁶. Therefore, one finds, in Isaac, sentences like these: “God is unwilling that those who love him have rest, in [this] body”³⁴⁷; “He desires that as long as they are alive, they be in tribulation in [this] world”³⁴⁸; and “The will of God is that all those who come near to him live among evils, humbled and brought low with their entire soul and body”³⁴⁹.

³⁴⁴ See Chapter V.

³⁴⁵ I 40 10 165-166 (Syr.); 177 (ET).

³⁴⁶ See I 60 424: “He desires (يُصَلِّ)”. See also I 61 427.

³⁴⁷ I 60 424.

³⁴⁸ I 60 424

³⁴⁹ I 60 425.

God is, for Isaac, “the life of the worlds”, the origin of everything³⁵⁰, “holy Nature”, “exalted Mystery”³⁵¹, not subject to passions like hate, vengeance, and anger, or to weakness, because he is completely other than his mutable creatures³⁵², being radical and unchanging love³⁵³. How to interpret, then, the previous affirmations? How can *this* God desire affliction? Who is God? The question is, clearly, not a theoretical question, but it touches the issue of God’s reliability in existence.

The deciphering of these two issues – the meaning of ‘weakness’ and who is one’s own God – lies at the centre of Isaac’s interests. Ascetic life, for him, is the practical immersion in their deciphering.

II.4. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examined the human condition in the world according to Isaac, the problems it raises, and its relation to the choice of the solitary life. The problem of suffering, in Isaac, emerges as being both the fundamental, ontological problem of the human condition, and as what awakens the creature to the quest for God in the solitary life.

Section II.1. examined Isaac’s understanding of the concept of the ‘world’, which is the context in which existence takes place. Isaac uses this term in multiple senses. First, ‘the world’ indicates material reality. Although Isaac acknowledges the goodness and beauty of creation, he regards it as marked by a profound frailty: it is limited, mutable, transient, and corruptible. Secondly, he conceives of ‘the world’ as the totality of the passions, i.e. those inner reactions that, when followed,

³⁵⁰ See e.g. II 38,1-2 144 (Syr.); 160 (ET).

³⁵¹ See e.g. II 5,6-7 6 (Syr.); 8-9 (ET).

³⁵² II 38,3-5 149-150 (Syr.); 161 (ET); II 40,1 163 (Syr.); 174 (ET).

³⁵³ II 40,2-3 163-164 (Syr.); 174-175 (ET).

lead to sin, distancing one from God. This does not mean that Isaac understands the passions as something independent from the material structure of the cosmos: they are, rather, intimately related. Thirdly, Isaac looks at ‘the world’ as the condition distinctive of this *katastasis*, i.e. as the current state of the cosmos, regarded as being in a dialectic relationship with its eschatological state. This implies conceiving ‘the world’ as the place of incompleteness, which should find fulfilment in the future. Lastly, Isaac regards ‘the world’ as the space of the secular life, as opposed to the desert. This opposition does not merely refer to an alterity between ‘the world’ and a sociological belonging to the monastic institution. At a deeper level, it refers to an alterity between the secular as a belonging to the present, incomplete condition of the cosmos, that is marked by suffering, and the desire to belong to God alone.

Section II.2. examined the human being, who lives in this ‘world’. Isaac conceives of him/her as ontologically marked by finitude and vulnerability. The human being is a creature, and Isaac has a profound sense of his/her distance from God. Composed of body and soul, mysteriously united by God, this creature is marked by limitations and suffering. Those of the body are examined in II.2.1.

The body is the aspect of the human being that is an integral part of the material, mutable, and transient world. Subject to change like all material realities, the body is passible and mortal. Passibility and mortality are intimately related: he understands suffering as being a death *in fieri*, so that every encounter with suffering implies the possibility of experiencing a loss while existing. Mortality, however, also has a value independent of suffering, being the final reminder of one’s intranscendable finitude.

An original element of Isaac’s understanding of mortality is that Isaac believes that the human being has been created mortal, and that death is not a

consequence of sin, but *vice versa*. This does not relate to Adam alone, but to everyone's existence.

This idea symbolically expresses the conviction that, at the root of every human experience, there lie imperfection and incompleteness rather than ontological perfection. It expresses Isaac's belief in an ontological precedence of 'the negative', intended as a condition of deficiency, imperfection, and insufficiency. Every human experience, in this perspective, arises from a state of limitation.

If one looks more closely at Isaac's writings, one discovers that it is not exactly the presence of suffering and death that causes sin, but the fear of these two phenomena. Fear causes the passions and, from the passions, sin arises.

On the one hand, this fear is an immediate, almost unavoidable reaction that one develops when confronting bodily suffering and the possibility of death. On the other hand, however, Isaac believes that there exists a difference between the ontological condition of bodily vulnerability and fear, and that, if the first is intranscendable, fear is not. This idea should be related to Isaac's conviction that the body is naturally passionate, while the soul is naturally non-passionate, a theme explored in section II.2.1.1.

Fear, in Isaac, can be interpreted as the original passion, from which all of the other passions develop. Just as fear is born as a reaction to the passible nature of the body, also the other passions, for Isaac, are rooted in the corporeal nature of the human being.

The reasons for the connection between the passions and the body are complex, but can ultimately be traced back to two main ways of interpreting how the passions arise. First, Isaac affirms that they are born from contact with objects. Through sensation, the receptive body has contact with things, and this contact

awakens one's desire for these. This desire, which is rooted in one's love for the self/the body/the world, gives rise to the search for pleasure. This mechanism describes a relationship with things marked by immediacy and automaticity, devoid of any capacity for distance and 'reflective mediation'. When Isaac affirms that the world is the totality of the passions, he is not referring to the fact that this 'world of the passions' concerns subjective reactions alone, but to the intimate connection existing between one's subjective reactions and the objective structure of the real.

This theory, however, fails to explain why one desires pleasure and clings to the transient. This should be read in the light of the ontological priority of the body's vulnerability. Sensation is merely a pre-condition for the development of the passions: their real nature is *an attempt to flee from one's passible condition*, to avoid the encounter with one's ontological state of limitation. When confronted with suffering, fear arises, from which 'knowledge' develops – a 'knowledge' which attempts to protect the body from exposure to suffering. This 'knowledge', that is distinctive of the soul, unites with the body's natural search for pleasure and, in this place of intersection, the passions arise. They appear, therefore, as attempts *to defend* oneself from one's vulnerability, as *defensive flights* from encountering one's creatural condition.

These attempts, however, are ultimately destined to failure: 'knowledge', Isaac states, is always 'needy', insufficient to protect the self completely. Even if it does everything to protect the self, this self and the world where it lives remain ontologically limited, so that 'knowledge' either fails or gives rise to increasingly complex passions that ultimately merely worsen one's condition. Being grounded in an attempt to control the real under the push of fear, and in a bypassing of one's ontological status, this 'knowledge' and the passions can never solve the problem of existence, but simply mask, avoid, and remove it. The problem of passionality,

in Isaac, is not merely moral, but *ontological*, being rooted in a flight from one's creatural condition.

Section II.2.2. examines Isaac's understanding of the soul, the immaterial, invisible aspect of human beings. Isaac either adopts the Platonic view of the soul as a union of the irascible, desiring, and rational functions, or adopts another similar division, which conceives of the soul as being the union of desiring function, irascible function, vitality, discursive rationality, and intuitive rationality (often: the intellect). This last form of reason is the highest element of the soul, which both guides the entire subjective life, and is also ontologically structured for encountering God in contemplation.

Although the soul is the noblest aspect of human beings, Isaac conceives it as radically limited. This is analysed in section II.2.2.1. First, the soul is not immortal in the sense that this concept possesses in other contexts because, after death, the only function of the soul which remains intact is vitality: its life is in the hands of the Creator, who alone can restore it. In this perspective, the soul is radically creatural in nature. Secondly, the soul is marked by 'inclination', an Antiochene concept that expresses the possibility that the subject has to 'incline' towards good or evil, but that sometimes also indicates a non-reliability, a non-stability of one's being, and therefore an 'inclination' towards evil and error. Lastly, the soul is characterised by receptivity: it is sensitive to the experience of the vulnerable body. This is not negative, in Isaac, and nevertheless is also what makes it possible for the passions to influence one's inner life. Not only is the body, then, ontologically limited, but also the soul.

Section II.2.2.2. examines the soul's subjection to the passions. While the conditions described in II.2.2.1. are intranscendable in nature, passionality is

unnatural for the soul. However, the passions *de facto* occur, because of the intimate connection between the soul and the body.

Isaac conceives the subjection to the passions as being the suffering distinctive of the soul. This powerfully emerges from the images that he employs when speaking of the passions: they are illnesses, which deprive one of health; they divide the soul, taking possession of it with violence; above all, they ‘enter’ into a space that is not their own. This last image describes the passions as something which invades from the outside the space of an ‘inside’, distinct from them. Isaac compares the passions to the body and its sensations, which can be perceived and observed. In doing so, Isaac points to an ‘excess’ of the soul over all that it sees, experiences, and knows of subjective life – something made possible by the soul’s receptivity. Isaac, then, seems to identify a subjective (the soul) and an objective dimension of the self (the body, sensations, passions). The ‘soul’ indicates, in this light, what can never completely become an object, suggesting that it is the place of one’s deepest belonging to oneself as a subject. The problem of the passions is that the objective pole of the self invades and darkens the subjective pole of the self, so that passionality can be interpreted as the suffering of a non-belonging to oneself, of the impossibility of fully belonging to oneself. Non-passionality, instead, would indicate a profound, complete condition of belonging to oneself. In this perspective, the exercise of the functions of the soul, outlined above, indicates the possibility of developing a reflective attitude, of learning to say ‘you’ to oneself when under the influence of the passions. As emerges from these observations, Isaac does not conceive of the concepts of body/soul and passionality/non-passionality as pointing to a dichotomy within the self. By employing these, instead, he is attempting to decipher the subject’s experience of him/herself, and suggests the possibility of developing a relationship with oneself.

Section II.3. describes how the choice of the ascetic life is rooted in one's experience of oneself as passible, vulnerable, and limited. Isaac describes how the quest for God is born from one's experiencing oneself as limited and mortal, and from one's acknowledging, within an experience of suffering, the transient nature of all earthly realities. This suffering and disillusionment reveal, in front of oneself, one's condition of limitation, favouring the birth of a reflective attitude that deconstructs the body's adherence' to objects. This awakens the creature to his/her soul, i.e. to himself/herself. Due to this 'awakening' to oneself, one discovers a new way of looking at God. Only in the light of one's experience of suffering, in fact, can one understand that the resurrection is the consolation for suffering, and God the source of this consolation. The quest for God is thus intimately related to the quest for one's liberation from suffering, and rooted in the ontological problem of limitation, which marks creatural existence. Without suffering, this would never have been understood.

It is in light of this experience that the creature leaves 'the world' and enters the desert, in search for consolation. Isaac often describes this quest as an attempt to transcend one's limited, passionate condition. However, Isaac stresses that this transcendence is impossible: one remains a creature, immersed in an "imperfect world". Isaac refers to this entire condition of creatural limitation by using the Syriac term *mḥilutā*, 'weakness', that should not be confused with single 'human weaknesses', but points to the ontological creatural condition of exposure to suffering in body and soul.

The attempt to inhabit and decipher the problematic relation between the desire to transcend limitations and their intranscendable presence is the central focus of the solitary life. To this problem, also Isaac's idea that the good and

merciful God 'desires' creatural limitations and even the suffering of the creature is related. This can be deciphered only within the path of *askesis*.

CHAPTER III

BETWEEN ONTOLOGY AND *ASKEISIS*: SUFFERING IN THE SOLITARY LIFE

This chapter explores Isaac's understanding of the solitary life as a condition which implies a contact with suffering. This will provide elements for understanding the main issue of this study: the relationship between the human ontological condition of vulnerability, i.e. the condition of being a creature (examined in Chapter II), and the ascetic life (which will be analysed in Chapter IV and V). To understand why these two themes are so closely related, one should first understand how Isaac interpreted the solitary life. As we shall see, he reads it as an immersion into the mystery of suffering, and an attempt to decipher its meaning.

In addition, this chapter introduces questions and clarifications which are essential for comprehending this study, such as the key question of what Isaac meant by 'suffering', in the context of the solitary life.

Other fundamental aspects of his view of the solitary life will also be presented, such as the role that relationships of trust play within it, the different forms of suffering that the solitary encounters on his/her journey, the emergence of the problem of whom God is for the sufferer, and the importance of the subject's internal attitude before the experience of suffering. It will be shown how these issues exceed the boundaries of the solitary choice, touching human existence as a universal condition, albeit remaining radically connected to the meaning of the solitary life.

III.1. THE SOLITARY LIFE: ‘INITIATORY PROCESS’ AND RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Chapter II ended with the identification of two fundamental questions in Isaac.

First, it was argued that Isaac believes that transcending the human condition of limitation is impossible, although the human being desires the consolation of his/her suffering. This exposes the creature to a tension, to a precarious balance, on this earth, between one’s actual state – the passible and frail dimension of existence – and that of the opening of the horizon towards God, beyond the ‘now’.

In the solitary life, the human being looks for a liberation from his/her suffering. However, within or without the solitary life, the creature remains marked by ‘weakness’, *مِهْلُوتَا* (*m̧hilutā*) the ontological condition of exposure to suffering of the body and the soul.

Secondly, it has been argued that according to Isaac, God seems to ‘desire’ this condition of subjection to limitation, and that the human being in search of him should know ‘affliction’. Isaac interprets this state of affairs as the specific condition of the “saints”: it is a sign, he thinks, of God’s love for his “saints”³⁵⁴.

These issues, which emerged at the end of the previous chapter, challenge the reader, especially the contemporary one.

³⁵⁴ See the whole discourse I 60 419-427, but especially 423: “Because *this is the will of the Spirit*: that those in whom he dwells might not become accustomed to slothfulness, and he does [not] invite them to pleasures, but to labours and greater affliction (مِهْلُوتَا), and teaches vigilance to them [...]. *This is the will of the Spirit*: that those who love him should be in troubles (مِهْلُوتَا)”; 424: “Those who love God complete their life among afflictions of all kinds [...]. *God does not wish* that those who love him be at rest in [their] body”; 425: “The saints live a bitter life in this world, with a body which has been made humble (مِهْلُوتَا), with an afflicted soul (مِهْلُوتَا), in adversities (مِهْلُوتَا) from all places. Thus, *the will of God* is that all who come near to him might live amidst evils (مِهْلُوتَا), made humble (مِهْلُوتَا) and lowly (مِهْلُوتَا) with all their soul and body [...]”. See also I 61 427-429, especially 427.

Is Isaac's language not ambiguous? Does it not imply that God does not correspond to the meaning and consolation for which one longs, that he is collusive with evil, that he betrays the trust placed in him? And yet Isaac conceives of this situation as an "honour"³⁵⁵ and a "gift"³⁵⁶, a privilege that God bestows – and God, for him, does not desire evil. It is clear, therefore, that this position needs to be deciphered.

The attempt of existentially deciphering the meaning of this state of things takes place precisely in the solitary life, where the adverb 'existentially' indicates that both the body and the psyche participate in this process. It is not a mere cognitive comprehension.

This existential and experiential nature of the solitary life leads Isaac to live it and conceive it 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"³⁵⁷; the cell is "the cave of hard rock, where God spoke with Moses (cf. Ex 33:21-23)"³⁵⁸; the solitary life is the "furnace" of Babylon³⁵⁹, where one is tried "like

³⁵⁵ See I 5 69, where Isaac says, of the person who, because of his quest for God, experiences poverty: "When you have [nothing to give] [...], say [this]: 'I give thanks to you, o God, because you gave to me this honour of becoming poor for your sake, and you made me worthy of tasting the suffering which you placed on the path of your commandments'"

³⁵⁶ I 59 416: "If, while journeying on the path of justice, [...] [a person] encounters on it one of these [afflictions], it is not right for him to turn aside from it, but let him accept it gladly, without inquiry, giving thanks, because God sent him his gift, [i.e.] he has been made worthy of being in the midst of temptations because of him, so as to be a partaker of the suffering of the prophets, of the apostles, and of the rest of the saints, who, because of God's path, endured afflictions (ܠܫܘܢܐܢܐܝܢ)".

³⁵⁷ See I 66 467.

³⁵⁸ I 24 178. Isaac adds "according to the word of the fathers". This might refer, as Bettiolo – Gallo note (*Discorsi ascetici*, footnote 3, 217), to a saying of Anthony, which can be read in P. Bedjan *Acta martyrum et sanctorum, tomus septimus vel Paradisum Patrum*, Paris/Leipzig, 1897, 463, no. 54: "Abba Anthony said that the cell of the solitary is the furnace (ܠܫܘܢܐܢܐܝܢ) of Babylon where the three young men found the Son of God, and the pillar of clouds [from] where God spoke with Moses (cf. Ex 40:34-38)". Solitude within the cell is central for 7th-8th century Syriac solitaries: see e.g. A. Louf, "Discours sur la cellule de Mar Syméon de Taibouteh", *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 64.1 (2002), 30-55; S. Chialà, "Simeone di Taybuteh e il suo insegnamento sulla vita nella cella", in E. Vergani – S. Chialà (eds.), *La grande stagione della mistica siro-orientale (VI-VIII secolo). Atti del V incontro sull'Oriente cristiano di tradizione siriana*, Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 26 maggio 2006, Milano, 2010, 121-138.

³⁵⁹ I 3 38: ܠܫܘܢܐܢܐܝܢ. Cf. Dn 3:49-50.

gold”³⁶⁰. The solitary life, then, for Isaac, is not only a state of life, a factual choice, an ethical quest for justice, as he himself explains³⁶¹. For him, it is the entrance into a mystery, and this mystery concerns one’s passibility and the discovery of God.

In this sense, the mystery into which one enters when one enters the solitary life is a mystery that concerns the fundamental problem of one’s existence: one’s ontological state as a creature, of which one is usually unaware in full extent in the life in the world (see Chapter II). In the solitary life, one chooses to face this problem.

It is necessary to clarify the context of this initiatory process, in order to understand what will follow. When Isaac speaks of the solitary life as an immersion into a mystery of this kind, he speaks within a universe of shared practices and interpretations, and of relationships which acknowledge the meaning of this life. This does not relativize the solitary nature of the experience of the individual, so essential for Isaac, nor should it be read only in factual terms, as a sign of the presence, in the form of life he practised, of eremitical and coenobitical elements – although this is also true. Instead, this should be intended in the first place to indicate the possibility of a transmission of wisdom concerning one’s passibility and God, within this form of life.

For Isaac, one does not journey on the path of the solitary life alone. On this path, in fact, one encounters many precipices:

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 on the path [...]³⁶².

³⁶⁰ See I 36 279.

³⁶¹ See Centuries II 43 43r-43v; Centuries II 44 43v-45r: “The spiritual delight which is bestowed in the hiddenness of practice (محصنة في العبادات) should not be counted [together] with virtue, for it is the lord of virtue [...]”.

³⁶² I 2 16.

The encounter with these elements of the journey requires, for Isaac, relationships of trust which make it possible to cross through them, as well as great integrity and rigour.

Although Isaac says that when one chooses the solitary life one should cut off all relationships with people who do not share one's aims³⁶³, he does not exclude interactions with solitaries who share the same preoccupations: in his writings, there are various descriptions of relationships of this kind, as well as stories about elders and brothers whom he met³⁶⁴. More radically, he stresses the necessity of having a relationship with one experienced solitary who knows the intricacies of the path. This relationship is of a unique kind and so one should have only one guide³⁶⁵, because at stake here is the vital issue of learning to deal with "the difficult precipices" that one encounters:

[A person] will never receive the light of consolation through interactions [with human beings], but he will be relieved [only] for a little while. Afterwards however, [this trial] will arise [again] violently against him. Indeed there is need of an enlightened man who is experienced in these things, so that [one] might be enlightened and comforted by him from time to time. Not all the time, however³⁶⁶.

³⁶³ See I 42 314.

³⁶⁴ See I 18 139-154; II 6,7 17-18 (Syr.); 21-22 (ET); I 66 468-470.

³⁶⁵ See Centuries IV 71 100r-100v, 100r.

³⁶⁶ See I 48 340. The trial of which Isaac speaks here is that of 'darkness', a theme which will be analysed in Chapter VI. Isaac's understanding of guidance in the spiritual life is a wide topic which should be examined in its own right. For a general introduction to the theme of spiritual fatherhood in the ancient Eastern Christian tradition, see the classic study: I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in early Christian East*, Cistercian Studies Series 116, Kalamazoo, 1990 (see also Kallistos Ware's introduction, for John Climacus and Symeon the New Theologian, vii-xxxiii). For a study of this theme in the Syriac spiritual tradition contemporary to Isaac, see P. Bettiolo, "Paternità e guida nel monachesimo siriano-orientale tra VII e VIII secolo", in *Storia della direzione spirituale vol. 1: l'età antica*, G. Filoramo (ed.), Brescia, 2006, 423-445, especially 438-445. For a study of this theme in Evagrius, see G. Bunge, *Paternité spirituelle: la gnose chrétienne chez Évagre le Pontique*, Spiritualité orientale 61, Bégrolles-en-Mauges, 1994; for a perspective on the desert tradition and early monasticism, see C. Stewart, "Radical Honesty about the Self", *Sobornost* 12.1-2 (1990), 25-39; 143-156. For spiritual guidance in Antiquity, especially in pagan sources, see the classic study: Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; and *Id.*, "The Spiritual Guide", in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality, Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, World Spirituality, Vol. 15, New York, 1986, 436-459. In both of Hadot's contributions, the connection between experience, life practices, the ancient conception of wisdom, and spiritual guidance are approached from a wider perspective, based on the (practical) meaning of philosophy in Antiquity. All of these themes, are also central to Isaac's thought.

Isaac stresses that one's guide should have a real, concrete experience of things, and contrasts it with cognitive knowledge: "Do not seek advice from him who does not share your aim in the [ascetic] conduct, even if he is very wise. Trust an ignorant person who knows things by experience (ܘܚܘܒܐ) more than a wise person who speaks on the basis of inquiry without [having] experience of them"³⁶⁷. Only a person of this kind, "who first governs himself well and [...] possesses the knowledge [gained through] experience"³⁶⁸, can be worthy of the trust of another human being in the solitary life, and can therefore guide him/her.

Sabino Chialà and Florence Jullien have helped to shed light on the monastic context within which the kind of solitary life that Isaac describes developed. It has its roots in the experience of Abraham of Kaškar, and is connected with the *milieu* of Rabban Šabur, to whom the figures of Simon of Taybuteh is also linked³⁶⁹.

Both Simon and Isaac report a dialogue between a young and an old solitary, which illustrates well what was described above. Simon specifies something which Isaac does not say, i.e. that the old man, here, is Rabban Šabur himself³⁷⁰. Isaac's account reads as follows:

One of the saints said: "There was a solitary, an honoured elder, and once I went to him when I was vexed (ܘܚܘܒܐ) by temptations (ܘܚܘܒܐ). But he was ill, lying down, and when I had saluted him, I sat with him and told him: "Pray for me, my Father, because I am greatly vexed by the temptations of the demons". He opened his eyes, looked well at me, and said to me: "My son, you are a youth, and God will not allow temptations [to fall] upon you". Then I said to him: "I am a youth, [it is true], but temptations of mighty men are with me". Then he said to me: "Then God desires to make you wise". And I said to him: "How can I be made wise, if every day I taste death?" But he said to me: "God loves you, keep silence, God is about to give you his gift", and again, he said to me: "You should know, my son, that for thirty years

³⁶⁷ I 39 297.

³⁶⁸ See I 39 297.

³⁶⁹ See Chapter I.

³⁷⁰ For Simon's passage, see A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies Vol. 7*, Cambridge 1934, 314 (Syr.), 59-60 (ET). Mingana, in *Woodbrooke Studies Vol. 7, 9*, already mentioned the correspondence between Simon and Isaac's passages. Also see Bettiolo, "Povertà e conoscenza", 118.

I made war with the demons. Although for twenty years I was not helped at all, when twenty five years had passed, rest began to appear, and the more [time passed], the more [the rest] became. Then, when twenty eight years had passed, it [became] increasingly great, and at the completion of thirty years [there was] so much rest that I do not know how much it was". And he was saying: "When I wish to stand up for the office, I am allowed to perform just one *marmitā*³⁷¹, but otherwise, if I stand three days, I am in wonder (ܠܝܘܢܐ) with God, not feeling weariness". Behold! What rest without end was produced by a long [period of] labour!³⁷²

This passage bears witness to the fact that, in the 'desert' described by Isaac there was space for relationships such as this, where suffering could be expressed, verified, and then be passed through, thanks to a transmission of trust from one human being to another. Although this passage is unique in Isaac's *corpus* with regard to the straightforwardness of communication and the compassion which shines through it, many other passages in which Isaac addresses his reader-disciple should be read from this perspective, as attempts to evoke in the reader this dimension of trust.

The attempt to decipher the connection between one's passibility and God does not take place in isolation. Instead, the vital importance of this problem causes the emergence of relationships of remarkable depth, between certain human beings. The existence of these kinds of relationships should not be forgotten, when reading what follows.

But what is the connection between human vulnerability and the experience of the ascetic life – something which, despite the existence of the relationships just described, is ultimately experienced alone?

³⁷¹ This is a subdivision of the Psalter, recited in the office, which monks should perform daily. The term is used differently in the West Syriac and East Syriac traditions. In the Western tradition the 150 Psalms are divided into 15 *marmyātā*. In the Eastern tradition the 150 Psalms are divided into 20 *hulālē*, each of which is subdivided into 3 *marmyātā*. So a *marmitā* here is the equivalent of about 3 or 4 short psalms, a very small unit. See J. Mateos, *Lelya Sapra. Essai d'interprétation des matines chaldéennes*, OCA 156, 1959, 29.

³⁷² I 53 387-388.

III.2. THE SOLITARY LIFE: AN ENCOUNTER WITH SUFFERING

As already shown in Chapter II, human suffering, which lies at the origin of the quest for God, does not disappear on entering into the solitary life. Isaac, however, goes further, interpreting the solitary choice as a way of living which is marked by conscious contact with difficult conditions.

Isaac often refers to these difficult conditions with the concept of ‘affliction’³⁷³ (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁷⁴, a term which, in its singular and (more frequently) plural form, often recurs in his writings, and encompasses a wide variety of experiences. Frequent also is his use of the term ܩܘܠܘܢܐ, ‘suffering’³⁷⁵, and of the verb ܩܘܠܘܢܐ, ‘to suffer’³⁷⁶: Isaac describes the solitary life, literally, as a “going out to suffer (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)”³⁷⁷. Other recurrent terms (in the singular or plural form) are: evils (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁷⁸, vexations (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ³⁷⁹ or ܩܘܠܘܢܐ³⁸⁰), pain (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸¹, mourning (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ/ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸², weeping (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ/ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸³, tears (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸⁴, grievous things (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸⁵, sorrows/adversities (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸⁶, labours (ܩܘܠܘܢܐ)³⁸⁷, war or battle

³⁷³ Or ‘tribulation’. See e.g. I 60 424-426; II 26,1 113 (Syr.); 125 (ET); Centuries IV 54 94v; III 12,33 110 (Syr.); 139.

³⁷⁴ Also the verb ܩܘܠܘܢܐ recurs: see e.g. I 53 387; Centuries IV 43 91r.

³⁷⁵ See e.g. I 59 416-417; I 80 546; Centuries IV 74 101r-102r, 101v. The term can also mean ‘passion’ in Syriac, or, sometimes, ‘intense feeling’.

³⁷⁶ See e.g. II 40,10 166 (Syr.); 177 (ET); Centuries II 63 51r-51v, 51v.

³⁷⁷ See I 35 233.

³⁷⁸ See e.g. I 5 70; I 39 303; Centuries II 11 36r-36v, 36r.

³⁷⁹ See e.g. II 25,1 111 (Syr.); 123 (ET); Centuries IV 39 90r-90v; III 4,29 25 (Syr.); 42 (IT). The term comes from ܩܘܠܘܢܐ, ‘to shatter’.

³⁸⁰ See e.g. I 33 220; Centuries IV 53 94r-94v, 94v (“of the body”); Centuries IV 55 94v-95r, 94v. The term derives from ܩܘܠܘܢܐ, ‘to smite, buffet’.

³⁸¹ See e.g. I 58 409; Centuries I 85 32r-32v, 32v; Centuries II 60 49v-50r, 50r.

³⁸² See e.g. Centuries I 85 32r-32v, 32v; Centuries IV 74 101r-102r; Centuries II 92 57r-57v, 57v.

³⁸³ See e.g. Centuries I 85 32r-32v, 32v; Centuries I 82 32r; III 7,22 50 (Syr.); 75 (IT).

³⁸⁴ See I 58 413; II 18,8 87 (Syr.); 98 (IT). I refer, here, to one of the different kinds of tears present in Isaac’s *corpus*, the tears of suffering. For a discussion of the different causes of tears, see Isaac’s own description in II 18,4-6 86-87 (Syr.); 97-98 (ET). For ‘tears’ in Isaac, see Lichter, “Tears and Contemplation”; Mascia, “The Gift of Tears”; Geevarghese, “Prayer with Tears”, 111-133; Hunt, *Joy-bearing Grief*; Bradford, “Mystical Process”.

³⁸⁵ Centuries III 82 78r-78v, 78v.

³⁸⁶ See e.g. I 58 409; Centuries III 69 74v.

³⁸⁷ Centuries IV 54 94v; Centuries IV 55 94v-95r, 94v.

(*ܡܘܚܐ*)³⁸⁸, struggle (*ܡܘܚܐ*)³⁸⁹, contest (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹⁰, torments (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹¹, torture (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹²; pangs of childbirth (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹³, difficulties (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹⁴, gloomy or sad things (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹⁵, fearful things (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹⁶; sadness (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)³⁹⁷, ‘darkness’ (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*/*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*, i.e. thick darkness⁴⁰⁰),⁴⁰¹ poverty (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)⁴⁰², infirmities/sickness (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*/*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*),⁴⁰³ danger (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)⁴⁰⁴, trials/temptations (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)⁴⁰⁶, mortification (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)⁴⁰⁷; and humiliation⁴⁰⁸. Isaac also often uses phrases such as these: “toils of the struggle (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴⁰⁹, “harsh and grievous temptations (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴¹⁰, “difficult afflictions (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴¹¹, “vehemence of the battle (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴¹², “gloomy darkness (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴¹³, “confusion of a great gloom (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴¹⁴, “labours and vexations of stillness and solitude (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)”⁴¹⁵,

³⁸⁸ See e.g. Centuries III 64 73r-74r, 73v; II 9,11 29 (Syr.); 36 (ET). This and the following terms are used almost interchangeably, and refer to the ascetic’s struggle against passions and demons.

³⁸⁹ See e.g. Centuries IV 57 95r-95v, 95v; Centuries II 11 36r-36v, 36r;

³⁹⁰ See e.g. I 35 238; Centuries IV 14 83v-84r, 83v.

³⁹¹ See e.g. I 49 342.

³⁹² See e.g. I 39 302.

³⁹³ I 49 343.

³⁹⁴ See e.g. I 80 546-547; Centuries IV 22 85r-85v. See also ‘difficulty (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)’ in e.g. I 77 532, and ‘difficult/harsh things/hardships (*ܡܘܚܐܘܬܐ*)’ in I 77 532.

³⁹⁵ See e.g. I 59 416; Centuries IV 23 85v.

³⁹⁶ I 77 535.

³⁹⁷ See e.g. Centuries II 16 37r; Centuries II 29 40r-40v.

³⁹⁸ See e.g. Centuries III 52 69r.

³⁹⁹ See e.g. I 48 340.

⁴⁰⁰ See e.g. Centuries IV 57 95r-95v, 95v.

⁴⁰¹ On the theme of ‘darkness’, see Chapter VI.

⁴⁰² See e.g. I 5 69; I 74 508; III 4,29 25 (Syr.); 42 (IT).

⁴⁰³ See e.g. I 5 69; III 4,29 25 (Syr.); 42 (IT).

⁴⁰⁴ See e.g. Centuries III 34 65r.

⁴⁰⁵ I 24 179.

⁴⁰⁶ See especially I 3 36-38; see also e.g. I 5 69-70; I 39 298-301.

⁴⁰⁷ See especially Centuries I 85 32r-32v; I 86 32v; I 87 32v-33r; I 88 33v; I 89 33r-33v; I 90 33v.

⁴⁰⁸ See e.g. I 65 444; Centuries I 25 24r; Centuries II 94 57v. The theme of ‘humiliation/being made humble’ is analysed in Chapter V.3.2.

⁴⁰⁹ I 24 182.

⁴¹⁰ I 3 38-39.

⁴¹¹ I 77 532.

⁴¹² Centuries I 30 25r.

⁴¹³ Centuries I 30 25r.

⁴¹⁴ Centuries II 11 36r-36v, 36r.

⁴¹⁵ Centuries IV 55 94v-95r, 94v.

“laborious difficulties (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴¹⁶, “dangerous tempest (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴¹⁷, “afflictions for the sake of truth (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴¹⁸, “laborious and vexatious activities (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴¹⁹, “difficulties full of danger (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴²⁰, “sharp pain (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴²¹, and “violent suffering of torments (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)”⁴²²; as well as verbs such as ‘to vex (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)’⁴²³, ‘to torment (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)’⁴²⁴; and ‘to strain in labour’s pains (ܘܚܘܒܘܬܐ)’⁴²⁵.

Syriac is a language which loves vivid descriptions. However, this rich and strong terminology is intentionally chosen by Isaac, and corresponds to core elements of his thought. Through this use of language shines Isaac’s familiarity with diverse and complex states of ‘affliction’. But above all its choice shows how, for him, the solitary life is intimately marked by the experience of ‘the negative’, intended as a general category which includes all that opposes the fruition of the consolation of suffering that the solitary seeks⁴²⁶.

In this sense, the solitary life, instead of being conceived as an immediate solution to the problems which led one to abandon the ‘world’, is described as them *coming into the open*, and as a deepening and radicalisation of knowledge of their presence, already experienced in ‘the world’ – although, at that time, unconsciously. Isaac, then, conceives the solitary life as a condition which implies an encounter with suffering.

⁴¹⁶ Centuries IV 45 91v.

⁴¹⁷ I 35 242.

⁴¹⁸ Centuries IV 57 95r-95v, 95v.

⁴¹⁹ II 19,10 94 (Syr.); 105 (ET).

⁴²⁰ I 66 467.

⁴²¹ II 18,9 87 (Syr.); 98 (ET).

⁴²² I 77 536.

⁴²³ See e.g. Centuries IV 29 87r.

⁴²⁴ See e.g. Centuries II 60 49v-50r.

⁴²⁵ Centuries IV 54 94v.

⁴²⁶ For a first mention of this concept, see Chapter II p. 46-47.

Isaac understands the solitary life as a passing through difficult zones of existence that remain in the shadows in usual life ‘in the world’, because the web of engagements, relationships, and consolations of life ‘in the world’ protects the creature from the knowledge of them. From this perspective, the solitary life means advancing into zones of ‘the human’ which, although no different in nature from those experienced in ‘the world’, assume in this new context a different intensity and are approached from a different perspective. The solitary life is the condition of crossing through these zones of ‘the human’, and in this sense it provides an opportunity for deciphering the problem of creatural existence.

In 1946, in an article devoted to analysing the presence of the theme of suffering in Eastern Christian spirituality, in which he challenged the idea that the experience which John of the Cross calls ‘night’ is a peculiar trait of Western Christianity alone, Irenée Hausherr already viewed Isaac as an author in whom the theme of suffering is particularly present⁴²⁷. This article, together with Salvestroni’s reflections on the influence of Isaac on Dostoevsky⁴²⁸ and some observations of Archimandrite Vasileios of Iviron, also devoted to the relationship between Isaac and Dostoevsky⁴²⁹, is the only study that directly touches upon the problem of suffering in Isaac (Isaac’s thought is examined among that of other authors on the spiritual life). Hausherr’s intuition corresponds to what the texts also show: the role of suffering in Isaac’s writings is crucial. This fundamental role is due to the fact that, for Isaac, it is the encounter with suffering that urges the human quest for oneself, God, and meaning. This is true on the ontological level, as examined in Chapter II, but also in the solitary life.

⁴²⁷ See Hausherr, “Les Orientaux”, especially 108-110; 113-116; 127-128.

⁴²⁸ Salvestroni, “Isaac of Nineveh and Dostoyevsky’s Work”.

⁴²⁹ Archimandrite Vasileios of Iviron, “Abba Isaac and Dostoyevsky: Their Spiritual Relationship”, in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, 241-247.

The theme of the presence of ‘afflictions’ in the solitary life is not restricted to Isaac alone. The word ‘affliction’ is frequent in Paul, and Paul’s letters play an important role in Isaac’s understanding of suffering in the ascetic life⁴³⁰. The theme of afflictions on the path to God recurs throughout the whole Christian ascetical tradition⁴³¹, related to the concepts of temptation/trial, the search for prayer, and the idea of *askesis* as struggle, an idea which lies at the basis of the ascetic’s self-understanding already in early sources⁴³².

Among the authors who influenced Isaac’s interpretation of experience, the theme of ‘affliction’ plays a significant role especially in the Syriac Macarian *corpus*, although it occurs also in other authors. In ‘Macarius’, not only does the idea of the presence of suffering in the ascetic life recur⁴³³, but so also do expressions and metaphors similar to Isaac’s. Like Isaac, ‘Macarius’ also employs the symbol of childbirth to highlight the difficulty of the process of *askesis*⁴³⁴, an allusion to an experience of intense physical suffering and to creation “groaning and being in the pangs of childbirth” of which Paul speaks (cf. Rm 8:22). ‘Macarius’ also insists on the weight of suffering in the ascetic life, on the strength of temptations⁴³⁵, and on the oscillations between the experience of ‘the positive’ and ‘the negative’⁴³⁶ – all themes which are also found in Isaac. In Isaac, however, there seems to be a more profound problematization of these issues than in the Syriac Macarian *corpus* and in other sources for his thought. Often, Isaac also discusses

⁴³⁰ See Chapter IV and V.

⁴³¹ See Hausherr, “Les Orientaux”.

⁴³² For an introduction to this theme, see P. Bourguignon – F. Wenner, “Combat Spirituel”, in *DS* 2.1, cols. 1135-1142.

⁴³³ See e.g. W. Strothmann (ed.), *Die Syrische Überlieferung der Schriften des Makarios*, 2 vols, Göttinger Orientforschungen, I Reihe: Syriaca, 21.1-2, Wiesbaden, 1981, Aeg h 1 1-34 (Syr.); 1-21 (GT), especially 1,19 31 (Syr); 19-20 (GT), where ‘Macarius’ speaks of taking one’s cross “in all the labours and sufferings of virtue”, a concept which, in other forms, he also stresses elsewhere.

⁴³⁴ See in Strothmann, *Die Syrische Überlieferung*, Aeg ep 2 91 (Syr.); 60 (GT). ‘Macarius’ refers especially to prayer.

⁴³⁵ See in Strothmann, *Die Syrische Überlieferung*, Aeg ep 1 73-84 (Syr.); 49-55 (GT).

⁴³⁶ See section V.3.1.

the presuppositions of his reasoning, deals with his readers' doubts, and with other far-reaching theological and ethical questions, which are intertwined with his reflections on suffering. The richness of his descriptions of the conditions of difficulty and his attention to describe the inner process connected with them not only point to the relevance of this theme in his writings, but also to an articulate and personal perspective: Isaac, accepting a received inheritance which he considers reliable, checks its validity against his own experience. "I wrote these things for my benefit and for that of all those who come across this book", Isaac states, "according to something I understood from the *theoria* of the Scriptures, from the mouth of trustworthy people, and a little from [my] experience (صبر)"⁴³⁷.

But what does 'suffering' in the ascetic life mean, in Isaac's writings? How is this concept used in this study, in an attempt to bring to light Isaac's approach?

The term 'suffering', in this study, does not usually point to pain that is self-inflicted through ascetic practices, nor indicate that 'suffering', for Isaac, aims at an expiation of guilt, in the sense of an attempt to remedy, through suffering, the presence of sin.

The first aspect, i.e. suffering as the effect of the application of 'ascetic techniques', features rarely in Isaac in this reductive sense, and he does not in any way think that the value of one's *askesis* is connected to the *quantity* of suffering experienced, as in a performance⁴³⁸. Concerning this, Isaac also explicitly states that the aim of *askesis* is neither to exhaust nor to hurt the body⁴³⁹, although these concepts are formulated in a way which might not immediately match contemporary Western conceptions.

⁴³⁷ I 14 127. See also I 37 281; Centuries I 41 26v.

⁴³⁸ On this theme, see section IV.3.2.

⁴³⁹ See I 65 448; I 64 442; I 59 416.

Regarding the second aspect, Isaac does not speak of expiation of guilt through suffering, but describes the solitary life as the choice to undergo an exigent process of education, which is also the reason for the creation of this world⁴⁴⁰. He views Adam's sin as the erring of a thoughtless child more than that of an adult who has mastery of his own self⁴⁴¹, and conceives of the power of sin, which stands between the human being and God, as an obstacle connected to the human ontological structure. For the human being, whom Adam symbolises, it is always possible to fall, so that he/she can never justify him/herself⁴⁴², “before the eternally Living (ܘܕܘܢ ܚܝܘܢ)”⁴⁴³, and in this way become immune from the possibility of sin. It is, however, the fall of a thoughtless child.

As seen in Chapter II, in fact, sin derives from obeying the passions, and the passions arise from the fear of one's original vulnerability, which is distinctive of

⁴⁴⁰ See e.g. Centuries III 71 75r-75v: “If God is truly a Father – he who brought forth all in his Grace –, rational beings his 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, when also the children will be raised above the need of being corrected. Your judgements cannot be investigated (cf. Rom 11:33)”. On Theodore of Mopsuestia's influence on Isaac's idea of the world as a school, see Chialà, *Dall'asceti*, 92-101, 96.

⁴⁴¹ See III 5,9 28 (Syr.); 44-45 (IT): “At the beginning of creation, when God created Adam, when he was not yet able to know [the difference] between right and left, immediately after he had been made, he desired the rank of divinity. And that which Satan sowed in him as evil – ‘you will be like gods (Gen 3:5)’ – and [that] he believed in his childishness, God accomplished it in reality”; on Adam's childish attitude, see also III 12,23 98 (Syr.); 137 (IT). On Adam as ‘childish’, see Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, footnote 11, 45. On the background of this idea of Isaac (in Theodore and Narsai), see Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*, 27-47, 27-41. The theme of Adam as childish recurs also in earlier Syriac literature: for its discussion in Ephrem, Aphrahat, and the *Liber Graduum*, see A. Salvesen, “Infants or Fools in the Garden of Eden? An Ambiguity in early Syriac Tradition”, in M.F.J. Baasten – W.Th. Van Peursen (eds), *Hamlet on a Hill, Semitic and Greek Studies presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 118, Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA, 2003, 433-440. This article also examines the literal reading of Adam and Eve as children, sometimes mentioned in the Syriac tradition, which seems to be rooted in the juxtaposition of Mt 18 and Gen 2-3 and in the double meaning of the term ܘܕܘܢ, i.e. ‘child’ and ‘childish, simple, naïve person’. Robert Murray mentions the presence of this idea in some Greek sources: see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Cambridge, 1975, 304-306. According to Salvesen, Syriac writers generally opted for a metaphorical reading of the idea of Adam as an ‘infant’, and by the time of Narsai (d. c. 500) and Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451-521) this approach prevailed: see A. Salvesen, “Without Shame or Desire: The Pronouncements of Jesus on Children and the Kingdom, and Early Syriac Attitudes to Childhood”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59.3 (2006), 307-326, in particular 325.

⁴⁴² See III 6,23 36 (Syr.); 56 (IT).

⁴⁴³ See Centuries III 16 62r.

human creaturalty. If therefore the human original condition of vulnerability and sin do not coincide, they are so closely intertwined that Isaac thinks that ultimately the problem of sin can be answered only by answering the problem of *one's original, creatural vulnerability*.

The concept of 'suffering' used in this study, therefore, does not refer to how painful certain ascetic practices may be or to exchanges between the human being and God. Instead, in the next two chapters, another possibility will be explored: that the subject, through the "laborious difficulties"⁴⁴⁴ of suffering, might be awakened, put to question, and brought to question, and, at the same time, might learn to connect to him/herself as a vulnerable being. In this perspective, Isaac's focus is on the quality of the experience of oneself as vulnerable, not on its quantity.

This does not mean, however, that Isaac undervalues the impact of suffering on the creature. Instead, Isaac's clarity about the fact that the solitary life implies a confrontation with difficult dimensions of existence often shines through certain images that he employs. The 'roughness' and 'density' of the adjectives he uses, the choice of specific verbs (i.e., the verb 'to taste [تذوق]'⁴⁴⁵ with regard to suffering), and the frequency of all this, suggest that Isaac never underestimates the intensity, pervasiveness, and destructive power of suffering. Rather, particular attention to the real weight of suffering characterizes his writings, in which the descriptions of the states of difficulty bear an almost physical, sensible power. Thus, he speaks of "the fearful desert (الصحراء المخيفة)" in which, "dwelling with savage animals, [one] remains in the fearful struggles (القتال المخيف) of the demons for

⁴⁴⁴ Centuries IV 45 91v.

⁴⁴⁵ See e.g. I 5 68: "Unless the soul tastes (تذوق) suffering for Christ's sake, it cannot have part in knowledge with him"; I 5 69; I 34 222. In Isaac's *corpus* this verb is linked not only to this experience, but also to pleasurable experiences. It is one of the terms which, together with *الشدائد*, *القتال*, and other expressions, shows Isaac's insistence on the physicality and therefore on the reality of experience in general.

forty or fifty years”⁴⁴⁶; of “the desert full of tribulations (ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ)”⁴⁴⁷; of “a waste region (ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ), in which great penury (ܩܘܕܫܐ) reigns”⁴⁴⁸; of “solitude and desert (ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ)”⁴⁴⁹, of “barren (ܩܘܕܫܐ)”⁴⁵⁰, “distant (ܩܘܕܫܐ)”⁴⁵¹, “difficult/harsh (ܩܘܕܫܐ)”⁴⁵² places”; of the “fearful (ܩܘܕܫܐ)”⁴⁵³, “rough (ܩܘܕܫܐ) sea of stillness”⁴⁵⁴; and of “the difficult (ܩܘܕܫܐ) conduct of the solitary life”⁴⁵⁵. The desert, in Isaac, emerges as the symbol of the process of stripping off which one undergoes in it, and the sea, as the symbol of the abyssal dimensions that one encounters there. He holds them in high regard for these reasons, far from any modern idealisation.

Among the contacts with ‘the negative’ that the person who chooses the solitary life inevitably experiences, Isaac lists heterogeneous factors, such as

Casual occurrences of natural passions [...], transgressions which [take place] through execrable thoughts, shame and insults without reason that [the solitaries] suffer from human beings, sicknesses of the body, [...] poverty and want of necessary things, [...] grievous sufferings (ܩܘܕܫܐ) [due to] fear of open battles with the demons, which [God] permits [to fall] upon them to shake them frequently, [...] fearful changes (ܩܘܕܫܐ), each more severe (ܩܘܕܫܐ), violent (ܩܘܕܫܐ), and difficult (ܩܘܕܫܐ) than the other⁴⁵⁶.

Lists of this kind are recurrent in Isaac’s writings. In another passage, for example, he describes the solitary life as the fact of living “afflicted, buffeted, in need, in solitude, in nakedness, in poverty, in infirmity, despised, treated with insolence, without a place to stay, with a broken heart, with a humble (ܩܘܕܫܐ) body,

⁴⁴⁶ Centuries I 64 51v.

⁴⁴⁷ I 53 387.

⁴⁴⁸ Centuries II 33 40v-41r, 40v.

⁴⁴⁹ Centuries IV 51 94v.

⁴⁵⁰ III 12,30 99 (Syr.); 139 (IT).

⁴⁵¹ III 12,31 100 (Syr.); 139 (IT)

⁴⁵² III 12,32 100 (Syr.); 139 (IT).

⁴⁵³ Centuries IV,41 90v.

⁴⁵⁴ I 66 467.

⁴⁵⁵ III 13,24 110 (Syr.); 152 (IT).

⁴⁵⁶ I 8 108-109.

with a mind full of sadness”, rejected even by friends⁴⁵⁷. In some texts, Isaac describes in detail even more difficult experiences, many of which concern states of intense prostration, that he connects with the pressure on the subject of the realities that he calls ‘demons’: “hunger, sickness, terrors of visions, with the rest⁴⁵⁸, [...] violent and unspeakable adversities thirsty for blood”⁴⁵⁹; “difficult occurrences, and many contrary things full of peril [...], invisible natures, incorporeal powers, [together] with many other things”⁴⁶⁰. In the desert, in fact, “demons and rapacious beasts”⁴⁶¹ dwell, whom Isaac considers to be legitimate inhabitants of the cosmos – an uncleared, unexorcised cosmos, where the presence of “evil people”⁴⁶² is also considered as non-removable, given human nature. This way is “full of thick darkness (حظلك) and narrow, with many stumbling-blocks, resistant to knowledge because of its incomprehensibility to human nature”⁴⁶³. Isaac is far removed from any spiritualisation and idealisation of the quest for God.

This does not mean that, in Isaac, ‘suffering’ is only related to what one might immediately label as ‘painful’. Within this term are included a wide range of experiences, some of which tend to be connoted by difficulty, toil, and inner labour. Thus, Isaac speaks of the hunger experienced during fasting⁴⁶⁴; sickness; the fear of solitude in desert places; the falling of the body onto the bed in “great weariness” and to a more general ‘falling’ due to asceticism⁴⁶⁵; the impossibility of finding a relationship with God in prayer; the effort of watchfulness; doubt; the experience

⁴⁵⁷ I 60 424.

⁴⁵⁸ I 36 274.

⁴⁵⁹ I 36 275.

⁴⁶⁰ I 51 365.

⁴⁶¹ I 53 386.

⁴⁶² I 53 386.

⁴⁶³ I 58 413.

⁴⁶⁴ See section V.3.2.

⁴⁶⁵ See Centuries II 80 54v-55r; Centuries IV 54 94v-95r, 94v; Centuries II 56 48v.

of inner states of confusion and ‘darkness’⁴⁶⁶; the awareness of sin⁴⁶⁷; the “suffering of the mind”, connected to “laborious and discerning reflection”⁴⁶⁸, the perception of one’s insufficiency in asceticism⁴⁶⁹, or the powerful experience of understanding of the meaning of Scripture⁴⁷⁰; calumny⁴⁷¹; the difficulties of chastity⁴⁷²; the exposure to precariousness and bare landscapes⁴⁷³; incomprehension; lack of clarity; the “suffering of discernment”⁴⁷⁴, “of prayer”⁴⁷⁵, “of mourning”⁴⁷⁶ and repentance, “of the heart”⁴⁷⁷; failure in *askesis*⁴⁷⁸; the experience of “the hard battles of the demons”⁴⁷⁹, who attempt to destroy the creature⁴⁸⁰; and the suffering for the sake of another human being, which Isaac considers similar to the suffering of martyrdom⁴⁸¹.

⁴⁶⁶ See e.g. I 48 339-341.

⁴⁶⁷ See e.g. II 18,9 87 (Syr.); 98 (ET).

⁴⁶⁸ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ II 18,8 87 (Syr.); 98 (ET).

⁴⁶⁹ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ in I 50 344.

⁴⁷⁰ See Centuries II 60 49v-50r, 49v.

⁴⁷¹ See I 5 63-64; 75.

⁴⁷² See I 30 208-209.

⁴⁷³ See e.g. III 12,30-32 99-100 (Syr.); 138-139 (IT): “[...] remote and barren places (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ)”, where the fathers died alone, “because nobody perceived that they were sick and come near to them at the time of their death, because of their remoteness and solitude”.

⁴⁷⁴ I 72 499: “Concerning this [i.e. humility], then, it is necessary that the mind suffer (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ) continually, through being made humble (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ) and through the suffering of discernment (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ)”.

⁴⁷⁵ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ: Centuries II 60 49v-50v, 50r. See also II 40,12 166 (Syr.); 177 (ET), where this suffering is compared to that of the tax collector of the Gospel (cf. Lk 18:13-14).

⁴⁷⁶ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ: Centuries II 92 57r-57v, 57v. Here, the theme of repentance is connected to suffering: ‘mourning’ is a sign and instrument of repentance. For repentance and mourning in Eastern Christianity, see the classic study: I. Hausherr, *Penthos. La doctrine de la componction dans l’Orient chrétien*, OCA 132, Rome, 1944. For a perspective on Isaac, see Hunt, “The Soul’s Sorrow”; *Ead.*, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, especially 129-159; *Ead.* “The Monk as Mourner”. For a recent analysis of this theme in Greek monastic sources, see A.C. Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life c. 400-650 CE*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford, 2013. As an introduction to essential terms related to repentance in desert monasticism, see P. Miquel, *Lexique du désert*, Spiritualité orientale 44, Bégrolles en Mauges, 1996, “Repentir”, 217-232. In Syriac ܩܘܪܒܢܐ indicates the entire monastic life, which is a quest for repentance. For Isaac’s reflection on who is a “continual mourner (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ)”, see Centuries IV 74 101r-102r.

⁴⁷⁷ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ in Centuries III 11 60r-60v.

⁴⁷⁸ See e.g. III 7,24 50 (Syr.); 75 (IT): “My heart’s compunction (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ) will be a witness before you that the tumult of the flesh is stronger than my will”.

⁴⁷⁹ See e.g. ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ in I 5,26 13 (Syr.); 17 (ET).

⁴⁸⁰ See II 5,3 5 (Syr.); 7 (ET).

⁴⁸¹ I 50 381: “On the day in which you suffer (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ) in some way for [another] human being, in the body or soul, be he good or evil, reckon yourself as a martyr on that day, and as one who has been

The solitary life appears to Isaac, in the first instance, not as an entrance into the light and peace of God, as the beatitude of contemplation, a ‘mystical’ experience of joy and harmony, but as a crossing through opacity, dimness, difficulties, labour, voids, abysses, disharmonies, aporias, conflicts, and failures. They emerge with particular clarity in the condition of solitude, privation, precariousness, and confrontation with oneself, in which the solitary chooses to dwell. They exert a ‘pressure’ on the subject and ‘push’ him/her against the ground, compelling him/her to a forced ‘incarnation’, i.e. to the acknowledgement of the evidence of his/her creaturalty. This evidence should emerge within consciousness, beyond every concealment and removal: “The afflictions for the sake of truth [...] heavily press (صَحْح) upon the body and the mind”⁴⁸²; “difficulties (صَحْح) heavily press (صَحْح) against” the courage of those who look for virtue⁴⁸³; thoughts and passions “are used to press heavily (صَحْح) with violence, upon the solitaries in stillness”⁴⁸⁴, in a “war” which is violent and vehement⁴⁸⁵. Images of ‘weight’ and ‘heaviness’ are also found in Isaac⁴⁸⁶.

All this tells of a profound discernment, by Isaac, of the impact of the experience of suffering on the subject, of a comprehension of its disintegrating power, which raises the question of how this can be bearable. The ascetic practices, the difficulties, and the inner states which one experiences on this journey are conceived by Isaac as means and places through which one’s human vulnerability comes to light, through the process of being reduced to truth which the “harsh” and “desolate” desert effects.

made worthy of suffering confession for Christ. Remember that Christ died for the bad, according to the word of Scripture, not for the good (cf. Mk 2:17; Mt 9:12-13; Lk 5:31-32)”.

⁴⁸² Centuries IV 57 95r-95v, 95v.

⁴⁸³ Cf. I 77 532.

⁴⁸⁴ Centuries IV 23 85v-86r, 85v.

⁴⁸⁵ I 9 113.

⁴⁸⁶ See e.g. I 66 468: “intolerable burden (صَحْح صَحْح)”.

In fact, all of the factors mentioned above, inner and outer, according to Isaac's descriptions, oppose the subject, exposing him/her to a destructive power to which, in other conditions, he/she would not be exposed. The limitedness of the human being before that is evident, for Isaac: all that surpasses intelligence, defies human nature⁴⁸⁷. However, at the same time, Isaac interprets all of these experiences as proceeding from God himself: it is God who 'buffets' the solitary with all of these events. Thus, Isaac writes that "God necessarily leaves to the saints causes of humility, the breaking of the heart, and a prayer of suffering [...], buffeting them [...] through the accidents of the natural passions, through transgressions [...], through the shame and insults [...] that they suffer from human beings", and with many other difficulties⁴⁸⁸.

Isaac's descriptions of the destructive power of suffering, when considered together with his interpretation of God as the one who 'buffets' the creature, bring out some essential issues connected to the creature's encounter with it. First, the issue of the role played by suffering in provoking one's questioning about who God is; secondly, the issue of the universal meaning of the experience of suffering for Isaac; and, lastly, the issue of the internal attitude that the subject should maintain in the face of this experience. These three problems will be examined in what follows.

⁴⁸⁷ I 58 413: "Perhaps you will be preserved from the evils which are prepared [for us] by the demons on the path of this way of life (ⲛⲓⲃⲟⲩ), a path full of darkness (ⲛⲁⲩⲧⲉⲛ) and narrow, with many stumbling blocks, rebel to knowledge for its incomprehensibility (ⲛⲁⲩⲧⲉⲛⲓⲛⲁⲩⲧⲉⲛ) for human nature. Trust me, my brother, believe my word, you are not sufficient to understand all the power of the demons, and your knowledge is not sufficient to support yourself before their artifices".

⁴⁸⁸ See I 8 108.

III.3. THE ‘GIFT’ OF SUFFERING: A UNIVERSAL PROBLEM

Although Isaac describes the encounter with suffering as distinctive of the solitary life, he acknowledges that the event of suffering is not a prerogative of the solitary life alone, but is a universal possibility of human existence. Hence, he takes the example of Job and Lazarus⁴⁸⁹ as figures of the suffering solitary.

Job and Lazarus, without having left ‘the world’, suffered in it, and starting from this, they knew God. The figure of Job, although explicitly mentioned only twice, in I 36⁴⁹⁰ and I 59⁴⁹¹, seems to be, for Isaac, a fundamental figure of the creature’s encounter with suffering, in the sense that there exist evident similarities between the experience described in the Book of Job and that which Isaac outlines⁴⁹². In the story of Job as in Isaac’s conception, although evil has an immediate origin other than God (Satan who tempts Job with all his sorrows; the

⁴⁸⁹ See I 57 399-400, where Isaac equates, as having the same function, the fact of ‘despising’ the world and the fact of being involuntarily deprived of the goods of this world. He writes: “Also when a person is deprived of the goods of this world involuntarily, the more he is lacking in these goods (lit.: them), so [also] mercy follows him, and divine compassion carries him. Glory to the one who has pity on us by [making use of both things of] the right and of the left (i.e. positive and negative), and [who] creates for us an opportunity for finding life (or: salvation) through all [these things]! For [in the case of] those who are too weak to acquire their salvation voluntarily, [God] causes their souls to advance gradually towards virtue through involuntary adversity (حَمَلٌ). Also that Lazarus, the poor man, was not in want of the goods of this world due to his will, and even his body was wounded by ulcers – he had two bitter griefs, one more severe (أشد) than the other: sickness and poverty –, but finally he was honoured [by finding rest] in the bosom of the patriarch [Abraham] (cf. Lk 16:19-31). God is near to the suffering (مُعْتَبِرٌ) heart, which calls out to him because of [its] affliction”.

⁴⁹⁰ I 36 278-279: “[With] all these things the Tempter is allowed (مُضْمَرٌ) to make war on the saints through temptations (مُتَعَبِّدٌ), so that their love of God (lit.: the love of God which is in them) might be examined through these temptations (lit.: them) [...]. It is not the case that they become known to God by means of these [temptations], but [they become known] to the Adversary, who strongly desires, if indeed possible, to learn these things, as he also said concerning Job. He even asked God, concerning him: ‘Does Job fear God for no reason (Job 1:9)?’ Then, a little negligence [by God] occurs, and the Tempter draws violently near, according to the measure of their capacity. Then, the Evil One falls suddenly upon [them], according to his desire for these things”.

⁴⁹¹ I 59 415-416: “How many times God allows the lovers of virtue to be tempted (مُتَعَبِّدٌ) in things such as these, and not only [this], but he also allows many evils to rise up against them from every place, strikes them in their bodies, like Job, brings them to poverty, forces humankind to deny them, and strikes them in all their possessions. Only to their soul damage does not approach”.

⁴⁹² Isaac alludes to the Book of Job in some other crucial passages, apart those aforementioned: when speaking of the realization of the suffering implied in the life ‘in the world’: I 35 229 (Job 3:10-11); when speaking of the difference between having an idea of the experience of God (i.e. ‘hearing’) and of the real, concrete experience of God (i.e. ‘vision’), in the context of a discussion of differences between faith and knowledge: I 44 320 (cf. Job 42:5); again, on faith, which transforms the subject in God’s likeness, and knowledge: I 51 362 (Job 23:13).

Adversary, the passions, and the negative events which oppress the solitary), it is included in God's plan, whose will is not given to the creature to understand with clarity. Ultimately, it is God who 'buffets' the solitary with 'afflictions', "who suddenly brings an evil thing" upon him⁴⁹³; who tries him "like gold in the furnace"⁴⁹⁴. The problem of the presence of 'the negative', then, is intimately connected, for Isaac as for Job, to the question of God's reliability and faith, on the one hand, and to the question of one's identity as a human being, on the other.

Isaac touches, here, on 'theodicy'. What is significant, however, also for a possible contemporary appropriation of his thought, is that his 'theodicy' is formulated from the perspective of *the sufferer*. This means that Isaac is uninterested in explaining the presence of evil on a purely speculative level and finding a rational justification for a God who allows its existence – at least not in the first instance. He is interested, instead, in the human being as one *who experiences* his/her suffering. His 'theodicy' therefore – if one still wishes to use this term – is shaped by the phenomenology of the experience of *the sufferer*. This means that, if a solution to the issue of 'theodicy' can be found, it will be found only on an existential ground, *by the sufferer*, within his/her personal experience.

On many occasions, Isaac asserts that God's project on creatures is for their good, although it includes experiences of the 'negative'. Isaac sometimes expresses this idea by saying that God guides the creature with 'his right hand' and with 'his left hand'⁴⁹⁵ (i.e. through positive and negative experiences), which ultimately

⁴⁹³ II 37,4 147 (Syr.); 159 (ET).

⁴⁹⁴ I 36 279.

⁴⁹⁵ See e.g. II 31,10 127 (Syr); 141 (ET). See also II 35,3 140 (Syr.); 152 (ET), where Isaac speaks of God's "supreme care, full of compassion, which visits creation unceasingly, sometimes under the aspect of the left, sometimes under that of the right"; I 57 399: "Glory to him who has pity on us in [things] of the right and of the left"; Centuries IV 23 85v-86r, 85v: Isaac speaks of the person who "perseveres in the struggle of the Lord in all things, of the right and of the left, which happen to him".

means that negative experiences are also for a greater good. God “[in] everything acts towards us according to what he knows will be useful to us, through things that cause suffering or through things that are rest-giving [...]: all are directed towards a single eternal good”⁴⁹⁶. Isaac, however, never uses these affirmations to diminish the value of the subject’s experience of suffering, or to depreciate its negative and challenging impact on him/her. He never bypasses subjective experience, suggesting that it has no value, and that the ultimate truth is final goodness, nor does he ignore ‘the negative’. In this sense, he never defends a supposed justice of God *as an alternative* to the experience of the sufferer: what is negative *for the sufferer* remains negative, as his pervasive descriptions of suffering show. His affirmations about the good occurring also through ‘the negative’, instead tend to have the function of helping the sufferer to deal with a ‘negative’ which is really present. In this sense, the idea of God guiding the creature with ‘his right and left hand’ helps the creature to face suffering, to remain firm despite its destructive power, or to develop an understanding of what he/she is experiencing.

If one arrives to believe that also negative experiences are for one’s good⁴⁹⁷, this occurs only *as the result of a process*, which involves one personally, in one’s own flesh, so that one becomes personally convinced of the truth of God’s

⁴⁹⁶ II 39,3 153 (Syr.); 163 (ET). This quote comes from a discourse devoted to the theme of Gehenna, which for Isaac also is an expression of mercy. On the importance of God’s mercy and love in Isaac, see in particular Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 143-149; 243-263; Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 35-43; A. Louf, “Pourquoi Dieu se manifesta”, 37-56; Chialà, “Trois thèmes majeurs”, 321-340. On Isaac’s idea that also Gehenna is subject to a limit, as he states in II 41,1 169 (Syr.); 180 (ET), and it is ultimately an expression of mercy, see: Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 363-278; Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 269-297; Brock, “Isacco il Siro: giustizia e Misericordia”; and Ramelli’s study on *apokatastasis*: I. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements Ser. 120, Boston, 2013, 758-766.

⁴⁹⁷ Ilaria Ramelli has recently spoken of a “therapeutic conception of all the sufferings decided by God” in Isaac, “an idea that Isaac shared with Clement, Origen, Gregory Nyssen, and most supporters of the doctrine of apokatastasis”: see Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 758; also Sebastian Brock, referring to Ramelli’s statement, highlighted Isaac’s “therapeutic, non-legalistic attitude regarding the existence of sin”: see Brock, “Isacco il Siro: giustizia e Misericordia”, 190. On this theme, Kavvadas highlighted Isaac’s debt towards Theodore of Mopsuestia: see Kavvadas, “Some Observations”, 152-153.

mysterious perspective. In this light, one can also understand Isaac's statements about suffering as 'a gift' of God, or even about God 'desiring' that "his saints" "be in tribulation in [this] world"⁴⁹⁸.

Isaac is not saying that God 'desires' suffering *per se*, as a passive experience, and neither is he saying that suffering *per se* is positive. Instead, he points to the encounter with suffering as the only opportunity for going through the *initiatory process* evoked above. His statements ultimately point to God 'desiring' what the subject can discover at the end of this process, i.e. him/herself and God. However, this is discovered *only* by passing through this process in one's own personal existence. For this reason, all of the elements which lead to this discovery have a very high value for Isaac, especially suffering itself, which is the origin of the whole process.

What Isaac says, then, presupposes an essential role *of the sufferer*, who alone can discern the opportunity and 'the gift' hidden within suffering. In other words, what Isaac states presupposes attributing a high value *to the subject*, who alone can seek the meaning of his/her experience.

'The sufferer', here, is a hermit, Isaac himself, or his disciple. His experience, however, transcends the boundaries of belonging. The example of Job and Lazarus, or those of the martyrs often quoted by Isaac⁴⁹⁹, among whom he also mentions women and lay people⁵⁰⁰, show that what is essential for him is the encounter with suffering *and* the access to its deciphering, not belonging *per se*.

This does not mean that Isaac relativizes the solitary state. It is sufficient to look at

⁴⁹⁸ I 60 424.

⁴⁹⁹ The idea of the solitary life as a form of martyrdom plays an important role in Isaac. It is a theme common in monastic sources: see E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr*, Washington, 1950. In Isaac the stories of the martyrs have a special place especially in III 12,38-49 101-104 (Syr.); 140-144 (IT).

⁵⁰⁰ On women martyrs, see III 12,43-49 102-104 (Syr.); 141-144 (IT).

some of his expressions to understand that this is not the case, as when he speaks of “the glorious observances of stillness”⁵⁰¹ or of “the wonderful way of life of solitaries”⁵⁰². Instead, with the reference to human beings who suffered and found God beyond the boundaries of the solitary life, Isaac wants to point to what he believes is at stake in the solitary life itself. Isaac’s reflection, then, has two functions: on the one hand, he points to the possibility, for all human beings, to discover what the encounter with suffering can bring out; and on the other, he reminds his reader-disciple of what his choice means, which is not his *status* or social identity, but a transformative process which deals with facing the universal problem of existence.

Isaac addresses the universal nature of the problem of suffering in many passages. This emerges with particular clarity in a passage of the *Third Part*, in which Isaac seeks to show his reader – an ascetic who would like to avoid the presence of suffering –, that it is actually possible to pass through it. Isaac invites him to consider not only the condition of the martyrs, who are traditionally taken as a model of the ascetic in monastic literature, but also of those who “involuntarily”⁵⁰³, suffer afflictions in the world. He says:

If you are buffeted (محلل), afflicted (مألم), and tormented (مضطرب) on the path of virtue, remember those who are afflicted, buffeted, and cast into all [sorts of] violent torments (عذبهم ومصائبهم) involuntarily, because of the world, and [so you should] glorify God, who made you worthy to be voluntarily buffeted, because of the fear of God and a life of repentance/conversion [...]⁵⁰⁴.

Certainly, these people do not consciously look for God. However, Isaac, in mentioning them, shows attention to the universal and ‘basic’ level of the problem of suffering, which precedes not only a belonging to the monastic state, but can also

⁵⁰¹ I 20 162.

⁵⁰² II 14,5 57 (Syr.); 67 (ET).

⁵⁰³ III 12,37 102 (Syr.); 140 (IT).

⁵⁰⁴ III 12,37 102 (Syr.); 140 (IT).

precede a reading of faith. An acknowledgement of a radical solidarity of human beings in suffering takes shape, in Isaac's writings, based on the common experience of vulnerability.

Hence, for Isaac, the solitary life does not concern something other, strange, different from what human existence implies, but it is a *voluntary*, conscious entrance into the deciphering of the ontological problem that *involuntarily* questions and afflicts *every* human being, unless he/she decides to hide it from his/her consciousness. This interrelatedness of the universal nature of human experience and the choice of the solitary life shines out also through Isaac's conviction that God, when he wishes to further the growth of a person who did not voluntarily chose affliction, makes him/her advance through involuntary 'afflictions'⁵⁰⁵.

All this means that in Isaac's view the toils of the solitary life and the involuntary toils of *every life* can have the same aim. Just as life brings light to the meaning of the solitary choice, so also Isaac's descriptions of the experiences of difficulty, the ways of passing through these, and the discoveries that occur in the solitary life can be meaningful in contexts different from Isaac's.

It could be argued, therefore, that these insights of Isaac are not only related to an ancient form of ascetic life, but regard wide and universal problems, connected with the *meaning* of life when placed before suffering. This is especially true when one considers the experience of extreme suffering, which Isaac also describes, where the human being knows radical trials and a lack of meaning⁵⁰⁶. But this will be discussed further in the conclusions of this study.

⁵⁰⁵ I 57 399 "[God] advances gradually towards virtue, through involuntary adversity, the souls of those who are too weak to acquire their salvation (or: life) voluntarily".

⁵⁰⁶ See Chapter VI.

III.4. THE *INTERNAL RELATIONSHIP* WITH SUFFERING: SAILING ON “THE ROUGH SEA OF STILLNESS”

What occurs, however, in the process of acquiring ‘knowledge’ of suffering and during its deciphering? The hypothesis which will be explored in this study is that the experience of suffering, due to its weight, urges the creature to develop a relationship with ‘the negative’, both internal and external. The experience of suffering, then, *is not good* in itself – in fact, it asks for redemption – but *is good* for this function and when experienced in this perspective.

In this sense, Isaac’s discourse on suffering should not be read from the perspective of a search for a practical, functional solution to the fact that suffering is present, but as something that looks at the problem of suffering from *another* angle: the quest for the *internal attitude* to keep before suffering, a suffering which *is actually present* and ‘presses’ upon the subject. In this sense, it concerns the *internal relationship* of the subject with ‘the negative’, not the external.

In other words, Isaac is not primarily interested in changing the outer negative reality. He is above all interested in how making use of what occurs within and without for learning an *inner attitude* that is capable of being in a relationship with this reality, even with its most negative features.

This junction is delicate, however, because, in the process, Isaac outlines how one does really experience suffering. This exposes the creature to the emergence of his/her frailty – something that can be dangerous within and without. There is a quality of ‘sacredness’, in what occurs here, and this is why, in Isaac, there exists a series of boundaries, practices, and relationships aimed at the protection of the person who goes through this process. On a personal level, Isaac

stresses the need of developing ‘discernment (ܟܘܢܝܢܐ)’⁵⁰⁷ and practices which protect and guard one on one’s path. Isaac uses for these practices (e.g. the regular office), terms which are literally connected to the ideas of protection and care: these are “guardians (ܟܘܢܝܢܐܝܗܘܢ)’⁵⁰⁸” (i.e., of orphans) and “stewards (ܟܘܢܝܢܐܝܗܘܢ)’” (i.e. of a house)⁵⁰⁹. On a relational level, Isaac speaks of the relationships of trust described in the first section.

But Isaac’s awareness of the delicate nature of what the process involves emerges also from other elements of his thought. It is in this light that we should read his exhortation to protect the weak person, to avoid exposing him/her to any kind of condemnation: “Cover the sinner [...]; sustain the weak and the distressed with your word [...], so that the right Hand which supports everything might sustain you”⁵¹⁰. Revealing are also Isaac’s views expressed in a passage where he criticises abusive power, that is inattentive to personal existence. He speaks in these terms of the superior of a monastery who, due to envy or the community’s needs, keeps a member of his community from leaving the coenobitic life in order to lead the solitary life, when this is his calling:

If there is a solitary who is capable of this grace (i.e. to dwell in stillness), and [who] received this gift from God, and one of the leaders and superiors of brothers, because of the comforts and the practice of the body (i.e. visible asceticism), or because of envy, denies this gift to [this] solitary, [his] judgement is with God, and he will have to give answer [for this] before the judgement-seat of Christ⁵¹¹.

⁵⁰⁷ ‘Discernment’ includes, e.g., developing the capacity of choosing what works for oneself, which can be different from what works for another person: see Isaac’s discussion of the different ‘paths’ in the ascetic way of life in II,30,3 122 (Syr.); 134 (ET). On ‘discernment’, see Chapter IV.

⁵⁰⁸ The Syriac word comes from the Greek ἐπιτρόπος, ‘steward, trustee, governor’ and, metaph. ‘guardian, protector’.

⁵⁰⁹ See II 4,6 2 (Syr.); 3 (ET). Cf. Gal 4:2.

⁵¹⁰ I 2 14.

⁵¹¹ Centuries II 44 43v-45r, 44v-45r.

All of these elements show Isaac's attention to personal, individual existence, and his conviction that the person *should be able* to go through the process of relationship with suffering, in order for the process to be transformative.

In this light, the ascetic life is not the mere fact of undergoing negative states, but the place where learning the *internal attitude* before these. It can be regarded as the process where learning 'how' to be in contact with the problem of existence, where discovering 'how' to suffer, 'how' 'to sail' on "the rough sea of stillness (ܐܘܪܫܐܝܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ)"⁵¹².

For this reason, Isaac employs various images, which in different ways highlight the necessity of dealing, with skill and care⁵¹³, with the difficulties encountered on a rough, deep sea. He speaks of "spiritual sailing"⁵¹⁴, of which he writes:

For the discerning ones, the honourable practice (ܥܘܠܐ) of stillness is a haven of mysteries, a goal towards which the mind gazes [...]. Just as the eyes of the helmsman look to the stars, so also the inner sight of the solitary, in all the course of his journey, gazes at the goal that he placed in his mind on the first day when he gave himself to travel on the rough sea of stillness, until he finds that pearl for whose sake he sent himself forth on the unfathomable depths of the sea⁵¹⁵.

The solitary is here a "buffeted merchant"⁵¹⁶, who is aware of the risks of commerce⁵¹⁷, and yet still decides to pass through "the harsh waves of the sea"⁵¹⁸

⁵¹² See I 66 467. In III 13,24 110 (Syr.); 152 (IT), Isaac always uses the same adjective, speaking of "the difficult conduct of the solitary life (ܐܘܪܫܐܝܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ)". In Centuries IV 41 90v, the sea of the solitary life is described as a "fearful (ܐܘܪܫܐܝܠܐ) sea".

⁵¹³ See Centuries IV 41 90v.

⁵¹⁴ ܐܘܪܫܐܝܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ: Centuries IV 41 90v.

⁵¹⁵ I 66 467.

⁵¹⁶ III 1,15 6 (Syr.); 11 (IT). The imagery of the merchant and commerce is common in Isaac, and in Syriac monastic writers: see Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 555, footnote 3, 68 and Chialà, *Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, footnote 52, 11. See e.g. I 80 565: "If you fall into temptations, do not despair. For there is no merchant who travels on seas and roads, without encountering losses, there is no ploughman who simply gathers his harvest, and there is no athlete who is not smitten and wounded, even if he receives victory at the end. So also with the things of God, with the affairs of the merchants of this invisible path. [There are], on [this path], profits and losses, blows [lit: sing] and victory".

⁵¹⁷ See e.g. I 58 408.

⁵¹⁸ ܐܘܪܫܐܝܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ in I 77 534.

to seek the pearl of greatest value. This ‘pearl’ is Christ, and to the search of this pearl another set of sea images is related: those of swimming, or diving⁵¹⁹. Isaac speaks of a “noetic swimming of the intellect”⁵²⁰, insisting on its danger, to which the person who is still in ‘infancy’ should never be exposed⁵²¹. The images of depth heap up: “descending to the heart of the earth”⁵²², “make the⁵²³ [body’s] movements dive down to deep places”⁵²⁴, in which “it is not easy for everybody to swim”⁵²⁵, “profound depths [...] in which our fathers swam”⁵²⁶, “descending to the abyss, which hold riches”⁵²⁷, “descent to the abyss”⁵²⁸. In this abyss, an encounter with ‘the negative’ occurs: Isaac mentions “waves assailing [the person]”, “[marine] beasts” encountering him, “holding [his] breath up to death”, “deprivation of clear air, which is granted to everyone”⁵²⁹. One understands then, how this ‘swimming’ is unsuitable for “the hired labourer”⁵³⁰: “If the diver (ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ) found a pearl in every oyster, everyone would easily become rich; if he brought [a pearl] up as soon as he

⁵¹⁹ Isaac came from the Persian Gulf, where pearl diving was an important activity. ‘To dive’, ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ, also means ‘to be baptized’ in Syriac, and this use, together with the idea of nakedness, and of Christ as the Pearl, recurs in Ephrem: see S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem*, Rome, 1985, 106-108. Isaac writes in I 45 326: “The diver (ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ) plunges naked (ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ) into the sea in order to find the pearl, and the wise monk journeys naked into creation, to find the pearl, Jesus Christ, within himself”.

⁵²⁰ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ in II 34,12 138 (Syr.); 149 (ET).

⁵²¹ See II 34,11 138 (Syr.); 149 (ET): “If, when we are still like children, we act with impudence [trying to reach] the regions of profound depths (ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ) within the sea in which our eminent fathers swam, being captivated by the desire to see [lit.: of the sight] the riches that they brought up and [still] bring up, we will be drowned in the sea”.

⁵²² II 34,5 137 (Syr.); 148 (ET).

⁵²³ Lit.: their.

⁵²⁴ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ in II 34,7 137 (Syr.); 149 (ET).

⁵²⁵ II 34,7 137 (Syr.); 149 (ET).

⁵²⁶ II 34,11 138 (Syr.); 149 (ET).

⁵²⁷ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ in II 34,12 138 (Syr.); 149 (ET).

⁵²⁸ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ in II 34,4 136 (Syr.); 148 (ET).

⁵²⁹ II 34,4 136 (Syr.); 148 (ET).

⁵³⁰ II 34,1 134 (Syr.); 146 (ET): “[God] makes worthy of great consolation those who labour for him not as if for a salary, but out of a sense of obligation. As for a salary labour those who do not rejoice when they should bear (ܠܚܘܨܘܬܐ) afflictions, adversities and the rest of sad things because of our Lord, but when they are not comforted according to their expectation or are not relieved, after they had laboured for a little time, they end up in lassitude, murmuring, and faint-heartedness”. See also II 34,3 136 (Syr.); 147 (ET) and II 21,10 104 (Syr.); 116 (ET).

dived, [...] pearls would be more frequent and numerous than pebbles”⁵³¹. There is no assurance, instead, in “the fearful sea”⁵³².

All of these images speak of the quest for a relationship with ‘the negative’. They describe the subject as an active agent, whose force is related to being able to swim, not due to the absence of waves – a quest that includes the possibility of empty oysters. In this perspective the waves, the dangers, and the dives in vain, urge the discovery of ‘*how*’ ‘to dive’, i.e. they orient ‘diving’ itself. It is because of this vital function of the ‘negative’ that Isaac can say: “Hardships (ⲥⲩⲩⲩⲁⲗⲁ) for the sake of the good should be loved like the good [itself]”⁵³³. In this sense, they are a ‘gift’, and ‘the negative’, something which awakens, challenges, and even guides one’s search.

This quest for an *internal* relationship with ‘the negative’ is ultimately a quest for a relationship *with oneself* subject to its happening, and Isaac believes that this is the only way in which also a relationship with God can be discovered.

To discover this, certain human beings choose the desert. It is in order to understand experientially the meaning of affirmations such as: “God is near to the suffering heart (ⲛⲉⲃⲉⲃⲉ ⲛⲉⲗⲁ)”⁵³⁴, that some human beings “went about clothed in skins of sheep and goats, and were like wanderers in the desert (cf. Heb 11:37)”⁵³⁵.

They departed and hid themselves in mountains, in caves (cf. Heb 11:38), and in remote and solitary regions, because they saw that this discipline could not be perfected among human beings, because of many obstacles, and they became dead to this life because of the life in God. They wandered in desert places (cf. Heb 11:38), among steep rocks, like people who went astray⁵³⁶. People who – the entire world is not comparable to the glory of one of them [...]. Some dwelt in steep and rugged crags, some at the foot of the mountains and in deep gorges, some in the holes of the earth and in dens (cf. Heb 11:38), like those which the foxes dig, to lie

⁵³¹ II 34,4 136 (Syr.); 148 (ET). See also Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 555, footnote 2, 148.

⁵³² Centuries IV 41 90v.

⁵³³ I 39 296.

⁵³⁴ I 57 400.

⁵³⁵ I 60 426.

⁵³⁶ Also here: ⲛⲉⲗⲁⲗⲁ.

hidden in them, some in tombs, some on the peaks of the mountains, some⁵³⁷ searched out a small shelter for themselves [lit: himself] in the desert, and completed there the rest of their [lit: his] life, some built a small enclosure on the top of a mountain, or a small cell, and they dwelt in it gladly, like in palaces of kings. And [this] did not occur because they were taking great care of how to live, but of how each of them could please God and complete his struggle in a beautiful way⁵³⁸.

Of these people, Isaac says, with the Letter to the Hebrews, “the world is not worthy (Heb 11:38)”⁵³⁹. With a lyrical tone and visible affection, Isaac describes a world of roughness and withdrawal from the dynamics of ‘the collective’, to discover the connection between oneself and God. The description of this quest, which takes place during the ascetic process, or ‘practice’, as Isaac calls it, will form the theme of the next chapter.

III.5. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter explored Isaac’s understanding of the solitary life as a process which implies an encounter with the mystery of suffering. This mystery is distinctive of the human condition *per se*, not only of the solitary life, but Isaac understands this way of living as a conscious attempt to contact and decipher it.

In this sense, Isaac conceives the solitary life as an *initiatory process*, in which the connection between one’s passibility and God is existentially explored.

This requires the presence of relationships of trust within which a transmission of

⁵³⁷ The subject of this and the following sentence is literarily singular.

⁵³⁸ I 80 552. These images, with the allusion to the Letter to the Hebrews, recur also elsewhere in Isaac: see II 5,26 13 (Syr.); 17 (ET), where he mentions “all the fathers and brothers who are on mountains, in caves, in gorges, in crags, in rugged places, and in the desert (cf. Heb 11:38), who are hidden from the world, and only to you is known where they are”; II 5,12 8 (Syr.); 11 (ET): “You made human tombs, caves, and holes in the earth (cf. Heb 11:38) the tabernacle of your revelations to them”, where Isaac makes of these caves and holes a mysterious, transformative place, like the cell as “furnace”, or Moses’s “cave of hard rock”, previously mentioned; I 60 426: “The saints were in afflictions in mountains, in caves, and in the holes of the earth, like those people of whom the Apostle testifies: ‘Of whom the world was not worthy (cf. Heb 11:38)’”; I 5 66: “[The solitaries], who for all their life loved solitude, made caves and crags their dwellings (cf. Heb 11:38), and gladly endured empty spaces and the desert because of [their] love of God”.

⁵³⁹ I 60 426.

wisdom can occur. Within them, suffering can be expressed, verified, and passed through (III.1.).

The suffering one encounters in the solitary life, explored in section III.2., takes different forms, and Isaac's vocabulary is extremely rich. He does not understand suffering primarily as self-inflicted pain or as the expiation of guilt, but as a wide range of inner and outer experiences which include pain, but also toil, difficulty, and laboriousness. The 'roughness' and 'density' of the adjectives he uses, the vivid quality of his descriptions, and his attention to states of utter difficulty, show how fundamental the encounter with suffering is for him. They also tell of Isaac's awareness of the destructive impact of suffering on the subject.

Thus, the solitary life, far from being an immediate entrance into the light and peace of God, takes the form of a condition of crossing through zones of human existence marked by the presence of 'the negative', i.e. of all that opposes the creature's search for consolation. They force the human being to encounter his/her original vulnerability, i.e. his/her ontological condition of being a creature.

Section III.3. explored the creature's encounter with suffering. This encounter is not a prerogative of the solitary life alone, but a universal possibility of human existence, and Isaac brings as figures of the suffering solitary human beings who, like Lazarus, the martyrs, and Job, encountered suffering while living 'in the world'. Above all, for Isaac, as in the Book of Job, negative conditions and suffering are included in the mysterious plan of God. This raises the issue of Isaac's 'theodicy'.

Isaac does not focus on theoretical justifications of God's goodness, but formulates his 'theodicy' from the perspective of *the sufferer*, i.e. as existentially based. He is interested in the human being as a human being who 'experiences': the

discovery of the goodness of God's plan despite the presence of suffering can occur only at the end of a process, which involves one's existence and one's conviction.

Therefore, when Isaac affirms that suffering is "a gift", or even that God "desires" it, he does not mean that God 'desires' suffering *per se*, but that God 'desires' the process of discovery that suffering awakens. This implies attributing a very high value to the subject who, in this process, experiences and deciphers the meaning of his/her experience. Due to the delicate nature of this process, however, which implies the encounter with suffering and an emergence of one's frailty, Isaac stresses the need for relationships of trust and practices that help the person to be in the condition of going through this process.

The encounter with suffering ultimately urges the creature to search for the internal attitude to keep before it, and this is examined in section III.4. This means that Isaac conceives of the encounter with 'the negative' as an opportunity to develop *a relationship with one's creatural, ontological condition of vulnerability, and therefore, with one's suffering self*. From this alone, Isaac believes, also the relationship to God develops.

The encounter, experience, deciphering, and possible discoveries related to suffering occur within the ascetic process, which Isaac also often calls 'practice'. It is in order experientially to understand its meaning that certain human beings enter the desert.

CHAPTER IV

THE ASCETIC LIFE: INTERPRETATIONS

This chapter examines Isaac's understanding of the ascetic process in the light of his wider thought, with the aim of bringing to light the connections between his interpretations of the ascetic life and his understanding of it as an encounter with suffering. The chapter aims to show that what is ultimately at stake in the solitary life is an encounter with the problem of existence, with one's ontological vulnerability.

Chapter III has pointed out how fundamental the encounter with suffering is for Isaac, and how he believes that encountering suffering is closely connected to developing a relationship with God. It has also suggested that deciphering one's experience of suffering and finding the *internal attitude* to keep before it is essential for Isaac, and that this is strongly tied in with the quest for God. To explore this relationship, some human beings leave 'the world' and choose the desert, passing through the demanding process of *askesis*.

Isaac, however, does not state that the ascetic process aims at making contact with one's vulnerability with concepts which are immediately transparent to a contemporary reader. Neither does he directly argue that this is the way to access a relationship with God. He most often speaks of the ascetic life as a search for a purification from the passions, as the way to 'impassibility (ἄσβεστος ἡσυχία)' and to "nakedness of the intellect (ἄσκησις ἡσυχίας)", as a process of 'crucifixion (ἁγίαστασις, ἁγίαστασις)' or 'mortification (ἁγίαστασις)', and as the path towards 'theoria (θεωρία, *tē'ōrīyā*)'. Isaac uses these concepts, which in his context were shared, understandable ways of reading human experience. In this chapter, these concepts will be analysed, so that their meaning might come to light. It will then become

clear why and in which way they are intimately related to the issue of the creature's suffering. This analysis will show how essential the ascetic process is in Isaac, and that this means that Isaac attributes an essential value to having contact and relationship with one's creatural condition of vulnerability.

Isaac's reading of the ascetic life as a search for purification from the passions will first be examined, and the role that the subject as 'soul' plays in it will be discussed. Secondly, the status of the ascetic process in relation to 'contemplation' will be considered. The different forms of contemplation, the condition of rootedness in oneself which is the aim of *askesis* ('integrity'), and the relationship between creature and Creator will be analysed. This analysis will bring to light the crucial value of the ascetic process in order to discover 'knowledge'. Lastly, by examining Isaac's reading of *askesis* as the exercise of 'natural knowledge' and as obedience to God's 'commandments', the ideas of limitation and negation of the self will be approached. This will make it possible to draw some conclusions about Isaac's understanding of the ascetic life as an encounter with suffering.

IV.1. 'PRACTICE': PURIFICATION FROM THE PASSIONS

Isaac conceives of the ascetic process as a path towards purification from the passions.

To describe this process, in this study, the use of the term *askesis* is usually preferred to 'asceticism'. If 'asceticism' tends to refer to a set of 'practices' related to a generic idea of 'renunciation' carried out for 'religious reasons'⁵⁴⁰, *askesis*,

⁵⁴⁰ See e.g. the definition in the Online Oxford Dictionary: "Severe self-discipline and avoiding of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons", at <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/asceticism>.

originally meaning ‘athletic training’, better conveys Isaac’s understanding of the ascetic life as a transformative process. The term that Isaac employs most frequently to describe this process is ܦܘܠܗܢܐ (*pulhānā*), that, as Guillaumont noted, is the word that, in the Syriac world, mostly inherited the meaning of Evagrius’ term *πρακτική*, although in the Syriac versions of Evagrius other translations are also employed⁵⁴¹. Isaac often uses it in a way that is reminiscent of Evagrius’ *πρακτική*⁵⁴², the exercise of oneself in *askesis*, that precedes *γνωστική*, ‘knowledge’ (ܐܕܒܘܬܐ, *ida’tā*), or ‘contemplation’ (ܬܘܪܝܬܐ, *tē’ōrīyā*)⁵⁴³, and seeks a purification from the passions⁵⁴⁴.

ܦܘܠܗܢܐ, however, in Syriac, originally referred to farming, and evokes at the same time the idea of ‘tillage’ or ‘cultivation of oneself’. Isaac himself uses the agricultural metaphor to speak of *askesis* as a concrete labour on ‘the earth’ of the soul⁵⁴⁵, and understands in this light the transformative work of *askesis*. Employing this term, Isaac has its symbolic resonance in mind: applying oneself, concrete and physical toil, but also patience, and awaiting germinations which are not in one’s power. Isaac’s metaphor, then, graphically differentiates the involvement of which he speaks from a mere mechanical ‘doing’.

Besides ܦܘܠܗܢܐ, Isaac uses several other expressions⁵⁴⁶, the most relevant of which is ܡܝܬܪܘܬܐ (*myatrutā*), ‘virtue’. This word, which in Syriac also means

⁵⁴¹ A. Guillaumont, “Les versions syriaques”, 35-41, 37-38.

⁵⁴² As an introduction to Evagrius’ conception of *πρακτική*, see Guillaumont’s introduction to *Praktikos*: A. Guillaumont – C. Guillaumont, *Traité pratique*, SC 170, 38-112.

⁵⁴³ On the usage of this term in Isaac, see S. Brock, “Some Uses of the Term Theoria in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh”, *Parole de l’Orient* 20 (1995), 407-419.

⁵⁴⁴ Although Isaac shares many of Evagrius’ insights about the nature of the passions and their interrelations, he does not develop a systematic analysis of the different passions or the tactics against them, as Evagrius does. Evagrius’ list of eight thoughts (λογισμοί) from which the passions arise is well-known: gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger, *akedia*, vainglory, and pride (see *Praktikos* 6, BL Add. 14578 3r col. a, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449, cf. Guillaumont – Guillaumont, *Traité*, SC 171, 506-509).

⁵⁴⁵ See I 28 203. Scully highlighted the presence of this agricultural metaphor already in Macarius: see Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*, 43-47.

⁵⁴⁶ ܡܝܬܪܘܬܐ, ‘action/doing’; ܐܘܪܘܬܐ, ‘way of life’; ܦܘܠܗܢܐ, ‘labours’; ܦܘܠܗܢܐ, ‘action/deed’; ܕܝܢܐ, ‘justice’.

‘excellence’, indicates *askesis* as a whole⁵⁴⁷, although often points to its visible aspect⁵⁴⁸.

Isaac understands ‘practice’ as the time of the exercise of oneself. This is not a mere application of techniques, but an intense activity of a complex kind and *a work of the subject on him/herself*, as the metaphor of ‘tillage’ suggests. In this sense, Isaac interprets *askesis* as the activity of oneself as ‘soul’, according to a reading of the quest for a purification from the passions that is already found in John the Solitary⁵⁴⁹:

In every conduct subject to the power of the will, there are wars, and it needs the labour of body and mind. For this reason [...] in [...] the practice of virtue (ܠܘܠܗܐ ܠܕܘܢܝܘܬܐ) and the hidden conduct of the mind (ܠܘܠܝܢ ܠܘܠܗܐ ܠܘܢܝܘܬܐ), in which the multitude of solitaries lives [...] there is also labour (ܠܠܗܐ) and struggle (ܠܠܗܐ), and they are confined within the meditation and care of *the soul*⁵⁵⁰.

John, who is the first Syriac writer to make use of the term ܠܘܠܗܐ, ‘passion’⁵⁵¹, conceives the time of *askesis* as the time of exercise of the soul: it is ܠܘܠܗܐ (ܠܘܠܗܐ) (napšānutā) ‘the level/the way of being of the soul’, which in his threefold reading of human life follows ܠܘܠܗܐ (ܠܘܠܗܐ) (pagrānutā), ‘the level/the way of being of the body’, and precedes ܠܘܠܗܐ (ܠܘܠܗܐ) (ruhānutā), ‘the level/the way of being of the Spirit’, which will reach fulfilment only in the post-Resurrection world. In John’s words, ܠܘܠܗܐ is “the exercise of afflictions (ܠܘܠܗܐ) and the labour (ܠܠܗܐ) of patient

⁵⁴⁷ See e.g. II 20,6 98 (Syr.); 108 (ET). Guillaumont notes that, in *Praktikos* (S1), often, phrases like ܠܘܠܗܐ ܘܠ ܠܘܠܝܢܘܬܐ ܠܘܠܗܐ were used to translate *πρακτική*: Guillaumont, “Les versions syriaques”, 37.

⁵⁴⁸ See Centuries II 44 43v-45r, 43v.

⁵⁴⁹ See Dederling, *Johannes*, 63.

⁵⁵⁰ Centuries IV 15 84r-84v, 84r.

⁵⁵¹ Probably under the influence of Greek thought: see Brock, “Some Paths to Perfection”, 85. There is no evidence of a connection between Evagrius and John until now: the topic should be explored in detail. For an analysis of Isaac’s terminology taken from Evagrius and John, see S. Brock, “Discerning the Evagrian in the writings of Isaac of Nineveh: a preliminary investigation”, *Adamantius* 15 (2009) 60-72. Unlike Evagrius, John does not outline a systematic classification of the passions, conceiving them instead as a wide phenomenon, including ‘good passions’ (like love [see Dederling, *Johannes*, 26] and humility [see Dederling, *Johannes*, 37, 67]) and neutral events (like sleep and hunger [see Dederling, *Johannes*, 43]). He also focuses on the negative passions, however: love for riches, zeal, anger, pride: see Dederling, *Johannes*, 19, 21-22, 24-25, 70.

endurance (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ) of the mind”, through which “the inner person strips off from himself the entire way of life of the old person (building upon Eph 4:22-24)”⁵⁵². In this perspective, John interprets *askesis* as a turning of ‘the soul’ to itself. This turning consists of seeking the soul’s freedom from dependence upon ‘the exterior-corporeal’, in which passionality is rooted, so that ‘the interior-distinctive of the soul’ could emerge, in what John describes as a gradual transition from the ‘outer person’ to the ‘inner person’⁵⁵³, that fully occurs only in ܠܗܘܘܘܬܐ (Cf. Rom 7:22, 2Cor 4:16; Eph 3:16).

Isaac interprets the originally Evagrian idea of an ascending journey from ‘practice’ to ‘knowledge-contemplation’ in the light of John’s dialectics ܠܗܘܘܬܐ/ܠܗܘܘܘܬܐ, as a move from the exterior to the interior⁵⁵⁴, as grounded in a strong sense of the alterity between what is human and what is of the Spirit, and above all as activity of the soul, i.e. as activity of oneself as a subject.

‘Soul’, here, should be understood in the light of the discussion presented in Chapter II: *this* ‘soul’ ‘sees’ and ‘perceives’, and is capable of having a relationship with oneself and the other, of sensing if its space is whole or has been violated, of discerning and desiring, of suffering and holding power. This implies conceiving *askesis* as being the exercise of what is properly human, because the soul is what is distinctive of being human. “Virtue is the way of [human] nature”⁵⁵⁵,

⁵⁵² Dederling, *Johannes*, 41.

⁵⁵³ For an analysis of this theme in John and Isaac, see Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*, 56-64.

⁵⁵⁴ Isaac also uses John’s concepts of ܠܗܘܘܬܐ, ܠܗܘܘܬܐ, and ܠܗܘܘܘܬܐ in reference to the elements of oneself involved in *askesis*. See Beulay, *La lumière*, 117-125.

⁵⁵⁵ II 20,6 96 (Syr.); 108 (ET).

Isaac states⁵⁵⁶. This requires attention, “exercise, and continuous reflection”⁵⁵⁷, because “every work you do without reflection and examination, your labour in it is empty even if it be beautiful, for God repays righteousness for the use of discernment, not for an undiscerning [lit.: casual] practice”⁵⁵⁸.

Revealing, in this sense, is what Isaac writes in his *Centuries*, where he criticises the possible tendency to cling to God as a way of bypassing the labour of working on oneself in *askesis*. Isaac writes:

The virtue accomplished in a state of rest by [a person] who is called ‘practical’ (⁵⁵⁹ ܦܠܣܝܩܐ) and wise in God is a portion of Satan, odious to God, and cursed, if it is possible for him to accomplish it without [rest], and if he expected to take on his practice without labour, both if you speak of the labour of the mind or of [the labour] of the body [...]. It is not the case that when laborious things (ܥܡܠܐ) occur to [a person], in that moment he thinks “my God!” and the action is properly accomplished by him [...]⁵⁶⁰.

Isaac, then, is highly critical of every reference to God which bypasses the subjective dimension and the need to take upon oneself the burden of ‘practice’.

Isaac distinguishes two aspects of this work on oneself: a ‘practice’ of the body, and a ‘practice’ of the soul. He refers to these two aspects by paired expressions such as: “practice of virtue (ܦܠܣܝܩܐ ܕܘܫܘܒܐ)”/“hidden conduct of the mind (ܦܠܣܝܩܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ)”⁵⁶¹; “practice of the body (ܦܠܣܝܩܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ)”/“practice of the mind (ܦܠܣܝܩܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ)”⁵⁶²; “labours of the body (ܥܡܠܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ)”/“labours of the

⁵⁵⁶ This involves an attempt to leave aside the ‘fear of the body’, typical of a ‘corporeal’ way of life, and to develop a sensitivity to the ‘fear of the soul’, i.e. being preoccupied with one’s salvation. For this theme in John see e.g. Dederig, *Johannes*, 15-16. Evagrius interprets *askesis* as beginning with the ‘fear of God’ (in his *Letter to Anatolius*): “Sons, the fear of God strengthens faith; abstinence from food [strengthens] the fear of God; hope and patience maintain abstinence from food; from them, the health of the soul (ܦܠܣܝܩܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ, i.e. ἀπάθεια in the original Greek) is born, which brings forth love”: BL Add. 14578 153r col. b, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449. See also Cf. *Praktikos* 81 BL Add. 14578 9v col. a-b, cf. Guillaumont – Guillaumont, *Traité*, SC 171, 670-671.

⁵⁵⁷ *Centuries* IV 15 84r-84v.

⁵⁵⁸ I 50 348-349.

⁵⁵⁹ The word is used in Syriac to translate πρακτικός: Guillaumont, *Les versions syriaques*, 38.

⁵⁶⁰ *Centuries* IV 20 85r.

⁵⁶¹ *Centuries* IV 15 84r-84v, 84r.

⁵⁶² II 24,1-2 109 (Syr.); 121 (ET)

soul (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ)⁵⁶³, or “labour of the heart (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܠܒ)⁵⁶⁴; “bodily conduct (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܥܡܘܣܐ)”/“conduct of the mind (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܢܚܘܒܐ)⁵⁶⁵; “patient endurance of the afflictions of the body (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܘܣܐ)”/“subtle practice of the mind (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܕܢܚܘܒܐ)⁵⁶⁶; “manifest/exterior practice (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ)”/“practice of the soul (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ)” or “hidden conduct of the mind (ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܢܚܘܒܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ)⁵⁶⁷.

Askesis of the body comes first in ‘practice’, and includes fasting, silence, chastity, solitude, the office, prostrations, sleeping on the ground, and dwelling in a stark place.

Askesis ‘of the soul’ is related to more inner dimensions: attention to the unfolding of the life of the mind; identification of its “hidden passions”⁵⁶⁸; watchfulness and discernment⁵⁶⁹; learning “the art of thoughts” and “the wisdom of spiritual sailing”⁵⁷⁰; the quest for ‘pure prayer’, not only vocal and liturgical, but before God alone in the attempt to abandon passions, thoughts, and images⁵⁷¹; interrogating Scripture and interiorising its words⁵⁷²; finally, confronting passions, which Isaac connects to the mind and lack of knowledge: particularly envy, vainglory, and pride⁵⁷³.

The ‘conduct of the soul’, therefore, implies a deepening of the presence to oneself that the whole ascetic process requires. In this sense, the passage from the body to the soul, that marks the transition from the first to the second form of

⁵⁶³ II 20,6 97 (Syr.) 108 (ET)

⁵⁶⁴ Centuries IV 94 108v.

⁵⁶⁵ I 40 303.

⁵⁶⁶ I 2 15.

⁵⁶⁷ Centuries I 36 25v-26r, 25v.

⁵⁶⁸ See I 40 306.

⁵⁶⁹ See e.g. I 70 483-488.

⁵⁷⁰ See Centuries IV 41 90v.

⁵⁷¹ See I 22 163-175.

⁵⁷² See e.g. Centuries IV 78 102v-104r, 103r-104r.

⁵⁷³ See Centuries IV 27 86v-87r.

‘practice’, corresponds to a movement from the outer to the inner⁵⁷⁴, that Isaac connects to gradually accessing an understanding of the *meaning* of things, of their real dimensions, and of their interconnectedness. It is the beginning of an access to their ‘mystery (ܠܝܫܪܝܐ)’, a concept that Isaac often uses, which he frequently connects to a *disclosure of meaning*⁵⁷⁵.

Isaac connects the idea of ‘theoria’ to this disclosure of meaning, which occurs *within* the ‘practice of the soul’.

IV.2. ‘PRACTICE’ AND ‘THEORIA’

Isaac conceives of ‘practice’ as the way to ‘theoria’, ‘contemplation’⁵⁷⁶. This section examines the relationship between them. As for Evagrius, also for Isaac two forms of ‘contemplation’ open up from ‘practice’: the ‘contemplation’ of the created natures, and the ‘contemplation’ of God⁵⁷⁷. Following Evagrius, Isaac also distinguishes two moments within the first form of ‘knowledge’: ‘second natural contemplation’ or ‘knowledge’, which concerns corporeal natures, and ‘first natural

⁵⁷⁴ This theme is related to John the Solitary’s distinction between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer person’, drawn from Paul. For the theme of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer person’ in Isaac, see A. Louf, “L’homme dans l’histoire du salut selon Isaac le Syrien”, *Connaissance des pères de l’Église* 88 (2002), 49-54; S. Chialà, “Le péché de l’homme”.

⁵⁷⁵ See Centuries IV 89 106v-107r, on ‘Scripture’: “[God] allowed the sharers of the mysteries of truth (ܠܝܫܪܝܐ ܠܝܫܪܝܐ) [...] to understand the aim of Scripture, and the order and reason of God’s dispensations [...]. [He allowed people] like the blessed Paul and the rest of his disciples after him who, through the Spirit, received insights and [the capacity to] interpret [Scripture]. Understand in this way also the mystery of the way of life in this world. For a certain meaning (ܠܝܫܪܝܐ) is hidden in it, and something of [this] meaning, according to the [right] time and the growth of the world and people, God reveals in part to some of those who hide themselves from all”.

⁵⁷⁶ As an introduction to this theme in Eastern Christian spirituality, see I. Hausherr, “Contemplation chez les Grecs et d’autres Orientaux Chrétiens”, *DS* 2.2, 1953, cols. 1762-1872.

⁵⁷⁷ As an introduction to Evagrius’ understanding of contemplation, see A. Guillaumont, “Un philosophe au désert: Évagre le Pontique”, *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 181 (1972), 29-56, 44-53. Isaac describes different ‘transitions’ in the solitary life in Centuries I 5 21r (Cf. Evagrius, KG II 4, A. Guillaumont (ed.), *Les six Centuries des “Kephalaia gnostica” d’Évagre le Pontique*, PO 28.1, Paris, 1958, 60; 62, S1). On Isaac’s teaching on knowledge, see Bettolo, “Povertà e conoscenza”; Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 119-141; Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 217-268; Seppälä, “The Idea of Knowledge in East Syrian Mysticism”, *Studia Orientalia* 101 (2007), 265-277; Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 181-189; Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, 77-138.

contemplation’ or ‘knowledge’, which concerns incorporeal natures, i.e. the angels, that Isaac conceives as noetic natures who gaze towards God⁵⁷⁸.

Both forms of ‘natural contemplation’ are included within the boundaries ‘of nature’, while subjection to the passions is understood as being ‘outside nature’, and the ‘knowledge’/contemplation of God as being “above nature”⁵⁷⁹. Isaac understands both ‘second’ and ‘first natural contemplation’ as taking place within ‘the conduct of the soul’ (in this sense, they occur within the boundaries of nature), although leaning towards the beyond⁵⁸⁰. The ‘contemplation of God’, instead, belongs to another ontological sphere. If ‘natural contemplations’ still possess a discursive content (although discovered through insight, not ‘grasping cognition’), this is not the case with the contemplation of God, which Isaac describes in terms of ‘wonder’⁵⁸¹ and complete transcendence of the dimension of the ‘here’. While

⁵⁷⁸ Centuries III 100 81v-82r: “The entire course of the intellect’s stirrings in the spiritual movement is comprehended as three knowledges which are said [to be] above purity: in the first, [the intellect] is instructed, in the second, it is made perfect, and in the third, it is crowned. Two of them [belong] to the course of [human] nature, and one [is] above [human] nature. The first is called second natural knowledge (ܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ), [that] which [comes] after this [is called] first and natural knowledge (ܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ), and that in which [the intellect] is crowned is [the knowledge] of the adorable Trinity, the true mystery of the Spirit”. In Evagrius, as known, first natural contemplation originally referred to the incorporeal intellects first created by God. Isaac follows the version S1 of Evagrius’ *Kephalaia Gnostika*, where Evagrius’ intellects are interpreted as angels.

⁵⁷⁹ See I 3 23. Also see e.g. II 14,27 64-65 (Syr.); 75 (ET). Cf. KG II 31 (Guillaumont, *Les six centuries*, 72, S1).

⁵⁸⁰ Neither ‘natural’ contemplations should be regarded as neat steps in a purely linear evolution: although evolution occurs, Isaac understands these states dynamically, as ‘wide lands’ with many nuances. See Centuries III 64 73r-74r, 73r-73v: “[...] Purity of heart is not a modest and small thing, and one does not enter and dwell immediately in it, [...] but it is a wide land with few borders, because those who walk towards it [...] encounter many good things and admirable delights, even if wars with the Philistines come upon them on [their] path [...]. Know that the children of Israel did not go out immediately from Egypt, nor did they enter and take possession of the entire Land of Promise at once and suddenly, but little by little [...]”.

⁵⁸¹ ‘Wonder’, for Isaac is the highest form of contemplation, the gift of the Spirit, in which the creature experiences his/her God. Isaac uses two terms to describe this experience: ܥܘܠܡܐ and ܥܘܠܡܐ. Some scholars have argued for their equivalence (Chialà, Hagman) and others for their differences in usage (Hansbury, Seppälä, Louf, Scully): see Scully’s overview in Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*, 74-75. Scully recently provided a perspective on Syriac and Greek authors’ influence on Isaac’s concept of ‘wonder/astonishment’: see Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh*, 73-116; 135-150. Seppälä devotes to this issue (not only in Isaac but also in other Syriac spiritual writers) a subsection of his thesis, in order to compare the ‘ecstatic’ phenomenon in Syriac ascetic literature and Sufi writings: see S. Seppälä, “In speechless Ecstasy”, *Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, Publications of the Institute for Asian and African Studies 2, Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2003, 81-90 (and the Appendix 1 331-341). Also, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 241-248.

the first occur through the mediation of the angels, the second is due to the operation of the Holy Spirit alone⁵⁸². Concerning this conception, scholars have rightly highlighted John the Solitary's influence on Isaac⁵⁸³.

This section, by bringing the relationship between 'practice' and 'theoria' to light, aims to demonstrate the vital role of 'practice' in order to find 'knowledge'. It does not pretend to trace a complete analysis of 'knowledge' in Isaac, but seeks instead to highlight some of the ways in which he conceived its relationship with 'practice'. 'Practice' will then appear as: 1) what makes it possible for 'theoria' to be *meaning*, so that 'theoria' emerges as being other than a mere communication of contents; 2) what 'forges' and 'structures' one's stability and rootedness in oneself, which is necessary in order to gaze at God ('integrity'); 3) what makes it possible for the creature to stand in front of a God whose alterity from the creature Isaac considers essential; 4) what allows the creature to be open to a relationship with the real in its many forms, and ultimately with Truth, if it decides to appear.

IV.2.1. 'SECOND NATURAL CONTEMPLATION': A DISCLOSURE OF MEANING

'Second natural contemplation' emerges during 'the practice of the soul', for the person who begins to be free of the passions. This section focuses on certain aspects of this form of contemplation. By examining the connections between personal experience in the ascetic process and the rising of this form of contemplation, it will become possible to approach a first feature of the relationship between 'practice' and 'theoria': 'theoria' as *meaning* which is related to personal existence.

⁵⁸² Cf. Centuries III 48 67v-68v, 68v.

⁵⁸³ See Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, e.g. 89.

In Isaac, ‘second natural contemplation’ takes the form of the revelation of the real weight and the inner aspect of things: “For every event, natural being, and word in this creation there is a sanctuary, and a Holy of Holies”, he writes⁵⁸⁴. Isaac connects this revelation of the inner nature of things to insights concerning God’s Economy and Providence, which hold up all things⁵⁸⁵: “God, hold me worthy of insight into the mystery of your love, which is depicted in your dispensation for the sensible world, in the works of your creation, and in the mystery of the killing of your Beloved One”⁵⁸⁶. Isaac conceives of these ‘insights’ as intimately related to a deciphering of ‘the sensible’, in which something of God is revealed: “One thing is to be moved by revelations concerning the operation of God, and another thing is to be moved by revelations concerning his Being (i.e. the ultimate form of knowledge). The first” – in which the reception of insights into God’s Providence is included – “naturally receives its cause from sensible things”⁵⁸⁷.

This revelation of God’s Providence has many aspects, always related to creation⁵⁸⁸. Above all, Isaac states that “the person who has been illumined looks at all the creatures of God with the eye of the mind, and [sees] God’s Providence accompanying them at all times”, receiving ‘insights’ (رؤى) which reveal to him/her “the heavenly care, full of compassion, which visits creation unceasingly, sometimes under the aspect of the left, sometimes under the aspect of the right”⁵⁸⁹, i.e. through negative and positive events.

⁵⁸⁴ II 30,10 124 (Syr.); 137 (ET).

⁵⁸⁵ The theme is already Evagrius: see Guillaumont, “Un Philosophe”, 45. In Evagrius, the contemplation of the ‘*logoi* of Providence and judgement’ means the contemplation of the reasons and aim of creation. See e.g. KG I 27 (Guillaumont, *Les six centuries*, 28, S1); KG V 15-16 (Guillaumont, *Les six centuries*, 182, S1). Kavvadas highlighted how Isaac conceived of ‘second natural contemplation’ as being intimately related to the contemplation of Providence, which in its turn is profoundly connected to the understanding of eschatology. See Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, 83.

⁵⁸⁶ II 5,15 9 (Syr.); 13 (ET).

⁵⁸⁷ I 20 161.

⁵⁸⁸ See Centuries II 73 53r.

⁵⁸⁹ II 35,3 140 (Syr.); 152 (ET); also see I 71 489.

The knowledge of which Isaac speaks here clearly implies insights into the *meaning* of things, their proportions, and God as their source. Isaac goes further, however, by stating that accessing these insights presupposes not only observing the sensible, but also *one's direct involvement*. 'First natural contemplation', he thinks, means beholding "the hidden glory of God which is concealed in [created] natures, and [his] power, wisdom, and eternal intelligence *concerning us*, which is understood from his varied dispensation *for us*"⁵⁹⁰. He suggests that 'second natural contemplation' should not be interpreted merely as factual knowledge of objects⁵⁹¹, nor as mere contemplation of the beauty and harmony of creation, but as accessing a meaning of things which is related to a 'for us'.

In order to discover this 'for us', subjective experience is essential for, among the sensible things, the subject is also included. In this case, contemplating the sensible involves understanding one's experience. Isaac is clear on this aspect, particularly in an important passage of the *First Part*, where he speaks of a connection between what he calls "theoria of one's (lit: his) practice" and the emerging of a certitude concerning God's Providence. The "theoria of one's practice" arises from "the [ascetic] conduct" and "repentance"⁵⁹², which means from one's experience of the ascetic process. Isaac, then, speaks of a connection between the revelation of a *meaning* which concerns oneself, discovered by crossing through *askesis*, and of a *meaning* which concerns the nature of the real. He writes:

⁵⁹⁰ I 43 315.

⁵⁹¹ See e.g. what Isaac says of the knowledge of 'the philosophers', which is accessible also to the person who is in the grip of the passions, in II 35,8 142 (Syr.); 154 (ET).

⁵⁹² Isaac considers 'repentance' (on which see section V.3.2.) as the threshold between 'practice' and 'theoria'. See e.g. Centuries IV 1 82r: "Fulfilment of repentance [is] the beginning of purity; fulfilment of purity [is] the beginning of limpidity. The path of purity [is] the labours of virtue, but to be made limpid [is] the work of the revelations".

Another operation [of God] which [occurs] after this⁵⁹³: when a person proceeds well in [his ascetic] conduct, he has arrived at ascending from the degree of repentance (ἔλεος) and has come near to tasting *the theoria of his practice* – when a gift from above falls upon him, so that he might taste the sweetness of the knowledge of the Spirit –, [...] first, he becomes certain of God’s care for the human being, and is illumined concerning [God’s] love for creation and [concerning] his great solicitude for the creation of the rational beings. For [it is] from this moment [that], in him, the sweetness of God begins, and the flame of his love which sets his heart on fire [...]⁵⁹⁴.

In this passage, the reference to oneself and one’s existence, i.e. the understanding of the *meaning* of one’s ‘practice’ (the “theoria of one’s practice”), is the way toward ‘contemplating’ or, rather, this understanding itself is already a ‘theoria’, a ‘contemplating’. The Providence that one sees as acting within the sensible world, then, is here a Providence *for-oneself* discovered in the process, not an ‘object’ of knowledge, or a simple ‘true’ content. It is something one intuitively acknowledges by perceiving the *meaning* of one’s journey, which took place within the ascetic process.

Isaac goes further, describing the understanding of Providence as understanding God’s care and compassion, occurring sometimes under the aspect of “the left”, sometimes under the aspect of “the right”, i.e. through negative and positive events. This implies finding an answer to the problem of one’s suffering and of ‘theodicy’, described in Chapter III⁵⁹⁵. For Isaac, the transition between ‘practice’ and ‘theoria’ is connected to untangling this knot, which concerns one’s existence. The disclosure of *meaning* which occurs in ‘theoria’ is therefore closely

⁵⁹³ I.e. the thought about the transient nature of human life.

⁵⁹⁴ I 47 337.

⁵⁹⁵ Kavvadas highlighted the connection between this form of contemplation, the presence of mortality and sinfulness, and the “question of theodicy”, underlining how this question cannot be answered within the forms of knowledge of this world, but points to God’s transcendence: see Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive*, 85-86. From the perspective of this study, this question can be ‘answered’ (so to speak) only existentially (and thus, through a knowing that differs from cognitive understanding).

connected with finding an answer to the issue of vulnerability. This occurs in the ascetic process.

Isaac, then, structurally ties in the dimension of *askesis* and involvement of the subject with the dimension of ‘knowledge’ and acknowledgement of the real. He understands it as being related to the emergence of a *meaning-for-oneself*, which begins to reveal itself only beginning from the ascetic process that one has passed through. ‘Contemplation’ does not mean factual knowledge, nor the revelation of mysterious, deep contents, which would manifest themselves to consciousness independently of material reality and, even more, from consciousness itself. If this were the case, ‘knowledge’ would be something *exterior*, juxtaposing itself to the subject’s experience: one would receive, but not understand. This, however, does not emerge from the texts. Instead, ‘knowledge’ is something *interior*, emerging *from within* experience as the *meaning* of experience, although *other* and not brought about by experience. It is related to personal existence, although gift, and *other* than existence. This is the connection, in Isaac, between ‘practice’ and ‘theoria’: the capacity to acknowledge God’s ‘gift’ is rooted in existence and not merely in the mental level, while ‘gift’ is connected to *meaning*.

IV.2.2. ‘FIRST NATURAL CONTEMPLATION’: A CREATORIAL ‘INTEGRITY’

In Isaac’s reading of the spiritual life, after ‘second natural contemplation’, ‘first natural contemplation’ follows. Like ‘second natural contemplation’, ‘first natural contemplation’ is also not related merely to contents, and does not imply the contemplation of noetic natures (i.e. the angels) as corporeal realities⁵⁹⁶. Instead, it is a state in which the intellect of a human being understands the angels’ way of

⁵⁹⁶ See I 20 162.

life and has access to a wisdom akin to theirs. Isaac states that this means understanding them as they really are, in their created state of spiritual beings⁵⁹⁷, and that “the true vision of the angels is to be moved by spiritual insights about things which concern them”⁵⁹⁸. These insights, however, are related to one’s own existence: Isaac states that the mystery of the generation of angels speaks of the mystery of *our* resurrection⁵⁹⁹, and the mystery of their way of life points to the mystery of *our* way of life in the New World⁶⁰⁰.

Although sharing the wisdom of the angels implies that more refined, subtle disclosures of meaning occur, Isaac’s main interest does not seem to be describing these insights in detail. He more often focuses on the highest state that one can discover at this point in the spiritual life, which is a bridge towards the knowledge above it. This section will mainly focus on this condition, to understand another aspect of ‘practice’: its aiming at a human, creatural ‘integrity’. This condition is a threshold towards the revelation of God, which occurs by pure Grace in both angels and human beings.

Isaac states that, in ‘first natural contemplation’, the human being abides in his/her creatural nature⁶⁰¹, in his/her “natural state/stability”⁶⁰², and also “in the first order of the nature of [his] creation”⁶⁰³. He speaks of this state as a vision ‘beyond the body’, but this does not mean seeing *something* beyond the body. Instead, it means becoming able to dwell in a place of oneself *more internal* than the extroverted perception (which occurs through the body). Thus, Isaac interprets this condition as being collected within oneself and as perceiving one’s own ‘light’ –

⁵⁹⁷ See I 20 162.

⁵⁹⁸ I 20 161.

⁵⁹⁹ For Isaac, this is even above the way of life of the angels: see II 40,5 164 (Syr.); 175 (ET).

⁶⁰⁰ See Centuries I 68 29v-30r.

⁶⁰¹ See Centuries II 72 52v-53r.

⁶⁰² Centuries II 75 53r-53v: *ܐܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܘܨܘܪܐ*.

⁶⁰³ Centuries II 74 53r: *ܡܠܚܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܘܨܘܪܐ*.

not a sensible light, but “the light of the beauty of one’s own soul”⁶⁰⁴, according to concepts which can be traced back to Evagrius⁶⁰⁵.

In a passage of the *Third Collection*, in which he does not directly refer to first natural contemplation, but makes a more general statement, Isaac writes of the possibility of a condition ‘beyond the body’ in terms which might help us to understand what he is hinting at. It is a knowing and perceiving of *another* kind. He writes, in a prayer to Christ:

Joy of creation, make me worthy of that joy which arises *beyond* the flesh and is received in the silence of the soul. [...] Bind my stirrings with the silence of the knowledge of you, because the entire knowledge of you is silence. Make me worthy to gaze at you with those eyes which have been opened *within* the eyes⁶⁰⁶.

Isaac, then, understands “the light of the beauty of one’s own soul” as something which is *internal*, *within*, intimately *one’s own*, even more than the body (more internal than the eyes). It is experiencing a “splendour”⁶⁰⁷ of one’s own. Isaac connects to the access to this ‘being one’s own’ the possibility not only of angelic revelations, but of the revelation of “God’s glory” in the soul, i.e. “the vision of his mysteries”⁶⁰⁸. In this sense, this state of the creature acts as a bridge between the experience of what is still in the created realm and what is above human nature.

⁶⁰⁴ Centuries I 37 26r: “The spiritual conduct is a practice without senses. The practice without senses, according to the word of the Fathers, is a mind/intellect which communicates with God through the revelation of his mysteries: [it is] that which they call the ‘naked intellect’. Sometimes, they also call it the ‘vision above the body’, according to the saying: ‘Then he sees in himself the light of the beauty of his soul (ܡܘܫܐܢ ܠܝܒܘܠܐܢ ܠܝܡܘܠܐ) and, at the time of prayer, he sees in himself heavenly visions, which means that he sees in his soul the glory of God, which is the vision of his mysteries”.

⁶⁰⁵ See *Pseudo-Supplement* 50 (W. Frankenberg [ed.], *Euagrius Ponticus*, Berlin, 1912, 462-464): “When the inner man becomes gnostic (ܠܒܘܠܐܢܐ), then he takes off the old man of the passions. Then he sees in himself the light of the beauty of his soul (ܡܘܫܐܢ ܠܝܒܘܠܐܢ ܠܝܡܘܠܐ) and, at the time of prayer, he sees in himself heavenly visions”. On the ‘Pseudo-Supplement to the Kephalaia Gnostica’ in Syriac (that is mostly a selection from Evagrius’ *Skemmata*), see A. Guillaumont, *Les “Képhalaia Gnostica”*, 19-20.

⁶⁰⁶ III 7,33 52 (Syr.); 77 (IT). The eyes within the eyes evoke the theme of the spiritual senses. On the spiritual senses in Isaac, see A. C. Pirtea, “Die geistigen Sinne in der ostsyrischen christlichen Mystik: Untersuchungen zum Wahrnehmungsbegriff und zur Gotteserkenntnis in der griechischen und syro-orientalischen asketischen Literatur der Spätantike”, Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung des Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie, Freie Universität Berlin, 2017.

⁶⁰⁷ Cf. Centuries II 76 53v: see below. Cf. Guillaumont, *Les six Centuries*, 182, S1 (KG V 15).

⁶⁰⁸ Centuries I 37 26r.

When Isaac speaks of ‘practice’ as a quest for freedom from the ‘corporeal’, his words should be read in light of these affirmations, as pointing to the necessity of moving towards what is more ‘one’s own’, more internal than what is visible. He does not speak of a split between the body and something tied to a mental dimension, but of an access to what is ‘within’, *internal*, deeper. This movement towards the inner occurs through ‘practice’.

Therefore, the ‘beauty’ of which Isaac speaks has no external visibility, but it refers to experiencing oneself as dwelling in a particular *internal* ‘place’, to inhabiting oneself in a particular way. Isaac states that this means that human beings access the “theoria of their own self (ⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲓⲟⲩⲛⲁⲓ)”, which concern “the first creation of [human] nature”⁶⁰⁹, i.e. one’s original state.

Isaac understands this experience of oneself as the fulfilment and boundary of the creatural state. He refers to this way of experiencing oneself with the phrase “naked intellect (ⲛⲁⲕⲉⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲁⲓ)”, as does Evagrius⁶¹⁰, where the concept of ‘nakedness’ points to the fact that the intellect remains bare of other encumbrances: not only of the passions, but also of thoughts, ‘images’ and forms of objects⁶¹¹. From there, ‘the Truth’ can manifest itself within the intellect, that can ‘behold’ “the mysteries of [God’s] hiddenness (ⲛⲁⲕⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ)” within its own “hiddenness (ⲛⲁⲕⲉⲛⲁⲓ, lit: ‘my own hiddenness’)”⁶¹².

⁶⁰⁹ I 40 304.

⁶¹⁰ See e.g. Centuries I 37 26r. Cf. KG III 6 (Guillaumont, *Les six centuries*, 100, S1): “The naked intellect (ⲛⲁⲕⲉⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲁⲓ) is that which has become perfect in the vision of itself (ⲛⲁⲕⲉⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲁⲓ), and has been made worthy to partake of the theoria of the Holy Trinity”.

⁶¹¹ Centuries II 35 41r: “The state [which is necessary for the rising of] truth in the soul, [is] stillness of the intellect, because truth is known without images”.

⁶¹² Centuries I 86 32v: “My Lord, depict in my hidden mind the mysteries of your hiddenness through the marks of the Spirit, and I will take delight in you in my hiddenness, through movements which see without composite eyes”.

Isaac believes that the subject becomes capable of dwelling in that ‘place of one’s own’ only if he/she has already found ‘impassibility (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ)’,⁶¹³ which implies having crossed through ‘practice’ and having been purified from the passions. Isaac inherits the concept of impassibility from Evagrius, and interprets it in a way which recalls *Praktikos*: “Love is the offspring of knowledge; knowledge, the offspring of the health of soul (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ)”⁶¹⁴, or, according to another possible translation of ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ, of a ‘soundness/solidity’ of the soul⁶¹⁵.

Impassibility has different degrees and nuances in Isaac⁶¹⁶. It can also be subject to regression⁶¹⁷. In particular, he interprets impassibility using the concepts of ‘purity (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ)’ and ‘limpidity (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ)’, drawn from John the Solitary⁶¹⁸. Although Isaac’s use of terms is very free and he does not explicitly identify correspondences between John’s concepts and impassibility, from his writings often emerges the fact that he interprets purity and limpidity as moments of a growing freedom from the passional, to which he alludes by the concept of “freedom of the soul (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ)” or “of the mind”⁶¹⁹.

This freedom, with ‘purity’, marks the entrance into ‘second natural contemplation’: it is the stripping off of the passions⁶²⁰. From there, the state of

⁶¹³ For an introduction to the theme of impassibility (*ἀπάθεια*), see G. Bardy, “Apatheia”, *DS* 1, cols. 727-746, and Miquel, *Lexique*, “Impassibilité”, 113-134. For impassibility in Evagrius, see Guillaumont – Guillaumont, *Traité* 170, 98-112.

⁶¹⁴ I 62 431. Cf. *Praktikos* 81 BL Add. 14578 9v col. a-b, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449.

⁶¹⁵ Another term of this kind is ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ: see e.g. I 3 24: “Virtue is the natural health of the soul (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ)”. ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ, “health/soundness of mind” is also mentioned in II 8,15 23 (Syr.); 29 (ET).

⁶¹⁶ See e.g. Centuries III 63 73r.

⁶¹⁷ See the analysis of ‘changes’ in section V.3.1. Evagrius made a similar remark when he wrote of an imperfect and a perfect impassibility. See Guillaumont, “Un philosophe”, 42-43 ; *Id.*, *Traité*, SC 170, 107-112.

⁶¹⁸ See Beulay, *La lumière*, 100-101. See Centuries IV 1 82r: “[...] Path of purity [is] the labours of virtue, but to be made limpid [is] the work of the revelations”.

⁶¹⁹ See Centuries I 12 22r; II 35,11 142 (Syr.); 154 (ET).

⁶²⁰ See e.g. I 3 31: “When the intellect stands in [its] natural stability/state (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ), it is in the theoria of angels, which is the first natural theoria. It is also called the naked intellect (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܐ). When [it is] in the second natural theoria, it sucks from corporeal breasts the milk [with which it] is nourished. This [...] is placed after purity, in which the intellect enters first”.

freedom grows and widens, until it attains ‘limpidity’, which Isaac defines as the abandonment of opinions and concepts⁶²¹. This state is distinctive of ‘first natural contemplation’ and coincides with the ‘nakedness of the intellect’⁶²².

Finding this inner condition also means the accomplished capacity for ‘pure prayer’⁶²³: freedom from the passions is the discovery of the ‘state (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ)’ of the mind distinctive of ‘pure prayer’. Isaac, as is well-known, considers this to be the highest possible creatural condition of prayer, beyond which there is no prayer, but ‘wonder’⁶²⁴, under the action of the Spirit. ‘State’, in Syriac, is expressed by the term ܠܗܘܘܬܐ, which corresponds to the Greek κατάστασις that Evagrius uses when speaking of prayer⁶²⁵. In Syriac, this word also evokes the idea of ‘stability’⁶²⁶.

Retaining the double resonance of the Syriac term ܠܗܘܘܬܐ, ‘stability’/‘state’, helps us to understand how Isaac conceives of the mind that might

⁶²¹ Centuries IV 2 82r: “Purity is the stripping off of the passions, but limpidity is the stripping off of opinions and the transformation of reflections, towards the exactness of the knowledge of mysteries”.

⁶²² The contemplative insights play a role in the growth of this condition. See II 14,28 65 (Syr.); 76 (ET): “The illumination of the insights and the understanding of the verses [of Scripture]” are “a rope”, which keeps “the empty intellect (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܘܐ)”, which is devoid of references to objects, from distraction.

⁶²³ See I 22 163-175.

⁶²⁴ The theme of prayer and non-prayer (the condition beyond prayer which transcends mental movements and indicates a complete union with God through the gift of the Spirit) is central in Isaac. He discusses it in detail in I 22 163-175. This theme has been explored in depth by scholars, who examined Isaac’s relation to Evagrius’ conception of ‘pure prayer’. Isaac, in I 22, quotes a passage by Evagrius that was mistranslated from Greek into Syriac (“Prayer is a state of the mind that only comes to be [under the influence] of the light of the Holy Trinity” of *Skemmata* 27 becomes in Syriac: “Prayer is the state (or: stability) of the mind which is only cut off from the light of the Holy Trinity by wonder”: see *Pseudo-Supplement* 30 [= Frankenberg, *Euagrius*, 454-455]; see p. 146). Scholars have debated how Isaac’s teaching on a ‘beyond’ of prayer is related to this mistranslation. See I. Hausherr, “Par delà l’oraison pure”; Khalifé-Hachem, “La prière”, 157-173; R. Beulay, *L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha, mystique syro-oriental du VIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1990, 216-223; Bettiolo, “Prigionieri”; Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 223-236 (where the debate amongst scholars is synthesised); Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind”; *Ead.*, “Theories of Prayer”; G. Bunge, “From Greek into Syriac – and Back: The Misadventures of a Quotation from Evagrius Ponticus”, in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and his spiritual legacy*, 135-145.

⁶²⁵ See *Pseudo-Supplement* 4 (Frankenberg, *Euagrius*, 426-427): “The state (or: stability) of the intellect (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܘܘܬܐ) is the summit of the intelligible realities, which resembles the colour of the sky, upon which, at the time of prayer, rises (ܘܕܢܐ) the light of the Holy Trinity”; also see *Pseudo-Supplement* 30 (Frankenberg, *Euagrius*, 454-455). The comparison between Evagrius and Isaac’s conceptions of prayer lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁶²⁶ E.g. I 3 31; Centuries III 48 67v-68v, where “natural stability/the natural state (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܘܐ)” refers to the ‘nakedness of the intellect’.

be able to receive God's gift of himself. This mind is stable and rooted in itself, because it is not dragged out of itself by the power of the passional mechanisms or the multiplicity of sensations and perceptions that come from the outside. Isaac also speaks of firmness, of an intellect which is "sound (ܡܠܝܚܐ) in its immobility", i.e. able not to follow every image, stimulus, and thought⁶²⁷.

It is in this sense of stability and rootedness in oneself that the idea of entering '*within*' should be interpreted: one dwells in a 'place' deeper than images, stimuli, and thoughts. Isaac's '*within*' is then related to a capacity for groundedness. It is a "collected state (ܡܠܝܚܐ)"⁶²⁸, a condition of "collectedness of the mind (ܡܠܝܚܐ ܡܠܝܚܐ)"⁶²⁹ or "of the intellect (ܡܠܝܚܐ ܡܠܝܚܐ)"⁶³⁰, i.e. a mind or intellect gathered within; not scattered, not dispersed.

It is in this strong, ontological sense that this study uses the term '*integrity*' to point to the state that should rise from having passed through '*practice*'. Isaac does not use this concept explicitly; however, it can be derived from all of the aspects examined hitherto. Images and terms, such as '*health of soul*', '*purity*', '*limpidity*', '*nakedness*', '*luminosity*', '*beauty of one's own soul/self*', what is '*within*', the '*internal*', and '*collectedness of the intellect*', should all be understood as different ways of expressing the nuances of a state of growing rootedness in oneself, deeper than one's passionality and mutability. Clear aspects of this condition shine through Isaac's choice of terms: groundedness, rootedness, solidity, stability, openness, presence, and freedom.

Therefore, although '*integrity*' might also be a possible translation of the Syriac word ܡܠܝܚܐ, previously rendered as '*stability*', in this study, it is used in a

⁶²⁷ See Centuries I 72 30v.

⁶²⁸ See Centuries IV 49 93v-94r, 93v.

⁶²⁹ See Centuries IV 49 93v-94r, 93v; Centuries IV 92 107v-108r, 108r.

⁶³⁰ See Centuries II 34 41r. This theme is analysed in Chapter V.

wider sense, to allude to a growing capacity for rootedness in oneself, of belonging to oneself *despite* all that oppose it and the violent pressure of the external. It alludes to a condition of growing ‘wholeness’, to be intended as a capacity for the non-fragmentation of the subject during the encounter with a myriad of perceptions, thoughts, stimuli, reactions, and defences.

Isaac believes that the issue of accessing this ‘integrity’ is extremely serious and connected to respecting the ontological status of the real. God is “fire”⁶³¹ and “flame”⁶³², so drawing near to God without having purified oneself from the passions exposes one to harm and illusion – like a sailor who attempts to cross the Pillars of Hercules, or a creature who wishes to walk on the holy ground on which the burning bush burns, without having removed his/her sandals, according to an image which Evagrius, not Isaac, uses to refer to a similar problem⁶³³. Only a mind characterised by ‘integrity’, capable of dwelling within itself, can open itself up to the Mystery, if the Mystery *decides* to manifest itself. In a creature capable of this ‘integrity’, the passions do not ‘enter’ (see section II.2.2.2.): he/she belongs to him/herself, and adheres to his/her ‘subjective pole’.

This capacity develops through ‘practice’, whose necessity now becomes apparent.

IV.2.3. CREATURE AND CREATOR

Isaac conceives of the condition of ‘integrity’ as the fulfilment and boundary of the creatural state. Understanding what this means is essential to understanding

⁶³¹ “Fire and Spirit (cf. Mt 3:11b)”: Centuries III 74 76r.

⁶³² II 14,14 60 (Syr.); 70 (ET).

⁶³³ See I. Hausherr, “Le ‘De Oratione’ d’Évagre le Pontique en syriaque et en arabe”, *OCP* 5 (1939), 7–71, no. 4, 11. Isaac states: “Every foreigner and non-circumcised shall not eat of the mystery of the Passover (cf. Ex 12:43, 48)” in Centuries I 27 24v.

how Isaac conceives of the relationship between ‘practice’ and ‘contemplation’, and the vital role of ‘practice’.

The analysis which follows aims to highlight the essential role of the creature as distinct from the Creator in Isaac’s thought, even in the highest stages of the spiritual life. It also aims to demonstrate that it is precisely the fact that the creature is creature and other than God that makes an acknowledgement of God *as God* possible⁶³⁴.

Of a mind capable of contemplation, Isaac says that it is an “empty mind (ܠܥܘܢܐ ܕܠܒܐ)”, or an “empty intellect (ܠܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡ)”⁶³⁵. As Isaac explains in one Century, ‘an empty mind’ is a mind which stands in wait:

The light of theoria journeys [together] with continuous stillness and the absence of manifest impressions, because when the mind is empty (ܠܥܘܢܐ ܕܠܒܐ), it stands up (ܕܥܘܠܡ) continuously and waits for (ܠܥܘܢܐ) the theoria which will dawn (or rise: ܕܥܘܠܡ) [upon] it. But the one who disputes concerning this, not only leads others astray, but also departs from the path, and does not perceive it, and runs after a shadow in the illusions of his intellect⁶³⁶.

This mind is ‘empty’ of ‘impressions’, but this does not mean that it is empty *of itself*. That this is not the case emerges from Isaac’s choice of verbs: in Syriac, they literally mean that this mind is ‘erected’ (or ‘standing up’: ܕܥܘܠܡ is the Lat. *surrexit, erectus est*, the verb also used for the Resurrection in Syriac) and that it ‘awaits’. This requires capacity for being present, of holding power, and of a tension towards the *other*: rooted in itself, not filled by anything connected to creation, this “empty mind” is “erected” *towards*, attentive to what could decide to appear.

The Syriac verb ܕܥܘܠܡ, ‘to rise’, which Isaac uses to indicate the manifestation of ‘theoria’ in the “empty mind”, is a word that he often employs. Already used in

⁶³⁴ This theme is explored in section VI.2.

⁶³⁵ See II 14,28 65 (Syr.); 76 (ET).

⁶³⁶ Centuries I 29 24v.

the ‘Syriac Evagrius’⁶³⁷, this verb in Syriac indicates the rising of the sun, and can also mean ‘to shine through’, ‘to appear’. In his writings, Isaac uses it as a technical term to indicate the revelation of something *new*, *other*, coming from elsewhere. He uses it to point to the emergence of what is gift: “theoria”, “Grace”⁶³⁸, “faith”⁶³⁹, one’s own state of “splendour”⁶⁴⁰, and the ‘beyond’ of God⁶⁴¹.

‘Integrity’, the ‘place of one’s own’, which has been described above, is the place in which something *new* and *other*, as a gift, can ‘rise’. The mind, concentrated and attentive, trained in a gaze other than the purely factual and objectifying by the ‘contemplations’ and ‘revelations’⁶⁴² experienced, can receive the self-revelation of God, who ‘overshadows’ it⁶⁴³.

The metaphor of the ‘overshadowing’ of the interiority of the subject by the Spirit of God speaks of the state beyond ‘first natural contemplation’. It evokes, as Brock observed, the event of the annunciation and maternity of Mary, in which “the Holy Spirit will come upon” her, “and the Power of the Most High will overshadow (ܐܘܪܝܫܘܢܐ)” her, according to the Peshitta⁶⁴⁴. Isaac therefore, interpreting the summit of contemplative experience through the idea of being ‘overshadowed’, symbolically reads what occurs in it as something which has the same structure as what ‘Luke’

⁶³⁷ See *Pseudo-Supplement* 4 (Frankenberg, *Euagrius*, 426-427).

⁶³⁸ See Centuries III 44 66v-67r, 67r.

⁶³⁹ See I 51 376. See Chapter VI.

⁶⁴⁰ See Centuries II 76 53v.

⁶⁴¹ See Centuries II 59 49r-49v.

⁶⁴² On ‘revelations’ in Isaac, see P. Bettolo, “Révélations et visions dans l’oeuvre d’Isaac de Ninive: le cadre d’école d’un enseignement spirituel”, in A. Desreumaux (ed.), *Les mystiques syriaques*, Études syriaques 8, Paris, 2011, 99-119.

⁶⁴³ See e.g. Centuries IV 92 107v-108r, 108r: “The first gift which is given to the solitary in a great and vigilant stillness, when he has concluded the second age that is the middle stature of the practice of the solitary life and he has set his feet to enter into the third age, which is the spiritual conduct, when the grace of the Spirit overshadows (ܐܘܪܝܫܘܢܐ) him, [is that] first collectedness of mind will be given to him, and from here he will enter into those great gifts described by the fathers”.

⁶⁴⁴ Cf. Lk 1:35, where ܐܘܪܝܫܘܢܐ translates ἐπισκιάσει (and John 1:14, where ܐܘܪܝܫܘܢܐ translates ἐσκήνωσεν – but this passage of John’s prologue refers to God the Word). Cf. Acts 10:44; Acts 11:15. See I 54 (Isaac states that Mary is beyond compare in her *maggnānūtā*). See S. Brock, “*Maggnānūtā*”.

describes. He reads it in terms of the mysterious encounter between alterities: the naked creaturalty of the human, and the Omnipotent God.

In the same perspective, Isaac speaks of the intellect as ‘capable’ of receiving God both as collected within itself, in a condition of noetic concentration and utter adherence to itself, and as *مستل*, a ‘receptacle’, of God⁶⁴⁵, in a receptive condition of openness to God’s possible self-revelation (*تظلم*, which above was translated as ‘overshadowing’, also means ‘inhabiting’, ‘dwelling in’).

To speak of the encounter with God, Isaac also adopts the image of one as ‘the place of God’, in I 22, his famous discourse on prayer and non-prayer. Also this image describes the difference creature/Creator. This image, taken from the Septuagint, that adopts it to avoid speaking of the elders of Israel seeing God on Sinai⁶⁴⁶, had been used by Evagrius to describe the condition of the intellect which, in his view of the highest state of contemplation, experienced its luminous nature under the influence of the light of the Holy Trinity⁶⁴⁷. Evagrius clearly acknowledges the alterity between the light of one’s intellect and the light of the

⁶⁴⁵ See I 3 22: the ‘limpid’ soul is *καθαρόν νοῦν ἡμιεὐκτατόν*.

⁶⁴⁶ Cf. Ex 24: 9-11. Isaac quotes this passage in I 22 174-175.

⁶⁴⁷ The expression “place of God” (cf. especially *Pseudo-Supplement* 25, cf. Frankenberg, *Evagrius*, 448-450; *Pseudo-Supplement* 28, cf. Frankenberg, *Evagrius*, 452-453) seems to be Evagrius’ solution to the problem of the light of the intellect, which questioned him in such a profound way that he visited John of Lykopolis to seek advice (cf. *Antirrhethikus* 6,16, Frankenberg, *Evagrius*, 524-525). The problem was whether the origin of the light of the intellect, which some experienced during prayer, belonged to the creature, to God, or to both. John did not answer directly the question about the light. However, he pointed out that one cannot be illumined without God’s Grace, describing in this way the structure of the creature-Creator relationship in contemplation. Evagrius accepts this viewpoint, so that in his writings he maintains the difference creature-Creator (the mind is the pure place where the revelation of God occurs). Nature, origin, and the interpretation of the ‘light’ in Evagrius have been analysed by scholars: see A. Guillaumont, “La vision de l’intellect par lui-même dans la mystique Évagrienne”, in *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 50 (1984), 255–262; Harmless – Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind”, 512-520; G. Bunge, “La Montagne intelligible: de la contemplation indirecte à la connaissance immédiate de Dieu dans le traité *De oratione* d’Évagre le Pontique”, *Studia Monastica* 42 (2000), 7-26, 10-14 (for a reading which highlights the quality of gift of the light); C. Stewart, “Imageless Prayer”, 193-201; K. Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity, Farnham/Burlington, 2009, 170-172; J.S. Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius Ponticus. The Making of a Gnostic*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies, Farnham/Burlington, 2009, 77-107. Resolution of this issue lies beyond the scope of this thesis. A recent study suggests interesting further explorations on Isaac’s closeness to Evagrius’ approach: see G. Bunge, “From Greek into Syriac”.

Trinity, but a subtle lack of clarity remains, in his writings, regarding the relationship between them.

For Isaac, with less ambiguity, the ‘place of God’ is that place *of one’s own*, creatural, on which the light, *other*, of the Holy Trinity shines. He reads Evagrius in this way, quoting him: “The stability (ⲉⲗⲁⲙⲁⲃⲁ) of the intellect is the summit of intelligible realities; it resembles the colour of the sky upon which rises (ⲁⲛⲁ), in the time of prayer, the light of the Holy Trinity”⁶⁴⁸; it is called “the place of God (ⲉⲗⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲛⲁⲛⲁ)”⁶⁴⁹. This can occur only in the state of the creature’s maximum concentration and adherence to him/herself, and therefore of a certain luminosity of one’s own, which is clearly distinguished from that of God. Isaac writes:

It is said by the fathers that, when a person has been made worthy to see the splendour (ⲉⲗⲁⲛⲁ) of his soul in prayer, then he is made worthy of the mystery of angelic revelations in his mind, and made worthy to receive incomprehensible things in revelation. They call the splendour of the soul its resplendence (ⲉⲗⲁⲛⲁ) because, when it is purified from all communion with sin, this resplendence rises (ⲁⲛⲁ) upon it at the time of prayer, in the likeness of the sun, that [resplendence] through which the soul shines in the stirrings of prayer and in the office [...]. They call this resplendence the first creation of the soul (ⲉⲗⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲛⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲛⲁⲛⲁ)⁶⁵⁰.

This is the stripping off of the intellect, in which one is “empty of the world”⁶⁵¹, as Isaac writes, but *not empty of oneself* – if it is true, as seen above, that the person who ‘reaches’ this ‘place’, ‘reaches’ it only *by crossing through experience*, within ‘practice’, and this cannot be regarded as irrelevant for the *structuring* of the self.

This junction is essential: only the creature who fully belongs to him/herself as a creature, capable of dwelling ‘within’, can find this state of ‘emptiness’. This can

⁶⁴⁸ I 22 174. Another translation could be: “Because upon it rises...”. Cf. *Pseudo-Supplement 4* (Frankenberg, *Euagrius*, 426-427).

⁶⁴⁹ I 22 175.

⁶⁵⁰ Centuries II 76 53v.

⁶⁵¹ I 1 2: “Virtue is this: that a person in his mind is empty of the world (ⲉⲗⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲛⲁⲛⲁ)”.

occur only by passing through ‘practice’, which gives shape to this ‘emptiness’, to the “place of God”.

Therefore, when one encounters Isaac’s descriptions of the absence of a perception of ‘the world’ and of the cognitive way of functioning which, according to him, one experiences in the union with God – such as in his well-known affirmation in I 22: “The stability/state (ⲉⲗⲁⲙⲁⲃⲁ) of the intellect is cut off only by the light of the Holy Trinity through wonder (ⲉⲓⲙⲁⲃⲁ)”⁶⁵² – one should read them with this background in mind. Equating this condition with a loss of subjectivity would ultimately mean forgetting the journey which gave shape to the subject who alone is able to access it, i.e. the subject *forged* by ‘practice’.

According to the texts, however, Isaac does not describe a loss of subjectivity, but expresses such a strong sense of God’s transcendence and alterity, which the creature experiences through God’s gift, that it cannot but produce ‘wonder’. ‘Wonder’ is not a mark of an absence of the human, but of the incommensurability between the human and the divine and, at the same time, of their encounter.

In other words, ‘wonder’ should be interpreted as the inner, subjective side of the experience of the encounter. It is not a dissolution into the other, but *one’s experience of the other*, which presupposes one’s being able of encountering the other, i.e. ‘integrity’, that is found only through ‘practice’.

Thus, Isaac never reduces to irrelevance or inexistence the creatural dimension, even in its extreme, most subtle purification. The one who arrives there is not empty of experience and therefore of oneself, but is *forged* by the process of ‘practice’.

⁶⁵² I 22 174. See footnote 624.

The central role of ‘practice’ speaks of the central role of the creatural condition in Isaac’s thought.

IV.2.4. *THE “DENSE SUBSTANCES”: RELATIONSHIP AND ‘TRUTH’*

In I 67, Isaac provides further elements for understanding the relationship between ‘practice’ and ‘theoria’. In this discourse, he alludes to the reason why he believes that purification from the passions is crucial by using a telling metaphor, not listed among those examined in Chapter II.2.2. This discourse is mainly devoted to explaining the relationship between the knowing power of the mind, its limitation, and the action of Grace, without which, even if the mind is ‘sound/healthy (صالح)’, ‘vision’ cannot occur. It is of Grace, Isaac believes, that the Psalm speaks when it says: “In your Light we see the light (Ps 35:10)”⁶⁵³, and he modulates all of his discourse on concepts such as light, sun, visual power, vision, and cross-references between bodily and noetic experience.

In this discourse, Isaac speaks of the passions as of “hard” or “dense” substances, which place themselves between one’s inner sight and the real, hindering one’s capacity for ‘knowledge’. Isaac writes:

The mind is the spiritual organ of sense which has been made receptive (مستقبل) of visual power, like the pupil of the bodily eyes, in which sensible light is poured. Noetic sight is natural knowledge (معرفة طبيعية), which is united by a power with the constitution of nature, which [the fathers] call natural light. The holy power is Grace, the sun which makes it possible to discern [things] which are placed between the light [of the mind] and that which is seen. While natures are things which are intermediate, distinguishable for vision by the light, passions are like dense substances (كثافات) 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 wing⁶⁵⁴.

⁶⁵³ I 67 473

⁶⁵⁴ I 67 472.

The natural light of the mind can ‘see’ the real (to be understood as outlined above, as grasped in its dimension of meaning) due to Grace. Grace, like the sun, makes it possible to see things and their ‘theoria’. However, the real becomes altered, if the “dense substances” of the passions interpose themselves between one’s sight and it. Isaac, then, describes the passions as obstacles to an adequate perception of the real. The appearance of the real, particularly the revelation of God, is a gift. It cannot be brought about by the subject. Nonetheless, Isaac believes that the capacity for seeing may or may not function properly, and so may or may not allow one to receive the gift: like in some diseases, which blur the eyes, the passions deform the sight of the real. The real does not change, it is there – real, outside oneself – but the passions change the ‘within’ of oneself, one’s gaze, and it is on this that ‘practice’ acts.

If ‘theoria’ is the gift of revelation of the real, ‘practice’ is what makes it possible that one’s capacity for vision may not be altered by “dense substances”: Isaac conceives it as what enables one to develop an adequate *relationship* with the real, avoiding it becoming distorted by the passional mechanisms that induce a perception of alteration.

In this light, the capacity for receiving ‘knowledge’ can be understood as a *capacity for having a relationship* with the real, which becomes gradually possible through ‘integrity’. This means that Isaac believes that one’s ability to be in a relationship is directly proportional to one’s ability to dwell within, rooted and stable.

In this perspective, ‘vision’, or ‘contemplation’ would indicate a ‘seeing’ grounded in a capacity of relational openness, which was previously hindered by the “dense substances”. This relational openness is not, firstly, ‘a way of behaving’

towards the other, but something prior to this, an internal attitude of a certain kind: letting the other be, to appear to “the light” of the mind, letting it show itself.

It is not accidental, then, that this fundamental attitude distinctive of contemplation also corresponds to the development of a concrete capacity for having a relationship with the other: human beings, wild animals⁶⁵⁵ and demons (as well-known in Isaac⁶⁵⁶), and God. This shines clearly through two other passages.

The first passage concerns God, and the passion of ‘judgement’. Isaac connects judging another human being to a misunderstanding of who God is, which arises from projecting one’s passions upon him. He writes:

[It is] easy for you to bear our iniquity, as it was simple for you to bring our creation out from nothing. For us [instead], my Lord, both are difficult, which means that we are not able even to bear a small sin, when we see [it] in our neighbour, and we judge with our own [kind of] judgement also the great sea of your love which, with its waves, surpasses the measure of our entire iniquity. And, according to our human mentality (ܠܗܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܝܢܐ), we think that you also, our Creator, are afflicted when you bear us. *Our passion is a mirror for us*: we look at what is ours starting from it, and through the passions of created beings we weigh your riches, my Lord⁶⁵⁷.

“The dense substances”, here, alter God’s identity and, at the same time, alter the identity of oneself and the other (“we look at what is ours starting from” our passion). The same concept recurs in I 63, where Isaac affirms that the subjection to “the movements of this world” leads creatures to look at God “as we are”, not “as he is”⁶⁵⁸.

In the second passage, Isaac outlines the phenomenology of how a person who is the victim of envy and vainglory behaves. These passions push the person to make use of the other for his/her own purposes, without respecting who the other truly is:

⁶⁵⁵ On the relationship with the animal word in the Syriac tradition (and in Isaac), see S. Brock, “Animals and Humans: Some Perspectives from an Eastern Christian Tradition”, *Journal of Animal Ethics* 6.1 (2016) 1-9.

⁶⁵⁶ See Chapter V.

⁶⁵⁷ III 7,40 53-54 (Syr.); 79-80 (IT).

⁶⁵⁸ See I 63 438.

You should speak with prudence before the vainglorious and the one sick with envy because, when you speak, he interprets your words as he desires in his heart. He also takes material to cause others to stumble from the good things which are in you and, in his mind, he turns your words into occasions for [exercising his] sicknesses⁶⁵⁹.

Here also, the deforming effect of “the dense substances” is evident. The passions of vainglory and envy alter the perception of the other, thereby hindering the relationship with him/her. Ultimately, they lead one to look at the other as an *object*, rather than a subject, and to use him/her for one’s own goals.

In this perspective, impassibility-‘integrity’ indicates the access to an *internal* condition in which the “dense substances” no longer deform the possibility of the perception of the other, which makes a relationship possible. Hence, by entering impassibility-‘integrity’, one would become gradually *capable of being in a relationship with the other*.

Thus, the more one moves towards ‘integrity’, the more one understands that, in God, there is no judgement of condemnation (in the likeness of human beings), and can therefore love and admire his greatness. And this is ‘theoria’. In the same way, one can see the value of the other human being without manipulating his/her words, acknowledging his/her alterity, and thus escaping the merely objectifying vision of the other which Isaac calls ‘corporeal’.

For Isaac, then, an adequate perception of things is essential, and ‘contemplating’ is closely related to developing an ability to perceive things as they are and be in a relationship with them. The process of *askesis* can be interpreted as a process whereby one learns to be in a relationship, and ‘integrity’, as having developed a relational capacity.

⁶⁵⁹ I 50 347.

The foundational value that Isaac attributes to ‘practice’ in order to welcome the revelation of the real should now appear evident. If the revelation of the real is not in one’s power and God’s Grace can either be there or not, one can work on oneself through ‘practice’, to find the state of rootedness which is also capable of a relationship with the real. In this sense, it is the inner work of ‘practice’ that makes it possible that ‘theoria’ is truly a relationship with the truth of the real. ‘Practice’ itself, therefore, has a *knowing value*, in the sense of founding the possibility of an encounter with the ‘truth’⁶⁶⁰. ‘Practice’ cannot produce truth, but practice is ‘truth-bearing’⁶⁶¹, because it causes one to be born to truth. ‘Truth’ is God⁶⁶², but what ‘Truth’ is *for oneself* takes shape only within the process of ‘practice’.

‘Practice’, then, in Isaac, is really a process of *forging*, of *structuring a subject* who only through this can become open to a disclosure of the Truth. Isaac does not conceive of ‘practice’ as a simple preliminary time, which leads to ‘theoria’, but as *the foundation* of the entire spiritual life, where ‘Truth’ becomes ‘Truth-for-oneself’.

It is no accident, then, that Isaac often uses expressions that indicate how it is *within* ‘practice’, *not simply after it*, that the gift occurs. It occurs *in the making of the process*. Hence, Isaac says: the experience of God “appears *from within* our

⁶⁶⁰ Centuries III 53 69r-69v.

⁶⁶¹ I 68 474-475: “Many indeed dared to [partake of truth through theoria] with the passions of the soul and body, through a philosophical way of life, relying on this alone. [But] they strayed even from the truth they possessed, and they destroyed also their usual visual power. [Just] as the eyes see hallucinations in the air due to the feebleness of their sight, when it is hindered by a moist material which [is] in them, [so also] truth is considered by each of [these people to be] the image which is imagined before him and, when all these images are brought together into one, there, instead of one, many images appear in place of the truth. This occurs to them because they did not ask for the rays of Grace, which shine forth through the purification of the soul. Truth is the perception concerning God, which a person tastes within himself in the sense of the spiritual senses, the intellect”.

⁶⁶² See Centuries IV 77 102r-102v: IV 77 102r-102v: “[...] he who tasted truth does not dispute about truth. He who is considered to be zealous with human beings for the sake of truth, this [person] has not yet learnt truth, according to what it is. For when he will have truly learnt it, he will also cease from zeal for its sake. [...] Truth is God. [...]”; see also Centuries II 35 41r; Centuries II 36 41r.

practice (مَحَلَّةٌ فِي الْقَلْبِ)⁶⁶³; “the noetic perception of Grace reveals itself *within* (فِي الْقَلْبِ) the intelligible practice of repentance”⁶⁶⁴; “the intelligible perception of the intellect, which first occurs in the practice of stillness, is the delight of a hope which gives joy that springs up in the sense of taste of the heart from within (فِي الْقَلْبِ) mourning”⁶⁶⁵; perceiving “the sweet pleasure” which is “*within* [one’s] labours (فِي الْقَلْبِ) ”⁶⁶⁶; “Oh God, make me worthy of the taste of delight which is laid *within* true repentance (فِي الْقَلْبِ) ”⁶⁶⁷; “the spiritual conduct [...] rises (فِي الْقَلْبِ) upon the soul from the Holy Spirit, *in* the fulfilling of the commandments (فِي الْقَلْبِ)”, i.e. within ‘practising’⁶⁶⁸. The verbs used – to appear, to reveal oneself, to spring up, and to rise – all speak of a dimension of gift, which emerges within a ‘doing’.

The analysis which follows will not attempt to examine ‘contemplation’, but the pre-conditions for acknowledging the manifestation of Truth, i.e. ‘practice’. It will focus on the human being, who passes through the process of ‘practice’, and the relationship of this process with the issue of creatural vulnerability.

IV.3. ‘PRACTICE’ AND ORIGINAL VULNERABILITY

Besides describing ‘practice’ as purification from the passions, Isaac describes it as the exercise of ‘natural knowledge’ and as obedience to God’s ‘commandments’. They directly touch upon the problem of the relationship between ‘practice’ and original vulnerability. Exploring these will make it possible

⁶⁶³ Centuries III 36 65v.

⁶⁶⁴ Centuries I 76 30v.

⁶⁶⁵ Centuries I 78 30v.

⁶⁶⁶ Centuries IV 31 87r-88r, 87v-88r.

⁶⁶⁷ Centuries I 81 31v-32r.

⁶⁶⁸ Centuries IV 13 83v.

to understand the connection between Isaac’s view of ‘practice’ outlined hitherto and his reading of it as an encounter with suffering.

IV.3.1. ‘PRACTICE’ AS THE RELATIONSHIP WITH ONESELF: ‘NATURAL KNOWLEDGE’

The first interpretation – ‘practice’ as ‘natural knowledge (ⲛⲁⲩⲁⲗⲁ ⲛⲁⲩⲁⲗⲁ)’ or, as Isaac also calls it, “knowledge of actions”⁶⁶⁹ – suggests that he reads the activity of the self in *askesis* as an activity of the relationship of one’s soul with other elements of one’s being. In other words, Isaac links ‘natural knowledge’ to developing what in Chapter II has been described as the first emergence of the soul’s capacity to say ‘you’ to other elements of the self, in a dialogue between one’s ‘subjective’ and one’s ‘objective’ dimension (body, thoughts, and passions).

In his threefold classification of ‘knowledge’, which encompasses a ‘knowledge of the body’, ‘of the soul’, and ‘of the Spirit’⁶⁷⁰, for Isaac ‘natural’ is the knowledge distinctive ‘of the soul’⁶⁷¹, and it is the soul as the subject acting in ‘practice’ that makes it increasingly articulate, deep, and differentiated. This knowledge is ‘natural’, then, in the sense of distinctive of the creatural nature, of the soul which characterises ‘the human’.

In his writings, Isaac describes ‘natural knowledge’ in different ways, but with common traits, which highlight that it implies developing a capacity for discernment (ⲛⲁⲩⲁⲗⲁ), in the labours of the body and the soul. In I 44, Isaac underlines that this ‘knowledge’, at the beginning of the ascetic journey, takes the form of discernment of good and evil⁶⁷². In I 51, where Isaac explains that this ‘knowledge’ consists of *askesis* of the body and soul, he says that ‘natural

⁶⁶⁹ See I 51 373.

⁶⁷⁰ See I 51 360-377.

⁶⁷¹ See above and I 51 367-368.

⁶⁷² I 44 318-321, especially 318: “What is natural knowledge? Knowledge which discerns good from evil. It is also called natural discernment”.

knowledge’ means performing ‘virtue’, “refraining from evils, discerning the subtle stirrings which arise in the soul, the struggle with thoughts, and the battle against the [...] passions”⁶⁷³. Of discernment, in I 70, Isaac writes:

Observe yourself continuously, my beloved, and watch all your persevering in labours, the afflictions which occur [to you], the desert region where you dwell, the subtlety of your mind and the sharpness of your knowledge, the great breadth of your stillness, and the many medicines of trials which press hard, [coming] from the true Physician.

Enter within yourself (כָּלֵךְ לְפָנֶיךָ) continuously: which of the passions do you see to have grown feeble *in your presence* (בְּפָנֶיךָ)? [...] [Is it] because your mind has grown up or because of the lack of occasions [to exercise them]? [...] Which of the passions presses heavily, and which [only] from time to time? Are they of the body, of the soul, or a combination of the two?⁶⁷⁴.

It is the intellect, which has authority over the senses, which takes care of all this, being in relationship with what it “observes”⁶⁷⁵. Isaac’s understanding of the ascetic struggle with the thoughts/passions as an exercising of the relationship with one’s own ‘you’ clearly shines through these words.

‘Natural knowledge’, therefore, implies developing an attitude which makes the self the object of one’s reflection, i.e. a capacity for ‘bending’ towards oneself, of ‘getting involved’ with oneself. This can mean observing mental states, understanding one’s experience, interrogating Scripture and nature in relation to oneself, trying to understand who God is for oneself, but also choosing bodily practices, which use making of them, and dealing with one’s body and its states (e.g. weakness, strength, fatigue). So, it is ‘practice’ in its wholeness that is linked with one’s relationship with oneself.

Isaac, then, interprets the activity of the subject in *askesis* as a complex work of the relationship with oneself. This implies a ‘listening’ to the ‘signs’ of one’s

⁶⁷³ I 51 368.

⁶⁷⁴ I 70 483-484.

⁶⁷⁵ See e.g. I 70 483.

state of mind: “Is your entire soul filled with blame [...] against everybody and everything?”, does “faintheartedness master you?”, “are you strengthened in your hope?”, “are your neighbour’s faults neglected in your eyes?”⁶⁷⁶.

Isaac believes that it is through the exercise of this relationship that the passions lose their grip and one draws near to ‘integrity’: through one’s exercise of a reflective attitude, one can learn to dwell *within* oneself, in that *internal* ‘place’, on which the Spirit can ‘rise’. This exercise urges a movement inwards, educating one continuously to choose as one’s *internal* position what in Chapter II has been called ‘the subjective pole’ of oneself. In this sense, through ‘natural knowledge’, a distancing from the ‘corporeal’, the passions, and the exterior gradually occurs, leading one to the inner. This distancing of the ‘soul’ from its ‘you’ makes possible a growing experience of one’s ‘integrity’, which corresponds to a growing emergence of contemplative insights.

This ‘distancing from’, however, occurs within a ‘being in relationship with’. This means that it is something alive: it does not take the shape of mental exercise alone, or of a cold distancing. Instead, it takes the shape of an exercise and a distancing which has an incarnate and suffered dimension, because it deals with problematic elements (particularly the passions), with lived experience (as in repentance), and with the body (intimately one’s own). All of these elements belong to oneself as a creature, and cannot be transcended (see Chapter II.3). Hence, this distancing, in Isaac, assumes a meaning far distant from what the idea of the alterity of the soul and the body might evoke for a contemporary reader at first glance. It is not grounded in a refusal of embodiment, but in an ‘incarnation’ within one’s

⁶⁷⁶ See I 69 481-482.

creatural reality, which it presupposes. It implies an *encounter* with the body's limitations and with the passions.

The fact that this is the nature of 'natural knowledge' already shines through Isaac's account of its first emergence, which occurred during the experience of disillusionment which led to one's abandonment of the world (see Chapter II.3.). It is within this experience that a reflective attitude first emerged, through one's encountering oneself as passible and mortal. This awakened one's soul, urging one to say 'you' to oneself, thus breaking the automatic attachment to the body, the world, and its objects, which Isaac conceives as the origin of the passional movements. This reflective attitude appeared, in its first occurrence, within an experience of contact with one's passible and mortal condition. For Isaac, 'practice' tends to reproduce this dynamic: 'natural knowledge' is intimately related to the experience of one's creatural vulnerability.

Some provisional conclusions can therefore be drawn. It has been shown that for Isaac freedom from the passions and accessing 'contemplation' involve the gradual emergence of a capacity for a relationship with the real. Now, however, we can see that he argues that one accesses this relationship the more one develops a capacity for being in relationship *with oneself*. If this 'being in relationship' with oneself is closely related to the experience of one's vulnerability, as has already albeit partially appeared, it can be said that it is developing a relationship with this vulnerability that is essential for discovering contemplation.

IV.3.2. 'PRACTICE' AS OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S 'COMMANDMENTS'

To explore this hypothesis further, one should examine a second interpretation of Isaac: 'practice' as obedience to God's 'commandments'.

Often, in the Syriac version(s) of Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika*, the Greek word *πρακτική* is translated by the phrase ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ, "practice of the commandments"⁶⁷⁷, an expression that Isaac also employs on occasion. Isaac interprets *askesis* as obedience to God's commandments, as does Evagrius⁶⁷⁸. "Virtue is the fulfilling of God's laws"⁶⁷⁹, he writes.

In Isaac's writings, which address solitaries, these 'commandments' have a difficult nature, encompassing chastity, poverty, silence, watchfulness, fasting, prayer, the office, etc⁶⁸⁰. But keeping the commandments does not mean that one understands their purpose: like 'virtue', 'the commandment' can remain at a level that Isaac calls "the exterior side of practice (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ)"⁶⁸¹, without touching the interiority of the person. At first glance, then, these 'commandments' appear to have limited value. Why, then, does Isaac believe that *askesis* is essential? To understand this, the origin of the commandment should first be investigated.

IV.3.2.1. Isaac's God

The commandment, in Isaac, is the commandment *of God*. The fact that it comes *from God* gives it a strongly radical quality, which corresponds to the nature *of God*. For this reason, Isaac reads 'practice' as the 'practice of virtue', but also as a path which leads to passing beyond 'virtue', by accessing its internal aspect. The 'commandments' are conceived as a way of accessing what another, more fundamental commandment requires: the love of God and of human beings⁶⁸². Isaac

⁶⁷⁷ Also in *Praktikos* S2. See Guillaumont, "Les versions syriaques", 38.

⁶⁷⁸ See e.g. *Praktikos* 81 BL Add. 14578 9v col. a-b, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449, cf. Guillaumont – Guillaumont, *Traité*, SC 171, 670-671.

⁶⁷⁹ II 17,3 81 (Syr.); 92 (ET).

⁶⁸⁰ See e.g. I 3 38.

⁶⁸¹ II 14,14 60 (Syr.); 70 (ET).

⁶⁸² See I 81 570.

connects this to the difficult nature of ‘virtue’, in an attempt to correspond to the radical nature of his God.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the character of mercy and love within Isaac’s conception of God⁶⁸³, which already impressed the ancients. When Isaac speaks of a merciful God, however, how does he understand him? To answer this question, one should inscribe his discourse on mercy within an investigation of the relationship between the creature and God, without which the *weight* of this mercy and the *stature* of this love cannot be understood.

Isaac believes that God is the highest pole in this relationship: his way of being merciful is immeasurable compared to human ways. ‘God-mercy’ is the eternal, transcendent Mystery, unattainable by the human. Isaac speaks of God as being “the Hidden from all and the Mysterious in his judgement”⁶⁸⁴. Radically other from the creature, God is deepest transcendence. He is “the Hidden”, to whom one should sing “in a hidden way”⁶⁸⁵.

God is the Origin of the cosmos, the source of life, “God of heaven, whom the heavens of heavens cannot contain”⁶⁸⁶; “Holy Nature, Hidden to the perception and knowledge of all created beings”⁶⁸⁷. He is the Omnipotent, “glorious God who dwells in ineffable silence”, before whom “by bowing my soul to the ground, with all my bones and with all my heart I offer the adoration which befits you”⁶⁸⁸. There exists, within these descriptions, a stress on verticality which does not disappear in God’s attitude of mercy.

⁶⁸³ See footnote 496.

⁶⁸⁴ Centuries III 72 75v: “Glory to you, o Hidden (مخفي) from all and Mysterious (مغيب) in his judgement, who precedes everything in his knowledge, before its constitution!”.

⁶⁸⁵ I 35 259: “The stirrings of a pure mind are quiet voices through which [the pure] sing to the Hidden in a hidden way”.

⁶⁸⁶ Centuries I 88 33v.

⁶⁸⁷ II 5,8 7 (Syr.); 9 (ET).

⁶⁸⁸ II 5,1 1 (Syr.); 5 (ET).

Goodness, love, and wisdom, which for Isaac are the characteristics of God⁶⁸⁹, are the goodness, love, and wisdom of *this* God. His mercy is abyssal, because it is grounded in his verticality and mysterious nature. At the same time, this ‘goodness, love, and wisdom’, when acknowledged in their truth, make it possible to realise the depth of the Mystery of *this* God, qualifying its transcendence.

This God “in his Grace brought all into being”⁶⁹⁰. At the same time, he is ‘my’ God: “my Father (ܡܘܬܪ)”⁶⁹¹. The *personal* pronoun⁶⁹², here, connects the personal dimension of God to the personal dimension of the human being. As Father, God guides this human in his Providence. He does it, however, in a mysterious way, through “things of the right and of the left”⁶⁹³, in a process of “instruction (ܟܘܠܘܢܐ)” which will be changed into joy only “in the world of the adult”⁶⁹⁴. God does not guide the creatures in the way that creatures do: he is the Father, but his radical mystery remains. Understanding this, the creature says: “Your judgments cannot be investigated!”⁶⁹⁵.

As Son, *this* God descends. “The mirror of the vehemence of God’s love for creation is Christ’s coming into the world”⁶⁹⁶. The mirror of [Christ’s] love [are] the ways of his humiliation (ܟܘܠܘܢܐ)”⁶⁹⁷, i.e. the “he emptied himself, of which the blessed Paul spoke (cf. Phil 2:7)”⁶⁹⁸. The proximity manifested in Christ evokes adoration in the creature because it is a bending down of God from his radical

⁶⁸⁹ See III 4,4 19 (Syr.); 33 (IT).

⁶⁹⁰ Centuries III 71 75r-75v, 75r.

⁶⁹¹ See also III 7, 47 55 (Syr.); 82 (IT).

⁶⁹² See also II 5,14 14 (Syr.); 12 (ET): “Lord of *my* life”.

⁶⁹³ See Chapter III and in this chapter, section IV.2.1.

⁶⁹⁴ See Centuries III 71 75r-75v, 75r.

⁶⁹⁵ Centuries III 71 75r-75v, 75v.

⁶⁹⁶ On love as the cause of the Incarnation, see Louf, “Pourquoi Dieu se manifesta”.

⁶⁹⁷ Centuries IV 80 104r.

⁶⁹⁸ III 5,15 30 (Syr.); 47 (IT).

verticality. He is “my Saviour”, “my Hope”⁶⁹⁹, but together with this he remains the “Mystery higher than word and silence”⁷⁰⁰ – “Hidden mystery, [you] who were revealed in our body which grows old (cf. 1Tim 3:16)”⁷⁰¹. “Christ at whom the many-eyed cherubim are unable to gaze because of the glory of your countenance, who, because of your love, received spit on your face”⁷⁰²; “[Christ] covered with light as if with a garment, who for my sake stood naked before Pilate”⁷⁰³; “Holy one, who dwells in the holy ones”⁷⁰⁴. These affirmations are expressions of a sensibility attentive to contrasts, oxymorons, and distinctions, through which Isaac conveys the ‘mystery’ of God’s taking on the difficult passibility of the human, described in Chapter II. There exists an abyss, Isaac believes, in a God who is deepest transcendence, and nevertheless “removes the weeping of creation”⁷⁰⁵. God’s self-lowering, for him, is a real scandal of God, the simultaneous revelation of his strongest alterity and of his extreme proximity to the creature.

Also, the Spirit, the ‘Power (قوة)’ of God⁷⁰⁶ whose flashes descend even into Sheol, and who inhabits the creature (‘overshadowing’ him/her) is the transformative power of the *other katastasis*. He comes from an ‘elsewhere’ of the world.

Before this God silence is the only possible attitude of the creature, who acknowledges the inexpressible.

When Isaac thinks of the commandment, he understands it as something which comes from *this* God. The radical way in which Isaac reads the way of *askesis*

⁶⁹⁹ II 5,21 11 (Syr.); 14 (ET).

⁷⁰⁰ II 5,7 6 (Syr.); 8 (ET).

⁷⁰¹ Centuries I 90 33v.

⁷⁰² II 5,23 12 (Syr.); 16 (ET).

⁷⁰³ II 5,22 12 (Syr.); 15 (ET).

⁷⁰⁴ II 5,26 13 (Syr.); 17 (ET)

⁷⁰⁵ III 7,36 53 (Syr.); 78 (IT).

⁷⁰⁶ See section V.3.1.

becomes understandable only in light of this conception of God. It is *this* God who demands the human being undergo a test of virtue of the same weight. When Isaac refers to the ultimate commandment as that of the love of God and human beings, he has in mind *this* origin, and therefore *this* love.

IV.3.2.2. *Virtue and 'Beyond Virtue'*

Fully adhering to the commandments, in this perspective, does not appear to Isaac to be a mere 'doing good', and even less as acting in a correct way on a formal level: this would be "the justice of the worldly"⁷⁰⁷, that Isaac considers inferior to the work of the solitary. He conceives of the work of the solitary, instead, as a virtue which moves into a 'beyond virtue'.

Isaac explains:

Also, this is forgotten by many, and they are not persuaded and do [not] understand: that we, the solitaires, do not confine ourselves within the door [of a cell] in order to practise virtue, but to become dead also to virtue. The living practice virtue, which can be practiced also among many. For if we seek virtue from stillness – and our firm brothers who [live] in community practice this same [virtue] – why, in addition, flight and a sepulchre of a cell? For nothing. Now, we expect to receive from stillness [something] which cannot be found among many, even if we should be hung by the eyelids of the eyes⁷⁰⁸.

Isaac's use of the concepts of 'living' and 'dying', here, is reminiscent of the *Apophthegmata*, where it is said that Abba Ammon, seeing that the young Poemen was more worried about his brother's non-virtuous behaviour (in his eyes) than about his own self, asked him: "Are you still alive, Poemen?" In a similar way, Isaac describes 'stillness' in terms of the removal of attention from "the many" and 'the collective', to take care of oneself⁷⁰⁹.

⁷⁰⁷ I 34 222.

⁷⁰⁸ Centuries II 43 43r-43v; see also Centuries I 20 23r-23v; Centuries III 35 65r-65v.

⁷⁰⁹ See E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of Paradise, Being the Histories and Sayings of the Monks and Ascetics of the Egyptian Desert by Palladius, Hieronymus, and Others*, London, 1904, no. 234, II 493 (Syr.); I 660-661 (ET).

Here, however, Isaac also identifies the opening of a dimension beyond *askesis*, through *askesis* – an *askesis* which, although far more interiorised than ‘the virtue’ of “the many”, remains *askesis*: “the flight and a sepulchre of a cell”, “the work of the heart and perseverance in solitude”⁷¹⁰. The access to ‘beyond virtue’ takes the shape of ‘dying’ to virtue, through virtue.

This ‘dying’ to virtue is not an end. It is the emerging of “the spiritual delight”: “The spiritual delight which is bestowed in the hiddenness of practice (ܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܘܬܐ) should not be counted [together] with virtue, for it is the lord of virtue”⁷¹¹. Through ‘dying to virtue’, a ‘passage’ occurs, which opens up zones that are unavailable to human action.

Isaac often uses the image of the cross and of ‘crucifixion (ܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ, ܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ)’ to describe this passage: “becoming crucified in [one’s] life”⁷¹²; crucifying “the world within oneself [...]” and suspending “oneself on the cross through the abandonment of everything”⁷¹³.

Isaac also employs the concept of ‘mortification (ܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ)’ – of the body⁷¹⁴, of the soul⁷¹⁵, and of the spirit⁷¹⁶ – to describe the passages that lead ‘beyond virtue’.

The ‘mortification of the spirit’ coincides with what Isaac also calls the “crucifixion of the intellect”, a concept drawn from Abba Isaiah⁷¹⁷, which denotes the passage into the highest contemplative condition:

⁷¹⁰ See Centuries II 44 43v-45r, 44r.

⁷¹¹ Centuries II 44 43v-45r, 43v.

⁷¹² Centuries I 26 24r-24v, 24r.

⁷¹³ II 30, 5 123 (Syr.); 135 (ET).

⁷¹⁴ Centuries I 85 32r-32v.

⁷¹⁵ Centuries I 87 32v-33r.

⁷¹⁶ Centuries I 89 33r-33v, 33r.

⁷¹⁷ See Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh*, CSCO 555, footnote 1, 135; Y. De Andia, “Hesychia et contemplation chez Isaac le Syrien”, *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 53 (1991), 20-48, 28-34. For Abba Isaiah, see R. Draguet, *Les cinq recensions de l’ascéticon syriaque d’abba Isaië*, CSCO 293, Sc. Syri 122; CSCO 289, Scr. Syri 120; CSCO 290, Scr. Syri 121; CSCO 294, Scr. Syri 123, Louvain, 1968, Logos XXVI 4, CSCO 290 (Syr) 405; CSCO 294 (FT) 451. One finds this theme also in Simon of Taybuteh: cf. P. Bettiolo, *Simone di Taibuteh, Violenza e grazia. La coltura del cuore*, Collana di testi patristici 102, Rome, 1992, footnote 16, 152-154.

Make me worthy to be raised above the voluntary gazing which brings forth phantasies, and to gaze at you in the coercion of the bonds of the cross, in [...] the crucifixion of the intellect (ܠܘܩܘܣܐ ܠܚܘܨܬܐ), in which freedom ceases from exercising its stirrings, through the continuous, non-natural gazing towards you⁷¹⁸.

The ‘cross’ is the symbol of the ascetic process, but more specifically a symbol of what, in the ascetic process, is a difficult crossing of thresholds, which involves suffering⁷¹⁹. It is in this sense, that the *initiatory* value of the ascetic life (Chapter III) should be interpreted.

‘Symbol’, here, should be understood in a strong sense, as the bearer of a meaning which connects (συν-βάλλειν) the life of the subject and the narrative of faith. Thus, Isaac states that the cross of Christ is a ‘bridge’: contemplating it, the creature can transit to the ‘beyond’. The same role of a bridge, as a way of transit is played by the ‘crucifixions’ in the experience of the subject. The meaning acknowledged in the narrative of faith makes it possible to decipher and pass through one’s experience, and *vice versa*⁷²⁰. In this way, *one’s own* cross can become *one’s own* bridge. It marks a transition from ‘practice’ to ‘theoria’.

Both the value of the commandment in leading ‘beyond’ itself and its limited nature emerge from certain Pauline resonances that are present in Isaac’s *corpus*, which should now be examined.

We have seen above that the ‘commandment’ can remain exterior: in II 14, Isaac notes that acts of visible devotion do not coincide with those of “the heart”⁷²¹.

⁷¹⁸ I 34 223. See also I 2 15-16, on the “crucifixion of the body and the intellect”.

⁷¹⁹ The language of “passing across (ܠܚܘܨܬܐ)” recurs in Isaac. See e.g. II 35,11 142 (Syr.); 154 (ET). Isaac also speaks of tears as marking “a mysterious passage (ܠܚܘܨܬܐ ܠܚܘܨܬܐ)” into “peace of thoughts”, and through it, into “the divine rest of which Paul spoke”, in I 14 126.

⁷²⁰ So Isaac instinctively connects one’s passing through the cross and one’s beholding “the Crucified One”. See II 5,6 10 (Syr.); 13 (ET): “Bind my inner senses with the bond of the cross; increase in me abundance of the love for you that comes from insight into the Crucified One; draw my mind inwards with the hidden things of the mysteries which [the cross] bears; fix within me a remembrance of the humiliation (ܠܚܘܨܬܐ) of your Beloved; increase within me wonder at your dispensation for me”.

⁷²¹ See II 14,24 63 (Syr.); 74 (ET).

Isaac often expresses the idea of the exteriority of the commandment with the concept of ‘law’, which he interprets as the duties of the ascetic life⁷²². The ‘law’ is marked by insufficiency, and Isaac explores this idea especially in III 6, where there are constant references to Paul’s Letters, particularly Romans and Galatians⁷²³. Here, he connects ‘the law’ to an understanding of the relationship between the human being and God, based on ‘works’⁷²⁴.

The ‘works’ which rise from the “law”, i.e. from “the rule” of the ascetic life⁷²⁵, do not justify one, making one ‘able’ to be in relationship with God. Only the “works” of “faith” can accomplish this. Furthermore, the commandments, being as radical as Isaac understands them, cannot be followed in their wholeness and without falls⁷²⁶ as mere exterior practices. Moreover, ‘the law’ always means the possibility of confrontation with setbacks, so that “nobody among the righteous can make his way of life equal to that of the Kingdom”⁷²⁷. If ‘the law’ *per se* counted for God, nobody, as a creature, could ever be saved because, as a creature, nobody could ever correspond in fullness to the commandment of *that* God. “Human nature cannot justify itself, because it is always in a state of poverty because of inclination, weakness, the body, difficulties, motions, and also what [comes] from the

⁷²² See III 6,7 32 (Syr.); 51 (IT).

⁷²³ Rom 3:20-22; Rom 4:13; Gal 2:16. See also Eph 2:8-9. To have a clearer picture of this theme in Isaac, one should also analyse how this specific idea of Paul reached him, i.e. which authors mediated it (possibly, John the Solitary and Mark the Monk). This lies beyond the scope of this work.

⁷²⁴ Chialà (*Isacco di Ninive*, CSCO 638, xvi) suggested that these reflections seem to anticipate the Catholic-Protestant debate of the 16th century. To these reflections also those on Isaac’s insistence on the alterity between ‘justice’ and mercy should be added: see P. Bettolo, “Misericordia *versus* giustizia nella meditazione di un solitario siro-orientale del VII secolo, Isacco di Ninive”, in F. Cavazzana Romanelli – M. Leonardi – S. Rossi Minutelli (eds.), “*Cose nuove e cose antiche*”, *scritti per Monsignor Antonio Niero e Don Bruno Bertoli*, Venezia: Biblioteca nazionale marciana, 2006, 55-70. The author explores Isaac’s use of the two concepts of ܐܘܨܬܝܬܐ and ܐܘܨܘܚܐ, the two terms for ‘justice’ in Syriac. The first indicates the justice of ‘the law’, while the second the ‘justice’ of the New Testament, which is mercy. Isaac’s use of these concepts is rooted in the Syriac tradition: Bettolo mentions the *Liber Graduum* and John the Solitary.

⁷²⁵ See II 14,7 58 (Syr.); 68 (ET).

⁷²⁶ See III 6,8 32 (Syr.); 51 (IT); III 6,10 33 (Syr.); 52 (IT).

⁷²⁷ III 6,18 35 (Syr.); 55 (IT).

outside”⁷²⁸ – Isaac’s awareness of the creatural limited condition emerges powerfully here.

The ‘law’, then, remains external and insufficient. It does not necessarily touch on the “conscience (ܠܘܝܢܐ)”⁷²⁹, which alone is capable of “faith”. Only this ‘faith of conscience’ justifies, making the relationship with God possible. For Isaac, as for Paul, this ‘faith’ surpasses ‘works’.

Isaac, however, never asserts that one should disregard the ‘law’, except when one receives a gift coming from God, which releases one from one’s customary ‘practice’⁷³⁰, or when one is sick and frail⁷³¹. Why, then, does he consider the ‘law’ as necessary?

First, Isaac conceives of “the laws” as a way towards “the illumination of the soul”⁷³² for those who still walk in infancy. By using the language of Galatians 3-4⁷³³, Isaac states: “Let the divine laws and fair rules of your holy way of life be the guardians and stewards (cf. Gal 4:2) which guide you in your condition of infancy, to lead you to the measure of the perfect man in Christ (cf. Eph 4:13)”⁷³⁴. When “the laws” are used in this way, they become “laws of [God’s] children” and are no more “laws of servants”⁷³⁵.

Secondly, Isaac believes that the role of the ‘law’ is to awaken and strengthen ‘conscience’, making it able to discover ‘faith’: this is the kind of ‘virtue’ which leads to its ‘beyond’. What matters, in this use of the law, is not whether or

⁷²⁸ III 6,23 36 (Syr.); 56 (IT). See also II 18,2 85 (Syr.); 96 (ET).

⁷²⁹ See III 6,9 32 (Syr.); 51 (IT); III,2,11 33 (Syr.); 52 (IT).

⁷³⁰ See Centuries II 49 46v: “Do not desire to be set free from the servitude to the yoke of the laws, in your way of life, until you perceive undoubtedly that the booklet of your freedom has been written upon your mind”.

⁷³¹ See II 14,15 60-61 (Syr.); 71 (ET).

⁷³² See II 14,7 3 (Syr.); 3 (ET).

⁷³³ See Chapter III p.114. Cf. Gal 4:1-7.

⁷³⁴ II 4,6 2 (Syr.); 3 (ET). This idea is connected to that of the world as a school (see footnote 440): see e.g. Centuries III 71 75r-75v.

⁷³⁵ See II 4,7 3 (Syr.); 3-4 (ET). See also II 14,34-35 67-68 (Syr.); 77-78 (ET), on the “rule of freedom” and the “rule for servants”.

not one's obedience to 'the law' is successful, but *what the attempt to obey 'the law' provokes in oneself*. 'The law', *through both effort and failure*, urges the activity, exercise, and labour *of the subject*, distinctive of *askesis*⁷³⁶. This is the main value of the 'law' in Isaac, who regards the commandment as an instrument for breaking an approach to things based on exteriority. In this sense, Isaac understands the commandment as a way to disrupt one's adherence to the external, and also as a way to lead to exercising the relationship with oneself, which opens one up to 'integrity'. Isaac writes: "The *practice of virtue* [is] keeping our Lord's commandments, [but] the *virtue of practice* is the stability of the mind (*ἡ ἀκίνησις τοῦ νοῦ*). [...] Christ does not desire the practice of the commandments, but the stability of the soul, because of which he gave [his] commandments to rational beings"⁷³⁷. The commandment, so understood, has a powerful transformative value, not merely a factual one. If read only in factual terms, it does not free the person, but remains merely a 'work'. However, if read as an evoker of 'conscience', as something that urges and awakens one's inner work, it breaks up the external level, leading within, towards the "stability of the mind", which alone can acknowledge God's gift.

In this perspective, Isaac attributes to monastic 'law' a function that recalls the function of the Law of Moses in Paul. In Paul, the Law of Moses reveals sin ("Now, what should we say? Is the Law sinful? God forbid! But I did not learn [what] sin [is] except through the Law"⁷³⁸). It makes one aware of its presence, and thus also brings out and intensifies the inner conflict of the creature ("The Law is

⁷³⁶ See I 7 102: from 'works', what Isaac calls "the testimony of conscience" is born, and this is intimately related to finding "trust" (on this, see Chapter VI). "Do you believe in God? You do well, but faith also needs works, and trust in him [needs] the testimony of conscience (*ἡ ἀκίνησις τοῦ νοῦ*), which is born from the labour of virtue".

⁷³⁷ I 58 409.

⁷³⁸ Rom 7:7.

spiritual, but I am corporeal [...]. I don't understand what I do. [...] For I don't do the good I want to do, but instead do the evil that I don't want to do"⁷³⁹). In a similar way, in Isaac, it is *within the confrontation with oneself, caused by 'the law'*, that one becomes aware of one's passional functioning, insufficiencies, and limitations, and that the problematic, aporetic aspects of creaturalty emerge. Only within this confrontation, which is the real labour of *askesis*, can that which lies 'beyond virtue' emerge.

Paul's affirmation in Galatians: "Through the Law I died to the Law"⁷⁴⁰ resonates in Isaac's understanding of the exercise of 'virtue' as a way to the 'beyond virtue', which involves 'dying to virtue'. It is not by chance that this statement immediately precedes other words of Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"⁷⁴¹.

IV.3.3. 'PRACTICE' AND VULNERABILITY: LIMIT AND NEGATION IN ASKESIS

In Isaac's view, 'the law' not only protects and causes growth, but it does so by limiting the subject: it sets 'boundaries' for him/her. This idea finds expression not only in the concepts that Isaac uses, but also in his language: in two passages, he speaks openly of "the boundaries (ܠܡܝܬܐ) of the law"⁷⁴², and of "the times and hours" of the office as a boundary (ܠܡܝܬܐ)⁷⁴³. It is as a 'limit' that 'the law' breaks up an exteriorised approach to things, clamping down on it. It delimits and circumscribes, in the attempt to contain the self within boundaries, which discipline establishes.

⁷³⁹ Rom 7:14; 15; 19.

⁷⁴⁰ Gal 2:19.

⁷⁴¹ Gal 2:20.

⁷⁴² See I 3 38.

⁷⁴³ See II 35,1 139 (Syr.); 151 (ET).

Thus, the quest for ‘virtue’ takes the form of a limitation of the self, through “the glorious observances of stillness”⁷⁴⁴. This limitation ‘keeps’ and ‘protects’, but also burdens the creature; it is acknowledged as the way, but also exposes one to failure. Within this limitation and the tensions it provokes, the inner work of the subject emerges and, within its labour, ‘conscience’ or soul comes to light and is exercised.

This limitation ideally aims at structuring within oneself a place which is circumscribed, internal, distinct from the external: ‘integrity’, “place of God”, or “naked intellect”. However, one does not access this experience through an immediate correspondence between the limitation-commandment of ‘the law’ and the possibility of becoming grounded and whole. Between them, the confrontation with limitation and with all that it reveals of oneself takes place.

Only from the ‘collected place’ discovered by passing through limitation can one find the way to fulfil the fundamental commandment – *of the Gospel, not of Moses*⁷⁴⁵: the perfect love of God⁷⁴⁶, and of human beings. Between the commandment and the rising of *this* love, which is ‘beyond virtue’, the confrontation with limitation took place.

It is in this sense, that ‘practice’ is the way which *structures* and *forges* the subject in quest for God, through the encounter with limitation. Not because it is sufficient to set boundaries for oneself and to observe ‘the law’, in order to be ‘structured’, but because these boundaries awaken the inner work of the subject. If the love of God is unreachable “as a result of watchful care of what has been laid down in the laws [...] or through compulsion and struggle [...], or as a result of

⁷⁴⁴ I 20 162.

⁷⁴⁵ See especially I 4 42-43. See Bettiolo, “Misericordia *versus* giustizia”.

⁷⁴⁶ I 35 261.

habit and human means”, but only as the gift of “the Spirit of revelations”⁷⁴⁷, nevertheless it is within the ‘struggle’ to observe the ‘law’ that the gift occurs.

However, the issue here is even more radical than that of limitation. Ultimately, in Isaac’s writings, the subject does not encounter only limitation, but the *negation* of oneself. Limitation takes this form due to the radical nature of *askesis*.

That this is the issue involved in the solitary life emerges with force when one considers how Isaac includes within the possible consequences of the choice of life of the solitary not only the ascetic ‘labours’ meant as ascetic practices, but also ‘labours’ connected to relational life, which are far less within the control of the subject. To this kind of ‘labours’, Isaac attributes a highly important function. They can range from the experience of calumny, of not being recognized by others, to the opposition to one’s choice of solitude, incomprehension, and denial. They can refer to unforeseen events, such as sickness and the lack of means of sustenance, in an exposure to the precariousness of life, not to mention setbacks in one’s *askesis*, rebellions, conflicts, and the darkening of one’s mind, which are all involuntary, unlike the ‘labours’ which ‘the law’ commands. All of these involuntary afflictions show that the issue of limitation/negation, in Isaac, goes far beyond the idea of applying techniques for a linear structuring of the self, and far beyond a legalistic understanding of ‘the law’. It is, instead, a matter of an encounter with ‘the negative’, which the limit urges.

At stake here is not merely a limitation of one’s needs meant as a search for sobriety, balance, and harmony. It is not a matter of a limitation of oneself in favour of others either, of an ethical nature – at least not originally. The issue at stake here is experiencing *an encounter with the negation of oneself* and with the reactions

⁷⁴⁷ See II 18,2 85 (Syr.); 95 (ET).

which it triggers within oneself. Isaac's concepts of 'mortification', 'crucifixion', and 'dying' clearly speak of this encounter with negation.

In this sense, the limitations/negations which one experiences in 'practice' force one to have contact with the original problem of existence: finitude, vulnerability, and mortality. The experience of limitation/negation inevitably puts the person in contact with these human dimensions, i.e. with one's being a creature. And if the passions develop as mechanisms of defence from this original problem of existence (see Chapter II), the limitation/negation has the role not only of revealing the ontological problem of one's original vulnerability, but also of bringing to light the passions hidden within oneself. In this sense, the confrontation with limitation/negation leads to a confrontation with oneself, within which a process of purification from the passions can occur.

If this is true, the quest for a liberation from the passions distinctive of 'practice' in Isaac takes the shape of: 1) the *encounter* with one's original vulnerability, with one's poverty as a creature; 2) the *encounter* with the passions, which break out in reaction to the contact with one's original vulnerability; 3) the exploration of a possible discovery of a relationship with one's original vulnerability *other* than the passional.

The inner work of the subject in 'practice' ultimately concerns this. It is linked with an 'incarnation' in one's being a creature.

In this sense, 'practice' tends to reproduce the dynamics experienced at the moment of renouncing the world. In its fundamental structure, this dynamic constantly recurs in Isaac's writings, at different levels of the spiritual life. At the moment of renouncing the world, the soul awakened to itself due to an experience of suffering, in which the person perceived him/herself as passible and mortal. From this, the human being started to say 'you' to him/herself, looking for the consolation

of suffering promised by God which, due to one's experience, was acknowledged as worthy of trust. In the same way, in the ascetic process, the contact with one's original vulnerability and with the passions that the limit-law triggers, urges the subject to confront and take them on him/herself. This inner labour involves the birth of a capacity of relationship with one's bodily vulnerability and the passions, and it is by passing through this inner labour that the subject opens him/herself to God. The limit, therefore, has a vital function in Isaac's thought, because its presence causes this dynamics to recur indefinitely. In this sense, in Isaac's thought, 'the negative', which limitations reveal, precedes and awakens one's search, and also precedes the gift.

Isaac refers to this when he says, in his *First Part*, that trial precedes Grace within one's awareness although, ontologically, it is Grace which precedes trial.

What [comes first]? The trial and then the gift, or the gift and then the trial? A trial does not occur unless the soul has secretly received something greater than its previous measure, and has received the Spirit of adoption. [...] However, although this is so, [one's] perception of the trial comes before [one's] perception of the gift. Because of the testing of [human] freedom, Grace never precedes the person's tasting of trial⁷⁴⁸.

In this light, the sense of 'natural knowledge', which at the beginning of this section was described as the capacity of saying 'you' to oneself, becomes clearer. Through the discussion presented in this section, it appears that the relationship with oneself, distinctive of 'natural knowledge', is not a mere reflecting on oneself. Instead, it is a relationship with oneself as vulnerable, as this 'oneself' emerges from the encounter with limitation/negation experienced in the ascetic life.

It is within the labour of this relationship with limitation and suffering that one learns the attitude to keep before it, 'how' to sail on "the rough sea of

⁷⁴⁸ I 39 298-299.

stillness”⁷⁴⁹, or ‘how’ to swim in it (see Chapter III.4). By learning this ‘how’, one accesses the ‘integrity’ which opens one up to God.

What is at stake in ‘practice’, then, is not immediately the problem of one’s ascent to perfection or of the practices leading to it, but the existential, universal problem of the limitation/negation of oneself, of what it triggers within, and of how to deal with it. ‘Practice’ means deep contact with one’s being a creature.

IV.4. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examined Isaac’s understanding of the ascetic life in order to bring to light why he conceives it as an encounter with suffering. Isaac does not openly state that what is at stake in *askesis* is an encounter with one’s original condition of vulnerability, but this can be inferred by examining his understanding of the crucial characteristics of the ascetic process.

Section IV.1. examined Isaac’s understanding of *askesis*, or ‘practice’, as a search for purification from the passions. This reading is deeply influenced by Evagrius’ interpretation of ‘practice’ as the way to ‘contemplation’ or ‘knowledge’, and John the Solitary’s understanding of *napšānutā*, the ‘level of the soul’, as the time of *askesis*.

Isaac conceives of the ascetic life as the time of exercise of the ‘soul’, i.e. of the human being as a subject. This means conceiving *askesis* as a complex process, which cannot be reduced to the application of ascetic techniques. Isaac compares it to the work of agriculture, understanding it as a ‘tillage’ or ‘cultivation of oneself’. He conceives of it as activity and effort, which are not merely ‘muscular’ but involve reflection, discernment, and waiting.

⁷⁴⁹ See I 66 467.

Askesis is a work on oneself, and Isaac understands it as a work on the body and on the soul. The first refers to physical labour and ascetic practices, and is more closely connected to exteriority. The second involves a deepening of one's attention to the inner life, discernment, and identification of the passions hidden within, and is more closely connected to interiority. The more one enters this dimension of interiority, the more the *meaning* of things emerges. Isaac's concept of 'theoria' refers to this emerging of *meaning*, which takes place within the 'practice of the soul'.

Section IV.2. examined the relationship between the ascetic process and contemplation, and showed that this relationship is of an intimate nature: 'practice' has an essential value in order to discover 'knowledge'.

Isaac, following Evagrius, conceives of 'theoria' as the contemplation of created natures and the contemplation of God. The former is divided into 'second' and 'first natural contemplation', which lie within the boundaries of human nature and still have a discursive aspect; the latter is completely above human nature and every discursive dimension. However, both are Grace's gifts, and are not 'attainable' through ascetic works. The problem of the reason for practising *askesis*, then, emerges.

'Second natural contemplation' (IV.2.1.) concerns visible created things, and is a revelation of their inner dimension. It also involves becoming aware of God's Providence acting within creation. This contemplation, which one receives when one finds freedom from the passions (impassibility), is not a mere reception of contents about creation, but a *disclosure of meaning*, in which the subject is directly involved. If *askesis* cannot cause contemplation, nevertheless one accesses it only when one accesses the *meaning* of the ascetic process through which one has passed. When this occurs, the veil of exteriority breaks up, and the creature

understands that both his/her positive and negative experiences come from God, understanding his Providence *for oneself*. This implies finding an existential answer to the problem of ‘theodicy’, sketched in Chapter III. From here, contemplation begins, because one ‘understands’, in a way which involves the insight, not cognitive knowledge, that Providence guides all, and that God is the origin of all. The possibility of ‘theoria’, which is *gift* and *other* than experience, is therefore rooted in one’s experience that is developed during the ascetic process, and in one’s existence.

‘First natural contemplation’ (IV.2.2.) concerns invisible created natures, the angels, whom Isaac conceives as noetic natures who gaze towards God. This is also not a revelation of contents about the angels *per se*, but an access to their wisdom and to more refined, subtle disclosures of meaning which concern one in the New World, when one will lead the life that the angels already experience. This occurs the more one ‘enters within oneself’ and finds ‘impassibility’, to which the concepts of ‘purity’ and ‘limpidity’ are related. Isaac interprets this condition as gradually abandoning extroverted perception in order to dwell within. This implies a movement from the exterior to the interior, which echoes John the Solitary, and a discovery of the beauty and splendour of one’s soul/self, which is reminiscent of Evagrius. This is the summit of this level of the spiritual life, and the fulfilment of one’s creatural condition.

For Isaac, this condition involves discovering stability, groundedness, and rootedness in oneself: it is a capacity for ‘wholeness’, for the non-fragmentation of the self, when meeting the myriad of perceptions, thoughts, stimuli, and passional defences which occur in the mind. Isaac interprets it as a capacity for belonging and adhering to oneself, accessing a ‘place’ which is only *one’s own*, to which he refers with the Evagrian phrase, ‘nakedness of the intellect’.

In this study, this growing capacity for rootedness in oneself is called ‘integrity’. In its most refined form, it is the fulfilment of the ‘level of the soul’ and the boundary of creatural existence. Isaac believes that finding *this* integrity is essential in order to approach God: without one being rooted in oneself, one’s quest for God would only lead to illusion and damage. One finds ‘integrity’ through ‘practice’, which has, therefore, an essential value. This means that *askesis* aims to lead one to belong to oneself, to what is most ‘one’s own’, to a capacity for dwelling within oneself.

When Isaac, therefore, interprets the contemplation of God as occurring when the mind is ‘empty’ or ‘naked’, he does not describe a condition of absence, but of the utter presence of the subject to him/herself. This ‘emptiness’ or ‘nakedness’ does not imply a loss of oneself, because it is the subject *structured* through the ascetic process who accesses this state. This capacity for ‘being present’ of the human being is ‘erected’ towards God, and ‘awaits’ him (IV.2.3.).

This ‘being present’ is creatural: it marks a distinction from the Creator. This distinction is precisely what makes the encounter with the Creator possible. Isaac, therefore, attributes a very high value to the condition of being a creature, and to its alterity from the Uncreated. The capacity for inhabiting this creatural condition is the fruit of ‘practice’, which has, therefore, an essential value.

In this light, even the highest, mysterious contemplative state, which implies ‘wonder’, cannot mean a loss of oneself, although it involves a lack of perception and cognition. In fact, it is the subject who passed through ‘practice’, found its meaning, and discovered ‘integrity’, who accesses it. Isaac uses the language of encounter to describe the ultimate contemplative state: in particular, the Biblical metaphor of ‘overshadowing’ speaks of an encounter between naked human creaturalty and the Omnipotent God. In this perspective, ‘wonder’ can be

interpreted as the reaction of the creature to the encounter with such a God. It is not an experience of absence of the creature, but an experience of marvel of the creature before God's gift. It describes, from the perspective of the inner experience of the subject, the same encounter that is elsewhere described as 'overshadowing', or as the 'rising' of God's light on one's mind.

In this perspective, *askesis* should be understood as the process which *structures* and *forges* a subject capable of being 'before God', of dwelling in that 'place of one's own' which alone can stand before the Mystery. This 'structuring' involves one's personal existence, and the capacity for inhabiting this existence. *Askesis*, for Isaac, has an essential value, because it is by passing through it that this possibility is found.

Through the analysis of Isaac's metaphor of the passions as "dense substances" which hinder the mind's vision and alter perception, section IV.2.4. shows that contemplation involves developing a capacity for being in relationship with the real, which the passions deform. This means letting the real be what it is, without manipulating it. This 'being capable' of relationship is insufficient for contemplation to occur, but it means being ready and open to a possible gift. This is discovered through the ascetic process, and it is not accidental that to this contemplative 'openness' corresponds the capacity of being in relationship also with the concrete external reality.

This means that the real can never be considered as being apart from the existence and experience of the subject. This is valid also in the case of the revelation of Truth, which, in Isaac, refers to God. This means that Truth cannot but be Truth *for oneself* in Isaac, a 'oneself' that has been *forged* by the process of 'practice'. In this sense, 'practice' has a fundamental value in order to discover 'knowledge', and is not merely a preliminary step to contemplation.

Instead of reducing Truth to a relative, changeable opinion, regarding Truth as ‘Truth *for oneself*’ means that Truth, through ‘practice’, becomes *incarnate* in one’s own existence and therefore meaningful to oneself. This deactivates the power of the passions, which deform the real, and Truth itself. Paradoxically, the more *for oneself* Truth is, the more true and objective it is. It is encountering this ‘Truth for oneself’ that leads one to ‘wonder’. This is what is implied in Isaac’s frequent expressions, which state that ‘contemplation’ occurs *within* the process of ‘practice’.

Having demonstrated the essential role of the ascetic process in Isaac’s thought, section IV.3. examines the connection between this understanding of ‘practice’ and Isaac’s idea that ‘practice’ involves an encounter with suffering. The issue is approached by analysing two readings of *askesis*: its interpretation as the exercise of ‘natural knowledge’ and as obedience to God’s ‘commandments’, respectively.

‘Natural knowledge’ (IV.3.1.) refers to knowledge distinctive of the ‘soul’, i.e. of the subject of *askesis*. It is ‘natural’ because it is distinctive of what is ‘human’. Isaac understands it as involving the exercise of discernment and self-observation in *askesis*. It means making oneself the object of one’s reflection, being attentive to oneself, ‘bending’ towards oneself. In this sense, it means developing a relationship with oneself, saying ‘you’ to oneself. For Isaac, it is through this exercise of a reflective attitude that one learns to dwell within, to identify with one’s ‘subjective pole’, i.e. with the ‘soul’ in relationship with other elements of oneself (the body, the passions, etc.). It is through developing this relationship with oneself that integrity as the capacity of dwelling within oneself can be found. This implies a distancing from experience in order to see oneself.

This distancing, however, in Isaac is never a cold detachment, but something which takes shape through encountering oneself, i.e. through experiencing oneself. This encounter, involving a contact with one's limited body and the passions, cannot but imply an encounter with one's condition of vulnerability.

To understand this junction, Isaac's reading of *askesis* as obedience to God's 'commandments' is analysed (IV.3.2.). Isaac frequently interprets the practice of the 'commandments' as the exercise of aspects of *askesis*, such as chastity, silence, visible prayer, etc. He conceives of them as 'laws', which often involve oneself on a mere exterior level. In this sense, Isaac's understanding of the 'laws' echoes Paul's reading of the Law of Moses, which cannot 'justify' the creature (IV.3.2.2.). Like Paul, however, Isaac believes these 'laws' are not useless: they can lead to their 'beyond', so that 'virtue' leads to a 'dying to virtue'. This means finding the way to the greater commandment of the love of God and human beings.

'Dying to virtue' occurs through 'virtue', through a difficult and demanding *askesis*. Its radical nature corresponds to the radical nature of Isaac's God, who is at the same time the vertical, transcendent Mystery other than creation, and the infinite Love who bends towards creation (IV.3.2.1.). Isaac believes that only a difficult *askesis* can open up the path to its 'beyond'. This is the reason why he interprets the process of 'dying to virtue' as mortification and crucifixion, and often uses the symbol of the cross in his writings, to mark the passage from 'virtue' to its 'beyond'.

This passage beyond *askesis* is discovered only through *askesis*. Although the commandments and 'laws' are radically limited if obeyed as if they were mere 'works', the confrontation with them, passing through success, failure, and

contradiction, can lead to an awakening of that ‘conscience’, which alone is capable of the ‘faith’ that justifies. Understood in this way, the ‘law’ has a positive function: it aims to provoke a passage from exteriority to interiority, by urging an awakening of oneself as a subject. This is the aim of the labour of *askesis*, that the ‘law’ favours.

Section IV.3.3. analyses the connection between Isaac’s reading of *askesis*, sketched in the previous sections, and his understanding of it as an encounter with both suffering and one’s original vulnerability. *Askesis* takes this form because Isaac conceives of ‘the commandments’ as a limitation of the self, which aims to structure an internal, circumscribed place with boundaries that is clearly other than the external (“naked intellect”, the “place of God”, ‘integrity’). This, however, is not a linear process. It does not imply merely following certain rules, or a legal obedience to certain norms. Neither can this process be equated with a mere search for sobriety. Instead, the limitation of oneself that Isaac outlines ultimately takes the shape of an encounter with the negation of oneself which provokes one’s inner labour. The work and labour of ‘practice’ refer to this encounter.

Encountering negation ultimately means encountering the original problem of human existence: one’s finitude, suffering, and mortality. It also means facing the emergence of one’s defences against it, which are the passions. If this is true, ‘practice’ in Isaac takes the form of: 1) an encounter with one’s original vulnerability; 2) an encounter with the passions; 3) the quest for a relationship with one’s original vulnerability other than the passional (in this sense, ‘practice’ is a quest for freedom from the passions).

In this light, several essential concepts introduced in this chapter become clearer.

First, ‘natural knowledge’, which has been described as the capacity for a relationship of the self with itself, now clearly emerges as an exercise of a

relationship with one's creatural vulnerability. If 'natural knowledge' is the way to 'integrity', this means that the relationship with oneself as vulnerable alone is the way to 'integrity'. This can be discovered only through the encounter with suffering which occurs within 'practice', which both reveals oneself as vulnerable and urges the awakening of oneself as a subject, who can seek a relationship with one's 'being vulnerable'.

Secondly, if 'integrity' leads to the capacity for being in a relationship with the real, which Isaac connects to contemplation, it means that it is only by developing a relationship with one's vulnerability that one learns a relationship with the real, i.e. contemplation. In this sense, the idea that contemplation could develop the more the passions recede means that it could develop the more a relationship with one's vulnerability is found – a relationship with one's vulnerability *other* than the *passional*.

It is in this light that the possibility of finding the 'how' to sail on, or dive into, the "rough sea of stillness" should be read. The *internal attitude* to keep before suffering, mentioned in Chapter III, is therefore found through the process of 'practice'. 'Practice', so understood, has an essential value.

The problem with which 'practice' deals, then, is not immediately the problem of one's ascent to perfection, but the problem of contacting one's creatural condition, with what it triggers within, and of the relationship with it. 'Practice', as a process of one's *forging* or *structuring*, ultimately concerns this problem. Its phenomenology is outlined in Chapter V and VI.

CHAPTER V

CREATORIAL 'WEAKNESS'

Chapter IV showed the essential place of 'practice' in Isaac's thought. It also demonstrated that the centre of 'practice' is the encounter with limitations/negation, and that encountering these means encountering the original problem of human existence.

This chapter examines Isaac's understanding of creatorial 'weakness', which is what the limitations/negation reveal.

The first section analyses the theme of 'weakness' and its central role in Isaac's writings. The second section investigates the topic of trials, which are the context of the encounter with 'weakness'. The third section explores the process of one's relationship with 'weakness', focussing on its phenomenology. The last section examines 'humility', whose birth in the soul points to the fact that 'weakness' has been 'taken on'.

V.1. 'WEAKNESS'

In his *Centuries*, Isaac narrates the story of a martyr⁷⁵⁰. The martyrs, he writes, because of God's power⁷⁵¹, were made insensible to suffering in the midst of terrible torments: "Not only were they acquiring courage, but they were also becoming completely insensible (ܠܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ) to all of the torments which were suddenly coming upon them": "[their] mind *was not suffering* (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܠܐ) at all", and "many times also the suffering (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ) of the body was taken away from them". One of them, whilst under torture, was even "filled with exultation, and was raising a hymn of joy to God, while his mouth was full of laughter and exaltation". However, when one of his knees was slashed open, "in this limb, *he suffered* (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ)". When asked the reason for that, he told the truth, according to Isaac: "I was allowed to suffer (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ), so that I may know that I am *a human being* (ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ), and [that] it was not a power (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ) of [my] nature which [supported me] up to now".

⁷⁵⁰ Centuries II 63 51r-51v: "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. One was seeing [it] in the form of a covering unfolded above him, one was seeing [it] in the form of the hand of a person which overshadowed (ܠܥܘܠܡܢܐ) him, one in the form of a beautiful youth standing beside him. At this sight, not only were they acquiring courage, but they were [also] becoming completely insensible (ܠܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ) to all of the torments which were suddenly coming upon them. When [the persecutors] were tearing asunder many of the limbs of [their] body, and [their] body was rent asunder and wet with blood, and [during] the amputation of [their] joints which were stripped of flesh and skin, [their] mind *was not suffering* (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܠܐ) at all. Many times also the suffering (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ) 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, while his mouth was full of laughter and exaltation. When it happened that they amputated one of his inferior limbs, which was the knee, in this limb *he suffered* (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ). And when they asked him why, during their amputation of all of [his other limbs], he was quiet and exultant, [but] in this he raised [his] voice – and for this [reason] also the persecutors regained strength, as if the martyr of God had become weak (ܠܥܘܠܡܢܐ) during the struggle –, he told them something which is true: 'You should know that when you were amputating all of my other [limbs], I did not suffer (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܠܐ), and my mind was wholly in heaven, but for this [limb], I was allowed to suffer (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ) now, so that I may know that I am a human being (ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܢܐ), and [that] it was not a power (ܥܘܠܡܢܐ) of [my] nature which [supported me] up to now'".

⁷⁵¹ For a discussion of this theme, see V.3.1.

I am a human being, and *I know this because I suffer*: all of Isaac’s understanding of the human condition can be synthesised in these few words. In this Century, Isaac describes a powerful encounter with one’s vulnerability, which manifests itself in consciousness through contact with limitation/negation (Chapter IV.3.3.). In his writings, Isaac usually refers to what this encounter reveals by using the term ‘weakness, ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ (*m̄hilutā*)’, the indelible mark of the creatural state, mentioned in Chapter II.3.

This ‘weakness’, which is a constant presence in Isaac’s writings, does not refer to a state of psychological frailty nor to ‘weaknesses’ in the sense of unwanted shortcomings and deficiencies, although these are expressions of its presence⁷⁵², just as psychological frailty can be a result of *a certain inner relationship* with it. Instead, it refers to the whole condition of ‘the human’ as Isaac conceives of it, which is subject to suffering, finitude and mortality. It refers to the creature in the ‘now’, and in this sense is an ontological condition. This condition implies the state of the passible and mortal body, subjection to ‘inclination’ and the soul’s instability, and the exposure to the possibility of passions and sin, which are born from fear of death and suffering. Saying that one experiences ‘weakness’, in Isaac, means that one experiences oneself as ‘a human being’, and the fact of being receptive to suffering directly points to this ‘being a human’, as in the case of the martyr. This ontological quality of ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ (*m̄hilutā*, ‘weakness’) emerges with clarity from Isaac’s *corpus*, where he often describes it as a characteristic of ܡܢ ܗܘܡܢܐ (human) nature⁷⁵³. Isaac, at times, also describes it using other expressions and phrases: he

⁷⁵² See e.g. I 45 322: “God bears all the weaknesses (ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ) of a human being [...]”; II 10,36 40 (Syr.); 50 (ET): “He who has been made worthy to taste divine love [...] his soul gladly draws near to a luminous love of human beings, without distinction, and he is never conquered by the weaknesses (ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ) which are in them, nor is he disturbed”; II 39,3 153 (Syr.); 163 (ET); III 7,38 53 (Syr.); 79 (IT).

⁷⁵³ See e.g. I 3 37; I 6 81; I 61 428; III 7,26 50 (Syr.); 76 (IT).

often employs the Pauline *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ*, ‘infirmity’⁷⁵⁴, or *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*, ‘infirmity of [human] nature’⁷⁵⁵. He speaks of a *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܗܝܘܬܐ*, a “weak nature”⁷⁵⁶, of a *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*, a “frail human being”⁷⁵⁷ and of *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*, the “frailty of our nature”⁷⁵⁸. He refers to a *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܗܝܘܬܐ*, a “feeble nature”⁷⁵⁹, to *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܗܝܘܬܐ*, ‘feebleness’⁷⁶⁰, and to *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*, “the wretchedness of your nature”⁷⁶¹. He prays to God to grant him “the humility that knows the measure of [human] nature and the wretchedness of its weakness (*ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*)”⁷⁶², because human beings are creatures of “weak strength (*ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*)”⁷⁶³, a “weak race (*ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*)”, whose knowledge cannot grasp the depth of “future hope”⁷⁶⁴.

One’s original ‘weakness’ can be experienced as something which is revealed in the body, as in the case of the martyr, or when Isaac speaks of a “weakness of the body (*ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*)” which does not hinder stillness⁷⁶⁵: ‘weakness’, in this case, takes the form of the original condition of bodily limitation which is so central in Isaac (see Chapter II.3.). It can also be experienced through contact with the feebleness of one’s soul: with sinfulness, passionality, or the non-passional subjection to ‘inclination’ which remains one’s own even when ‘integrity’ is born. In this case, one’s original ‘weakness’ takes the form of a frailty of the soul, and often Isaac refers to this experience, as when he speaks of a “weakness of my

⁷⁵⁴ See e.g. I 29 208.

⁷⁵⁵ E.g. Centuries IV 89 106v-107r. Cf. Rom 6:19; 2Cor:7-10. For the role of this second passage, see below.

⁷⁵⁶ I 72 499.

⁷⁵⁷ I 77 524.

⁷⁵⁸ Centuries IV 36 89r-89v, 89r.

⁷⁵⁹ III 7,38 53 (Syr.); 79 (IT).

⁷⁶⁰ III 7,26 50 (Syr.) 76 (IT).

⁷⁶¹ I 72 500.

⁷⁶² III 7,45 55 (Syr.); 81 (IT): “Grant me, my Lord, the humility that knows the measure of [human] nature and the misery of its weakness (*ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*), and a mind which [holds] correct knowledge, proper to rational beings”.

⁷⁶³ I 80 546.

⁷⁶⁴ III 11,28 91 (Syr.); 127 (IT): “The knowledge of our weak race (*ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ*) is insufficient now to acquire and come close to the whole truth concerning its hope”.

⁷⁶⁵ Centuries III 34 65r.

soul (ܡܢܘܚܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ)”, which, once seen, leads to weeping⁷⁶⁶. This, however, does not imply that ‘weakness’, in Isaac, relates to moral deficiencies and sinfulness alone, although in his *corpus* the reflection on this theme is highly developed. In Isaac’s understanding of the ‘human’, in fact, this specific experience of inner frailty is intimately connected to the weakness of the body and subjection to ‘inclination’, which are more original (see Chapter II). For Isaac, one’s moral insufficiencies and lapses are so radically rooted in these ontological conditions as to be almost unavoidable – not in the sense that they are good and should simply be accepted, but in the sense that they are continuously reborn, even when one advances in the solitary life, thereby evoking constant attention in ‘practice’. Moral ‘weakness’, then, cannot be considered in isolation, when one examines Isaac’s thought, but should be considered in connection to the more fundamental condition of ontological ‘weakness’, which is its source. “Remember that you share the stink of Adam, and you also are clothed with his weakness (ܡܢܘܚܐ ܕܐܕܡ)”,⁷⁶⁷ Isaac tells his reader, evoking the ontological condition distinctive of being a creature. ‘Weakness’, in Isaac, *refers to the fact of being a human*.

‘Weakness’ manifests itself within one’s encounter with suffering. It cannot be ‘known’ in other ways, for Isaac. Experiencing ‘weakness’ means experiencing oneself as *receptive* of suffering, of body and soul, and therefore coming into contact with the problem of existence in a practical, embodied way.

The fact that encountering ‘weakness’ implies encountering ‘suffering’ emerges with utter clarity from Isaac’s whole *corpus*, but particularly from his discourse I 8, which is entirely devoted to ‘weakness’ and its role in the inner life. In this discourse, Isaac outlines the process to which the encounter with suffering

⁷⁶⁶ III 7,22 50 (Syr.); 75 (IT).

⁷⁶⁷ I 5 79.

gives rise, which involves experiencing suffering, perceiving oneself as vulnerable, and ‘knowing’ one’s ‘weakness’. This process, which implies developing a relationship with oneself as being subject to suffering, is ultimately a process of developing a relationship with oneself as marked by ‘weakness’. Isaac writes:

Blessed the person who *has known* his weakness (رحمته)! This knowledge will be for him the foundation and beginning of all good and beautiful things. When a person *has known* (مد) *and perceived* (رأى) that precisely and in truth he is weak (رحمته), then he restrains his soul/himself from scattering, which is the dispersion of knowledge, and increases watchfulness over his soul/himself. But if he is not allowed [to be] a little imperfect⁷⁶⁸, [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* (رأى) his weakness (رحمته)⁷⁶⁹.

Here, Isaac outlines a phenomenology of the encounter with ‘weakness’, which involves the creature, together with the difficult conditions which he/she experiences. As in the case of the martyr, these conditions force him/her to ‘perceive’ his/her ‘weakness’. This encounter with ‘the negative’ leads to a process of ‘knowledge’, whose occurrence can be inferred by Isaac’s use of the verbs ‘to know’ and ‘to perceive’ in the past tense, at the beginning of the passage. The creature who has gone through this process (who “has known” his/her ‘weakness’), discovers blessedness, and every “beautiful thing”. He/she has passed “beyond the sea”⁷⁷⁰. First of all, however, a ‘perception’ of ‘weakness’ occurred, which revealed oneself as receptive, and therefore sensible to suffering – the receptivity of body and soul inscribed in creaturalty. Only by beginning from this ‘perception’ can the process of relationship and ‘knowledge’ develop.

The importance of this moment of ‘perception’ constantly emerges from Isaac’s writings. Thus, he speaks of a ‘receptivity’ to accidents, or to ‘weakness’ itself, which the contact with negative experiences makes known:

⁷⁶⁸ Or: “If he is not almost abandoned”.

⁷⁶⁹ I 8 104.

⁷⁷⁰ Cf. I 6 94.

The fact that a person may be found in accidental transgressions makes known the weakness of [human] nature (ܡܨܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܢܫܐ), that our nature is necessarily receptive (ܡܨܠܘܬܐ) of [weakness]. It did not appear profitable to God that [a human being] should be completely elevated above it, before his nature reaches the second creation. This receptivity (ܡܨܠܘܬܐ) to accidents is useful for bringing the mind low⁷⁷¹.

Or he states: “[God] made your nature a receptacle of accidents (ܡܨܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܢܫܐ), and in the world [...] he multiplied the causes of accidents and trials. He made your nature a small receptacle of these things”⁷⁷². Elsewhere, Isaac affirms that, in the midst of afflictions, creatures “perceive (ܡܨܠܘܬܐ) the weakness of [human] nature (ܡܨܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܢܫܐ), the strength of temptations, and the wickedness of the Adversary”⁷⁷³. This ‘perception’ of ‘weakness’, indicates a powerful contact with oneself as vulnerable, which leads the creature to the acknowledgement of *being a creature*.

Chialà, in his study on Isaac, referred to the value of ‘acknowledging weakness’ in Isaac. In a wider analysis of the role of negative experiences in Isaac’s thought, he highlighted that this ‘acknowledgement’, “produces in the human being the awareness of his radical need of help, and makes him experience the force of God which acts in him”⁷⁷⁴. He also alluded to a connection between weakness and humility⁷⁷⁵, as also did Louf⁷⁷⁶. This study will demonstrate that both the possibility of acknowledging ‘weakness’ (to be understood as one’s ontological, creatural condition) and the connection between this and humility are rooted *in the process of relationship with one’s suffering self*, which the encounter with negation reveals.

⁷⁷¹ I 6 81.

⁷⁷² I 5 70-71.

⁷⁷³ I 61 427-428.

⁷⁷⁴ Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 159. For an analysis of the relationship between the experience of ‘weakness’ and of the ‘force’ of God, see V.3.1.

⁷⁷⁵ See Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 159-160.

⁷⁷⁶ See next section.

Isaac often refers to the acknowledgement of ‘weakness’ as acquiring ‘knowledge’, or ‘awareness’ (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ)⁷⁷⁷, of ‘weakness’ – an awareness that is not merely cognitive, but a deeply personal experience, which is rooted in the powerful contact with oneself which suffering causes. It is what occurred to Abba Ammon, who, while travelling in the desert to the dwelling place of Anthony, and having lost his way, said to God: “Lord, let not (ܡܠܘܬܐ) your creature perish”⁷⁷⁸. This awareness can develop “in the battles against chastity” as well as in the midst of “sadness”⁷⁷⁹: through these experiences, one can develop “the knowledge of the weakness of [human] nature (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܡܠܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܡܢܐ), of what its nature is, and of how weak, frail, ignorant, and childish [it is]”⁷⁸⁰. This ‘knowledge’ of ‘weakness’ would be impossible, unless suffering itself has been ‘known’.

Isaac’s interpretation of a creatural ‘weakness’, which is perceived within the contact with suffering, echoes a fundamental passage of Paul. In 2Cor 12:7-10⁷⁸¹, Paul states that “a thorn” was given to him, in his “flesh”, to buffet him, to prevent him exalting himself as a result of the great revelations received. Paul, in this passage, describes a powerful contact with suffering, which he connects to an experience of oneself as subject to what he calls “weakness”, or “infirmity”, ܠܗܘܘܬܐ in the Peshitta (ἀσθενεία, in Greek)⁷⁸².

⁷⁷⁷ The Syriac root ܠܗܘܘܬܐ does not convey the idea of simple intellectual knowledge, but at the same time of ‘knowledge’, ‘understanding’, ‘awareness’, and ‘perception’.

⁷⁷⁸ I 60 421. Cf. Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, saying 441, II 560-561 (Syr.); I 741-742 (ET).

⁷⁷⁹ See II 9,11 29 (Syr.); 36 (ET).

⁷⁸⁰ I 9,11 29-30 (Syr.); 36 (ET). See also I 45 321.

⁷⁸¹ 2Cor 12 7-10: “So that I might not boast for the abundance of the revelations, a thorn was given me in my flesh, a messenger of 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 (or: infirmity ܠܗܘܘܬܐ)’’. Gladly, therefore, I will boast in my infirmities (ܡܠܘܬܐ), so that the power of Christ (ܡܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ) may overshadow (ܡܠܘܬܐ) me. Because of this, I am pleased with infirmities (ܡܠܘܬܐ), insults, afflictions, persecutions and imprisonment, for the sake of Christ, for when I am weak (ܡܠܘܬܐ), then I am strong (ܡܠܘܬܐ)”.

⁷⁸² The Harklean, which Isaac obviously did not read, translates ἀσθενεία with ܠܗܘܘܬܐ.

Instead of ‘boasting’ about belonging to the Jewish People, about being a minister of Christ (as some seductive preachers do), or about the great revelations he received, Paul states that he prefers to ‘boast’ in his “infirmities (ܠܫܘܢܐ)”. These ‘infirmities’, which here he describes as being the “insults, afflictions, persecutions, and imprisonment” that he suffers for Christ⁷⁸³, make him a “weak (ܠܫܘܢܐ)” being. Also the ‘thorn’ clearly refers to an element that causes suffering, which is intimately related to one’s ܠܫܘܢܐ. Paul does not draw an explicit phenomenology of how his ‘afflictions’ and the ‘thorn’ reveal his weakness, nor of any process of a relationship with it, as Isaac does. However, it is clear that the experience of the ‘thorn in the flesh’ is related to suffering, a suffering which plays a central role not only in 2Corinthians, but in the whole Pauline *corpus*.

Isaac, who unlike modern exegetes reads this *corpus* as a unit, interprets the suffering of the solitary life in the light of Paul, so suffering is conformation to Christ’s suffering, and the way to the resurrection⁷⁸⁴; it is also the consequence of one’s choice for God, as the ‘afflictions’ in Paul. Above all, however, it is the revealer of ‘weakness’, and Isaac is more interested in the existential consequences of this experience than in its visible results: he interprets Paul’s experience as something which occurred for his growth, which has a value *per se*, also independently from Paul’s success in preaching of the Gospel, which is its manifest effect⁷⁸⁵. Pauline resonances, as we shall see, are also found in Isaac’s understanding of the relationship between one’s acknowledgement of ‘weakness’ and the experience of Grace.

⁷⁸³ In 2Cor 6:4-5, Paul mentions “afflictions, necessities, distresses, scourging, imprisonments, tumults, weariness, vigil, fasting”. In 2Cor 7:5, he describes himself as “afflicted in every way, by war outside and by fear within”.

⁷⁸⁴ See e.g. Gal 2:20; 2Cor 4:10: “We always carry in our bodies the mortal state (ܠܫܘܢܐ) of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies”.

⁷⁸⁵ See I 73 505.

Isaac openly quotes 2Cor12:7-10 on two occasions, although echoes of Paul's passage are to be found throughout his *corpus*. In I 61, he compares Paul's 'thorn' to "the experience of a myriad of evils that God allowed to be among [the solitaries]"⁷⁸⁶, while in I 73, he likens it to the 'trials' which occur "because of the subtlety and incomprehensibility of those things which continuously fall upon us, which defy the power of our knowledge"⁷⁸⁷. Isaac reads both the afflictions related to *askesis* and the involuntary setbacks one encounters in the solitary life in the light of Paul's passage.

From this perspective, every condition of limitation/negation can make 'weakness' known, like Paul's 'thorn': sickness, involuntary afflictions, the violence of the passions of body and soul, or the labours of *askesis*. All of these serve a similar revelatory function concerning oneself. Isaac conceives of all of these 'afflictions' as dialectic elements, which at the same time reveal oneself as the one subject to 'weakness', and as the one who can 'know' it, and can therefore develop a relationship with it. This corresponds to Isaac's understanding of the original role of 'the negative' which already emerged in this study.

This is particularly evident in the case of the passions. While, in the life in the world, they were merely accepted, in the ascetic life, they become 'suffered', 'experienced', and can thus be 'seen'. Isaac's use of the expression 'to experience' to refer to the encounter with the passions, points to the fact that the passions, now, become one's 'thorn'. They become an opportunity to encounter 'weakness', which can bring about the process of 'knowledge' that for Isaac leads to blessedness. For instance, he states: "We do not dare to say that [a state of purity of mind] is acquired without *the experience* (تجربة) of the contrary thoughts, otherwise [a person] would

⁷⁸⁶ See I 61 428.

⁷⁸⁷ I 73 503.

not even be clothed in a body. We do not remove contradictions from [human] nature before the world to come”⁷⁸⁸; or: “Without *experiencing* (ܢܥܣܘܢܐ) the passions, it is impossible to know the truth”⁷⁸⁹. Isaac’s understanding of the experience of ‘weakness’ and of the process it triggers is primarily rooted in this ‘experiencing’ and ‘perceiving’ suffering – which means, at the same time, ‘perceiving’ oneself. He believes this to be the foundation of the labour of *askesis*.

With regard to this, in his *Centuries*, Isaac affirms that the lack of “spiritual wisdom” “is easily recognised from *the lack of perception* of the deficiencies which [are] in the soul”⁷⁹⁰. The fact of ‘experiencing’ and ‘perceiving’ the passions reveals them to be “dense substances” which hinder one’s sight, and this ‘perception’ lies at the root of the attempt to face them in *askesis*. The encounter with the passions, then, becomes a ‘trial’, in the solitary life.

V.2. TRIALS

Besides the passions, Isaac often refers to all negative conditions and the encounter with them by using the term ‘trial, ܢܥܣܘܢܐ (*nesyōnā*)’⁷⁹¹.

The Syriac word ܢܥܣܘܢܐ (*nesyōnā*), related to the root ܢܥܣܘܢܐ, ‘to try, prove, tempt’, but also ‘to know by experience’, conveys the meaning of what English expresses by the two terms ‘trial’ and ‘temptation’. In this study, the word ‘trial’ is usually preferred, because it has the advantage of pointing to the common phenomenology of the experience of ‘afflictions’ in Isaac: although trials can have

⁷⁸⁸ I 3 27-28.

⁷⁸⁹ I 1 3.

⁷⁹⁰ *Centuries* II 26 39v.

⁷⁹¹ For a reflection on ‘trials’ in Isaac, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 91-109; Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 163-168.

different immediate causes, Isaac thinks that God is the ultimate origin of every ‘being put to the test’.

Isaac often uses the terms ‘affliction’ and ‘trial’ interchangeably, so that a ‘trial’ is every encounter with the limitation/negation of the self, and also all that which emerges from the limitation/negation of the self⁷⁹².

It is because of this essential connection between the idea of suffering and the idea of trial/temptation in Isaac, that André Louf, who first brought to scholarly attention the presence of the theme of ‘weakness’ in Isaac, was able to identify the existence of a close link between ‘temptations’ and the awareness of ‘weakness’, stating that “the realisation of one’s own frailty and weakness [...] usually occurs at the heart of temptations”⁷⁹³. Louf refers in particular to the moral aspect of weakness, as a creatural liability to passions and sins, and to insufficiencies in *askesis*, bringing to light the value that becoming aware of this aspect of weakness plays in developing a relationship with Grace and accessing humility⁷⁹⁴. However, the dynamics of the acknowledgement of one’s ‘weakness’, which lies at the root of Louf’s intuition, are found in the entire phenomenology of the encounter with afflictions that Isaac outlines⁷⁹⁵. Within trials, according to Isaac, the revelation of a ‘weakness’ which is not only moral, but *ontological*, occurs, a revelation which points to the connection between the exposure to suffering and the fact of being a creature.

⁷⁹² For a description of these trials, see e.g. II 37,3 147 (Syr.); 158 (ET).

⁷⁹³ See Louf, *Isaac le Syrien*, 56-57.

⁷⁹⁴ See Louf, *Isaac le Syrien*, 25-26; 33-34; 56-61.

⁷⁹⁵ I 61 428: “Then they learn the weakness (جسلة) of [human] nature and the assistance of the divine Power (سله), 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 [...] [and] how enfeebled [they are] before every passion, when the divine Power departs from them. Through all these things, they acquire humility [...]. From where could they have acquired all of these things had they 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 for the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan (cf. 2Cor 12:7)’”.

Isaac's reading of suffering as a 'trial'⁷⁹⁶ has many implications, all of which are rooted in his interpreting of suffering in relation to 'the horizon' of God, understood as radical consolation of suffering and meaning. The experience of 'trials', in this light, emerges as including three components: oneself, suffering, and the future, which belongs to God. This reading allows Isaac to interpret suffering as a *challenge* and an *initiation*⁷⁹⁷, something which can/should be passed through and which is opened to what lies 'beyond' it. In this sense, Isaac's interpretation of suffering as a 'trial', shows that he conceives of it as a non-static element, as a passage, and as a place of transition. As he states, God makes use of alternations between rest and suffering, "so that on the way or at its end, one may taste torment, and then *pass beyond*"⁷⁹⁸. The transcendence itself of the 'horizon' of God, seen in a dialectic relationship with the present, gives depth to one's experience of the present, making it *meaningful*. This changes one's perspective on suffering, shifting one's attention from the external to *oneself*, from *what* is suffered to *who* suffers. The challenge of suffering, in this way, becomes transformative in nature.

Isaac reads trials as both the consequence of one's quest for virtue, and also as what gives birth to virtue. There are Pauline echoes in Isaac's first reading, and he quotes Paul on this matter: "[Paul] openly calls a gift the fact that a person might be prepared to suffer for the sake of God's hope, in faith, when he says: 'it has been given to you by God not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake (cf.

⁷⁹⁶ Among 'trials', Isaac draws a distinction between the 'trials of the body' and 'trials of the soul'. See in particular I 3 35-37. If one should enter those 'of the body', Isaac suggests avoiding as much as possible those 'of the soul' (that concern faith, or are due to pride, blasphemy, and holding "stupid opinions"). As a matter of fact, however, also these trials occur.

⁷⁹⁷ In this sense, referring to Jesus' words to the sons of Zebedee and their mother before his Passion, when they asked him to "sit with him in [his] Kingdom", Isaac calls afflictions a "cup" and "baptism" (cf. Mt 20:22): "Can you drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptised with the baptism by which I will be baptised?". "The Lord refers to the cup of trials", Isaac observes: see I 3 35-36.

⁷⁹⁸ I 30 213.

Phil 1:29)”,⁷⁹⁹. This means that the quest for virtue unleashes powerful forces against the creature who seeks freedom:

At the time when a person begins to be separated from the sin which dwells in him and to emerge from under the rule of the spirit of this world, according to what the fathers say, it happens to him that which happens to the woman for whom the time of bringing forth approaches, because, night and day, sin afflicts him in such a way that his soul is almost close to perishing, and a myriad of trials comes upon him⁸⁰⁰.

These ‘trials’ themselves, however, give birth to virtue in the soul: they are the ‘negative’, which urges the process of relationship with oneself that leads to ‘integrity’, calling oneself to the transformative labour of *askesis*. In this perspective, Isaac speaks of trials as “teachers”⁸⁰¹, not only as painful experiences:

Whoever says that he is without concern and that he leads [a life of] virtue, this [person] does not even know *by what [means] virtue is brought forth in the soul. [...] The door to heaven is opened before the soul by means of trials*. Our fathers guided [us] on this path⁸⁰².

This interpretation of the experience of trials as potentially transformative is strengthened by Isaac’s conviction that all trials come from God⁸⁰³, although they have different immediate causes – the body, the world/human beings, and the demons⁸⁰⁴. Isaac believes that adopting this perspective can lead the creature to place him/herself alone before God alone, and that this, in turn, can make it possible for trials to be experienced as opportunities for undergoing a “[*process of*] growth

⁷⁹⁹ I 59 417. Also see III 3,31 16 (Syr.); 28-29 (IT): “The human being has the courage to say: ‘[...] who will separate me from the love of Christ? Danger, nakedness, poverty, shame, infirmity, or death (cf. Rom 8:35)?’”

⁸⁰⁰ Centuries II 12 36v. See also I 5 61: “When you wish to begin with one of the virtues, prepare your soul first, so that you might not doubt the truth because of the evils which will come [upon you] because of it”; I 39 297-298: “Whenever on the path of your journey you find yourself in a peace without change, be afraid: you are very far from the divine paths trodden by the weary feet of the saints. For, as long as you are advancing on the path to the city of the Kingdom [...], this will be a sign for you: the strength of the temptations encountered by you”; I 77 532.

⁸⁰¹ I 5 71.

⁸⁰² I 59 418.

⁸⁰³ See e.g. II 25,1 111 (Syr.); 123 (ET): “Rests and vexations occur to a person by God’s will and, when God commands it, [the human being] is at rest, and by his will he is allowed to be afflicted in whatever manner it may be”.

⁸⁰⁴ See e.g. Isaac’s discussion of this theme in I 3 28, where he also (unusually) mentions the soul among the causes of trials; see also I 79 542, where Isaac speaks of ‘blaming’ human beings, demons, or even God’s justice.

(ܠܗܘܐܝܬܐ)''⁸⁰⁵. By focussing one's attention on the relationship between oneself and God, and by ceasing to blame the external⁸⁰⁶, one can learn to use trials as occasions for working on one's inner state⁸⁰⁷, that they make known. Embracing this attitude is the pre-condition for entering the process of 'knowledge' of one's 'weakness', that is examined in the next section.

V.3. 'KNOWING' ONE'S 'WEAKNESS'

This section examines the process of knowledge of one's weakness.

First, the most frequent context in which 'weakness' emerges will be analysed. This is a relational context, where the human being and God's mysterious 'power' are involved. Secondly, the encounter with limitations and negation will be examined, together with the emergence of the 'weakness' of body and soul that this reveals. Third, the meaning of pride, which hinders one's contact with one's 'weakness', will be explored. Lastly, this section will examine the *internal attitude* which one should discover in one's relationship with 'weakness', according to Isaac. This, which this study defines as 'bearing suffering', is the highest expression of 'practice'.

⁸⁰⁵ II 37,4-5 147 (Syr.); 159 (ET).

⁸⁰⁶ Isaac invites his/her reader to avoid "blaming the demons in [one's] vexation, or human beings, or the body – for all the vexations which exist come from these three": see II 25,1 112 (Syr.); 123 (ET).

⁸⁰⁷ Isaac explores this theme in detail in a series of discourses of the *Second Part*: II 25 111-112 (Syr.); 123-124 (ET); II 26 113-114 (Syr); 125-126 (ET); II 27 115-116 (Syr.); 127-128 (ET); II 28 117 (Syr.); 129 (ET). Alongside these discourses, II 37 146-147 (Syr.); 158-159 (ET), and I 39 302-303. Trials, Isaac states, cause affliction because within there are "*hidden wounds* (i.e. passional wounds), and [if] you *enter within yourself* and you *examine things hidden* within yourself, and you meditate within yourself upon the fact that 'God, who rashly brings misfortune upon a person, [is] not unjust', you will quickly find relief from your trials, consolation in your vexation, and you will reach knowledge of truth *through the [process of] growth* (ܠܗܘܐܝܬܐ) which [occurs] through your trials": see II 37,4-5 147 (Syr.); 159 (ET).

V.3.1. *BETWEEN NEARNESS AND DISTANCE: 'CHANGES', 'ABANDONMENT', AND 'WEAKNESS'*

The Century II 63 quoted above, in which the martyr, under the pressure of torments, experienced suffering and acknowledged being a human being, is preceded and followed by other Centuries which deal with the same theme. In this set of Centuries, Isaac outlines an essential trait of his understanding of the encounter with 'trials': the alternation, within trials, of one's feeling of God's presence and of his distance, which he interprets as a training⁸⁰⁸ of the soul, a 'relational training' effected by Grace, within which the creature learns 'to know' his/her 'weakness'. This occurs through the coming near and drawing away of Grace⁸⁰⁹, and through the process that the creature undergoes within this experience⁸¹⁰. Isaac's discourse on 'weakness' is often, albeit not always, related to this experience. Terms such as 'power' (ܩܘܘܿܬܐ), 'change (ܩܘܘܿܬܐ)', and 'abandonment (ܩܘܘܿܬܐ)' are frequently mentioned in relation to ܩܘܘܿܬܐ ('weakness') in these descriptions.

In Isaac's understanding of the 'training' which Grace effects, multiple influences are intertwined. They are found in monastic texts that were essential to the formation of the solitary in the East-Syriac tradition of his time, which he reads in the light of his experience and wider thought: the Syriac Pseudo-Macarian *corpus*, Abba Isaiah, Evagrius, and Palladius' *Lausiac History*. Isaac connects these ideas together, reworks them, and reads them in the light of Paul (especially 2Cor 12:7-9) and Luke 1:35 – the passage on 'overshadowing'.

⁸⁰⁸ See e.g. II 9,9 29 (Syr.); 36 (ET): "By this uneven [course] the blessed soul which is under divine providence is guided, [and] it receives training".

⁸⁰⁹ This is, in reality, a subjective perception: Isaac, as seen at the end of the previous Chapter, thinks that Grace is always with the creature, objectively. See II 9,8 29 (Syr.); 35 (ET).

⁸¹⁰ Themes and language similar to those used in this set of Centuries are also found in I 5 65 and I 35 263-265, with the story of the young martyr Theodore, which recalls that in this Century.

Describing the ‘relational training’ of Grace, in the first Century ‘on the martyrs’, Isaac writes:

For there is a Power (ܩܘܪܥܐ) with the human being and, whenever it journeys afar from him, immediately fear draws near to [his] heart, his soul becomes weak (ܩܘܪܥܐܘܬܐ) in all its intelligible limbs, and it is completely deprived of all knowledge. At that time, this person is completely stripped of the trust of faith (ܩܘܪܥܐܘܬܐ ܩܘܪܥܐܘܬܐ), and thus becomes like a small child in his thoughts. However, when it draws near to him again, immediately the soul puts on courage, and his heart becomes stronger than a mountain, and he is not afraid of anything in creation. Nothing terrifies his heart, neither the fear of demons, nor of savage animals, nor of evil and wicked people, nor infirmities of the body, nor nakedness, nor lack of food, and not even death, the end of everything, which is frightening to [human] nature. Briefly, one puts on zeal, like burning coals of fire, and nothing in God’s creation terrifies one’s mind, [with] its sight, or [with] its remembrance⁸¹¹.

Immediately after introducing the Century devoted to the experience of the martyr, Isaac writes:

I think that this is the Power (ܩܘܪܥܐ) through which the holy martyrs triumphed over the suffering of martyrdom, and through whose courage they trampled upon the afflictions of the persecutors. Through it, also, the solitary fathers despised the great temptations of the demons⁸¹².

It is this ‘power’, which sheltered the martyr from suffering, amidst torments, until the moment when he perceived that he was “a human being”, when it journeyed afar from him. In the “fearful desert”, the same phenomenon occurs:

This is the Power (ܩܘܪܥܐ) which keeps the solitary from the injuries of the demons in the fearful desert, in an invisible way, while it is unclear to them whence this [may come], that a human nature, for a period of forty or fifty years, dwelling with savage animals, remains in the fearful struggles of the demons, and his mind is not injured or disheartened. [...] The solitaries who keep watch [over themselves] in every struggle of their labour see this Power (ܩܘܪܥܐ) in an intelligible way. If a person sets a sign, at all times he can perceive (ܩܘܪܥܐ) when it departs from him and in which moment it draws near to him. He can perceive [it] from the change (ܩܘܪܥܐ) which takes place within him, from the ineffable strength (ܩܘܪܥܐ) which he unexpectedly sees in himself, and from the feebleness (ܩܘܪܥܐܘܬܐ) of [his] nature, up to which point [lit: where] it is brought down a short moment after this change (ܩܘܪܥܐ) has passed away from him. Through this [alternation] the course of the way of life of the solitaries develops⁸¹³.

⁸¹¹ Centuries II 61 50v.

⁸¹² Centuries II 62 50v.

⁸¹³ Centuries II 64 51v.

Isaac, here, describes the alternation between an experience of strength and an experience of enfeeblement of the creature – a ‘change (ܥܘܠܡܐ)’, as he calls it. This is due to the presence or absence of a ܥܘܠܡܐ, a ‘power/force/strength’, that does not normally belong to the creature. By the drawing near of this ‘power’, the creature begins to feel ‘strength’ – a ‘strength’ which originally is not his/her own, but which *becomes* his/her own. The drawing away of this ‘power’ amidst afflictions, instead, leads the creature to experience ‘fear’ and enfeeblement before suffering (the soul ܥܘܠܡܐ, “becomes weak”), which causes him/her to acknowledge the ܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܢܫܘܬܐ, the “feebleness of [human] nature”. This experience of enfeeblement occurs when God ‘allows’ the creature to suffer, as Isaac states in the Century of the martyr, where ܥܘܠܡܐ, ‘to allow’, in Syriac, also means ‘to abandon’, so that the words of the martyr reported in the first section of this Chapter – “I was allowed to suffer (ܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ), so that I may know that I am a *human being*” – could also be translated as “I was abandoned in order to suffer, so that I may know that I am a *human being*”. By ‘perceiving’ fear and enfeeblement, and comparing them with the strength and ‘courage’ felt when the ‘power’ was with one, one comes to know this ‘change’, one’s ‘weakness’, and the presence or absence of the ‘power’. Many themes are intertwined here, which will now be analysed in detail.

First, what is the ‘power’ mentioned in Isaac’s *Centuries*? Elsewhere in his *corpus*, Isaac calls it a “divine power”⁸¹⁴, and states that it guards solitaries amidst trials⁸¹⁵. “Divine power”, however, in Isaac, does not allude to God’s strength in

⁸¹⁴ E.g. II 9,11 29 (Syr.); 36 (ET); II 35,13 143 (Syr.); 155 (ET); Centuries IV 46 91v-92r, 92r; I 71 489; I 80 553; I 36 272.

⁸¹⁵ I 80 553.

general, but to *the* ‘Power’ of God, who is the Holy Spirit⁸¹⁶. This can be inferred by Isaac’s use of the verb ܐܘܪܝܢܐ, the technical term he employs for the action of the Spirit, to speak of the action of the “divine Power”⁸¹⁷ – an interpretation that is rooted in Luke 1:35, the passage which alludes to Mary conceiving by the Spirit, when Luke writes that “the Power of the Most High will overshadow (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ)” her⁸¹⁸. Isaac’s reading of the Spirit as the agent of the ‘relational training’ of the soul is based on a synthesis between this passage of Luke and various Pauline passages, which Isaac also reads in the light of Macarian insights.

If Luke draws a connection between ‘the Power’ and the Holy Spirit, without mentioning any link between ‘the Power-Spirit’ and ‘weakness’, it is Paul who openly speaks of a relationship between the experience of one’s ‘weakness’ and that of God’s ‘power’. However, he does not openly identify it with the Holy Spirit. In 2Cor 12:8-9, having spoken of the ‘thorn’ that God gave him, Paul states:

Concerning [the thorn], 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 (ܐܘܪܝܢܐܐܘܪܝܢܐ)”. Gladly, therefore, I will boast in my infirmities (ܐܘܪܝܢܐܐܘܪܝܢܐ), so that the power of Christ (ܐܘܪܝܢܐܐܘܪܝܢܐ) may overshadow (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ) me⁸¹⁹.

The Syriac translation of Paul (Peshitta) uses⁸²⁰ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ, like that of Luke, which allows Isaac to connect these two passages. Paul, moreover, draws a strong connection between the fact that the creature might become able to ‘boast’ of his/her infirmities, and the fact of being overshadowed by God’s (literally Christ’s) power, as the result of his experience of the ‘thorn’, which revealed his ‘weakness’ to him.

⁸¹⁶ On the Holy Spirit in Isaac, see Kavvadas, “Theodore of Mopsuestia”; S. Seppälä, “The Holy Spirit in Isaac of Nineveh and East Syrian Mysticism”, in D.V. Twomey – J.E. Rutherford (eds.), *The Holy Spirit in the Fathers of the Church: The Proceedings of the Seventh International Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 2008*, Dublin, 2010, 127-150.

⁸¹⁷ See in particular Centuries IV 46 91v-92r, where Isaac speaks of “the divine power (ܐܘܪܝܢܐܐܘܪܝܢܐ) which overshadows (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ) you (cf. Lk 1:35) in a guarded stillness”.

⁸¹⁸ See Brock, *Maggnānūtā*; see section IV.2.3

⁸¹⁹ 2Cor 12:8-9.

⁸²⁰ Greek: ἐπισκηνώσῃ.

Lastly, it is *in this* ‘weakness’ that the power of God manifests itself – within a personal experience of ontological nature which, for Paul, mirrors that of Christ, as he clarifies in 2Cor 13:4: “Although he was crucified in weakness (ܘܚܘܫܘܬܗ), he lives by the power of God (ܘܥܘܠܡܗܘܬܗ). [...] And even if we are weak (ܘܚܘܫܘܬܗ) with him, we live with him by the power of God (ܘܥܘܠܡܗܘܬܗ)”. The close connection, which constantly recurs in Isaac, between power (ܥܘܠܡܗܘܬܗ) and weakness (ܘܚܘܫܘܬܗ), is rooted in 2Cor 12:8-9⁸²¹.

Isaac reads Luke and Paul’s passages in light of ‘Macarius’⁸²², who had already spoken of a ‘Power-Spirit’, whose drawing near and distancing occurs within trials.

In I 72, Isaac explicitly refers to a passage from the Macarian epistle *Ad Filios Dei*⁸²³, which describes the ascetic life as an alternation, within trials, of one’s experience of God’s aid and of encounters with “the enemies”, through which God ‘puts to the test’ the human being, to prove his/her heart. The context is similar to that which Isaac outlines:

If the heart is frightened by these things, so as to be weakened (ܘܘܫܘܬܗ) by the toils of these wars, then the merciful God sends to it a Holy Power (ܥܘܠܡܗܘܬܗ) and he sustains the heart [...]. Then, when the good God sees that the heart has been strengthened against the enemy, he takes away [his] Power from it from time to time, and permits that the enemies might be sent forth to fight against it [...]. Just as a ship without rudders goes off course and strikes here and there, so also the

⁸²¹ To this, also 1Cor 15:43 and 2Cor 4:7 should be added. Other Pauline passages that should be kept in the background, are 1Cor 1:27-2:5; 1Ts 1:5; Eph 6:10; Col 2:12; 1Cor 4:20; 2Cor 6:7; 2Cor 10:4; Phil 3:21.

⁸²² The Syriac translator(s) of the Macarian writings reworked the original Greek *corpus*, combining different Greek passages and adding new material, so that, while the Syriac version is indeed based on the Greek *corpus*, it has also been reshaped into a new literary text. For further analysis of this issues, see my “Human Weakness in Isaac of Nineveh and the Syriac Macarian *corpus*: A First Investigation”, *Aramaic Studies* 14 (2016), 1-13.

⁸²³ This writing, which might really bear traces of the thought of Macarius the Egyptian, is extant in Greek, but not as part of the Greek *corpus*. Gennadius, in the 5th century, already attributed this Letter to Macarius the Egyptian. This writing is also extant in Latin, Armenian, and partially in Coptic; see Guillaumont, “Macaire l’Égyptien”, *DS* 10, col. 12. The Greek text was edited by Strothmann in *Die Syrische Überlieferung* II, XV-XXVI. On the Syriac version, see G.L. Marriott, ‘Macarius of Egypt: His Epistle *Ad Filios Dei* in Syriac’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1918), 42-44. For further information, particularly on the position of contemporary scholars about the author of the letter, see my “Human Weakness”.

heart, when is weakened (ܡܚܝܒܘ) and grows feeble (ܦܥܝܒܘ) through these things. [But] the good God, who takes care of his creature, sends again [his] Holy Power, and He sustains his heart [...] [placing it] under the yoke of the Paraclete. [...] Then, the good God begins to open the eyes of [the person's] heart, so that he might know that he is his supporter. Then the person comes to know how to honour God with great humility (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ)⁸²⁴.

'Macarius' openly draws an equivalence between the "Holy Power" and the Paraclete, and reads one's experience of 'strengthening' and 'weakening' as being related to his drawing near and distancing: the parallels with Isaac's *Centuries* are striking. These, however, are not the only Macarian echoes present in Isaac.

Isaac refers to the alternation between a subjective experience of strength and one of enfeeblement within afflictions by using the term 'changes (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ)', which he distinguishes from 'variations (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ)'. 'Variations', he says, concern the different statures and labours of the solitary life, while 'changes' are related to the alternation between "assistance" and "weakness"⁸²⁵, which one experiences under the action of the Spirit. Isaac writes that "the holy fathers" have a specific understanding of this issue:

By variations (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ) [the fathers] mean the aims of labours, whose kinds change with [the growth of] knowledge [...]. By changes (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ), [they mean] the [different] kinds of warfare, and the assistance of Grace, which occur at all times with solitaries in the course of [their life] in stillness; also, [they mean] the changes in the workings of the Holy Spirit, and the various consolations which are administered by God to the saints⁸²⁶.

The two terms, ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ and ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ, are used in a *logion* of Abba Isaiah, whose words are less transparent than Isaac's. However, Isaiah clearly refers to an awareness of the fact that the path of *askesis* is not an even path, as Isaac does: on it, there is peace and war, rest and setbacks. He writes:

On the path of virtues, there are falls, for there are also enemies; there are changes (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ), there is variation (ܦܥܘܠܘܬܐ); there is abundance, there are measures; there is deficiency, there is despondency; there is joy, there is pain of the heart; there is

⁸²⁴ Aeg. ep. 1,9-12, Strothmann, *Die Syrische Überlieferung*, I 79-81 (Syr.); II 52-54 (GT).

⁸²⁵ See II 9,11 29 (Syr.); 36 (ET).

⁸²⁶ II 22,8-9 107 (Syr.); 119 (ET).

sadness, there is rest of the heart; there is growth, there is violence – for the journey on the path lasts [lit: is] until you reach repose. Impassibility, however, is far from all these things: it does not need anybody, for it is in God, and God in it⁸²⁷.

Isaac, in his *corpus*, frequently refers to a similar ‘unevenness’ of the path⁸²⁸ by using the concept of ‘change’. In his discourse I 72, he discusses this systematically, reading Isaiah’s concept in the light of Macarian ideas⁸²⁹:

Changes (ܠܘܬܘܬܐ) occur to every person, just as in the air. There is the time of cold and, after a moment, heat, and perhaps hail and, after a little while, fair weather. And [it is] thus for our training⁸³⁰: [there is] war and the help of Grace, and sometimes the soul is in a tempest, and violent waves assail it and, again, sometimes there is a change and it is visited by Grace, and joy fills the heart, and [there is] a peace which [comes] from God, and chaste and peaceful thoughts. Therefore, if, after these things, chance-events which afflict [us] press hard, let us not become sad, and, in the time of rest which is from Grace, let us not boast, but, in the time of joy, let us contemplate affliction, and, in the time of affliction, let us wait for help. And thus let us prepare our way, for he who departs from this becomes prey to wolves⁸³¹.

In his discourse, Isaac wishes his reader to become aware that the path he/she chose inevitably implies the ‘changes’ that ‘Macarius’ describes, that are frequent, like atmospheric variations. If a person learns this, his/her trials will “make him wise [...], if he is vigilant”⁸³². He can then be “watchful over what is his, and [see] how many changes (ܠܘܬܘܬܐ) of rest and tranquillity his mind receives every day, and how it suddenly turns away from [this] calm into troubled waters, without any

⁸²⁷ R. Draguet, *Les cinq recensions*, Logos XXIV 1, CSCO 290 (Syr.) 362; CSCO 294 (FT) 417.

⁸²⁸ “Unevenness (ܠܘܬܘܬܐ)”, is a term which Isaac himself uses in II 9,9 29 (Syr.); 36 (ET).

⁸²⁹ This passage is present in the Syriac *corpus* but not in the Greek one. It is also mentioned by Simon of Taybuteh and inspired John of Dalyatha. For Simon, see Beulay, *La lumière*, 204, and Bettiolo, *Simone di Taibuteh*, 145-146. Beulay states that John mentions atmospheric ‘changes’ in his unedited *Centuries* (I 28): see Beulay, *La lumière*, 82 and footnote 326, 276; similar passages can be found in John’s Letters and Homilies: see e.g. Letter 37: R. Beulay (ed.), *La collection des lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 39.3, no. 180, Turnhout, 1978, 406 (Syr.); 405 (FT); see also footnote 1, 404; Homily 6: N. Khayyat (ed.), *Jean de Dalyatha, Les Homélie I-XV*, Sources syriaques 2, Antélias, 2007, 158 (Syr.), 159 (FT). I thank Mary Hansbury, who pointed out to me the existence of Simon and John’s passages.

⁸³⁰ Or: instruction.

⁸³¹ Strothmann, *Die Syrische Überlieferung*, Al. h 1,3, I 137 (Syr.); II 88–89 (GT). In I 72, Isaac quotes this passage almost literally, with very minor variations. On this theme, see my initial investigation: “‘Changes happen to every Person, just as in the Air’: an Analysis of the Theme of Humility in Isaac the Syrian’s Homily I 72”, *The Harp* 32 (SEERI, Kerala, India) (2017), 117-134.

⁸³² I 72 494.

cause from some place or other, and is in great, unspeakable danger”⁸³³. In the moment when the Power journeys far away, “the soul is enfeebled (ܠܥܘܒܝܢܐ) and suffers torment”; but then there is a ‘change’, and “again [its overshadowing] manifests itself to the soul in a hidden way, and the soul is fortified, rejoices, and receives courage”⁸³⁴. In this learning, it is essential to understand that these ‘changes’ affect *every* human being, and *that one is a human being*: “Understand well [Macarius’ words]: ‘to every person’, for our nature is one. Do not think that he speaks to imperfect people alone, while the perfect would be free from changes (ܘܥܘܒܝܢܐ), and abide in a single order without inclination, without [experiencing] the movement of the passions”⁸³⁵: “inclination passes without distinction through every rational nature”⁸³⁶. In his discourse, Isaac speaks at length about this issue, suggesting that it is important to remember “affliction” in times of joy, and “joy” in times of affliction, thus keeping alive within oneself the memory of being a human.

In I 24, Isaac vividly describes these ‘changes’ as encounters with Grace and with one’s creatural solitude, in the midst of difficulties, which can then even expose one to a possible loss of oneself: “Frequently, amidst the hours of the day, it occurs that, [even] if a kingdom of the earth might be given to a brother, he would not be persuaded [...] to leave his cell [...]. The time of trading [for riches] has suddenly become present, for him. [...]. Grace suddenly visits him”⁸³⁷.

⁸³³ I 72 494-495.

⁸³⁴ II 9,8 29 (Syr.); 35-36 (ET).

⁸³⁵ I 72 495. Isaac adds: “As the Messalians say”. Apart from any reference to the actual Messalian movement, Isaac defines as ‘Messalian’ any attitude which refuses to deal with imperfection and the difficulties of life and *askesis*. See the section on ‘pride’ below (V.3.3., footnote 955). On Isaac and the ‘Messalians’, see: Hagman, “St Isaac of Nineveh and the Messalians”; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, “‘Neither Beginning nor End’: the Messalian Imaginaire and Syriac Asceticism”, *Adamantius* 19 (2013), 222-239, 228-231.

⁸³⁶ I 72 494.

⁸³⁷ I 24 177.

“Sometimes”, instead, “a certain necessary battle is suddenly presented to a brother, and he is in danger, having placed his hands on his heart in order to avoid flying [away]. Prostrate on his face, praying to God, he cannot hear the voice of [any] human being”⁸³⁸. “Sometimes [...] he suffers bereavements in his cell”⁸³⁹. “Many are the changes (كثرة التغيرات) on this sea”, and “[only] those who have passed over this sea and are acquainted with the winds which blow [there], know these changes (كثرة التغيرات)”⁸⁴⁰.

In the moment of negative ‘changes’, when ‘the Power’ withdraws and the pressure of the trials increases, the creature has the opportunity to experience a powerful contact with his/her ‘weakness’. Isaac often alludes to these negative ‘changes’ by saying that, through them, the human being suffers ‘abandonment (التخلي)’, and by employing the verb *حرم*, ‘to abandon/allow/permit’, but also ‘to leave [alone]’⁸⁴¹, to describe God’s action towards the creature.

‘Abandonment’, in Isaac, can take on different forms, reasons, and degrees. It can occur for the sake of a trial, without the creature being responsible for it⁸⁴², as a consequence of one’s incredulity⁸⁴³, or because one judges others⁸⁴⁴. “Love of pleasure and ease” can be its cause⁸⁴⁵, and its toughest form is that which Isaac calls ‘darkness’⁸⁴⁶. Above all, however, Isaac connects it to pride: it occurs to reduce pride, or to prevent it. In this sense, ‘abandonment’ is an expression of “the rod of

⁸³⁸ I 24 178-179.

⁸³⁹ I 24 179.

⁸⁴⁰ I 24 179.

⁸⁴¹ For a perspective on the theme of ‘abandonment’, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 101-109. Alfeyev draws a parallel with the experience of 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 Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 18 [Syr]; I 21 [ET]).

⁸⁴² Cf. I 30 209.

⁸⁴³ Cf. I 57 403.

⁸⁴⁴ Cf. Centuries II 21 38v-39r.

⁸⁴⁵ I 36 273.

⁸⁴⁶ On ‘darkness’, see Chapter VI.

God, which causes affliction”⁸⁴⁷. If one ‘exalts’ oneself, Isaac thinks, one will be abandoned⁸⁴⁸, and

By the quantity of pride which is visible in the soul [a person] can search out the weight of the ruin which is near to being sent upon [the soul] by God. God does not depart from a human being, [nor does he] abandon (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ) him completely, and reject him for any sins, until he finds that his mind is engaged in converse with pride (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ) or blasphemy⁸⁴⁹.

Also, when this ‘abandonment’ is only partial, Isaac believes that its reason is the danger of pride, which even the pure and impassible suffer, “in God’s mercy”⁸⁵⁰.

Ἐγκατάλειψις, ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ in Syriac, is an Evagrian theme, which Evagrius discusses especially in the *Gnostikos*. For Evagrius, ‘abandonment’ occurs for various reasons, but above all, as in Isaac, it teaches humility, through the power of experience:

Be attentive to these five divisions of abandonment (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ), so that you (i.e. the gnostic master) may guide those who are discouraged [...]. For abandonment reveals hidden virtue. If [virtue] has been neglected, it turns [one] back through punishment. It also becomes a cause of salvation for others. When you become first in virtue, it teaches humility to those who possess it. He who had experience of evil, hates it, for experience (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ) is the offspring of abandonment, and abandonment is the child of disobedience⁸⁵¹.

⁸⁴⁷ II 37,3 146 (Syr.); 158 (ET); see Centuries II 21 38v-39r: God is the ultimate source of abandonment, rather than Satan: “[It is] not credible this, that [Satan], by his own will, without abandonment (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ) which [comes] from the divine will (lit: hint), could do this or any other thing which vexes. [...] There is a Guide with us, and these reasons set abandonment (ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ) in motion”.

⁸⁴⁸ I 72 498.

⁸⁴⁹ I 58 411. Blasphemy often depends on pride: see section V.3.3.

⁸⁵⁰ See I 72 494, title.

⁸⁵¹ See BL Add 17167 (S3), 11r, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 743, 676-678. In S1 (which instead of ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐ employs ܐܘܘܪܘܢܐܐܘܪܘܢܐ, ‘comprehension’), the last sentence reads: “of impassibility”; see BL Add. 14578 (S1) 14r col. b, Wright, *Catalogue*, no. 567, 445-449. For the Greek fragment of this chapter, see A. Guillaumont – C. Guillaumont (eds.), *Évagre Le Pontique. Le gnostique*, Sources Chrétiennes 356, Paris, 1989, cap. 28, 134-135 and footnote 28, 135-143.

This teaching, as Driscoll suggested, is rooted in the wider desert tradition and in Evagrius' personal experience⁸⁵². Similar causes of abandonment (manifestation of hidden virtue; driving away of pride), are also discussed in a story of the *Lausiac History*, where the old man Paphnutius is questioned by Evagrius and Palladius about misfortune occurring to the just, and the fall of some advanced solitaries, who lost themselves due to pride⁸⁵³. Isaac openly refers to both Evagrius and material from the *Lausiac History*, when discussing 'abandonment'⁸⁵⁴.

That which can free one from pride is the process of contacting one's 'weakness' and seeking a relationship with it. As the Century on the martyr suggests: "*I was abandoned in order to suffer, so that I might know that I am a human being*". This 'knowledge' alone, for Isaac, leads to humility, and through its discovery alone the creature "does not experience abandonment (ܠܗܘܢܘܨܘܬܐ) during any of the trials [which occur]"⁸⁵⁵. This humility, however, is discovered only through 'abandonment' itself. The 'negative', again, plays a vital role.

After this analysis, one will not be surprised to find in the Macarian *corpus* words such as these: "Many times we are abandoned (ܠܗܘܢܘܨܘܬܐ), so that we might know our weakness (ܠܗܘܢܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܐ), that we are human beings"⁸⁵⁶. Although Isaac does not quote this sentence directly⁸⁵⁷, the similarities with his Century are evident. What is distinctive in Isaac's passage, however, is his stress on 'suffering' ('in order

⁸⁵² See J. Driscoll, "Evagrius and Paphnutius on the causes for abandonment by God", *Studia Monastica* 39 (1997), 259-286, 277; 285. In this article, Evagrius' understanding of abandonment is examined in relation to similar teachings in the *Lausiac History*.

⁸⁵³ The theme is examined in further detail in the section on 'pride' below. For Palladius' story in Syriac see Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 217-222 (Syr.); I 265-273 (ET).

⁸⁵⁴ See section on 'pride' below.

⁸⁵⁵ Centuries II 23 39r.

⁸⁵⁶ Aeg. ep. 7,5 in Strothmann, *Die Syrische Überlieferung*, I 122 (Syr.); II 79-80 (GT). The passage is taken from what is called, according to Strothmann's classification, the '7th letter of Macarius the Egyptian'. This text does not feature in the Greek Macarian *corpus*, but forms part of the Syriac one.

⁸⁵⁷ Dadišo' quotes this passage in his writing 'On Solitude' (Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies Vol. 7*, 238, col. 2 [Syr.]; 129 [ET]), as Beulay and Strothmann had already noticed: see Beulay, *La lumière*, 36; Strothmann, *Die Syrische Überlieferung* I, XXII.

to suffer”), that he relates, with powerful awareness, to knowing oneself as a human being. This theme, in Isaac, becomes central.

The encounter with limitation and negation, which lies at the heart of this process of ‘knowledge’, will now be examined.

V.3.2. ‘HUMILIATION/BEING MADE HUMBLE’

Isaac conceptualizes the process of ‘knowledge’ of one’s ‘weakness’ as the process of ‘being made humble/becoming humble’. In his discourse I 8 in particular, which is entirely devoted to this theme, Isaac equates the fact of ‘having known’ one’s ‘weakness’⁸⁵⁸ with one’s access to humility, which follows this process. Isaac calls this process a “confrontation with [one’s] weakness (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*)”⁸⁵⁹, and stresses the fact that only this confrontation can lead to knowledge of God’s “aid” and “mercy”, within an experience of profound trust (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*)⁸⁶⁰.

In this section, it will be demonstrated that Isaac reads the process of ‘being made humble’ as one of contacting one’s ontological creatural condition and, therefore, the original problem of existence. For this reason, Isaac stresses the vital importance of this process: “Without being made humble (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*)”, a person’s

practice cannot become firm; without trials, he cannot acquire wisdom; and without wisdom, he cannot reach humility (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*). For this reason, God necessarily leaves to the saints causes of humility, breaking of the heart (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*), and a suffering prayer (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*) and without wandering (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*), buffeting them at times through the accidents of the natural passions, with the transgressions which [occur] through abominable thoughts, at times with the shame and insults without reason that they suffer from human beings and the pains of the body, at times through poverty and the need of necessary things, and sometimes through the powerful sufferings (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*)⁸⁶¹ of fear (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*), in open battles with the demons, that he allows (*ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ*) upon them, to shake them frequently, and through fearful

⁸⁵⁸ I 8 104: “Blessed the person who has known his weakness!”.

⁸⁵⁹ I 8 104.

⁸⁶⁰ Cf. I 8 105.

⁸⁶¹ Or: passions.

changes (عقبات مستلزمة), each more powerful, terrible, and difficult than the other⁸⁶².

This process cannot occur without encountering ‘the negative’ and, in this perspective, Isaac states: “Humility cannot be acquired without its causes”, which are the encounters with ‘afflictions’, “because of which the breaking of the heart continuously occurs and the thoughts of presumption (كبرياء) are destroyed”⁸⁶³. This implies that, through the encounter with ‘the negative’, and with the ‘weakness’ that it reveals, the passional defences can be broken down, and the creature can contact him/herself in truth. Humility emerges as the fulfilment of this process, through which one realises that one “is a creature (حيوان)”⁸⁶⁴. Suffering has no value *per se*, if it does not lead there:

Virtue is the mother of adversities, from adversities humility (تواضع) is brought forth, and for humility a gift is given. Therefore the 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 vain⁸⁶⁵.

The discovery of *this* humility is a vital matter. At stake, here, is the preservation of the self, within suffering, and the access to a condition of ‘integrity’ which surpasses understanding:

With great weeping lift up your voice to God, and ask for humility. 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 had mercy on you and given humility to you. Do not still your mourning until you perceive (تدرك) within your soul that you have received [humility]⁸⁶⁶.

All the energies of the creature should be concentrated in this quest, although “humility is a certain power (قدرة) which cannot [...] be acquired through

⁸⁶² I 8 108.

⁸⁶³ I 8 108.

⁸⁶⁴ I 8 109.

⁸⁶⁵ I 58 408-409.

⁸⁶⁶ I 58 412-413.

human power”⁸⁶⁷. One can only pass through the process of relationship with ‘weakness’, within which it can be bestowed.

The term Isaac most frequently uses to describe the encounter with ‘the negative’ which leads to ‘knowledge of weakness’ is ܡܘܟܐܟܐ (mukākā), which derives from the verb ܡܟܚ, ‘to lay flat/to lower/to humble oneself’. This term, which is widely present in Isaac’s *corpus*, conveys the idea of being brought low and, in this sense, humble. Isaac also uses the verb ܡܟܚܘܬܐ, ‘to be lowered, to be brought low’, to express the same idea.

If the term ܡܟܚܘܬܐ (makikutā), ‘humility’, indicates the end of the process of becoming humble, Isaac usually uses ܡܘܟܐܟܐ (mukākā) to point to the condition of the human being as he/she passes through this process. As Isaac states in I 82, a discourse entirely devoted to humility, humble is not

he who humbles himself through remembrance of his wounds and lapses, and remembers them in order to reach the breaking of the heart, and his mind *descends* from its movements of pride through the remembrance of them [...]. He still has thoughts of pride, and does not possess humility, but brings it near to himself by means of stratagems. Although this is laudable [...], yet he does not possess [humility]: he seeks it, and it is not his⁸⁶⁸.

ܡܘܟܐܟܐ (mukākā) is the condition of this ‘seeking’.

The term ܡܘܟܐܟܐ (mukākā), which Isaac also uses, at times, as a synonym for ܡܟܚܘܬܐ (makikutā, ‘humility’), more frequently evokes the idea of what has traditionally been called ‘humiliation’: Brockelmann and Payne Smith translate the Syriac with the Latin ‘humiliatio’.

⁸⁶⁷ II 27,3 115-116 (Syr.); 127 (ET). In this light, Isaac also clarifies that humility is unconnected from a natural attitude of peacefulness and meekness. See II 18,10 87-88 (Syr.); 98-99 (ET). See Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 236; Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 115-116; and Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 190-192.

⁸⁶⁸ I 82 578-579.

To speak of ‘humiliation’ in our culture almost immediately evokes a condition of abuse but, in Isaac’s world, كحلل refers to every condition which brings low, and therefore can make humble, including abuse, as in the case of what Christ experiences. The choice of how to translate the term كحلل, then, is difficult: how to access what Isaac says? Whether one chooses the term ‘humiliation’, or the phrase ‘being made humble’, in both cases, something is lost. In this study, then, both resonances will be retained and both translations employed. If the term ‘humiliation’ has the disadvantage of evoking mainly injustice and one’s being wounded by it, this term still alludes, even today, to the event which according to Isaac lies at the root of one’s becoming humble, that is suffering⁸⁶⁹. The foundational role of suffering in the process of ‘knowledge of weakness’ and the discovery of humility cannot simply be dismissed; otherwise, there is the risk of failing to understand the nature of the process that Isaac outlines. However, the idea of ‘being made humble’ should be kept in the background, because it expresses the aim of the process, which is *transformative* in nature and not purely ‘humiliating’ (in the contemporary sense). If, then, as Isaac says, “humility (كحلل) cannot be acquired without its causes”⁸⁷⁰, that is to say suffering – and this, as a matter of fact, can also include abuse, as in the case of calumny, which Isaac often mentions⁸⁷¹ –, the idea of ‘becoming/being made humble’ clarifies the ‘why’ of the process. Above all, the difference between ‘humiliation’ as injustice and annihilation, and ‘humiliation’ as the event of ‘being made humble’ emerges from Isaac’s writings as being related to the possibility of discovering a specific attitude within suffering,

⁸⁶⁹ See e.g. I 58 408: “It is impossible for the mind to remain in the condition of having been made humble (كحلل) if it does not experience buffeting, and it is impossible, without having been made humble (كحلل), to persevere in the toil of supplication towards God with limpidity”.

⁸⁷⁰ I 8 108.

⁸⁷¹ See particularly I 5 64-65: “He who endures (كحلل) calumny with humility has attained perfection: the angels marvel at this. There is no virtue more difficult and greater than this”; I 6 84.

and to *how much the subject is structured*, in his/her encounter with suffering, even if it is unjust (the issue of ‘humiliation’ as abuse lies here).

The theme of the connection between ‘humiliation’ and ‘humility’ was recently explored by Jane Foulcher, in her study on humility in Christian reflection on the inner life (desert monasticism, the rule of Saint Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the writings of Christian de Chergé⁸⁷²)⁸⁷³. In her conclusions, Foulcher criticizes the “understandable” tendency of some modern translations of ascetic writings to separate the moment of ‘humiliation’ and that of humility⁸⁷⁴, whose connection stems from Biblical texts, where the humble know poverty and oppression⁸⁷⁵, thus knowing concrete forms of ‘humiliation’. “In the monastic traditions I have considered”, Foulcher states, “humility and humiliation are necessarily, if dangerously, related”⁸⁷⁶. Foulcher concludes that the term ‘humiliation’ cannot simply be dismissed, because it points toward our humanity “bound to the earth”, which “inevitably” means to “experience frustration and pain”⁸⁷⁷. Even though synthetically, the author highlights how the essential difference, in this slippery territory, is “between a self freely offered, and a self compelled to submit to another”⁸⁷⁸. In Isaac, this fundamental difference concerns the interiority of the subject: it is in relation to his/her inner movements, more than to objective experiences and external relationships of power, to which Foulcher

⁸⁷² Christian de Chergé OCSO was a Trappist monk, prior of Our Lady of Atlas, in Tibhirine (Algeria), who was kidnapped and killed in 1996 along with six other monks from his abbey by GIA. Besides other writings, he left a series of notes on the theme of humility, based on short talks he gave at his monastery.

⁸⁷³ J. Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility, Four Studies in the monastic Tradition*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2015.

⁸⁷⁴ Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 313.

⁸⁷⁵ Cf. Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 19, where the author examines the modern Biblical scholarship on this theme.

⁸⁷⁶ Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 313.

⁸⁷⁷ Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 313.

⁸⁷⁸ Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 314.

mainly refers when she makes this statement⁸⁷⁹. Nonetheless, also in Isaac, this difference is essential, within oneself, because at stake here is one's inner freedom, which alone opens one up to God. After having said that the path of the desert is "full of afflictions", Isaac adds the clarification that "it is not the case that God wishes the vexations of human beings, but that you [may become able to] offer him your sufferings as a sacrifice of love"⁸⁸⁰. Here he is referring to this inner freedom, which is the pre-condition for loving and offering.

It would be difficult to read Isaac's writings ignoring the connection between becoming humble and 'humiliation': this cannot simply be dismissed. It is no accident that Isaac also employs the word *ܡܘܟܐܟܐ* (*mukākā*)⁸⁸¹ to describe Christ's passage through suffering – Christ who nevertheless *passes through it without letting himself be 'humiliated' by it, in the contemporary sense of the word*. It is Christ's capacity for wholeness within suffering – his attitude within it –, rather than the external events *per se*, that determine the quality of the experience of 'humiliation/being made humble', and where it leads. This wholeness, in the case of the creature, is desired, known, and forged in the process of one's relationship with suffering, which ultimately is the relationship with one's ontological 'weakness'. In this light, the creature's attempt to descend into the contact with his/her suffering self remaining whole, is, in Isaac, an *imitatio* of Christ⁸⁸².

The description of the dynamics of being made humble is pervasive in Isaac's *corpus*. 'Being made humble' can be experienced in body and soul, but the first experience is more original in Isaac. Only by understanding this original

⁸⁷⁹ She refers to "abusive human power", in Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 314.

⁸⁸⁰ I 53 387.

⁸⁸¹ See Centuries IV 80 104r; Centuries IV 74 101r-102r, 101v; Centuries IV 82 104v; II 5,16 10 (Syr.); 13 (ET); and II 18,6 86 (Syr.); 97 (ET).

⁸⁸² This theme is explored in my "La passione secondo Isacco di Ninive", *Adamantius* 21 (2015), 341-352.

function can one understand correctly his insistence on physical *askesis*. This is connected to the nature of bodily experience, in which the contact with one's 'weakness' occurs in a very straightforward, powerful way.

Often, in his writings, Isaac speaks of bodily sufferings, of the suffering of hunger⁸⁸³, of the struggle for chastity⁸⁸⁴, of the fall of the body on the bed in "great weariness"⁸⁸⁵, and of the toil of kneeling⁸⁸⁶. He often insists on the value of these experiences, that he interprets as a "humbling of the body"⁸⁸⁷ – a 'fall' of the body, as he describes it⁸⁸⁸. Through becoming humble of the body in this way, the soul itself is made humble.

There is an experiential quality in this becoming humble of the body, which is not found elsewhere when Isaac describes learning the humble attitudes of the body. This 'becoming humble' has a different depth and touches other dimensions of the self. It is a 'physical entrance' into humility, which is mysteriously taught by the Spirit, who "teaches [the creature] the ways of humility (تواضع) in his hiddenness and in his senses"⁸⁸⁹. If humble external attitudes can be simply learnt, humility is a place where one arrives, after a demanding journey: "Although you pass through all the abodes of the virtues, you will not encounter rest from your vexation nor breathe from your persecutions until your journey reaches the abode of humility"⁸⁹⁰.

⁸⁸³ See later in this section.

⁸⁸⁴ Which he calls "struggle of blood" in I 30 209.

⁸⁸⁵ Cf. See Centuries II 80 54v-55r; Centuries IV 54 94v-95r, 94v; Centuries II 56 48v.

⁸⁸⁶ See especially Centuries II 81 55r-55v.

⁸⁸⁷ In II 5, preface, 4 (Syr.); 5 (ET), Isaac speaks of "mingling the humbling (تواضع) of [one's] body with the movements of [one's] prayer".

⁸⁸⁸ Centuries IV 54 94v: "In these places (i.e. desert regions), strain your body in birth pangs (تولد), the verb used, indicates labor pains), in afflictions and labors, so that, after your body has fallen (سقط), it will not return to laxity [...], and become full of passions [...]"

⁸⁸⁹ I 62 431.

⁸⁹⁰ I 33 220.

The 'becoming humble' of the body, for Isaac, protects the human being from exposure to the violence of destructive forces. In this sense, it becomes, for the creature, an internal place of 'trust': "The heart of anybody is sustained by trust (توكل) in the measure in which he is weary and made humble in his body, when the phalanx of Satan surrounds him"⁸⁹¹. It is clear that Isaac, here, is not referring to a protection offered by a trust in a 'justice' related to ascetic actions, which would be a mere 'work'. He seems to refer, instead, to a more original trust, which one discovers through a rootedness and stability that are found as a consequence of deeply adhering to oneself, by means of the fatigue of the body⁸⁹²: through this, a radical contact with one's 'weakness' occurs.

The mind, when it looks above, toward God, tends to fly away. The 'humbling' *askesis* of the body, however, leads it down again, toward its creatural space:

If, through Christ's Grace, you arrive to take delight in the mysteries of visible created things – which is the first summit of knowledge (i.e. second natural contemplation) –, arm your soul against the spirit of blasphemy, because you will be unable to stand in this region without weapons, lest you be suddenly and secretly killed by the deceivers. Your weapons will be fasting and tears, which you will shed in [your] continual humiliations (تواضع) ⁸⁹³.

The 'being made humble' of the body takes the shape of a deep adherence to the frail, suffering body. It implies adhering to one's creatural condition in its most naked form. This experience of one's creatural condition has a foundational value in unifying the sphere of the 'mental': the 'soul' can be protected by the 'humbling' of the body. This emerges with clarity from Isaac's descriptions of fasting.

⁸⁹¹ I 35 241.

⁸⁹² In this light, also a passage like this, in I 35 268, should be read: "When the body is weak because of fasting and humiliations (تواضع), the soul is powerful through the Spirit, in prayer".

⁸⁹³ I 4 48.

Isaac calls fasting ‘hunger (جوع)’ – “hunger for Christ”⁸⁹⁴; “the flame of hunger”⁸⁹⁵; “prolonged hunger”⁸⁹⁶; “the suffering of hunger”⁸⁹⁷. Fasting forces the creature to perceive a void, in his/her flesh, as the word ‘hunger’ indicates. This suggests that Isaac interprets fasting as an embodied recalling of one’s status of creatural ‘weakness’, through the perception of hunger pains. In the perception of a physical void, which immediately makes one aware of one’s creatural incompleteness, the desire for God is born: “As soon as he begins the fasting, he desires intimacy with God in his mind”⁸⁹⁸. Awake to oneself as a creature, one becomes “awake for God”⁸⁹⁹. This occurs, however, because fasting connects one with oneself as hungry, weary, needy, and passible, “through its laborious difficulties (جوع, تعب, حزن)”⁹⁰⁰. This stills the mind, which “remains immovable in the encounters with all difficulties and grievous events”⁹⁰¹, *through inhabiting the ‘place of hunger’*. The fact of *voluntarily* bringing suffering upon oneself through bodily *askesis*, then, in Isaac, connects one to the possibility of the original suffering which one experiences as a creature. Here, one touches on the most original form of vulnerability, which is physical, inhabiting the point of origin of the problem of existence.

This does not occur through ascetic practices alone. It is not the nature of these practices *per se* that attracts Isaac’s attention, but the contact with oneself as a creature which occurs through them. For this reason, Isaac believes that sickness, or the frailty of the body, can also fulfil the same function: in I 65, speaking of

⁸⁹⁴ I 35 241.

⁸⁹⁵ I 35 241.

⁸⁹⁶ Centuries IV 45 91v.

⁸⁹⁷ I 37 285.

⁸⁹⁸ I 35 238-239.

⁸⁹⁹ I 35 239.

⁹⁰⁰ Centuries IV 45 91v.

⁹⁰¹ I 35 241.

solitaries who, having left their community to live in stillness, are sick, Isaac states that “instead of all the [monastic] ordinances, the weakness (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) of the body alone, and stillness, sufficed them”⁹⁰². Elsewhere, he tells his reader-disciple, who is concerned that a life spent in solitude, which will cause him to experience a state of physical frailty, will not allow him to devote himself fully to ascetic practices: “Love solitude, even if you are too weak (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) to [fulfil] all the righteous acts which are in it”⁹⁰³; “Reclusion and quietude with themselves [...] is given to a very few only as a gift from God so that they might endure in the weakness of [their] limbs (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) the difficulty of solitude (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ)”⁹⁰⁴. It is a matter of *inhabiting* this difficulty “in [one’s] limbs”, adhering to one’s creatural status. As in the case of fasting, through this ‘lowering’ of the body, it is a ‘lowering’ of the mind that occurs: “In labour among human beings, there is pride (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ), but in weakness (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) in stillness, the breaking of the heart (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ)”⁹⁰⁵.

This “breaking of the heart”, which Isaac contrasts with pride, refers to another aspect of one’s ‘being made humble’⁹⁰⁶. It concerns the soul, whose poverty is encountered through seeing oneself in truth. Isaac often refers to this encounter by speaking of the “humiliation/being made humble of the heart (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ)”⁹⁰⁷: “Without stillness, the heart is not humbled (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ); without the heart’s being

⁹⁰² I 65 463.

⁹⁰³ Centuries II 92 57r.

⁹⁰⁴ Centuries II 44 43v-45r. In this Century, Isaac also states (44r): “Do not be grieved, o brother weak in [your] body (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) who dwell in stillness, because you do not possess the labour of the body [...]. Greater is the gift that [God] gave you, which is perseverance (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) and love of stillness”.

⁹⁰⁵ Centuries II 93 57v.

⁹⁰⁶ Of the “broken of heart”, in I 65 458, Isaac says: “Christ came for the sake of sinners, to heal the broken of heart (ܐܘܨܘܠܘܬܐ) and to bandage their wounds (lit.: sufferings)”.

⁹⁰⁷ See Centuries II 79 54r-54v, 54v; Centuries II 94 57v; II 5,8 7 (Syr.); 10 (ET); II 18, 8 87 (Syr.); 98 (ET); II 18,6 86 (Syr.); 97 (ET)..

made humble (ܠܚܒܘܬܐ), the heart is not set on fire by manifold movements, and with these, all the practices of the solitary are dust and ashes”⁹⁰⁸.

This experience, which implies a contact with negative states (often through ‘changes’⁹⁰⁹ and ‘abandonment’⁹¹⁰) and passions, ‘humbles’ the soul through awareness: it is the core of the process of repentance/conversion (ܠܬܘܒܘܬܐ, *tyābutā*), which Isaac conceives as the crossing from the region of ‘practice’ to that of ‘theoria’⁹¹¹.

The relationship with oneself distinctive of *askesis*, which is a relationship with one’s creatural ‘weakness’, mainly develops within this experience. Although Isaac interprets ‘humiliation’ of the soul as a wider process (e.g. it can be born through experiencing contempt⁹¹²), in his writings it is often associated with developing this awareness concerning oneself. The more one enters limpidity, the more one descends into this state; the more one descends into it, the more limpidity unfolds: “When the movements have begun to become limpid, then the heart is humbled (ܠܚܒܘܬܐ), and it is as if it dwelled in some deep. And from this humbling (ܠܚܒܘܬܐ), it is brought near to limpidity”⁹¹³.

The encounter with ‘weakness’, here, is less immediate than when the body’s vulnerability is involved: it requires “the labour of the heart”⁹¹⁴ and an effort of ‘discernment’ – “the suffering of discernment (ܠܚܒܘܬܐ ܠܚܒܘܬܐ)”⁹¹⁵, “the humbling

⁹⁰⁸ Centuries II 94 57v.

⁹⁰⁹ Centuries II 47 45r-46v.

⁹¹⁰ Cf. Centuries I 80 31v.

⁹¹¹ Cf. II 20,17 99 (Syr.); 111 (ET); Centuries IV 93 108r-108v: “The labour of the life at the level of the soul is the conduct of repentance (ܠܬܘܒܘܬܐ ܠܚܒܘܬܐ), which is the intermediate stature of the conduct of the solitary life, that is the degree of the penitent [...]”. Isaac even suggests that human existence on this earth has been given in order to discover repentance: see I 79 544. On this theme, see footnote 476.

⁹¹² See e.g. I 4 41.

⁹¹³ Centuries II 91 57r.

⁹¹⁴ See e.g. Centuries IV 94 108v.

⁹¹⁵ I 72 499; I 65 443.

[which comes] from discernment (ܠܘܩܘܣܐ ܠܚܘܒܐ)⁹¹⁶. However, the dynamics of encountering ‘weakness’ is the same, and is rooted in the soul’s capacity to *perceive* its inner world: in this light, Isaac states that one’s “receptivity (ܠܚܘܒܐ) to accidents is useful for bringing the mind low (ܠܚܘܒܐ)⁹¹⁷, adhering to its real, creatural condition.

This ‘lowering’ of the mind occurs within an experience of suffering, which indicates that an encounter with oneself is taking place: “Make me worthy, o Lord, to taste that contrition (lit.: suffering. ܠܘܒܐ), wherein is placed the gift of pure prayer⁹¹⁸. Without this capacity for perceiving oneself⁹¹⁹, repentance would be impossible. In perceiving oneself instead, there is true sight: “God will give you the gift of compunction of heart (lit.: suffering, sorrow, ܠܚܘܒܐ), in order to *see* your soul through it; and, through it, you will enter spiritual joy⁹²⁰; or: “The human being who is made worthy to *see* himself is greater than he who is made worthy to see the angels⁹²¹. Isaac’s rich terminology related to suffering, which he uses to describe the process of repentance – mourning (ܠܘܒܐ)⁹²², contrition/suffering (ܠܘܒܐ; ܠܚܘܒܐ)⁹²³, compunction (ܠܚܘܒܐ)⁹²⁴, suffering of the mind (ܠܚܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ/ܠܘܒܐ)⁹²⁵, sorrowing heart (ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ)⁹²⁶ – points to the fact that one *should be*

⁹¹⁶ See II 18 8 87 (Syr.); 98 (ET).

⁹¹⁷ I 6 81.

⁹¹⁸ I 65 453. This whole discourse is devoted to repentance.

⁹¹⁹ Cf. III 12,29 99 (Syr.); 138 (ET): compunction is “the suffering sensation of [one’s] sins”.

⁹²⁰ I 46 334.

⁹²¹ I 65 463.

⁹²² See e.g. Centuries II 44 43v-45r, 44r; I 65 464; Centuries I 78 31r; Centuries IV 74 101r-102r, where Isaac discusses Mt 5:4, which in Syriac reads: “Blessed [are] those who mourn (ܠܘܒܐ, oi πενθοῦντες in the original Greek), because they will find comfort”. The word ܠܘܒܐ corresponds to the Greek πένθος, and the noun ܠܘܒܐ, ‘mourner’, which derives from the same root, is the term used to indicate the monk in the Syriac tradition (see footnote 476). Isaac reads the Gospel’s saying with these resonances in mind.

⁹²³ See e.g. I 65 446; II 8,17 24 (Syr.); 31 (ET).

⁹²⁴ See e.g. I 65 443; II 10,19 35 (Syr.); 45 (ET): ܠܚܘܒܐ.

⁹²⁵ See e.g. I 50 352; Centuries II 44 43v-45r, 44r.

⁹²⁶ See e.g. II 18,8 87 (Syr.); 98 (ET).

⁹²⁷ II 5,3 5 (Syr.); 7 (ET).

able to feel suffering, in order for this process to occur. Only when one cultivates one's capacity for perceiving oneself can contact with one's creatural condition take place, can one truly 'be made humble', and 'humiliation' become transformative.

The fact of perceiving one's passions, mistakes, and setbacks recalls one from an idea of the self to the real self. This causes an intimate realisation of one's distance from the Uncreated: it is in this perspective, of an utter awareness of one's being a creature, that Isaac describes himself as "a vessel full of uncleanness", "dust and ashes"⁹²⁸, whose "scattered impulses [...] are intoxicated with the multitude of the passions and the power of darkness"⁹²⁹. This alludes to an awareness of an unbridgeable distance, on the human side, which only God can cross by granting a repentance that is ultimately a 'gift': "O merciful God, send me from the height of your holiness the gift of repentance, through which I might be brought near to your Lordship"⁹³⁰. There is a sense of an abyssal difference, in Isaac's words, and of the unworthiness of the creature before God's holiness. This, however, does not imply making the creature culpable for what he/she could not avoid completely. This is not the kind of suffering that Isaac relates to repentance: he knows that the passional dimension is inscribed in the human condition, in this *katastasis*. As seen in Chapter II, he believes that sin is intimately connected to bodily frailty and the soul's 'inclination'. Thus, the humbling realization of one's subjection to sin is accompanied by an acute awareness of one's inability to eliminate it completely through the will. Nevertheless, this does not reduce the suffering felt, which connects one to one's ontological 'weakness'.

⁹²⁸ II 5,8 7 (Syr.); 9 (ET).

⁹²⁹ II 5,4 6 (Syr.); 7 (ET).

⁹³⁰ Centuries II 81 55r-55v, 55v.

Being made humble at the sight of one's imperfection protects one's mind in the same way as does inhabiting the body's weariness. 'The negative' hidden within, when perceived and seen, can then become what allows one to acknowledge God's alterity, just as does the physical void of fasting:

How many buffetings and humiliations (مفاسد و محاسن), [together] with thanksgivings, are brought forth by passibility and fear, [and] also by inclination, is manifest to everybody [...]. All of these teachers [God] multiplied for you because, had you been freed from them, because of your lack of need, [of] the non-receptivity of your nature, and [of] your elevation above [lit: from] fear and painful events, you would have forgotten God, you would have departed from him, and you would have sought a multitude of gods⁹³¹.

Before remembering God, as other than oneself and all idols, one should remember oneself as a creature.

A final element for understanding Isaac's view of the 'humbling' of repentance is that sin, for him, is an intricate, hidden web. This makes repentance, as Isaac conceives it, a complex process of transformation, which does not merely involve acknowledging single transgressions or moral mistakes of which one is aware, but the becoming known of the unknown, and the manifestation of the hidden. Most of the time, one is not guilty of one's passional movements in the sense of a deliberate, voluntary choice, but one is subject to blindness. Isaac conceives of repentance as a continuous process of unveiling one's inner world: "We should know that we are always in need of repentance, throughout the twenty-four hours of the night and day"⁹³², in a continual openness to the possibility of 'being humbled' by the sight of oneself.

It is in reference to its function of bringing awareness of creaturely 'weakness', then, that Isaac states that "every person who is a servant of God loves

⁹³¹ I 5 71.

⁹³² I 73 502.

contrition”⁹³³. In light of the above analysis, it appears that Isaac refers to loving the humbling vision of one’s true self, and being re-connected to one’s creatural status. This adherence to one’s real self which occurs through repentance is interpreted by Isaac as a source of joy: “O God, make me worthy of the taste of delight which is set within (ⲁⲗⲗ) true repentance”⁹³⁴. This can be known only if one develops *a specific attitude*, within ‘humiliation’, which alone allows one to descend into contact with ‘weakness’.

V.3.3. PASSIONAL DEFENCES: PRIDE

Chapter III described the powerful impact of suffering on the creature. Suffering can be a unifying element, as in the experience described above, but also a divisive, disintegrating element, which cuts off one’s contact with oneself. Isaac is aware of this ambiguous status of suffering, and also of the fact that the creature might be unable to stand the encounter with it. One can be made humble only if one enters suffering *in a certain way*. In Isaac’s writings, we find both readings of the experience of suffering, as well as a clear sense of the difference between these two possibilities.

Isaac states that one’s soul can “become diminished (ⲛⲓⲁ) because of the labours and vexations of stillness and solitude”⁹³⁵, or he speaks of “a grief which is reckoned to be because of God, [...] while [instead] it is a snare of Satan”⁹³⁶. Also faintheartedness, the mother of torments”⁹³⁷, in adversity causes one to “jump up, aggrieved and upset at the outward appearance” of things⁹³⁸; moreover, when they

⁹³³ I 65 446.

⁹³⁴ Centuries I 81 31v-32r, 31v.

⁹³⁵ See Century IV 55 94v-95r, 94v. Also see Century II 81 55r-55v (on kneeling).

⁹³⁶ Centuries II 29 40r-40v, 40r. The difference between these two forms of sadness and the necessity of discerning between them is a common theme in early monasticism.

⁹³⁷ I 39 301. ‘Patience (ⲛⲓⲁⲛⲓⲁⲛⲓⲁ)’, instead, is “the mother of consolations”.

⁹³⁸ II 37,3 147 (Syr.); 158-159 (ET).

suffer injustice, “vainglory does not leave [those who did not die to the world] without them being immediately inflamed by anger – or they fall into thoughts of sadness which are brought forth by this [same vainglory]”⁹³⁹. Suffering, in its nature, divides, and the experience of ‘the negative’, instead of breaking one’s passional defences, can turn them into worse passional defences, such as those described above.

Of these defences, the most dangerous is pride⁹⁴⁰. It is a passional flight that differs from all others, because it pulls one away completely from contact with oneself, thereby preventing one from encountering one’s ‘weakness’. For Isaac, in losing this contact with oneself, one also loses contact with God: through pride, one “falls away from God, just as a dry leaf falls from a tree”⁹⁴¹, so that the possibility of being in a relationship with God is literally founded on one’s adherence to oneself as a creature.

Isaac employs different terms when speaking of pride, which are extremely frequent in his writings. He uses *רָמוּתָא* (*rāmūtā*) ‘pride’ (lit.: ‘elevation’) and *רָמוּתָא*, ‘to exalt oneself’ (lit: ‘to go up’), which conveys a meaning opposite to *מַקִּיּוּתָא* (*makikutā*), ‘humility’, which, deriving from *מָקַד*, literally indicates a non-elevated position. He also uses a term which refers to one’s perception of oneself, *רָמוּתָא*, which means ‘opinion’ but, in this context, should be translated as ‘a high opinion of oneself’, or ‘presumption’, as well as the verb *אִזְדָּר*, ‘to dare’, which refers to the action of venturing into something higher than where one is really standing. Lastly, he also uses *רָמוּתָא*, ‘pride, pomp, haughtiness’.

⁹³⁹ I 5 76.

⁹⁴⁰ This theme has been examined in my “Pride in the thought of Isaac of Nineveh”, *Studia Patristica* 92 (2017), 137-147.

⁹⁴¹ I 35 262.

All of these moves cast the person into a condition of unreality, into an illusory realm. “Pride”, which dominates the inner space of the creature, “cannot perceive⁹⁴² that it walks in darkness and cannot know understanding and wisdom. In its thoughts, it lifts itself up *above* (ܐܘܘܪܐ) everything, but it is poorer and lower than everything”⁹⁴³. As Isaac understands it, pride tears one away from the perception of oneself and of reality. For this reason, it is “above everything” only “in its thoughts”, rather than in reality, and it leads one to imagine that one has the place of God⁹⁴⁴, pulling one in the opposite direction to the acknowledgment of ‘weakness’. Having forgotten one’s ܡܗܝܠܘܬܐ (*mḥilutā*, ‘weakness’) one becomes persuaded of possessing a ܗܝܠܐ (*ḥaylā*, ‘strength’) that one does not have⁹⁴⁵, seeing no more difference between “the exaltedness of the divine nature, and the earthiness of [one’s] nature”⁹⁴⁶.

Isaac describes two forms of pride: one can exalt oneself due to either ascetic achievement or one’s ‘knowledge’. If the first hands one over to lasciviousness, the second is far more dangerous, and can even lead to the loss of one’s reason. Isaac refers to this through the expressions ⁹⁴⁷ܥܘܪܐ “harm”, or ܥܘܪܐ ⁹⁴⁸ܥܘܪܐܝܬܐ, “damage to the intellect”: of human beings who

depart in their mind from the path of humility and are stripped of the divine help [...] those who exalt themselves (ܥܘܪܐܝܬܐ) in the virtue of [their ascetic] conduct, the majority of them fall into disgraceful lasciviousness, but those [who exalt

⁹⁴² Or: understand, recognise (ܐܘܪܐܝܬܐ).

⁹⁴³ I 16 133.

⁹⁴⁴ See e.g. Centuries II 21, 38v-39r.

⁹⁴⁵ Cf. Centuries II 21, 38v-39r.

⁹⁴⁶ II 14,42 70 (Syr.); 80 (ET).

⁹⁴⁷ From ܥܘܪܐ, ‘to harm, hurt, injure’. This idea and language recur in a set of stories of the *Lausiac History*, which discuss the fall of several advanced monks (see footnote below); see Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 165 (Syr), I 197 (ET) (Valens); II 169 (Syr.), I 201 (ET) (Abraham); II 218 (Syr.), I 266 (ET) (Palladius’ and Evagrius’ question); I 406 (ET) (Eucarpus); see also R. Draguet, *Les formes syriaques de la matière de l’Histoire Lausiacque*, CSCO 389-390, 398-399; Scr. Syri 169-170, 173-174, Louvain, 1978, CSCO 398, 371 (Syr.); CSCO 399, 241 (FT) (Eucarpus).

⁹⁴⁸ From ܥܘܪܐܝܬܐ, ‘to strike, assail’. This expression, ܥܘܪܐܝܬܐ, is not listed in dictionaries, except in Brockelmann, where the only example is Isaac’s passage. Its proximity to the other expression allows us to hypothesise a similar meaning.

themselves] in knowledge and the conduct of the mind [fall] into blasphemy concerning divine things or into damage to the intellect⁹⁴⁹.

The concept of “damage to the intellect” recurs in certain stories of the *Lausiac History* that inspired Isaac, which also deal with the theme of ‘abandonment’. They tell of solitaries who, having been deluded and believed that they had reached perfection, abandoned their ‘practice’. As a consequence, they were ‘abandoned’ by God, and some of them lost their mental balance⁹⁵⁰.

All of these figures desired a spiritual knowledge, freedom and joy for which they were unprepared, which clearly alludes to an incapacity to perceive one’s real condition and one’s ontological status as a human being. Isaac’s use of the verb ‘to dare’ in this context reinforces this idea effectively. The loss of mental balance, in this light, appears to be rooted in an ‘ontological misunderstanding’, a misunderstanding concerning one’s creatural condition, which in turn is rooted in a ‘greedy’ quest to transcend the limits inscribed within the status of ‘this world’. In this perspective, pride emerges as the most dangerous of the “dense substances”, which prevents one from developing an adequate relationship with the real, and can

⁹⁴⁹ I 58 411. Similar ideas recur elsewhere: see e.g. I 17 139 and I 45 322. The two possibilities that Isaac mentions here – lasciviousness and “damage to the intellect” – are the two consequences of pride according to the *Lausiac History*. In particular, Palladius speaks of various ascetics who fell into pride: Valens, Hero, Ptolemy, Abraham, Stephen, Eucarpus. They either fell into lasciviousness and dissolute living or were mentally damaged. There is also a further story, in which Evagrius and Palladius question Paphnutius, a wise elder, on the reasons for this, where these two possibilities are explicitly mentioned. That Isaac read and used the *Lausiac History* in his interpretation of pride can be inferred both from the similarities between the thought and the language and also from the fact that Isaac mentions ‘Ptolemy the Egyptian’ in Centuries III 86 78v-79r (see below) and refers to Palladius’ stories in II 14,41-42, 69-70 (Syr.), 79-80 (ET). For the Syriac *Lausiac History*, see Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 164-169 (Syr.), I 195-201 (ET) (Valens, Hero, Ptolemy, Abraham); II 217-222 (Syr.); I 265-273 (ET) (Palladius’ and Evagrius’ question and Paphnutius’ answer); I 400-406 (ET) (Stephen, Eucarpus). The Syriac text of Stephen and Eucarpus’ stories, which are not found in Greek, is not included in Budge’s edition. For this text, see Draguet, *Les formes syriaques*, CSCO 398, 364-372 (Syr.); CSCO 399, 236-241 (FT).

⁹⁵⁰ The idea is also Evagrian: see e.g. *Praktikos* 15 (14 in Greek) in BL Add. 14578 (S1) 4r, Wright, no. 567, 445-449. The link between Palladius’ stories and Evagrius’ thought has been highlighted by Driscoll: see Driscoll, “Evagrius and Paphnutius”. Driscoll also focused on the relevance, in the texts he examined, of the distinction between a pride centred on ‘practice’ and one centred on ‘knowledge’, the connection between pride and a loss of mental balance, and the link between pride and the refusal of ‘practice’.

even remove one completely from contact with it. Of this real, the self is the first, most essential element. In the phenomenology of pride, which one finds in Isaac's writings, this contact is lost when one bypasses 'practice':

Whoever, before the exercise of the first part (i.e. practice), transcends the bounds of the second (i.e. theoria) because of its sweetness, with an eager desire, [...] prepares wrath to blow against him, because, before [...] having healed the infirmity of his thoughts through the endurance of the toil and the shame of the cross, he dared (ܐܘܘܪܐ) to fantasise in his intellect about the glory of the cross⁹⁵¹.

Those who snatch knowledge with violence, with violence are snatched towards pride (ܐܘܘܪܐ) and, the more they apply their mind [to it], [the more] they are darkened. But those into whose movements knowledge enters [and] dwells are brought low (ܥܘܠܘܢܐ) towards the depth of humbling (ܐܘܘܪܐ ܘܥܘܠܘܢܐ), and receive in themselves, in a luminous way, the persuasion which gives joy (ܐܘܘܪܐ ܘܥܘܠܘܢܐ) (cf. Col 2:2)⁹⁵².

"Those who snatch knowledge (ܐܘܘܪܐ) with violence", Isaac clarifies, "[are] those who assail it without practice; but this means that, instead of the truth, they snatch an appearance (ܐܘܘܪܐ)"⁹⁵³.

This bypassing of 'practice' takes the form of the pretention to live without any limitation, without "law" and "rule"⁹⁵⁴, and of the refusal to place oneself "under (ܥܘܠܘܢܐ)" them – a move which can be contrasted with pride, placing itself "above" (ܥܘܠܘܢܐ)" everything. 'Rule' and 'law', which allude to the limitations of the ascetic life⁹⁵⁵, would awake one to the perception of one's 'weakness', and would protect from pride which, in its refusal of them, bars one's access precisely to

⁹⁵¹ I 2 15-16.

⁹⁵² Centuries I 25 24r.

⁹⁵³ Centuries I 26 24r.

⁹⁵⁴ See Centuries III 88 79r: "At the beginning [Satan] demands to all those whose ways have been led astray and [who] have begun to be caught in his net, to love freedom and to go out from [being] under (ܥܘܠܘܢܐ) rule and law, because, at that time, according to his will, he can sow in them his own things".

⁹⁵⁵ See II 14 56-72 (Syr.); 66-83 (ET). In this discourse, which deals with prayer and the necessity of keeping its outward forms, Isaac also criticises what he calls 'Messalian' tendencies. Isaac's intention does not seem to be criticising a specific heretical group, but a certain approach to spiritual life characterised by bypassing 'practice' and looking for light alone, which he labels as 'Messalian'.

contact with ‘weakness’. His bypassing of limitations is what caused the fall of Lucifer:

That morning star which rose at dawn (cf. Is 14:12⁹⁵⁶), because in his eyes it was diminishing to be under (ܕܠܘܕܐ) a rule *according to the boundary of the creatures* (ܕܠܘܕܐ ܕܠܘܕܐ ܕܠܘܕܐ), from that moment it was abandoned (ܕܠܘܕܐ) by that Power (ܠܘܕܐ) that was upholding it, and it fell like lightning (cf. Lk 10:12) from its glory⁹⁵⁷.

In this sense, “from the desire for freedom the thought of wickedness began in creatures”⁹⁵⁸, where “freedom”, here, should be understood as a freedom which bypasses the creatural status.

What Isaac calls “submission” to ‘rule’ and ‘law’, instead, protects the human being, keeping him/her within “the boundary of the creatures”, in the sense of reminding him/her of his/her creatural status:

Let us keep *the boundary of submission* (ܕܠܘܕܐ ܕܠܘܕܐ ܕܠܘܕܐ), my brothers, in order to avoid falling into the hands of the demon of pride (ܕܠܘܕܐ) and hence being abandoned (ܕܠܘܕܐ) by that Providence which holds and surrounds us [...], *so that we might know that we are creatures* and might not desire that freedom which is distinctive only of the Creator⁹⁵⁹.

In Isaac’s words, the root of the consequence of one’s original ‘ontological misunderstanding’ shines with clarity: forgetting one’s creatural space, and thus mistaking this creatural space for that of the Creator. Isaac expresses the opposite concept through words which evoke those of the martyr of Century I 63: “So that we might know that we are creatures”.

From forgetting this, the bypassing of ‘practice’ arises, but from this also a dangerous divergence between conceptions and facts develops, highlighted in Isaac’s vocabulary: one exalts oneself “in one’s mind”⁹⁶⁰, one “fantasises in one’s

⁹⁵⁶ In the LXX.

⁹⁵⁷ Centuries III 87 79r.

⁹⁵⁸ Centuries III 88 79r. Always, in this perspective, Isaac states, in I 30 213: “Watch over a freedom which [comes] before submission! Watch over a consolation which precedes wars! Watch over a knowledge which comes before the encounters with trials!”.

⁹⁵⁹ Centuries III 89 79v. Here Isaac speaks of being tempted by lasciviousness as a consequence of ‘abandonment’, but the same dynamics are valid for all forms of pride.

⁹⁶⁰ See I 45 322; I 39 300; I 16 133.

intellect”⁹⁶¹, one is carried away by “illusions (ܐܘܠܝܝܘܬܝܢ)”⁹⁶², a term which also means ‘hallucinations’ – and this is the ultimate form that these illusions can attain⁹⁶³, so that, from a lack of attention to one’s ontological status, a gradual loss of contact with reality develops.

This can assume various forms, which Isaac lists in the phenomenology of pride. They have different degrees of gravity but, according to him, they share the same root. One “has no fear of anything which can harm him”⁹⁶⁴; “temptations of the demons beyond the limits” of one’s forces⁹⁶⁵, “the continuous agitation of the heart with a sudden fear which has no reason”⁹⁶⁶, “delusions” of the demons⁹⁶⁷, and apparitions of the demons in a “glorious vision”, in the form of Christ and the angels⁹⁶⁸. At the end of the spectrum, there is “the complete going astray of the intellect, ܐܘܠܝܝܘܬܝܢ ܐܘܠܝܝܘܬܝܢ”⁹⁶⁹ an expression which, again, indicates the loss of mental stability. The term ܐܘܠܝܝܘܬܝܢ, in Syriac, means ‘going astray’, but also ‘deception’ and ‘error’⁹⁷⁰.

This complete going astray is exemplified, in Isaac’s *Centuries*, by the story of Ptolemy the Egyptian⁹⁷¹, who was utterly abandoned into the hands of the

⁹⁶¹ See I 2 16; I 76 522.

⁹⁶² See I 4 51; I 68 474; I 76 522; *Centuries* II 50 46v-47v, 46v. II 14,41 69 (Syr.); 80 (ET), where Isaac evokes the stories of the *Lausiatic History*.

⁹⁶³ See *Centuries* II 50 46v-47v.

⁹⁶⁴ II 17,10 83 (Syr.); 93 (ET). See also I 38 291: “Courage of heart and the fact that a person despises all dangers arise from one of two causes: either from hardness of heart, or from a great faith in God. To the first pride is joined and, to the second, humility of heart”.

⁹⁶⁵ I 39 300.

⁹⁶⁶ I 39 301.

⁹⁶⁷ I 39 300.

⁹⁶⁸ See *Centuries* II 50 46v-47v. In this Century, Isaac mentions an elder who refused to see “an angel” and “Christ” in a vision. This attitude, which is inspired by two *apophthegms*, contrasts with that of the ascetics of the *Lausiatic History*, who considered themselves worthy of visions. For the *apophthegms*, see Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 624 (Syr.); I 823 (ET) (no. 28 [648]); II 626 (Syr.); I 824-825 (ET) (no. 36 [656]).

⁹⁶⁹ I 39 300.

⁹⁷⁰ Isaac uses this word to describe the action of the demons on the person: see *Centuries* II 50 46v-47v, 46v and *Centuries* IV 26 86v. Cf. *Lausiatic History*: Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 165 (Syr.); I 196 (ET) (Valens).

⁹⁷¹ The story is inspired by the *Lausiatic History*. In Palladius’ work, Ptolemy is one of the ascetics who fell into pride. Isaac however, although calling his character ‘Ptolemy’, was not inspired by

demons due to his pride. The story, inspired by the *Lausiac History*, reads as follows:

If the solitary is raised to the throne of Divinity through revelations, if he despises the psalms, he will be delivered into the hands of the demons. The boundary of pride (ܩܕܝܫܝܘܬܝܗ) begins from here in a human being, when he thinks high things of himself. “Your rank surpasses now [that of] those who make use of the psalms” – thus Satan spoke to Ptolemy the Egyptian, when he appeared to him in that impure revelation [which] Palladius describes in the *Book of Paradise* – “Do not be concerned about the office of the psalms [Satan said], and do not torment your body through bodily labours, but labour only in the labours of the soul, and gaze continually at me in your mind, and I will show you my glory”. And in this way, he was mocked by the demons⁹⁷² and abandoned (ܩܕܝܫܝܘܬܝܗ) by God, so that [the demons] were even lifting him up and dashing him against the ground when he was abandoned (ܩܕܝܫܝܘܬܝܗ) to their hands⁹⁷³.

This being “lifted up” and “dashed against the ground” by external forces which dominate the subject is merely an extreme expression of one’s forgetfulness of one’s creatural state. Only “with difficulty”, Ptolemy “regained his mind (lit.: he came back to his intellect)”⁹⁷⁴.

The ‘rule’ and ‘law’ that Ptolemy abandoned, in this perspective, play the role of every limitation in Isaac’s thought. Delimiting the space, they limit one’s desire for immediate freedom, joy, and knowledge, forcing one to adhere to “the boundary of the creatures”. If this is a source of suffering, this also makes it possible for the creature to abide in a ‘space of his/her own’, creatural. This creatural space can then have an ‘above’ – God –, and a ‘below’ – the demonic universe which no longer invades the space of the subject. This can be discovered, however, only if these limitations are ‘borne’.

Palladius’ Ptolemy, but takes elements and entire passages from the story of Eucarpus (also found in the *Lausiac History*; see Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, I 403-406 (ET); Draguet, *Les formes syriaques*, CSCO 398, 368-372; CSCO 399, 239-241.

⁹⁷² The idea of being “mocked by the demons” is found in the *Lausiac History*: see Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, II 164 (Syr.); I 195 (ET) (Valens); I 406; Draguet, *Les formes syriaques*, CSCO 398, 372 (Syr.); 399, 241 (FT) (Eucarpus).

⁹⁷³ Centuries III 86 78v-79r.

⁹⁷⁴ Centuries III 86 78v-79r, 79r.

V.3.4. 'BEARING SUFFERING', 'BEARING WEAKNESS'

If it is possible to pass through suffering without being submerged by its weight, and to encounter oneself in suffering, remaining whole, even when its violent pressure attempts to pull one away from contact with oneself, this is related to discovering *a specific attitude* within it. It is the discovery of this attitude which opposes the passional flight into pride, which dis-connects one from oneself, and from all alterity. In this study, this attitude is referred to by the phrase 'bearing suffering', an expression that Isaac himself uses, although his thinking on this subject should not be confined to occurrences of this phrase. This attitude refers to 'how' the creature passes through suffering, and it is the pre-condition of the process of 'knowledge' of one's 'weakness'⁹⁷⁵.

The answer to the question which emerged in Chapter III – How can suffering be bearable? – can emerge only within the quest for this attitude, and the difference between 'humiliation' as annihilation, and 'humiliation' as 'being made humble' is also rooted in its discovery. The quest for this attitude constitutes the core of 'practice', and how much the subject *is structured*, in his/her relationship with suffering, is related to becoming capable of it. Never found once and for all, one should seek this attitude again and again.

The vocabulary that Isaac uses when dealing with this issue is very rich. He employs **ܣܝܒܪܐ** (*saibar*), 'to endure'⁹⁷⁶, a verb which points to an element of

⁹⁷⁵ Concerning the importance of this 'how', and the possibility of experiencing the same event in different ways, see e.g. I 5 77: "If you despise yourself/your soul to be honoured, the Lord will act cunningly with you; but if you despise yourself/your soul because of truth, he will command to [his] creatures to praise you, and they will open before you the glory of the Creator, who from eternity speaks through them".

⁹⁷⁶ See e.g. I 4 41; 43; I 5 63; 75; 76 (**ܣܝܒܪܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ**); I 48 340; I 59 419; I 61 429; Centuries II 81 55r-55v, 55v; Centuries IV 57, 95r-95v, 95v; III 3,25 15 (Syr.); 27 (IT); III 12,34 101 (Syr.); 139-140 (IT).

resistance; *ܠܡܨܝܢ* (*hamsen*), ‘to endure, hold fast, persevere’⁹⁷⁷; ⁹⁷⁸ *ܠܡܨܝܢ* and ⁹⁷⁹ *ܠܡܨܝܢ* both of which verbs mean ‘to bear’, the first with a nuance indicating passivity (it can also mean ‘to suffer’ something), and the second expressing the idea of ‘bearing a burden’ (*ܠܡܨܝܢ* in Syriac means ‘burden’). Another term that Isaac uses is *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, related to *ܠܡܨܝܢܐ*, which means ‘endurance, patient endurance, patience, perseverance’⁹⁸⁰. Rarely, he also employs *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, ‘longsuffering’⁹⁸¹, *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, ‘[capacity of] bearing’⁹⁸², and *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, ‘endurance, perseverance’⁹⁸³. Important, although rare, is also the verb *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, ‘to remain, to abide’⁹⁸⁴, and two further words – *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, ‘expectation’, and *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, ‘hope’⁹⁸⁵ – are also frequently used in this context. Given Isaac’s very free use of vocabulary, all of these words should be contextualized, in order to understand their meaning. Often, for instance, Isaac speaks of endurance and uses *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*, but the context will reveal that he is discussing a far deeper attitude than that of mere resistance⁹⁸⁶. The Biblical and patristic (especially monastic) concept of *ὑπομονή* should be kept in mind, when examining this issue in Isaac: *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ* and *ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ* are the terms which in the Peshitta NT translate *ὑπομένω* and *ὑπομονή* and, as in the Biblical reading of *ὑπομονή*, also for

⁹⁷⁷ See e.g. I 4 57; I 30 214; I 61 428; I 62 436; II 341 134 (Syr.); 147 (ET); II 19,6 93 (Syr.); 104 (ET); III 12,33 100 (Syr.); 139 (IT).

⁹⁷⁸ See e.g. I 1 3 (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*); Centuries I 77 30v-31r, 31r (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*); II 10,41 42 (Syr.); 52 (ET) (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*); II 19,10 94 (Syr.); 105 (ET); II 34,1 134 (Syr.); 147 (ET); III 12,35 101 (Syr.); 140 (IT).

⁹⁷⁹ See e.g. I 53 387; I 61 427; III 12,26 98 (Syr.); 137 (IT).

⁹⁸⁰ See e.g. I 5 75; I 39 297; 301; 303; I 46 332; I 59 419; I 62 431; 436; II 34,1 134 (Syr.); 147 (ET); III 12,27 99 (Syr.); 138 (IT).

⁹⁸¹ See I 24 182.

⁹⁸² See I 50 344.

⁹⁸³ See I 39 297; I 65 451; I 77 535.

⁹⁸⁴ I 5 75; I 41 313.

⁹⁸⁵ See I 24 181-182.

⁹⁸⁶ See e.g. I 5 75: “The strong endurance (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*) of voluntary injustice (or: oppression) purifies the heart; patient endurance (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*) of injustice comes from despising the world, and that a human being might abide (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*) under (lit.: in) calumny without sadness [is] because [his] heart has begun to see the truth. [...] It is impossible to endure (*ܠܡܨܝܢܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*) calumny and injustice with a joyful will unless [for] those who died completely to the world in their thoughts”.

Isaac, ‘patient endurance’ is strongly related to hope⁹⁸⁷. ‘Bearing suffering’, however, in this study refers to a more complex attitude, which Isaac describes with profound attention to the existential dynamics implied in finding it.

A first move toward developing this attitude is resistance. Although Isaac’s idea of ‘bearing suffering’ does not coincide with the idea of ‘enduring’ suffering, this plays an essential role in his writings. He relates it to ‘zeal’ (i.e. the soul’s irascible faculty, *ܠܘܒܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*)⁹⁸⁸ which, together with ‘desire’ and ‘reason’, is a function of the soul: all three functions collaborate to find a relationship with suffering, within *askesis*. Concerning ‘endurance’, Isaac writes: “When the heart is zealous in spirit, the body does not suffer in afflictions, nor is it afraid of fearful things, but the intellect causes it to stand against all temptations like a diamond in its endurance (*ܠܘܒܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*)”⁹⁸⁹. This capacity for resistance indicates a force of opposition, during the encounter with suffering, for not succumbing to the “afflictions for the sake of truth, which press heavily on the body and the mind”⁹⁹⁰. This implies the effort of ‘not departing’ “from the stadium (lit: place of struggle, *ܠܘܒܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ*)”⁹⁹¹, and the attempt to remain standing, amidst the storm. When one analyses the process of ‘being made humble’ and the central role of ‘weakness’ in Isaac’s thought, his accent on this ‘force’ should also be considered. Without it, this process would be impossible: one would simply be submerged.

⁹⁸⁷ As an introduction to the theme of *ὕπομονή* in Biblical and patristic thought, see M. Spanneut, “Patience”, *DS* 12.1, cols 438-452, 1984; Miquel, *Lexique*, “Hypomonè”, 257-278. On the relationship between Stoicism and Christian thought about patience, see M. Spanneut, “Le Stoïcisme dans l’histoire de la patience chrétienne”, *Mélanges de science religieuse* 39.3 (1982), 101-130. On the connection between patience and hope in Biblical authors, see in particular C. Spicq, “Ὑπομονή, patientia”, *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 19 (1930), 95-106. For an overview on *ὕπομονή* in Greek sources, see A.-J. Festugière, “Ὑπομονή dans la tradition grecque”, *Recherches des Science Religieuse* 21.1 (1931), 477-486.

⁹⁸⁸ For this Platonic concept see section II.2.2.

⁹⁸⁹ I 77 535. See also II 19,6 93 (Syr.); 104 (ET): “When we show endurance in that active part, [...] this contemplative part, which is the excellence of the faculty of reason, brings the mind close to complete mingling with God”.

⁹⁹⁰ Centuries IV 57 95r-95v, 95v.

⁹⁹¹ Centuries IV 23 86r.

Isaac’s idea of ‘bearing suffering’, however, is wider and deeper: it implies placing oneself under the weight of suffering, while perceiving this weight, receiving it on oneself, and sustaining it. Isaac speaks of “receiving on oneself (ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ) the labours of conversion”⁹⁹², of “receiving (ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ) upon your face blows and wounds”⁹⁹³, where the verb used, ܡܥܬܠ, which also means ‘to accept’ and ‘take upon oneself’, points to an attitude of ‘active receptivity’, where all of the oppression of difficulties and suffering is felt: “There is nobody for whom the time of training is not hard, nor anybody for whom the time when they make him drink the medicine of trials is not bitter”⁹⁹⁴. The fact of perceiving the weight of suffering is essential, to find this attitude before it, and also when discussing impassibility and pure prayer, Isaac stresses this perspective, emphasizing that these are not a state of non-receptivity to suffering⁹⁹⁵. Isaac’s ‘endurance’ implies perceiving all of the strength of suffering: it is within this experience that ‘enduring’ becomes ‘bearing’.

Isaac speaks of “a mind which bears *suffering* (ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ)”⁹⁹⁶; of “enduring *the pain* (ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ)” which comes from experiencing calumny and injustice”⁹⁹⁷; and he prays: “Grant us, Lord, a mouth filled with praise for you, and also a mind which bears *suffering* (ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ)”⁹⁹⁸. This ‘bearing’, since it implies the full perception of the weight of what is suffered and of one’s subjection to it, is not a move of power. It is, instead, a perceiving and acknowledging as weight that

⁹⁹² III 12,19 97 (Syr.); 136 (IT).

⁹⁹³ I 9 113. Isaac attributes these words to Theodore of Mopsuestia.

⁹⁹⁴ I 61 329.

⁹⁹⁵ See e.g. Centuries III 41 66v: “Just as impassibility (ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ ܡܥܬܠܗܘܢ) is not this, that the passions are not set in motion within the soul, but that pleasure at the feeling of their enticement does not operate in it, so also pure prayer is not this, that in the intellect [...] the appearances of the objects are not set in motion [...]”.

⁹⁹⁶ Centuries I 77 30v-31r, 31r.

⁹⁹⁷ I 5 76.

⁹⁹⁸ II 10,41 42 (Syr.); 52 (ET).

which oppresses oneself, placing oneself *under it*⁹⁹⁹, to ‘bear’ it. It is positioning oneself in this way that involves suffering, because it implies *accepting to be fully in relationship* with all that is experienced and with oneself, challenged by a negation which reveals oneself as weak. This involves remaining in a relationship with ‘the negative’, and with one’s ‘you’ – whatever it is, and however it is. This implies the possibility of a distancing from this ‘you’, not identifying oneself with it, in order to ‘bear’ it. Only a self who accepts to learn this attitude can encounter suffering and, instead of being submerged, ‘be made humble’.

The “perseverant sitting (سجود راسخ) in the cell”¹⁰⁰⁰, in Isaac, is the symbol of this attitude, and the place where it can be learnt¹⁰⁰¹. Dwelling within stillness is also the symbol of this ‘bearing’, which Isaac describes as a ‘remaining’, an ‘abiding’, a patient ‘staying there’, in contact with ‘the negative’: “That a person might remain (سجد) under (lit: in) calumny without affliction [is] because [his] heart begins to see the truth”¹⁰⁰², and “the commandment that says ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your heart’, more than the whole world, [of human] nature, and [of all] that belongs to it, is accomplished when you abide (سجد) there”¹⁰⁰³, in stillness.

In this symbolic and real place, all can emerge. By placing oneself *under* the burden, however, receptive and firm, one can discover that one can accept its presence, especially that of ‘the negative’ which is one’s own, without being destroyed. This is what Isaac describes in two *Centuries*:

[The human being] who does not receive on himself (سجد على نفسه), rejoicing in them, heaviness, sloth, and listlessness in the office, in order to bear their difficulties

⁹⁹⁹ The literal meaning of the Greek word ὑπομονή, to ‘remain under’, can be evoked here. Also, Isaac’s words quoted above, about placing oneself ‘under’ the ‘rule’ and ‘law’ to avoid pride, should be kept in mind.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Centuries IV 23 85v.

¹⁰⁰¹ On the cell, see Chapter III, footnote 358: this is a central theme for the whole monastic tradition.

¹⁰⁰² I 5 75.

¹⁰⁰³ I 41 313.

(صفتها لرحم) with gladness, and suffocation and darkness (سوء), and the rest of the griefs of the cell *as the perfect practice of God* (كمالها كمالها), but desires complete deliverance from them, although he does not want [it], he is handed over to the spirit of fornication [...] ¹⁰⁰⁴.

The human being naturally flees, in fact, when he/she encounters suffering – into the passions, but especially into a desire for light, ‘luminosity’, and ‘cleanness of mind’ which, as seen above, tends to bypass one’s real condition. Struggling not to follow this desire, and remaining in contact with oneself as subject to suffering, means abiding in one’s real condition. This is vital, even in darkness. It implies ‘descending’ into the place of the suffering self and, in this sense, positioning oneself in a place ‘below’ it, lower than it, in order to ‘bear’ it ¹⁰⁰⁵. This means not

¹⁰⁰⁴ Centuries IV 22 85r-85v.

¹⁰⁰⁵ This attitude of placing oneself ‘below’ what is heavy and undesired, of the ‘negative’, “inhabiting” this condition, is extremely modern. As a *method*, in fact, this can have a value that also extends beyond both Isaac’s monastic context and even a faith perspective, when the subject is forced to encounter what, of oneself, is difficult, incomprehensible, and undesirable. Chapter VI will demonstrate how Isaac employs the same method also when the doubt concerning faith and the condition of extreme suffering that he calls ‘darkness’ emerge. In her book *Simbolo, affetto e oltre...*, M. Maddalena Pessina describes an attitude that appears to exhibit similarities with the one that Isaac outlines. The context, here, is the author’s reading of those, which she identifies as essential elements of Jung’s approach to the psychoanalytic process of therapy, that she examines with an original interpretative perspective. “This process is nothing other, for Jung, than the dialectic transformative encounter of the consciousness with the unconscious” (personal communication). By describing the psychodynamic of this encounter, Pessina identifies the making of the possibility, for consciousness, to “‘inhabit’ the depression” (p. 28) – that depression produced by the therapeutic process and therefore functional to said process –, understood, with Jung, as *regressio*, descent, *descensus*, up to the depth of the unconscious (cf. p. 26-33 and personal communication), in “that Void that we call unconscious (Jung)” (p. 50). There, Pessina adds, consciousness “takes on, in letting himself be permeated by it, its secret and meaning” (p. 28). How does this occur? “It is from this remaining, resisting, from this inhabiting that ‘void of consciousness that we call unconscious’, that a new, unprecedented renaming [of the suffering that previously tormented consciousness] cannot fail to emerge. This is the meaning, new and distinctive of that *hic et nunc*, that unravels, by re-activating it, the process” (personal communication). In her book, the author describes this as “the psychodynamic of the making of the ‘symbol’”, understood according to Jung, but also in the original sense that she outlines throughout the text, and especially in the ‘First Part’. This process, that implies that there is no anticipation of that which will unfold, be experienced, and therefore make *healing* possible, finds its foundation only and especially in that naked “*inhabiting*”. The analytic relationship, according to the author, is the place in which this process can occur, where analyst (the “guarantor” of the process, cf. p. 32) and patient can “inhabit”, together, “that void of world” in which “one does not look at the after, but at the origin of the process” (p. 38). “One adheres to that void through the (ethical) abstaining from filling it with something: neither I, nor matter, nor only unconscious, nor nothing; the destiny (the after) of the process has to remain unattainable, because the making of the work has to remain open...” (p. 38). Besides the interesting usage of the phrase “void of world”, which recalls a phrase of Isaac (in I 1 2, Isaac affirms that virtue is “being empty of the world” – another context, certainly, but still noteworthy), these words also describe a dynamic that can be brought closer to that which Isaac outlines. This, as Chapter VI will demonstrate, implies a mysterious germination of an “ineffable transformation” (cf. II 23,1-2 108 [Syr.]; 120 [ET]) only *from* one’s ‘bearing’ the weight of ‘the negative’, *without anticipating this*

cutting off the relationship with the suffering self, even when this self is unwanted, as in the case of the passional movements. It means inhabiting the place of suffering – as in the case of fasting, when one inhabits the ‘place of hunger’. ‘Remaining in contact’ with the suffering self in this way, is the “perfect practice of God”.

Believe me, my brothers, listlessness, dejection, the heaviness of the limbs, the tumult and confusion of the mind, and the other sad things which are allowed (ܡܨܘܒܝܢ) [to occur] to ascetics while they sit (lit: sitting, ܟܘܝܢܝܢ) in stillness, are *the perfect practice of God* (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܡܨܘܒܝܢ ܟܘܝܢܝܢ). Do not think that luminosity in the office, cleanliness of mind, delight and exultation of heart, the consolation of sweet tears, and limpid converse with God alone are divine practice (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܟܘܝܢܝܢ). 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 (ܡܨܘܒܝܢ) 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 (ܡܨܘܒܝܢ), not going out of his cell, also this is reckoned [to be] a pure sacrifice and holy and divine practice (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ) – except for pride (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ) alone. Because he perseveres (ܡܨܘܒܝܢ) in the struggle of the Lord in all things, [those] of the right and of the left [...] ¹⁰⁰⁶.

Only pride bars one’s entrance into this attitude, preventing one from contact with oneself, through a quest for light that has an illusory nature. All the rest, even blasphemy and vainglory, when ‘borne’ in this manner, becomes the way. For this reason:

If there is [someone] who reckons [as] outside of the path and an error (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ) listlessness, darkness (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ), and the confusion of the mind, which are joined together with a limpid practice (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ) by the spiritual Providence, and teaches and announces to you a single order full of joy without interruption, know that he leads you out of the path of God, and [that] he wants to hand you over to the error (ܟܘܝܢܝܢܝܢ) of the demons ¹⁰⁰⁷.

Positioning oneself in this way, maintaining one’s centeredness amidst what “presses with violence upon” oneself while remaining perceptive, means remaining

transformation, which is a matter of Grace alone. Pessina, speaking of one’s “remaining, resisting in that void of world” concludes with words that evoke the mystery that inhabits us and our responsibility as human beings: “The origin is the one which should be looked at and enjoyed in its silence, because there is kept that unknowable *res* that for us remains unknowable, but of which we are anyway responsible” (p. 38). See M. M. Pessina, *Simbolo, affetto e oltre...*, Milan, 2004.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Centuries IV 23 85v-86r.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Centuries IV 26 86v.

at the centre of a contrast, between opposing forces. This implies great suffering and inner labour, and all the presence to oneself distinctive of ‘practice’. It is to this attitude that Isaac refers in his *Centuries*, when he states that “[knowledge] dwells of its own [volition] in the movements of those who became crucified (ܩܪܒܘܢ) in their life (cf. Gal 6:14) and who inhaled (cf. Psalm 119:131) life¹⁰⁰⁸ from within death (ܩܪܒܘܢ ܕܡܝܬܐ)”¹⁰⁰⁹. ‘Life’, here, is not a mere event which follows the cross and death, but something to which one tends while being *within* (ܕܡܝܬܐ) the cross and death, while ‘remaining’ in crucifixion. Inhaling life from this place indicates a relationship to ‘life’ which does not remove the cross and death but, while inhabiting them, maintains a relationship with ‘life’, and therefore with God.

Prayer, like a thread, is what unites the creature to life and the ‘horizon of meaning’, in “expectation” and “hope”, within this ‘work’: “Expectation (ܩܘܘܒܐ) possesses patience (ܩܘܘܒܐ ܕܩܘܘܒܐ), and stimulates [the human being] to linger in prayer. Expectation relieves the limbs of the weight of fatigue. It also knows how to bring rest to the heart in its afflictions. [...] Remember the ploughman who sows in hope (ܩܘܘܒܐ)”¹⁰¹⁰. Prayer, in this waiting, can become an experiencing of “evils [together] with God”¹⁰¹¹, attentive and perceptive, amidst conflict.

If God’s ‘horizon of meaning’ helps the creature to remain in the cross and death while still open to ‘life’, it is *the creature’s labour* to maintain a dialogue with it, despite the pressure of ‘the negative’:

[...] we are given life, and we pray; we are wounded, and we pray; we are victorious, and we pray; we roll about in defeat, [and] we pray; we wallow in the blood of our wounds, and we pray; we are fallen, and we pray; [...] we are darkened

¹⁰⁰⁸ Or: salvation.

¹⁰⁰⁹ *Centuries* I 26 24r-24v. The first part of the *Century* reads as follows: “Those who snatch knowledge with violence [are] those who assail it without practice (ܩܘܘܒܐ ܕܩܘܘܒܐ), but this means that, instead of the truth, they snatch an appearance”.

¹⁰¹⁰ I 24 181-182. One should not confuse this hope with the reality of the present, which is marked by the encounter with ‘the negative’: “He should await from afar [joy and the excellence of mind], not [considering] them [to be] close at hand”, Isaac states in II 34,3 136 (Syr.); 147 (ET).

¹⁰¹¹ III 12,27 99 (Syr.); 138 (ET).

(ساجد), and we pray. [...] If we wander (لما) [in the mind], fall, or [suffer] from infirmities, let us entrust everything to God in prayer [...] ¹⁰¹².

Within this tenacious, suffering prayer, the process of ‘being made humble’ occurs. “Falsities and beauties” of the mind come to light ¹⁰¹³, but one places oneself ‘under’ them, to ‘bear’ them.

It is within this relational ‘bearing’, that “the state of deficiency (لما) of [one’s] nature” can also “make known [that one] is in need of the assistance of another” ¹⁰¹⁴, opening one up to prayer. “When [a person] realizes that he is in need of divine aid”, after having perceived that he is a creature, “he multiplies [his] prayer[s], and, when he has multiplied [his] entreaties, [his] heart is made humble (لما)” ¹⁰¹⁵. ‘Weakness’, then, when ‘borne’, allows one to acknowledge God as other, because this ‘bearing’ allows one first to acknowledge oneself as a human being, as in the case of the martyr. ‘Bearing weakness’, in this perspective, does what pride hinders, allowing one to ‘say yes’ to one’s ‘being made humble’, and using this experience to learn to dwell in one’s creatural space. This opens one up to acknowledging the ‘otherness’ of God.

While ‘being made humble’ in this way, ‘bearing’ one’s own ‘earthiness’, the creature can discover that he/she can “show to our Lord [his] weakness

¹⁰¹² Centuries IV 36 89r-89v. In this perspective, ‘pure prayer’ is an act of ‘bearing’; see e.g. Centuries III 42 66v: “Pure prayer is when the mind does not wander in those [things] which the demons set in motion in the thought, or that [human] nature sets in motion from memory or from a movement of the temperament’. Finding this way of ‘bearing’ in prayer is, in its accomplished form, the summit of the level ‘of the soul’, i.e. of ‘practice’; see e.g. Century III 46 67r-67v, 67r: “[...] when [the mind stands] in the purity of prayer, it stands, in its practice, in the accomplished order of the soul”.

¹⁰¹³ See Centuries IV 62 96r-96v: “When you wish to know the measure of your soul, [...] test your soul in prayer, for this is the mirror of the soul. [...] There, falsities or beauties of the mind are revealed”.

¹⁰¹⁴ I 8 109.

¹⁰¹⁵ I 8 105.

(ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ)”¹⁰¹⁶. Becoming able to look at oneself with honesty and frankness, ‘bearing’ this sight, allows one to stand with honesty and frankness before God: within this ‘bearing’, one’s prayer can become naked. Isaac expresses this idea by using the concept of *parrhesia*, ‘confidence’ and ‘freedom of speech’¹⁰¹⁷: “Endure contempt through being made humble (ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ), with a virtuous mind, for the sake of [obtaining] *parrhesia* of the heart toward God; for every harsh word that a human being endures (ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ) with discernment, [...] he receives on his head a crown of thorns because of Christ. [...] He also will be crowned, in a time he does not know”¹⁰¹⁸. “Great is the power of the prayer of *parrhesia*”, which is “gazing towards [God] without a veil”. “For this reason God allows his saints to be put to the test with every affliction, on the path toward him”¹⁰¹⁹. ‘Bearing’ is the condition of a possibility of relationship.

Inhabiting the place of conflict in this way, in relationship with one’s suffering self and with what is ‘above’, is, for Isaac, the distinctive place of the creature in this cosmos, and all the creature can ‘do’, to discover the knowledge of God. It is the heart of ‘practice’. All that occurs beyond this boundary is a mystery and transcends the will.

Within the ‘work’ of ‘bearing’, through elaborating a relationship with ‘weakness’, the ‘knowledge’ of it takes the shape of a gradual ‘taking it on’. This ‘taking on’ of ‘weakness’ by inhabiting it, reverses the flight into passionality, which removes suffering and death under pressure of fear, because the human learns actively to accept being in contact both with his/her original frailty (the suffering

¹⁰¹⁶ I 65 448-449: “Beware of presumption (ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ) at the time of good changes. With an assiduous prayer, show to our Lord your weakness (ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ) and your ignorance against its subtlety, lest you be allowed (ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ) to be tempted through hateful things”.

¹⁰¹⁷ The Syriac term ܐܘܨܬܐܘܪܐ transliterates the Greek παρρησία. For this concept in the Bible and Greek patristics, see P. Miquel, “Parrhèsia”, *DS* 12.1, 1984, cols. 260-267.

¹⁰¹⁸ I 4 41.

¹⁰¹⁹ I 61 427.

and mortal body) and with the soul's vulnerability which emerges through the passions. A continual exercise of this attitude, for Isaac, leads to 'integrity', to be conceived as the full expression of the capacity for a relationship with 'the negative', made possible by 'bearing': "Love is the offspring of knowledge; knowledge is the offspring of the health of soul (ܠܘܘܐ ܕܠܚܝܬܐ); the health of soul is a strength which is born from prolonged patience (ܠܘܘܐ ܕܠܚܝܬܐ)"¹⁰²⁰. A 'weakness' which is 'borne' in this way becomes a threshold, and its experience, transformative.

V.4. HUMILITY

Humility¹⁰²¹, in Isaac, emerges as a gift from a condition of 'weakness' which has been 'taken on', through the process outlined above. While 'humiliation/being made humble' refers to the process, 'humility' refers to what is born of it. It comes from God, and can never be produced by human will. However, at the same time, it is intimately one's own, because it is rooted in one's experience of oneself which is forged through the process. God's gift, in Isaac, can be bestowed only on something which is intimately one's own¹⁰²². In this sense, "mercy [follows] [one's] becoming humble (ܠܘܘܐ)"¹⁰²³.

In this light, humility emerges from Isaac's writings as the accomplished form of 'integrity', which arises from one's having developed a relationship with

¹⁰²⁰ I 62 431.

¹⁰²¹ On this theme, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 111-128; Chialà, *Dall'asceti*, 236-243; G. Mansour, "Humility according to St. Isaac of Nineveh", *Diakonia* 28 (1995), 181-186; Hagman, *The Asceticism*, 189-196; Bettiolo, "Avec la charité", 323-345, 331-336.

¹⁰²² In this sense, in Centuries II 16 37r, Isaac affirms that "the confession of [one's] weakness (or: thanksgiving at his weakness)" is the "refuge" of one's faith, as if faith "in the time of temptations and sadness" could emerge only from a 'weakness' which has been 'taken on'.

¹⁰²³ I 77 528: "Take refuge in weakness and simplicity, so that you may live well before God and be without care. For just as shadows follow bodies, so also mercy [follows] [one's] becoming humble (ܠܘܘܐ)".

‘the negative’ through the ‘work’ of ‘bearing’. *This* humility is the summit of ‘practice’, understood as an initiatory process of relationship with negation, which structures that ‘place of one’s own’ that alone can receive God. “A human being who has reached the knowledge of his weakness (ܡܕܝܠܥܘܒܐ ܕܗܘܐ) has reached the extremity of humility (ܕܡܕܝܠܥܘܒܐ ܕܗܘܐ)”¹⁰²⁴.

Louf and Chialà have already detected a strong connection between ‘knowledge of weakness’ and humility¹⁰²⁵, and Chialà spoke of humility in Isaac as “a path of truth, of descent in our truth of creature”¹⁰²⁶. In light of the process of ‘bearing’, which has been outlined above, the connection between ‘weakness’ and humility becomes transparent and the existential dynamics which lie at its root are revealed. Humility appears from Isaac’s writings as the accomplished capacity of ‘bearing the negative’ and, in this sense, as both a complete relational capacity, and wholeness within negation. “When humility (ܕܡܕܝܠܥܘܒܐ) 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”¹⁰²⁷. When Isaac describes humility as that which tames wild animals and demons¹⁰²⁸, this can occur because the creature has first ‘tamed’ his/her own ‘negative’, becoming “acquainted” with his/her ‘weakness’¹⁰²⁹ through being in relationship with his/her suffering self. 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 their wickedness and bitterness, and [with] all the pride of their minds, when they come to the humble person, they become

¹⁰²⁴ I 45 321.

¹⁰²⁵ See section V.1., p. 187.

¹⁰²⁶ Cf. Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 236-237. The author also highlights the Christological foundation of humility in Isaac, which emerges particularly in I 82.

¹⁰²⁷ I 34 224.

¹⁰²⁸ On this aspect, see Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 241-242.

¹⁰²⁹ See I 8 108 (ܡܕܝܠܥܘܒܐ ܕܗܘܐ).

like dust. All their harshness grows weak, their stratagems are dissolved, and their contrivances come to an end¹⁰³⁰.

If the passional defences indicate a non-relational attitude – especially pride, which pulls one utterly away from contact with oneself –, humility indicates a profound capacity for a relationship with oneself:

Easiness to anger comes from pride. Take notice of this word: every time that, within yourself, you possess humble (مستحق) thoughts, not even a [single] trace of anger could approach you. For humility knows to remain without anger even in infirmities, in poverty, and [in] vexations which [come] from neighbours¹⁰³¹.

Humility does not flee the suffering self. For this reason, it does not defensively react with anger, when this self is exposed to negation. It remains whole within it.

The ‘capacity for relationship’ distinctive of humility, in light of this Chapter, means that humility is able to ‘bear’ the contact with the suffering self, whatever this may be and however it may occur. This causes fear to recede, because one remounts, by ‘taking’ them ‘on’, to the places which fear refuses: the vulnerability of the body, and that of the soul. This indicates that the original problem of existence, which is rooted in the fear of one’s creatural ‘weakness’, has been faced, dealt with, and inhabited. Not only does the ferocity of animals recede before the humble person, but his/her own internal ferocity, which wounds the soul through fear and the passions, also recedes. This opens oneself to ‘theoria’.

The capacity for ‘seeing’ the real in ‘theoria’ emerged in Chapter IV as a capacity to have a relationship with the real, if it wishes to appear. This, in Isaac,

¹⁰³⁰ I 82 577-578. 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 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 (أدنى) every creature’”: Budge, *The Book of Paradise*, Saying 477, I 570 (Syr.); II 751 (ET).

¹⁰³¹ III 4,29 25-26 (Syr.); 41-42 (IT).

comes to light the more one finds humility, the summit of ‘practice’. Humility is a threshold on what lies beyond it: a transition between the creatural and the realm of God, and between ‘practice’ and ‘theoria’. If, in Isaac’s thought, the capacity for a relationship with oneself and the capacity for a relationship with the real appear to be intimately related, as emerges from Chapter IV, this occurs in the experience of humility.

In *this* humility, then, the relational openness distinctive of ‘theoria’, the capacity for being in a relationship with ‘the negative’ outside oneself (animals, evil human beings, and demons), and the capacity for being in a relationship with ‘the negative’ inside oneself emerge as profoundly interconnected.

As a new relational capacity, humility in Isaac takes the shape of *the only, real defence*, before negation and suffering:

A righteous person who is not persuaded¹⁰³² of his weakness (ܡܠܚܘܬܐ ܕܚܘܒܐ), his affairs are subject to [lit: in] fear (ܡܘܦܬܐ), he is not far from falling, and the destroying lion (cf. 1Pt 5:8), the demon of pride (ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ), is not distant from him. Because he lacks knowledge of his weakness, he lacks humility (ܡܠܚܘܬܐ); because he lacks humility, he lacks perfection, because he lacks perfection, he is still afraid. When [this] is [the case], there is still space for the Enemy against him, because his city is not strengthened by bars of iron and doorposts of brass (cf. Ps 107:16)¹⁰³³.

According to Isaac, one does not remain naked amidst negation and suffering, once fear and the passional defences have been dismantled, but one is covered and protected by the *real defence* of humility, which is discovered at the end of the process of ‘being made humble’: it is “bars of iron and doorposts of brass”. This interpretation of humility as a defence and protection also recurs elsewhere in Isaac’s writings: “Humility protects the practice [of] the great”¹⁰³⁴, it is one’s

¹⁰³² Or ‘acquainted with’.

¹⁰³³ I 8 108.

¹⁰³⁴ I 58 409.

“armour”, “in the difficult battles of the demons”¹⁰³⁵, and when one “enters” “the city of humility”¹⁰³⁶, one is no longer persecuted “by passions” and “accidents”¹⁰³⁷. “You will be gathered within the fortification of divine mercy, because of the honour of the humility which has been found by you”¹⁰³⁸. The process of relationship with ‘weakness’, in fact, structures an internal place which is capable of remaining naked without being naked, and whole while shattering.

Humility also emerges from Isaac’s descriptions as a profound capacity for dwelling within oneself. Also, in this light, it emerges as the accomplished expression of ‘integrity’. This comes to light the more one adheres to oneself, through the process of ‘being made humble’ that is undergone while ‘bearing’.

Isaac often notes that the experience of ‘being made humble’ through perception of ‘weakness’ humbles the heart, which interrupts its tendency to ‘wander about’. It is this experience that marks the passage into humility: “The heart does not cease from wandering (ܠܡܢܐ) until it is made humble (ܘܢܚܠܐ). Humility gives collectedness to the heart (ܠܡܨܘܒܐ)”¹⁰³⁹. The encounter with suffering concentrates the subject within him/herself, shifting his/her attention from the external to the self. By ‘becoming aware’ of one’s “stains”, for instance, one “becomes still from great wandering (ܠܡܢܐ)”¹⁰⁴⁰. If ‘wandering’ means fixing one’s attention on the outside, searching for possibilities, solutions, and reasons, when one knows oneself to be ‘weak’, all this is stilled, and one returns to oneself.

¹⁰³⁵ See II 5,26 13-14 (Syr.); 17-18 (ET): “[...] And to those who are engaged in difficult battles with the demons, whether openly or in secret, send succour, Lord, and overshadow them with the cloud of your Grace [...], and clothe them in the armour of humility [...]”.

¹⁰³⁶ I 33 220.

¹⁰³⁷ See I 34 224.

¹⁰³⁸ I 58 413.

¹⁰³⁹ I 8 105.

¹⁰⁴⁰ See II 5,4 6 (Syr.); 7 (ET).

The mind, through this experience, remains silent, and adheres to its real state, which is creatural in nature. One's scattered impulses become unified, in a 'descent' toward oneself, which leads to the discovery of a deep belonging to oneself. Every experience of this kind is a small, partial experience of humility, but entering "the abode of humility"¹⁰⁴¹ means inhabiting this condition at a deeper level, without the 'affliction' which 'being made humble' still implies. This, again, indicates a capacity for wholeness, within suffering, which marks one's access to the 'place of one's own' which alone can receive God's gift. Thus, Isaac speaks of humility as "the end of the collectedness of the intellect (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܒܘܠܐ)"¹⁰⁴². "Just as presumption (ܠܗܘܘܠܐܘܬܐ) scatters the soul through imaginations of wandering (ܠܡܗܘܠܐ), [...] so that it flies in the cloud of its thoughts to go around in all creation, so humility collects (ܠܗܘܠܐܘܬܐ) its being in a stillness of thoughts, and a contraction (ܠܗܘܠܐܘܬܐ) of the soul within itself [occurs]"¹⁰⁴³. Isaac believes, then, that the capacity for being in a relationship with 'otherness' is inextricably linked to 'dwelling within'.

As the experience of being collected within oneself by adhering to oneself, Isaac describes humility as the condition of 'being dead to the world'¹⁰⁴⁴: "What is perfection? The depth of humility (ܠܗܘܠܐܘܬܐ ܠܒܘܠܐ), which is the abandonment of everything visible and invisible. [...] What is humility? A double voluntary death to all things. [...]"¹⁰⁴⁵. This 'dying' implies a 'letting go', of everything, but this is discovered only by a creature who has learnt to be in relationship with what it 'lets

¹⁰⁴¹ I 33 221.

¹⁰⁴² Centuries II 34 41r.

¹⁰⁴³ I 74 514.

¹⁰⁴⁴ See e.g. II 20,21 100 (Syr.); 112 (ET).

¹⁰⁴⁵ I 74 507. See also I 62 431-432: "From what can it be perceived that [one] has reached humility? From the fact that it is abominable for him to please this world through his dealing [with it] or through his word, and the glory of this world is odious in his eyes".

go’, both within and without. *This* ‘dying’ becomes, then, a passage into ‘mysteries’: “The mysteries are revealed to the humble (Sir. 3:21)”¹⁰⁴⁶.

It is only at this point that something, coming from beyond, can occur. “*After* a human being has been made humble (صاحباً)” – that is to say, after a human being, while ‘bearing’, *has accepted being made humble* –, “mercy (رحمة) immediately surrounds and embraces him”¹⁰⁴⁷. *Only after*. The phenomenology of being made humble, outlined above, showed that, prior to the disclosure of ‘mercy’, a ‘knowledge’ of ‘weakness’ occurred: the creature ‘took on’ his/her condition of lack and poverty, without ‘wandering’ any longer in search of something which might fill this lack and remove this poverty. Only after this ‘taking on’, by inhabiting a void which is part of oneself, does the alterity of Grace show itself. *Before*, as Isaac writes, “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 Grace draw near to him/her¹⁰⁴⁸.

Isaac believes that this ‘taking on’ is a passage from a condition of servitude, which is full of fear, to a condition of trust. Humility is this passage *itself*: “Without humility (تواضعاً), a person’s practice cannot be sealed; upon the document of his freedom, the seal of the Spirit has not yet been placed: he is still a servant, and his practice cannot be raised above [lit: from] fear (خوفاً)”¹⁰⁴⁹.

Only a ‘weakness’ ‘taken on’ mysteriously becomes ‘the dwelling place’ of God’s Grace. “You clothed me with a weak nature (ضعفاً) which is always a witness of your Grace. Through our weak realities, your wisdom manifests your

¹⁰⁴⁶ I 4 52; I 12 122; I 82 579.

¹⁰⁴⁷ I 8 105.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Cf. Centuries III 18 62v.

¹⁰⁴⁹ I 8 108.

love for us”¹⁰⁵⁰. Paul’s words in 2Cor 12:8-9 – “[God] said to me, ‘My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (ܠܗܘܐܘܬܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ)”¹⁰⁵¹ – are read, in Isaac, in the light of the process of relationship with ‘weakness’: only the creature who ‘has known’ his/her ܠܗܘܐܘܬܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ (‘weakness’) can encounter God’s ܠܗܘܐܘܬܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ (Power).

In the distance which Grace maintains, there is space for the process of the relationship with oneself to unfold. The phrase “blessed he who *has known* his weakness”, then, means ‘blessed he who has gone through this process’.

V.5. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter explored the central theme of this study: creatural ‘weakness’ (ܠܗܘܐܘܬܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ), its connection with the experience of suffering, and the possibility of developing a relationship with it.

The path that Isaac outlines emerges, from this analysis, as being a close confrontation with ‘the negative’, which lie at the root of the problem of existence: suffering, finitude, and mortality. The entire journey described in this chapter can be synthesised as an attempt to inhabit this problem and descend into the deep place from which it arises, struggling against those forces which attempt to ignore, bypass, or unduly transcend it.

The analysis began with an examination of the meaning of ‘weakness’ for Isaac (section V.1.). Central in his *corpus*, ‘weakness’ refers to the human ontological condition as subject to suffering, death, ‘inclination’, and the passions. These arise from a fear of one’s more original condition of vulnerability: Isaac’s

¹⁰⁵⁰ III 7,38 53 (Syr.); 79 (IT).

¹⁰⁵¹ And: “Gladly, therefore, will I boast in my infirmities, *so that the power of Christ (ܠܗܘܐܘܬܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ) may overshadow (ܠܗܘܐܘܬܐܘܪܐܘܬܐ) me*”.

reflection on this moral aspect of ‘weakness’ should never be considered in isolation, but as evoking the ontological problem which lies at its root. In this sense, ‘weakness’ emerges from Isaac’s texts as the condition of being a human.

This ‘weakness’ can be acknowledged only through contact with suffering, i.e. with limitation and negation, which lie at the heart of the process of *askesis*. Isaac often refers to a fundamental passage of Paul, 2Cor 12:7-10, to describe this experience: just as God gave a ‘thorn’ to Paul, which, ‘buffeting’ him, made him aware of his ‘weakness’, so also every form of suffering leads the creature to perceive his/her creaturalty. As Isaac states with clarity in his Century I 63, through encountering limitation and negation, one is allowed to suffer, in order to discover that one is human. This moment of perception, which is absolutely central in Isaac’s descriptions, inaugurates a process of ‘knowledge’ of one’s ‘weakness’, which is ultimately a process of developing a relationship with oneself as subject to suffering.

Every condition of limitation and negation can lead the creature to encounter his/her humanity: sickness, involuntary afflictions, the labours of the ascetic life, or the encounter with the passions, which in the context of *askesis* are experienced as dialectic elements, just like all the other negative experiences which force the creature to acknowledge his/her condition of being a human. Isaac often refers to all of these experiences and to what they trigger by using the concept of ‘trial’, which is examined in section V.2.

Isaac’s interpretation of the encounter with limitations and negation as a ‘trial’ indicates that he reads this encounter as a transformative event, which leads to something beyond it. It is a challenge and an initiation, and Isaac interprets it as involving not only the creature and his/her suffering, but the future, which is of God. Isaac conceives of this future as a mysterious horizon of consolation and

meaning: its transcendence makes it possible for the present to be meaningful, and to be passed through.

This stress on a future of consolation and meaning allows Isaac to shift the attention of his reader from the negative experience of suffering to the role of the subject within it, something which is also favoured by Isaac's belief that all trials ultimately are sent by God. This allows the creature to focus on his/her personal experience, rather than on external negative events, making it possible for him/her to use trials to undergo a process of growth.

Section V.3. examined the process of developing a relationship with 'weakness'. V.3.1. analysed Isaac's concepts of 'changes' and 'abandonment'. Isaac uses these concepts, building on multiple sources, both Biblical and monastic. He believes that, within the experience of trials, God's Power (the Holy Spirit) effects a 'relational training' of the soul: the creature experiences God's proximity and distancing, which leads to an inner experience of strengthening and enfeeblement, which forms part of the process of 'knowledge' of one's 'weakness'. Isaac calls 'changes' these alternations between the feeling of God's presence and his distance, believing that, in the moment of distancing, powerful contact with one's 'weakness' can emerge. Within this experience of distancing, which Isaac often calls 'abandonment', one experiences one's creaturely self as exposed to suffering, and encounters one's 'weakness'.

'Abandonment', which has different forms and degrees, is ultimately always related to pride or its risk. The encounter with 'weakness' frees the creature from this pride, leading to the discovery of a humility which thus emerges as being utterly related to one's 'knowing' one's 'weakness'. Without the experience of 'abandonment' and of the continuous 'changes' which mark, as Isaac highlights, the life of *every* human being, this 'knowing' cannot take place, and no humility

can be discovered. For this reason, Isaac values the encounter with negation, which causes contact with one's ontological 'weakness'. Isaac conceptualises this as something which 'makes humble', a theme which is examined in section V.3.2.

The term that Isaac often uses when speaking of this experience, *mukākā*, has been traditionally translated as 'humiliation'. This translation, in contemporary culture, risks evoking exclusively the experience of being wounded by injustice and abuse, which is not the only experience that Isaac has in mind. The Syriac term, originally related to the idea of 'being made low', can also be translated with 'being made humble', a phrase which highlights the transformative nature of the experience that Isaac describes. The term 'humiliation', however, cannot simply be dismissed, because it points, even today, to the suffering which lies at the root of one's 'being made humble'. This suffering can also include injustice and abuse, as in the case of what Christ experienced. What marks the difference between 'humiliation' as annihilation and the idea behind Isaac's reflections is how the subject is structured, within the experience of suffering, even when it is unjust. This difference is related to finding a specific attitude within the experience of suffering, which implies remaining whole within it, as in the case of Christ, who passes through suffering without being 'humiliated' in the contemporary sense.

The experience of 'being made humble' can take place in the body and soul. In both cases, a powerful contact with one's ontological 'weakness' occurs. The experience of the body, however, in Isaac is more original. Through bodily *askesis*, an adherence to one's frail, suffering body occurs, and one connects to oneself as weary, needy, hungry, and passible. The fact of bringing suffering upon oneself through ascetic practices, in Isaac, has this value: it connects to the possibility of the original suffering which one experiences as a creature. This, which can occur also through sickness and the experience of weakness of the limbs, is, in Isaac, a

way of inhabiting, in a practical, embodied manner, the place from which the problem of existence arises. Isaac believes that ‘inhabiting’ the body’s ‘weakness’ can quieten the mind, so that the ‘being made humble’ of the body plays a foundational role in unifying the sphere of the ‘mental’. This occurs because, through the force of physical experience, one adheres in an immediate, direct way to one’s creatural self.

The ‘being made humble’ of the mind, in Isaac, usually refers to the experience of being humbled by the sight of one’s real inner condition, which is marked by the passional defences. It is something which is less immediate than the experience of the body and requires the labour of discernment. This ‘seeing oneself’, which is the core of the process that Isaac calls ‘repentance’, is marked by an experience of suffering, which points to the fact that an encounter with one’s real inner condition is occurring. As in the case of the ‘being made humble’ of the body, also through this experience one is re-connected to one’s creatural condition. ‘Repentance’, in this sense, can occur only if one is able to ‘perceive’ one’s real state, which, only then, will emerge as a state of creatural poverty.

The experience of ‘being made humble’ should lead to a condition of unification, through the breaking of one’s passional defences and the adherence to one’s real being. However, Isaac is aware that this is not the only possibility, and that, when encountering suffering, worse passional defences can instead arise, as a reaction to the divisive force of suffering. Suffering bears with it an ambiguity: one can be submerged by suffering; one can experience a pain which is not transformative; one can react with anger; but, above all, when encountering suffering, one can flee to the greatest of all passional defences: pride. This is analysed in section V.3.3.

Isaac conceives of pride as a move rooted in a misunderstanding of one's ontological status. It implies an incapacity for being in contact with one's real condition, which pulls one away from the perception of oneself. This, in turn, pulls one away from an adequate perception of reality and of one's place in the cosmos, leading one to think that one is perfect, and attributing to oneself that which belongs to God alone. In its most extreme form, it can even lead to a loss of mental balance. All this is rooted in a greedy quest for joy, knowledge, and freedom which pretends to access them by bypassing the painful moment of 'practice'. Its 'rules' and 'laws' represent limiting factors that protect the creature, allowing him/her to dwell in his/her real state, which is creatural. Losing contact with these boundaries leads to losing contact with oneself, and also with reality. Instead, by keeping them, one can discover the possibility of dwelling in a creatural space, a space which is only one's own. This allows the human being to be him/herself, and to acknowledge what is 'above', God, and what is 'below', the demonic forces which, through one's inhabiting one's creatural space, no longer invade it.

The possibility of remaining whole within the desegregating experience of suffering is related to developing a specific attitude within it, which is examined in section V.3.4. In this study, this is described as 'bearing suffering', an expression that Isaac also uses. Looking for this attitude is the pre-condition of the process of 'knowledge' of 'weakness', and the capacity for remaining whole within suffering emerges in so far as this attitude is discovered. The difference between 'humiliation' as annihilation and 'humiliation' as the unifying experience of 'being made humble' is also rooted in the discovery of this attitude. Understanding its nature and value implies understanding the whole conception of *askesis* by Isaac.

Although the capacity for resisting the pressure of 'the negative' is essential in developing this attitude, this cannot be reduced to resistance alone, nor to mere

endurance. It implies cultivating, within this endurance, an ‘active receptivity’, in which all of the strength of suffering is felt. While perceiving the pressure of suffering, one places oneself under it, to ‘bear’ it. This implies accepting being fully in relationship with all that is experienced and with one’s suffering self, exposed to it. It is an ‘abiding’, a ‘remaining’ in contact with the suffering self.

This ‘remaining’, which the sitting in the cell symbolises, allows the ‘knowledge’ of ‘weakness’ to develop, a ‘knowledge’ which takes the shape of being in a relationship with one’s ‘weak’ self, whatever form this may take. Everything can emerge, in fact, when one ‘remains’ there, but one struggles to avoid breaking the relationship with the suffering self, even when what emerges is unwanted, as in the case of the passions. ‘Bearing’, instead, the emergence of listlessness, fornication, vainglory, and blasphemy is openly described by Isaac as being “the perfect practice of God”, and Isaac criticises every approach to the spiritual life which pretends to eliminate the experience of ‘the negative’, teaching “a single order full of joy without interruption”. In this sense, ‘bearing’ reverses the refusal of being in contact with oneself, distinctive of pride.

Positioning oneself in this way involves profound suffering, because it means dwelling at the centre of a conflict. However, the creature can remain firm within this conflict, and “inhale life from within death”, maintaining a relationship with the future of consolation and meaning, which is God. Before *this* God, one’s prayer can become frank and honest, being rooted in an acknowledgement of God’s alterity which is founded in a more original acknowledgement of one’s creatural condition.

Within this ‘bearing’, one’s ‘weakness’ is ‘taken on’. This indicates that the flight into passionality has been reversed, through accepting inhabiting those opaque, painful places from which the passions develop. Instead of following fear,

the creature courageously accepts being in contact with the void from which fear arises. There is a creatural courage and strength, here, which allows the human being to 'take on' his/her 'weakness'. This marks one's entrance into that condition of 'integrity' that Isaac calls humility, which is examined in section V.4.

Humility, in Isaac, emerges as a gift from a condition of 'weakness' which has been 'taken on'. Although it is God's gift, it is intimately one's own, and fruit of the process that one has passed through. In this light, humility emerges from Isaac's writings as the accomplished form of 'integrity', which arises from one's having developed a relationship with 'the negative' through the 'work' of 'bearing'. *This* humility is the summit of 'practice', understood as an initiatory process of relationship with negation, which structures that 'place of one's own' which alone can receive God. This place is humility itself.

Humility also emerges as the accomplished capacity of 'bearing the negative'. In this sense, Isaac conceives of it as an accomplished relational capacity: the humble is in a relationship with his/her suffering self and, for this reason, he can tame wild animals and demons. The possibility of discovering the relational openness distinctive of 'theoria', the ability to welcome the revelation of meaning, is rooted in humility's capacity to be in a relationship with all 'the negative', within and without. Humility, in this sense, emerges as the only, real defence before suffering, a defence which, in contrast to the passions, does not flee reality. This implies having had access to a profound experience of collectedness, and being able to dwell within, in one's creatural space, despite the divisive force of suffering.

Only within *this* humility does Grace manifest itself, consoling the creature. Until humility is found, it stands at a distance. This means that Grace, for Isaac, is never a maternal dimension, as it were, to be understood as something which would fill the human void and spare the creature from the difficult relationship with his/her

creatural condition, i.e. with him/herself. It is a dimension, instead, which mysteriously inhabits only the one who inhabits this creatural condition: it does not exempt the subject from the process of taking on his/her limit. Isaac reads 2Cor 12:7-10 in this way.

The miracle can happen – that the ‘Power of God’ removes from the creature even his/her suffering, as in the case of the experience of the martyr described in section V.1. This, however, is never deserved. It is Grace, in fact, and Grace can be acknowledged only by the person who has known his/her ‘weakness’.

CHAPTER VI

EXTREME SUFFERING AND FAITH

This chapter examines Isaac's view of extreme suffering and of how to pass through it. The phrase 'extreme suffering' alludes in this study to a suffering which concerns one's relationship with God, which differs from the creatural suffering that has been described up to now. Within this experience, that Isaac calls 'darkness', the solitude of the creature deepens, and the 'work' of 'bearing' assumes peculiar traits.

The theme of extreme suffering, in Isaac, is intimately related to the theme of faith. Suffering not only challenges the birth of faith, but also awakens it. Extreme suffering is the form of suffering in which one faces a possible loss of faith. Therefore, the role of suffering with respect to faith is essential in Isaac.

In this chapter, a first section examines 'darkness' and its relationship with faith. A second section analyses Isaac's understanding of faith. A third section explores the form that 'bearing' takes within the experience of 'darkness'. A fourth section analyses the fruit of 'bearing' – a "germination", an "ineffable transformation", as Isaac calls it.

VI.1. 'DARKNESS': RADICAL 'DOUBT' AND THE 'TRUST' OF 'FAITH'

Among the conditions of 'abandonment' that Isaac describes in his writings, the most extreme is 'darkness (ܕܠܟܘܬܐ; ܕܠܟܘܬܐ; ܕܠܟܘܬܐ)'¹⁰⁵². He describes it as being

¹⁰⁵² On the theme of 'darkness' in Isaac, see Hausherr, "Les Orientaux"; see also Chialà, *Dall'asceti*, 198-201; *Id.*, "L'importance du corps", 33-37, where the author explores the role of the body in prayer at the time of 'darkness'; Duca, "La Passione secondo Isacco", 351-352; and *Ead.*, "'A Light which rises by Grace (I 51)': Faith, Trust, and Suffering in Isaac of Nineveh", forthcoming in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* (acts of the XII Symposium Syriacum, Rome, 2016).

a “darkness (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ) outside of God”, “Sheol”¹⁰⁵³, and “noetic Gehenna”¹⁰⁵⁴ – a state of extreme suffering. He devotes two entire discourses to its phenomenology (I 48 and I 49¹⁰⁵⁵), but the theme is widely discussed throughout his *corpus*.

Isaac’s descriptions of ‘darkness’ are extremely coherent. He describes it as a form of ‘abandonment’ in which ‘faith’ wavers and fades, and one is submerged by ‘doubt and fear’. This emerges amidst the difficulties of the solitary life.

This ‘fear’ is not an ordinary state of fear before something, but a far deeper, more fundamental experience, in which one feels radically lost and confused. It is a form of anguish and, in I 58, Isaac describes it in these terms:

[If] you are allowed to be put to the test by that thick darkness (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁ) of soul which those who are abandoned by God and handed over into the hands of the demons [experience], then you will know that you are before them like an infant who does not know where to go. [...] All your knowledge will be troubled like [that of] a little child, and this mind [of yours], firmly set on God, the exactness of your knowledge, and your sound intelligence will be amidst a sea of doubts (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁ)¹⁰⁵⁶.

In I 69, describing the ‘marks’ that allow one to realise that one is entering ‘darkness’, Isaac states that “you will become weak in your faith (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁ), [...] your trust (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ) will fail, [...] your soul will be shaken with fear (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ), so that you will become terrified and made afraid [even] by your shadow”¹⁰⁵⁷. It is in I 48, however, that the connection between ‘fear’ and the wavering of faith emerges in clearest form. In ‘darkness’:

Our soul is suffocated and is as though amidst the waves. If a person draws near to Scripture, to the office, or to all he approaches, he receives darkness upon darkness (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ), and he leaves [it] aside. How many times *he is not even allowed* to approach [these things]. He cannot believe at all that he will again receive a change (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ) and be at peace. This hour is full of desperation (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁ) and fear (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ), hope in God and the consolation of faith (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁ) are completely effaced from the soul, and [the soul] is utterly filled with doubt (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ) and fear (ⲛⲓⲛⲁ). [...] Especially those who desire to live in the conduct of the mind and who, on their

¹⁰⁵³ Cf. I 76 521-522.

¹⁰⁵⁴ I 65 456.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Irénée Hausherr quotes these two discourses in “Les Orientaux”, 113-116.

¹⁰⁵⁶ I 58 413-414.

¹⁰⁵⁷ I 69 481-482.

journey, long for the consolation of faith (ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ) are put to the test [by] this experience. For this reason, this dark (ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ) hour vexes them more than everything, through the doubt of the mind (ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ). Mighty blasphemy is also joined to this, and sometimes also uncertainty concerning the resurrection [...]. Frequently have we experienced all of these things, and we have written them down for the consolation of many¹⁰⁵⁸.

Isaac, here, speaking of things he knows from experience, mentions ‘doubt, ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ’, together with fear. This doubt does not concern creation or oneself, but God. It opposes one’s faith in God, effacing from the soul hope and the “consolation of faith”. However, as emerges from Isaac’s words, it is not a doubt *about* God of a discursive kind, but a more fundamental condition of doubt. ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ can also mean ‘division’, so that, when Isaac alludes to a “doubt of the mind”, he evokes a state of inner division, which follows the wavering of one’s faith. This lack of faith ‘divides’ the subject, worming its way into the mind. One is then thrown “amidst the waves”, in uncertainty, and cannot be convinced that this situation will ever end.

This encounter with ‘darkness’ does not befall everyone, Isaac adds, but only “those who desire to live in the conduct of the mind and long for the consolation of faith”¹⁰⁵⁹, i.e. to those who walk toward ‘theoria’, seeking the encounter with God. What is this ‘consolation’, then? What is the faith that ‘doubt/division’ opposes? And what is this doubt? This becomes clearer from other texts of Isaac.

In II 8, Isaac speaks of faith, and contrasts it with ‘darkness’. He writes:

For a person to entrust (ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ) himself to God means [...] that he will never be swallowed up in anguish or fear (ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ) over anything, [never] being tormented by disputing in [his] thought *as when he thinks that he has no one to take care of him*. When a person falls away from *this* trust (ܐܘܨܘܪܐܢܐ) in his mind, from here, he falls into myriads of trials in his thoughts, just as the blessed Interpreter (i.e. Theodore of Mopsuestia) says in [his] volume on the Evangelist Matthew: “The entire concern of Satan is this: to persuade a person that God *does not care about him*”¹⁰⁶⁰.

In I 1, Isaac states:

¹⁰⁵⁸ I 48 339-340.

¹⁰⁵⁹ I 48 340.

¹⁰⁶⁰ II 8,21 25 (Syr.); 31 (ET).

When the lack of faith (ጥላይነት ስሜን) implants itself in our heart, then all things are found [to be] against [us], and not because of [our] testing. By those who lie in ambush and shoot their arrows in darkness (ጥቅር), it is continuously suggested: “He will not [be] happy at all times, [if] he trusts (ገብረ) God, and [God] *does not care about you* as [one] supposes”. [...] The division (or: doubt, ጥቅር) of the heart brings fear (ጥላይነት) into the soul; faith (ጥላይነት), instead, can strengthen the mind even during the amputation of limbs¹⁰⁶¹.

When Isaac speaks of doubt, then, in the context of ‘darkness’, he is referring to a specific kind of doubt: a doubt which concerns God’s care for the suffering creature. This care is absent and always will be, the divisive doubt suggests. Isaac does not refer to a cognitive doubt *about* God, here, so that it could be countered by cognitive argument. Cognitive arguments are powerless here, because this doubt is relational and existential in nature. It is relational, because it concerns a sense of betrayal of a trust which has been given. It is existential, because this trust has been given to God, and God, for Isaac, is consolation and meaning. Doubt, then, concerns something highly specific and radically personal: the loss of meaning of one’s life, which is God; and a complete solitude in suffering. This doubt suggests that there is no other, apart from oneself, who is oppressed by the power of suffering. This is what is at stake in ‘darkness’.

Just as this doubt is relational and existential in nature, and cannot be countered on a discursive level, so also the faith which dissipates ‘darkness’ is relational, existential, and not merely cognitive. It is a matter of trust, as already emerges from the expressions used in the passages quoted above, where the word ጥቅር (tuklānā), ‘trust’, recurs, and the verb ገብረ, ‘to trust’, is employed.

This trust, in Isaac, concerns God’s care for the suffering self, and Isaac directly connects faith to being persuaded of God’s care. In II 8, in describing the state which opposes the doubting distinctive of ‘darkness’, he writes that “until a person

¹⁰⁶¹ I 3 3-4. Cf. Centuries I 63, the century on the martyr analysed in section V.1.

loses the faith (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) of his heart, that is to say the exact knowledge of this divine care (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ), he does not fall into the darkness (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) of the mind, from which anxiety and anguish come”¹⁰⁶². In II 9, still discussing ‘darkness’, Isaac relates faith to trust, and this to God’s care: “The absence of faith (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܘ) empties a person of knowledge of the truth concerning God, and of the trust (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) which one should rightly have in him at all times”¹⁰⁶³. Knowledge instead “counsels a person, saying: ‘Do not be disturbed, for creation is not abandoned to chance. [...] It has a Guide [...]”¹⁰⁶⁴. Only this “trust (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) in God makes thought firm and not weak within all the afflictions that occur”¹⁰⁶⁵: at stake, here, is a non-abandonment to the divisive force of suffering. Isaac’s discourse on faith ultimately concerns this issue.

VI.2. THE “NOETIC LIGHT” OF FAITH

If ‘darkness’ is a “noetic Gehenna”, faith is the “noetic light (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ)”¹⁰⁶⁶, which sees hidden things, and the “noetic power”¹⁰⁶⁷, which strengthens the creature in suffering. To understand what this means for Isaac, the vocabulary he employs should first be examined.

Isaac’s terminology related to faith is vast. On most occasions, this terminology alludes to trust, entrusting oneself, and an inner certainty related to these. Beside ܐܘܪܘܚܐ (*tuklānā*), ‘trust’¹⁰⁶⁸, which recurs very frequently, the word

¹⁰⁶² II 8,25 25-26 (Syr.); 32 (ET).

¹⁰⁶³ II 9,4 28 (Syr.); 34 (ET). See also Centuries I 79 31r-31v, 31r.

¹⁰⁶⁴ II 9,3 27 (Syr.); 34 (ET).

¹⁰⁶⁵ III 12,25 98 (Syr.); 137 (ET).

¹⁰⁶⁶ I 51 376.

¹⁰⁶⁷ I 69 482.

¹⁰⁶⁸ See e.g. ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ: I 5 68; I 51, 364; 370; Centuries II 61 50v; I 53 387: ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ; I 7 99; 102; 103; I 51 377; I 53 379: ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ; I 69 482; III 12,25 98 (Syr.); 137 (IT); I 51 362: “Fear follows knowledge, but trust (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) [follows] faith (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ)”.

that Isaac most often employs in this context is *ܚܝܡܢܘܬܐ* (*haymānutā*), which is the Syriac term for ‘faith’ (derived from the verb *ܚܝܡܢܐ*, ‘to trust, to entrust, to have faith in’ someone or something¹⁰⁶⁹). To these two concepts other terms that Isaac employs are also related: ‘firmness/certainty (*ܚܝܡܢܘܬܐ*)’¹⁰⁷⁰ and ‘persuasion (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*)’¹⁰⁷¹. Lastly, Isaac also speaks of a “consolation of faith (*ܚܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*)”¹⁰⁷², as seen above, of a “delight of faith (*ܚܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*)”¹⁰⁷³, of faith as ‘light (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*)’¹⁰⁷⁴, “noetic light (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*)”¹⁰⁷⁵, and “noetic strength (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*)”¹⁰⁷⁶.

The term *ܚܝܡܢܘܬܐ* (*haymānutā*, ‘faith’), in Syriac, can point both to an attitude of entrustment, and to the confession of faith. For this last concept, however, Isaac usually employs another term, *ܬܘܨܕܝܬܐ* (*tawditā*)¹⁰⁷⁷, which is linked to the idea of ‘acknowledgement’ and ‘affirmation’. The ‘certainty’ of faith, in Isaac, is not synonymous with correct doctrinal statements, nor with a cognitive assent to a content of faith: as both Alfeyev¹⁰⁷⁸ and Chialà¹⁰⁷⁹ observed, in Isaac

¹⁰⁶⁹ See e.g. II 8,21 25 (Syr.), 31 (ET).

¹⁰⁷⁰ See e.g. I 53 379. Isaac also uses the verb from the same root, ‘to be confirmed (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*)’, in the context of faith: see e.g. I 53 379; Centuries I 36 26r; Centuries I 38 26r; I 77 531; I 44 320.

¹⁰⁷¹ See e.g. I 53 379: *ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*; Centuries I 36 26r: *ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*; Centuries I 38 26r: *ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*. In this last Century, ‘persuasion’ is not explicitly mentioned in connection to the word ‘faith’, as in Centuries I 36, but is connected to the idea of being confirmed in “the hope to come”. However, from the context of the unit formed by Centuries I 36-38, where Isaac speaks of the “spiritual conduct” which ‘confirms’, within, the “faith of persuasion”, one can appreciate the close relation between these two expressions. Similar concepts are found in: Centuries I 64 29r: “Faith is a movement full of persuasion (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*)”; and I 51 376. Cf. Heb 11:1.

¹⁰⁷² See e.g. I 5 63, 65; I 48 339, 340 (*ܚܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*); in a similar sense, the phrase “consolation of hope” is used in I 50 352 (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*) and I 65 455 (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*).

¹⁰⁷³ I 77 525.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Centuries I 28 24v: “The light of faith (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*), which rises (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*) upon him by Grace”; III 12,25 98 (Syr.); 137 (IT): “Faith (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*) concerning God’s providence is the light of the mind (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*) which rises (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*) by Grace within the human being”. Note the use of *ܚܝܡܢܐ*: see section IV.2.3.

¹⁰⁷⁵ I 51 376: “I call this faith (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*) the noetic light (*ܚܝܡܢܐ ܚܝܡܢܐ*) which rises (*ܚܝܡܢܐ*) in the soul by Grace”.

¹⁰⁷⁶ I 69 482.

¹⁰⁷⁷ See e.g. I 53 379.

¹⁰⁷⁸ See Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 259-260.

¹⁰⁷⁹ See Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 218-219.

‘faith’ does not coincide with the confession of faith, the *ḥayyānā*. The faith which dissipates fear, Isaac states, is not “that [faith] which is the foundation of the confession (*ḥayyānā*) of the [Christian] community [...], but that noetic power (*ḥayyānā ḥayyānā*) which sustains the heart through the light of the mind, and through the testimony of conscience (*ḥayyānā ḥayyānā*) stirs in the soul a great trust (*ḥayyānā*) in God”¹⁰⁸⁰.

This does not mean that Isaac fails to attribute any value to the confession of faith, but that he is interested in the connection of this confession of faith *to the human being* when, in his/her existence, he/she experiences faith. “The firmness of faith (*ḥayyānā ḥayyānā*) in God is not the soundness of the confession of faith (*ḥayyānā ḥayyānā*), although this is the mother of faith”, Isaac writes, “but [it is] a soul which beholds the truth of God by the power of [its] conduct”¹⁰⁸¹. The *ḥayyānā* (‘confession/belief’) in Isaac’s eyes, leads the human being to a deeper dimension of faith, which is existential entrustment. Isaac, however, goes further, in the passage quoted here, relating faith as entrustment to the ‘beholding’ distinctive of ‘*theoria*’. Before examining this aspect of faith, it is essential to examine how trust is born in the soul.

When, in I 35¹⁰⁸², Isaac discusses the creature’s discovery of God and the reasons for entering the solitary life, he already demonstrates an understanding of faith which is attentive to its connection to the concrete experience of the subject. As seen when analysing I 35 in Chapter II, in Isaac, the possibility of believing in God is intimately related to a disillusionment concerning the nature of the world and oneself. By realising that one is passible and mortal, and that reality is

¹⁰⁸⁰ I 69 482.

¹⁰⁸¹ I 53 379.

¹⁰⁸² See I 35 228-230. Cf. quotations in II.3.

incomplete and transient, the possibility of faith emerges, by Grace. This realisation, however, is not of a mental kind, but connected with an experience of suffering which concerns one on a personal level: only by feeling suffering for one's real, ontological condition can one open one's eyes to the incompleteness of all created things. This realisation grants access to an objective vision of reality, and only from this objective approach to reality, born from contacting one's real condition, can one see in God a dimension of consolation and meaning. This gives birth to a faith which takes the shape of entrusting oneself to the possibility of the resurrection, conceived as the consolation for suffering, and to God the Creator as *other* from all created things, conceived as the source of this consolation for suffering. This faith regards meaning.

Faith, then, also at the beginning of one's journey, concerns the existential dimension, and is born from the experience of the flesh. The trust of faith emerges within an experience of suffering which awakens and urges existential entrustment. Of the person who experiences this, Isaac says: "He throws away from himself the burden of sadness and a great joy is moved in him, as one who has found an excellent and firm hope"¹⁰⁸³. Without suffering, however, this faith, its meaning, and its force would remain hidden. This faith, in its urgency, cannot be separated from what triggers its awakening. This faith imposes itself on the consciousness when one encounters the incompleteness of everything.

The experience described in I 35 mirrors the fundamental value of 'the negative' in Isaac, which has emerged repeatedly during this thesis. The pressure of 'the negative' awakens one to the perception of one's real suffering state, and only from 'taking' this truth 'on' in a move which is already a form of 'bearing',

¹⁰⁸³ I 35 230.

can one understand that *what is at stake, when one speaks of God, is the consolation and meaning of existence*. Only through *this* understanding of God, born from suffering, can one develop a faith in him, which is trust. Suffering, in Isaac, when inhabited, awakens entrusting oneself to God. As always in his writings, Grace (the Grace of faith, here) appears as the fulfilment of an experience which is intimately one's own.

In the ascetic life, the same structure of experience seen in I 35 recurs repeatedly, on increasingly deeper levels. If one looks at Isaac's understanding of the ascetic life as a process of encountering one's suffering and 'weakness' through contact with negation, one can even say that this life, for him, aims precisely at creating the conditions for keeping open, in the subject, the possibility of the self-giving of faith as trust. It is an attempt to remain 'on the ridge' where entrustment, i.e. the entrusting of oneself to God, arises.

The fact that one's entrustment is born 'on the ridge' is particularly visible from Isaac's descriptions of 'despairing' – not a passional state of desperation, but a despairing of all human consolation. Of the experience of Grace, born of faith as entrustment, Isaac writes that one accesses it "amidst things full of desperation (فصم صحتهم)"¹⁰⁸⁴, when one "casts away from oneself every visible help and human hope"¹⁰⁸⁵. But entrustment itself – "the holy impulse of faith" – is "something which suddenly shines (or rises: نسل) from within a person when he is standing in peril"¹⁰⁸⁶, within a profound experience of 'weakness'. In this condition, any hope in objects cannot be an answer, and all mundane knowledge fades away. The

¹⁰⁸⁴ See I 77 524-536, particularly 531: "For in a wondrous way, God's help to a person becomes known when [the person] is amidst things which are full of desperation, and there God manifests his Power (سله) by saving [him] from them".

¹⁰⁸⁵ I 77 529: "When a person casts away from himself every visible help and human hope and follows God in faith and with a limpid heart, immediately Grace adheres to him, and reveals its Power (سله) in him through various [types of] assistance".

¹⁰⁸⁶ II 9,6 28 (Syr.); 35 (ET).

creature, facing this condition and ‘bearing’ all of its weight, can then discover *this* trust: God alone “is sufficient” for my “care and guidance”, he, “to whom I have entrusted myself” completely¹⁰⁸⁷. Entrusting oneself to God takes the shape of placing one’s faith in God alone, rather than in objects or oneself¹⁰⁸⁸. This, as always in Isaac, occurs only if ‘despairing’ is ‘borne’.

Making contact with this experience and ‘bearing’ it requires great courage: “Nothing is stronger than desperation (lit.: the cutting off of hope, **لَم يَمُوتَ**). [...] When, in his mind, a man has cut away (**لَم يَمُوتَ**) the hope which [comes] from his life, nobody is more courageous than he”¹⁰⁸⁹. Faced with creatural suffering, in fact, many run away, and seek a human remedy for it. They cannot stand the encounter with the suffering self, and they try to remove the experience of their creaturalty as it is experienced under the burden of suffering. Isaac writes that many happened to seek “a multitude of gods” because, “while they were greatly passible and needy (**لَم يَمُوتَ لَم يَمُوتَ**), and all these tormentors were let loose against them, for a fleeting richness, for a short-lived power, for a precarious health, not only did they invent many gods, but in their folly they dared to call themselves [gods], and [to say] that we are of the nature of God”¹⁰⁹⁰: it is the problem of the passional flights and pride. Those who resist at the centre of their most naked creatural being, can instead, by ‘bearing’ it, encounter God. There, in one’s most naked creatural being, *far from other ‘gods’*, God can arrive.

From this trust born of suffering in a God who is consolation and meaning, in fact, something greater than trust, which fulfils it, can appear. “Persuade God to grant you to reach the measure of faith”, Isaac writes. “If you perceive the delight

¹⁰⁸⁷ See I 77 529.

¹⁰⁸⁸ See I 77 526.

¹⁰⁸⁹ I 77 532.

¹⁰⁹⁰ I 5 71-72.

of faith (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܘܬܐ) within your soul, it is not difficult for me to say that nothing keeps [your soul] far from Christ”¹⁰⁹¹. Through entrustment, one can cross a threshold, and experience that which Isaac often calls the “consolation of faith”, linked to the ideas of certainty of trust, of being ‘confirmed’ in one’s faith, of ‘delight’, and ‘persuasion’ – the “persuasion of the mind of which Paul spoke (cf. Col 2:2)”¹⁰⁹². This ‘consolation’ alludes to the presence of the Power of God, the Holy Spirit¹⁰⁹³. Through trust, one accesses the encounter with God, the Spirit.

The experience of trust and the experience of its fulfilment are contiguous, in Isaac. Faith as trust is Grace, and “the delight of faith” as an encounter with the Spirit is the inhabiting of Grace within. This corresponds, in the subject’s experience, to a growth of trust which takes the shape of a certainty which is *not mental, but experiential*. This emerges in many passages of Isaac, but especially in I 51, where he discusses the differences between ‘knowledge’ and faith, and where he openly connects this faith and the presence of the Spirit. He writes:

Through spiritual eyes, [the noetic light of faith] shows to [the soul] the mysteries concealed in it, and the hidden riches of Divinity, which are concealed from the eyes of the children of the flesh, but are revealed by the Spirit to those who are brought up at the table of Christ through the study of his laws, according to what he said: “If you keep my commandments, I will send you the Spirit, the Paraclete, that the world cannot receive, and he will show you the entire truth (cf. John 14:16-17; 16:13)”. In this way, [Christ] shows to the person the Holy Power (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܘܬܐ)

¹⁰⁹¹ I 77 525.

¹⁰⁹² Centuries I 38 26r. The ‘spiritual conduct’, Isaac believes, follows the confirmation of the “faith of persuasion”: see Centuries I 36-38 25v-26r. Col 2:2 reads as follows: “So that their hearts might be comforted, and they might be brought near, in love, to all the riches of persuasion (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ; Greek: πληροφορία, ‘full assurance’) and to the understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of God the Father and of Christ”. See also Heb 10:22, where the Greek πληροφορία πίστεως is translated as ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܘܬܐ. The theme of *plerophoria* is central in Pseudo-Macarius, who connects it to the experience of the Spirit (see V. Desprez, “Plèrophoria”, *DS* 12.2, cols. 1819). A comparison of Isaac’s views and language with those which might emerge from the Syriac Macarian *corpus* lies beyond the scope of this thesis, but might prove fruitful.

¹⁰⁹³ See I 77 526: “You will be made worthy of this (i.e. of the “delight of faith”) if before you force yourself to cast your care upon God in faith and exchange your providing for his providing. Then, when he sees your will, that with complete limpidity of mind you entrusted yourself (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ) to God [...] and you forced yourself to put your trust (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ) in God more than in your own self, then, that Power (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ), which is unknown to you, will overshadow (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ) you, and you will perceptibly feel the Power which is with you, without [any] doubt (ܠܗܘܘܬܐ)”.

which always overshadows (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ) him. This Power is the Paraclete. Through the power of this faith, all the parts of the soul are kindled, as if by fire¹⁰⁹⁴.

If, as Alfeyev suggests¹⁰⁹⁵, there is a form of faith which, in Isaac, can be equated with the knowledge of God¹⁰⁹⁶, which he also calls “non-knowledge”¹⁰⁹⁷ and the “perception of God’s mysteries”¹⁰⁹⁸, it is this specific form of faith as the fulfilment of trust, as a contact with the Spirit. It leads the creature, as Isaac states, to knowing God as God, to acknowledging “*God as God*”¹⁰⁹⁹. This, however, has a specific meaning in Isaac: it means acknowledging God as care, as love for the suffering creature, so that the experience of trust is an experience of non-abandonment to the destructive power of suffering. The encounter with ‘the Power of God’, examined in Chapter V, refers to the fulfilment of this trust: the inner certainty of not being alone within suffering, of not being abandoned to it. It refers to an original experience of trust.

¹⁰⁹⁴ I 51 376-377.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 268.

¹⁰⁹⁶ This is, for Isaac, the ‘third degree’ of knowledge, a gift of the Spirit, which transcends all human efforts and actions. Isaac discusses the relationship of opposition between faith and (cognitive) knowledge (i.e. the first two ‘degrees’ of knowledge, of the body and the soul), especially in I 51 360-377. If cognitive knowledge cannot free the creature from fear, faith can. In I 52 378, Isaac states that, while the first degree of knowledge arises “from constant study and the incentive of teaching”, and the second “from a sound conduct and the faith of the mind”, the third “is reduced to faith alone”. On ‘knowledge’ in Isaac, see footnotes 577-578 in IV.2. On Isaac’s view on the equation between true knowledge and the summit of faith, see also e.g. I 8 (the main discourse on ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ) 105-106, where Isaac describes the experience of God’s mercy as the experience of “a certain trust (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ) and strength (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ)”, which “palpitates” within the person. This experience fills the heart with faith (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ), because one understands that God is one’s helper: for this reason, one’s heart “exults in trust (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ)”, and this is equated to “the reception of the knowledge of God (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ)”. In I 50 352, Isaac affirms that faith is called the “revelation of truth”, and in III 7,8 46 (Syr.); 70 (ET), that “the top of the mountain of faith” is “the knowledge of the Spirit, [that] is the flashes which shine on the intellect [coming] from that fearful fire which flashes from the inner region of faith (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ)”; see also III 7,17 48-49 (Syr.); 73 (ET), where faith and knowledge are equated to Mount Sion. Elsewhere, faith and knowledge, albeit not equated, are closely connected: see e.g. Centuries I 79-80 31r-31v.

¹⁰⁹⁷ By using this term, Isaac is pointing to the radical difference of this form of ‘knowledge’ from all other forms of knowledge. On this concept, see Chialà, *Dall’ascesi*, 137-138, and Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 263-264; see e.g. I 52, 377-379; and III 11,31 91-92 (Syr.); 128 (IT), where Isaac uses the Biblical concept of the ‘dark cloud (ܩܘܪܕܘܢܐ)’ (cf. Ex 20:21) to describe the knowledge of faith.

¹⁰⁹⁸ See e.g. Centuries I 36 25v-26r.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Cf. I 50 351.

strength”, or “power”¹¹¹⁰, which introduces one into the experience of the certainty of trust¹¹¹¹. The eyes of faith contemplate the ontological truth of God¹¹¹²:

[By] faith (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) I do not mean that which a person believes concerning the distinction of the adorable Persons of the Essence, the properties of its nature, or the marvellous dispensation which occurred to humanity through the taking on of our nature, but I call faith the noetic light (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܝܢܐ), which rises (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) in the soul *by Grace*, and through the testimony of the mind sustains the heart in freedom from doubt (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܝܢܐ), in the persuasion (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) of the hope which is far from every presumption¹¹¹³.

This “noetic light” is trust in a God who is consolation and meaning. It keeps one far from presumption because it makes it possible to inhabit one’s creatural poverty without fleeing into the passional defences. It is relational, and existentially rooted. For this reason, when this trust appears, by Grace, it can free the creature from the divisive doubt which is also relational, and existentially rooted. ‘Theoria’, as seen in Chapter IV, begins in the creature when he/she accesses a ‘knowledge’ of God’s Providence for oneself and for the world. Faith as trust leads the person to this discovery, countering Satan’s insinuation: “God does not care for you, as [one] supposes”. When one becomes existentially convinced of this, through the path of ‘practice’ (“by the power of [his soul’s] conduct”¹¹¹⁴), one discovers a “faith of vision (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܝܢܐ)”, different from the faith of “hearing (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ)” – “another faith, which is not the opposite of the former (i.e. the faith ‘of hearing’), but strengthens (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ)” it¹¹¹⁵. Isaac alludes here to the Book of Job, where Job, at the end of his journey through suffering, says to God: “I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now, behold!, my eye sees you (Job 42:5)”.

¹¹¹⁰ I 51 360.

¹¹¹¹ I 69 482.

¹¹¹² See also Centuries II 19 37v-38r: “Glory to the one who became for us the mediator to these goods, through whom we have been made worthy to receive, know, and perceive through faith that which the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard, and the senses of the soul cannot imagine concerning these goods (cf. 1Cor 2:9)”.

¹¹¹³ I 51 376.

¹¹¹⁴ I 53 379.

¹¹¹⁵ I 44 320.

This faith, which is not ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ (‘confession/belief’), but existential entrustment to the Unseen, remains Christian, for Isaac, in two senses. First, it is entrustment discovered by passing through disillusionment, desperation, and loss: Isaac reads all of this as a death, from which, by Grace alone, a resurrection can blossom. It is the entrustment to God of suffering creatures, for whom the symbol of the cross takes on a very real, ontological meaning. Secondly, it is faith in Christ, as the one who makes this existential path known¹¹¹⁶ and passed through it¹¹¹⁷ – “the most despised and humiliated of human beings, without form or splendour”¹¹¹⁸ who, as a suffering human being, knows the burden of our “frailty”¹¹¹⁹. These two interpretations of faith are inseparable, in Isaac’s view, and their unity appears evident to him: the existential resonance of trust *within* the human being, and the faith in Christ *of* the human being.

Faith is the revelation of insights. When the mind is darkened (ܩܘܫܝܘܬܐ), faith is hidden, fear rules us, and our hope is cut off. The faith which [comes] from instruction (or: doctrine, ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ) cannot free a person from presumption and doubts (ܩܘܫܝܘܬܐ), but [only the faith] which rises (or: dawns, ܩܘܫܝܘܬܐ) through insights and is called revelation of the truth. As long as the intellect *acknowledges God as God* through the revelation of insights, fear does not draw near to the heart¹¹²⁰.

VI.3. ‘BEARING’ IN ‘DARKNESS’

If a person does not lose this faith-trust, Isaac states, “he does not fall into the darkness of the mind”¹¹²¹. But in reality, the creature experiences this loss of faith-trust and also ‘darkness’. Thus, even if Isaac consoles his reader – “God does not leave the soul entirely in this [state] the whole day, otherwise it would be deprived

¹¹¹⁶ See e.g. Centuries II 19 37v-38r.

¹¹¹⁷ See e.g. I 60 426.

¹¹¹⁸ I 3 39 (cf. Is 53:2-3, passage on the ‘suffering Servant’)

¹¹¹⁹ See I 80 546-547.

¹¹²⁰ I 50 351.

¹¹²¹ II 8,25 25-26 (Syr.); 32 (ET).

of life and of the whole hope of the Christians”¹¹²² –, he is still profoundly aware of the nature of the prostration that one experiences within ‘darkness’, which leads one to think that this will be endless: “He cannot believe at all that he will again experience a change and be at peace”¹¹²³. Or, as he says elsewhere: “You will encounter [...] something that you will think is the end of all”¹¹²⁴.

‘Darkness’ is not an inconvenience on the path, but an essential part of it, and occupies a central position in Isaac’s understanding of the inner life. This fundamental value shines through his belief that ‘darkness’ will never be completely overcome, so the only way of dealing with it is by learning to pass through it: “This struggle does not cease immediately”¹¹²⁵; “you will receive, and you will lose”¹¹²⁶; and this will continue, “until [a person’s] departure”¹¹²⁷. How does one pass through ‘darkness’, then? ‘Bearing’ is the only way, also in this case.

Within ‘darkness’, ‘bearing’ assumes specific traits, more extreme than in all other conditions of suffering. If, in the other conditions of suffering, a trust in God both guides the creature and deepens through his/her ‘despairing’ of objects, ‘darkness’ implies experiencing a condition of ‘desperation’ in which it is God’s horizon that disappears from one’s sight. ‘Despairing’, here, does not involve created things, but their Source.

As seen above, this “noetic Gehenna” alludes to an existential, relational suffering, related to a loss of meaning and the loss of the presence of the other, who is this meaning. It implies entering a fundamental form of fear which is transformed into a profound solitude within suffering. ‘Darkness’, then, not only challenges

¹¹²² I 48 339.

¹¹²³ I 48 339.

¹¹²⁴ I 49 342.

¹¹²⁵ I 48 340.

¹¹²⁶ I 49 342.

¹¹²⁷ I 48 341.

one's relationship with God, but also attempts to destroy the subject him/herself, through destroying the meaning of his/her life.

'Bearing', in Isaac's writings, is intimately related to prayer. In 'darkness', the nature of this prayer and its vital function powerfully emerge. In I 48, Isaac clarifies that one "will never receive the light of consolation through interactions [with human beings]"¹¹²⁸ and, in I 49, he speaks of prayer as the only possible way open to the creature who is oppressed by 'darkness'. Isaac insists on the value of kneeling, in this condition¹¹²⁹ – even when the heart "is cast down"¹¹³⁰, and "we do not even have prayer and we do not know what to say, because words of supplication do not even come to us"¹¹³¹. This prayer is a difficult 'remaining there', "prostrated on our faces continuously, although we are silent"¹¹³², tarrying "before his door"¹¹³³. This can last "an [entire] day and night"¹¹³⁴.

In Chapter V, the role of prayer in 'bearing' has already been explored. In Isaac, it is a matter of remaining connected to the horizon of meaning when one is challenged by trials, suffering, and the difficult vision of one's real self. Remaining in a prayer of this kind is itself a form of 'bearing', meaning experiencing the pressure of 'the negative' in connection with God, without being submerged by it. Here, however, what is borne is the fading away of the horizon of God itself. This exposes one to the pressure of 'the negative', in solitude. Prayer, in this condition, becomes the creatural act which maintains open within oneself the possibility of the horizon of God and confesses the need for a relationship with God *even when God*

¹¹²⁸ I 48 340.

¹¹²⁹ This kneeling is not a mere bending on the knees, but includes prostration, similar to the metany in the Orthodox Tradition. On the value of this gesture, see Chialà, "L'importance du corps". For further observations on the role of the body in prayer according to Isaac, see *Id.*, "Prayer and the Body". For a listing of outer forms of prayer, see Alfeyev, "Prayer in St Isaac".

¹¹³⁰ I 49 341.

¹¹³¹ I 49 341.

¹¹³² I 49 341.

¹¹³³ Cf. I 49 342.

¹¹³⁴ I 49 342.

seems absent. In this sense, it is *the profoundest act of faith of the creature*, the confession of a trust stronger than all other expressions of trust.

This trusting in ‘darkness’ occurs within a condition of negation, which is not removed from consciousness, but inhabited, as always in Isaac. This ‘inhabiting’ is extremely difficult, because the negation experienced is the greatest of all negations. Within this experience, the prayer that Isaac describes contains no consolatory aspect: it occurs simultaneously with the pain caused by doubt, fear, and the lack of trust. Isaac stresses the almost physical opposition of Satan to the gestures of prayer, which gives an idea of the kind of pressure one experiences: “He endeavours *with all his power* to prevent you from drawing near to [prayer] and when you are close to falling on your face, he troubles you”¹¹³⁵. It is the fact of inhabiting this lack of faith that urges the birth of the invocation of faith.

In ‘darkness’, then, the creature dwells ‘on a ridge’¹¹³⁶, as never before: the profoundest expression of trust emerges from within a lack of trust, when this is ‘borne’. Only the human being who does not flee from the doubt, fear, and despair which this absence of trust implies can understand what is at stake, when one speaks of trusting God. ‘Darkness’, doubt, a lack of trust, and even despair, then, have a foundational value in Isaac, when they are ‘borne’: without experiencing these, one cannot access the meaning of trust and faith.

It is only after passing through ‘darkness’ and understanding the value of what one seeks – or, in Isaac’s language, “when [God] sees that you supplicate him *with pain of heart*” –, that God, “who is merciful and good, will not delay from giving you consolation and refreshment”¹¹³⁷. So here also, as in the case of the

¹¹³⁵ I 49 341.

¹¹³⁶ For this idea, see VI.2.

¹¹³⁷ I 49 342.

‘weakness’/‘Power of God’ relationship examined in Chapter V, the phenomenology that Isaac outlines regards the creature’s experience of solitude as necessarily preceding the encounter with God.

The attempt to preserve faith-trust within ‘darkness’ – an attempt which is symbolised by prayer –, is a form of loyalty to this God. It takes the shape of remaining loyal to *one’s* God despite everything, *even against what seems to be God* – the “*God [who] does not care about you*”, that Satan suggests. In this sense, it is also an affirmation of loyalty to oneself, as the one who can choose who is ‘one’s own God’. One’s trust in God as consolation and care and one’s trust in oneself are intimately connected, in Isaac. To speak of trusting oneself, however, in the context of Isaac’s descriptions of ‘darkness’, does not allude to trusting one’s ideas and opinions *about* God, but to a far more fundamental trust in oneself as a suffering being, who desires consolation – a trust that can be born only from perceiving the fear, confusion, and despair that lacking trust implies.

Isaac links the act of loyalty to God distinctive of prayer to not-despairing: it is a form of resistance to desperation which originates *within* desperation itself. The suffering implied in this choice of resistance is great, and great is the courage needed:

During the time when that heavy darkness (سحر كحل) presses on the soul, let us beware of desperation (فقد سحر). Listen to me, my brother: like a travelling woman amidst her pangs (John 16:21) and like a person who endures torments, struggle to avoid leaving your cell¹¹³⁸.

The cell, symbol of ‘remaining’ (see Chapter V.3.4.), becomes, through these words, the place where the possibility of a radical freedom, accessible to the creature even in the most adverse conditions, is affirmed. It is the freedom to choose

¹¹³⁸ I 49 342-343.

to inhabit the ‘place of despair’ and, once in this place, to choose to not abandon one’s God, not to break off a relationship.

If prayer, in this condition, is the act of trust which confesses God even in despair and anguish, Isaac also speaks of the extreme possibility that prayer itself might fade away, under the burden of ‘darkness’. “I counsel you, oh human being”, he writes in I 48, where he describes the impossibility of prayer, “if you have not the strength to dominate yourself and fall upon your face in prayer, wrap your head in your cloak and sleep, until the hour of darkness (ⲕⲁⲗⲉⲛⲁ ⲕⲁⲃⲉ) passes from you, but do not leave your cell”¹¹³⁹. Even this mute resistance, however, this ‘remaining’ “within the door [of the cell]”¹¹⁴⁰, speaks of a relationship with God that remains unbroken. Hidden and naked, it is an act of faith.

This ‘bearing’ is not an act of power, and could never be so – here, it is more evident than ever. Rather, it is a placing oneself in a very low position. This ‘bearing’ itself, however, in a hidden way, keeps open the possibility of God’s self-giving. By struggling to preserve a possible space for God within oneself, it calls for his advent. After ‘darkness’ withdraws, in fact, the human being who, within it, has ‘borne’ suffering, *acknowledges* “the change which follows” this “hour”¹¹⁴¹, as Isaac describes it, evoking Christ’s arrest at Gethsemane¹¹⁴². It is precisely in this situation that the suffering creature learns to acknowledge as Grace every self-giving act of God, becoming sensitive to his alterity – while “waiting in faith that the truth of his knowledge might rise (ⲛⲁⲛⲁ) in our hearts, *as he [alone] knows*”¹¹⁴³.
Mysteriously, from within this ‘darkness’, something can appear.

¹¹³⁹ I 48 340.

¹¹⁴⁰ I 48 340.

¹¹⁴¹ Cf. I 48 339.

¹¹⁴² The expression “hour of darkness (ⲕⲁⲗⲉⲛⲁ ⲕⲁⲃⲉ)” resembles that used in Lk 22:53 (“but this is your hour and the power of darkness [ⲕⲁⲗⲉⲛⲁ ⲕⲁⲃⲉ ⲁⲓⲛⲁ ⲕⲁⲃⲉ ⲛⲁⲛⲁ]”).

¹¹⁴³ Centuries II 59 49r-49v, 49r.

VI.4. “GERMINATION”

“The gift of light and the delight of joy”, Isaac writes, “do not follow closely after every darkness (ܟܘܠܗ), powerful struggle (ܟܘܠܗ ܟܘܠܗ), and gloom (ܟܘܠܗ), but these [dark moments] precede every gift, [...] by an hour, a day, [some] months, or years, in proportion to the gift”¹¹⁴⁴. Only after these does the mind encounter “light”¹¹⁴⁵.

While the creature is ‘bearing’ ‘darkness’, in fact, a mysterious transformation may occur. It is not due to the will, and it cannot be brought about by the creature. All that the creature can do is to ‘remain’ there, in connection with his/her desire for God, sustaining the weight of ‘the negative’:

After much converse with the Scriptures, continuous supplication and the acknowledgement of his weakness (ܟܘܠܗ ܟܘܠܗ ܟܘܠܗ)¹¹⁴⁶, 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 (ܟܘܠܗ) which gives birth to joy *from within*, *although [this] has no origin from that person himself* by the 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*. He sees that the mind is raised up from association with everything, is lifted up and is above the world with its agitation, and [above] the memories which came into being below it, and it despises and drives the whole world of time away, far from itself [...]. 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 (ܟܘܠܗ) 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 (ܟܘܠܗ ܟܘܠܗ) of the blustery weather¹¹⁴⁷.

¹¹⁴⁴ Centuries II 11 36r-36v, 36r.

¹¹⁴⁵ Cf. Centuries II 11 36r-36v, 36r.

¹¹⁴⁶ Or: confession of his weakness/thanksgiving at his weakness.

¹¹⁴⁷ II 34,2-3 135 (Syr.); 146-147 (ET). This last sentence is according to Brock’s beautiful translation.

This mysterious “germination”, as Isaac calls it, has “no origin from the person”: one “does not know the reason why”; no one can grasp “the nature of these things”. It is a matter of Grace, something which comes from the elsewhere of God. There is a connection, however, with the creature’s experience: the “germination” emerges *from within*, as the plant from the seed. It is intimately one’s own.

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 (cf. Jn 12:24), 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. It entails passing through a loss, a death. The “ineffable transformation” emerges from within this hidden work. Isaac describes it, again, using the image of small seeds:

The demonstration of what is hidden in seeds can be seen through the labours which the saints and godly people bear (ܡܚܠܝܩܝܢ) in themselves for the sake of God. For under the ordinary appearance of [seeds], at the time when the land is tilled, the transformation (ܡܚܘܠܩܝܢ) of the spring keeps hidden the multitude of ineffable transformations and the beauty of the many glorious colours that it will bring out, [visible] to sight, as a wonderful vesture and adornment for the earth that has allowed them to grow within herself. This mysterious meaning, which can be recognised in these small seeds, holy people engrave spiritually in their minds, as a demonstration that the Creator’s Power (ܩܘܘܿܬܐ) will be made known in them, at times when their practice is despondent and darkened (ܡܚܘܠܩܝܢ ܡܚܘܠܩܝܢ), and they wait to see in themselves, as a result of the strength of these ordinary labours, the ineffable transformation which will become perceptible [starting] from them, through the operation of the Holy Spirit which they will receive thereafter, according to the growth of their [ascetic] conduct¹¹⁴⁸.

This “transformation”, Isaac states, belongs to the spring¹¹⁴⁹, rather than to the seed: it is the working of the Spirit, the ܩܘܘܿܬܐ (‘Power’) of God. It occurs, however,

¹¹⁴⁸ II 23,1-2 108 (Syr.); 120 (ET).

¹¹⁴⁹ See also II 18,1 84 (Syr.); 95 (ET): “[Only] after the experience of conflicts does the soul receive limpidity (ܡܚܘܠܩܝܢ). Even though the soul is darkened (ܡܚܘܠܩܝܢ) during times of struggle, nevertheless, when [these] struggles have passed from it, then the intellect becomes like the sun in the splendence of knowledge: when it has been buffeted by temptations from the passions and the demons for the sake of our Lord, [it becomes] like the annual fruit harvest (lit.: fruits) which is

only to the creature who has ‘borne’ his/her *ضعف* (‘weakness’) in a ‘practice’ which is also “despondent and darkened”. The creature acknowledges this, and knows that he/she has passed through this process: “Listlessness and uncertainty are joined to the seed, but it is sweet for the labourer when he eats his [own] bread; his sweat is particularly sweet for him”¹¹⁵⁰. This awareness of having passed through something great and vital in one’s flesh shines through the metaphor of childbirth, which Isaac also employs:

At the time when a person begins to be separated from the sin which dwells in him and emerge from under the rule of the spirit of this world, according to what the fathers say, it happens to him that which happens to a woman for whom the time of bringing forth (*ولادة*) is near, because, night and day, sin afflicts him in such a way that his soul is close to perishing, and a myriad of trials comes upon him. However, when the air has begun to grow a little more serene for him, and he has seen hope from afar, from that time onwards his heart prevails against him who stands against him, and he receives a complete victory against sin. Every day that comes, joy meets him, and also the difficult changes (*تغيرات صعبة*) that suddenly come upon him pass easily away from him, [...] until, little by little, he reaches the harbour of mercy, for which all of the saints, who were buffeted and afflicted for the sake of God, waited, after long labours¹¹⁵¹.

The creature who has passed through this and discovers the “germination” which Grace operates, understands the existential meaning of the Christian faith – “The cross is the door to mysteries: through this door the intellect enters into knowledge of the heavenly mysteries. The knowledge of the cross is hidden in the sufferings of the cross”¹¹⁵².

This “germination” is no other than “the consolation of faith”, the fulfilment of trust¹¹⁵³.

buffeted by the strength of the [sun’s] rays and then receives sweetness and becomes useful for [human beings’] delight”.

¹¹⁵⁰ I 35 258.

¹¹⁵¹ Centuries II 12 36v.

¹¹⁵² I 79 544.

¹¹⁵³ See Centuries I 90 33v.

VI.5. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examined Isaac's understanding of 'darkness', a condition of extreme suffering that Isaac considers to be the most difficult of all. Within it, the creature experiences the possibility of losing his/her faith. This chapter also analysed Isaac's understanding of faith, of passing through 'darkness', and of the transformation which follows it, which can be regarded as the end of the whole process of the relationship with 'the negative' outlined in this study. From Isaac's descriptions, a profound connection between suffering and faith emerges.

Section IV.1. examined the nature of 'darkness', that is a condition of 'abandonment', in which one's faith wavers, and one is submerged by 'doubt and fear'. This doubt and fear refer to an original experience of anguish and confusion. 'Doubt', here, is not a cognitive, conceptual doubt *about* God, but a condition of inner division which worms its way through the mind of the creature whose faith wavers. It has a specific meaning in Isaac: it refers to doubting God's care for the suffering creature. This doubt is relational, because it suggests that God betrays a trust which has been granted to him; and it is existential, because this trust has been given to a God whom Isaac conceives as consolation and meaning. It suggests complete solitude in suffering, an absence of meaning, and a fear that suffering will hold sway forever over the self.

This understanding of 'doubt' sheds light on Isaac's understanding of 'faith', which is examined in section VI.2. For Isaac, faith does not merely coincide with the confession of faith, but alludes to a movement of entrustment and a condition of trust that oppose the relational and existential doubt described above. It implies entrusting oneself to God who is conceived as consolation, meaning, and care.

This does not mean that the confession of faith has no value in Isaac's eyes, but reveals a specific focus of Isaac, who connects the confession of faith to the

experience of *the human being* who, in his/her concrete existence, experiences faith-trust.

Isaac's focus on the connection between the creature's experience of him/herself and faith-trust already emerged during his description of entering the solitary life. This choice follows an act of entrustment which is born from one's perception of oneself as passible and mortal. It is from an experience of suffering that leads one to realise the nature of one's real, objective condition, marked by passibility and mortality, that one understands that what is at stake, when one speaks of God, is the meaning and consolation of existence. The birth of faith cannot be separated from the suffering implied in this experience. Suffering returns one to oneself, forcing one to contact one's creatural condition of limitation; this awakens one's need for entrustment – something that corresponds to the essential role of 'the negative' in Isaac's thought.

In the ascetic life, which is the process of encountering one's 'weakness' through encountering negation, this structure of experience recurs indefinitely. The encounter with negation distinctive of *askesis* can be interpreted as an attempt to create the conditions for keeping open, within the subject, the possibility of the self-giving of faith, as a remaining 'on the ridge' where existential entrustment can be discovered. This ultimately implies experiencing a 'despairing' of all objects and worldly knowledge, remaining alone before God. This forces one to contact one's naked creatural being. If many flee this experience, Isaac believes that he/she who decides to resist at the centre of this naked creatural being can discover the entrustment of faith and, through this, encounter God.

Within entrustment, in fact, something greater can appear, and one can experience what Isaac calls the "consolation of faith", which is the presence of the Power of God, the Spirit. This experience and the experience of entrustment are

contiguous in Isaac: the first takes the shape, for the subject, of a growth of trust and of a non-mental, experiential condition of certainty, which concerns God's care for one's suffering self. This certainty regarding one's non-abandonment to the destructive power of suffering alludes to 'theoria'. As seen in Chapter IV, 'theoria' begins with understanding God's Providence, which is care for the suffering self. This means acknowledging "God as God", in Isaac's words.

Isaac, then, conceives of faith-trust as a new way of knowing, which leads the creature to the 'knowledge' of God; as a new way of seeing, which gazes at what is hidden. Coherently, he describes faith as 'noetic', a term which bears witness to the breadth of his concept of reason (see Chapter II), which culminates in intuition, different from all cognitive or procedural ability. He understands this intuition as a capacity for faith, which gazes, through trust, at what is hidden.

This faith, which is existential entrustment to the Unseen, means, for Isaac, entrustment to the God of the Christian confession of faith. This Christian quality of Isaac's faith-trust emerges in two specific senses: first, the faith-trust can be discovered only through experiencing a passage through 'the negative' – the symbol of the cross speaks a language that is credible to the suffering self; secondly, in light of this experience, Christ demonstrates the possibility of this passage, which leads to what lies beyond it. The existential resonance of trust *within* the human being and the faith in Christ *of* the human being appear to be deeply connected in Isaac, in a way which is so immediate that it requires no explanation. In this sense, his understanding of faith not only remains Christian, but suggests that for him only the Christian God can withstand a confrontation with the experience of the suffering self. This way of looking at God, however, is born of the experience of the suffering self, and not merely of the confession of faith.

Although this faith has the power to dissipate ‘darkness’, the creature still encounters ‘darkness’ on his/her journey: according to Isaac, it can never be completely overcome. The way to pass through it, as with all other conditions of suffering, is by ‘bearing’ its weight. This is examined in section VI.3.

While, in other forms of suffering, desperation is due to aspects of the world, in ‘darkness’ this desperation is related to their Source. While, in other forms of suffering, it is possible to ‘bear’ while in connection with the horizon of God, here, it is precisely this horizon that fades away. Isaac understands ‘prayer’ as a form of ‘bearing’, in the sense of sustaining the weight of ‘the negative’ through connection with God and while oriented towards him. This provides the way through this suffering also.

In this condition, however, where the horizon of God wavers and one is exposed, alone, to the pressure of ‘the negative’, prayer becomes the creatural act which keeps open the possibility of God, confessing the need for a relationship with him despite a feeling of absence. In this sense, this ‘bearing’ is *the profoundest act of faith of the creature, a confession of trust stronger than every expression of trust.*

In confessing God as he who cares for the suffering self against any other visions of God that divisive doubt may insinuate, this act of loyalty to God is also an act of loyalty to one’s creatural self, exposed to suffering – these ‘loyalties’ are indivisible, in Isaac. This profoundest act of faith, in fact, is born from experiencing, listening to, and ‘bearing’ one’s condition of suffering, inhabiting, as always, in Isaac, the negation that one undergoes. This act of faith, then, contains no consolatory aspect, because it is simultaneous with one’s experience of lacking faith. It is this lack of faith itself that, when inhabited, urges the invocation of faith. The “consolation of faith”, that is the presence of God, is not a way of bypassing

this conflict. It is discovered, instead, *as Grace*, by the one who refused to flee from it.

In ‘darkness’, at times, even prayer is impossible. Isaac describes the creature who cannot utter words or make any gestures, but simply remains present, without leaving the cell, waiting. Even this mute resistance, however, this mere ‘remaining there’, confesses God, and, in a hidden way, constitutes an act of faith.

Through this naked act of faith, it is not only God who is confessed. Through it, one’s highest human dignity is also confessed, through the refusal to renounce consolation and meaning. Only the human being can preserve this meaning, preserving the love and memory of it, even through a silent waiting.

This ‘bearing’, therefore, in maintaining oneself open to a relationship, preserves a possible place for God’s self-giving, even in the deepest ‘darkness’. From this ‘darkness’, in fact, something new can emerge. This is examined in the section VI.4. Isaac refers to this event by speaking of a “germination”, a “transformation”, and a ‘birth’. It is similar to what occurs within a seed, which mysteriously becomes a plant, while it dwells under the ground, exposed to the changing wintry weather.

This ‘staying under’, that in this context evokes ‘bearing’, describes well what Isaac believes to be the distinctive place of the creature within this cosmos, with respect to God. One cannot possess God; one cannot force him to appear and be present. Faith is something else, in Isaac. It is not conceived as an unwavering certainty, but as a difficult way of knowledge. It is a knowledge other than knowledge, which with ‘noetic eyes’ contemplates the Mystery that can never be possessed. It is not a consolatory path, something that might be used to avoid contact with limitations. It is, instead, something which even includes the limitation

of an absence of trust. By accepting to inhabit even this creatural experience, one enters the mysterious relationship between the creature and the Creator.

It can even be stated that, for Isaac, the wavering, deficiency, and even the experience of an absence of faith play a foundational role in the full discovery of the nature of faith: they preserve, at the same time, the nature of God as mystery and the creatural condition of the human being. Presence, as it were, graciously emerges from the courage to encounter absence, and the “consolation of faith” from a trust that accepts the trial of ‘doubt’. The whole process of relationship with ‘the negative’, outlined in Isaac’s writings, finds fulfilment in this move. The “transformation” which follows is a matter of Grace and, at the same time, intimately one’s own.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

VII.1. MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the works of Isaac of Nineveh, a 7th century East-Syriac solitary monk and writer, the role of the limited, finite condition of human beings is central.

This study explored this issue through adopting a phenomenological and hermeneutical method, aiming to bring to light the experiences and dynamics of the inner life that Isaac describes. This was achieved through engaging in a close dialogue with the texts, examined in the original Syriac. Sociological and anthropological approaches to the themes central for Isaac have been deliberately put aside, in an attempt to listen to his own voice. This voice is born of living experience, and asks questions that arise from this.

Isaac does not provide a treatise in which he systematically lays out his main assumptions, key ideas, and theological conclusions. This apparently unsystematic approach is due to the fact that he is dealing with existence, in a constant dialogue with the problems of his readers. This study, therefore, entailed a continuous effort to connect, decipher, and bring to light ideas that a close textual approach reveals as intimately related, but that might not be immediately apparent from a more superficial reading of Isaac's *corpus*.

This study focussed on two essential issues in Isaac: his view of the human ontological condition, radically marked by passibility and finitude; and his understanding of the solitary life as the place where this ontological condition can be known, deciphered, and inhabited, through a process of relationship with it and with oneself. This implied considering Isaac's discourse on the quest for God *in*

light of human existence and of the questions arising from it. This quest, in Isaac, is intimately related to creatural suffering.

Given this analytical purpose, this study attempted to answer several questions that emerge from Isaac's *corpus*: first, how does Isaac conceive the creature's ontological condition and the vulnerability that characterises it? Second, how does he read the choice of the solitary life and the meaning of *askesis* in relation to this condition? Third, what is the role of suffering in awakening the creature to the problem of his/her existence? Fourth, how does Isaac understand God, in relation to the ontological problem of suffering? Fifth, how does Isaac describe the creature's passing through suffering, and how can this be bearable? Sixth, how does one remain whole, during suffering? Seventh, what meaning does faith assume for the creature who passes through suffering? Lastly, can this suffering be transformative, and if so, how?

These issues have been touched upon by previous scholars¹¹⁵⁴, but only in passing or as part of wider studies devoted to the whole of Isaac's thought. No systematic analysis of these themes in Isaac has been undertaken previously, so this thesis consisted primarily of the analysis of original texts. Only recently have hermeneutical readings of Isaac begun to appear, so the situation is quite different from that related to studies on other essential Christian writers, such as Augustine in the Latin West or Gregory of Nyssa in the Greek-speaking East.

By examining these problems, also in reference to the writings and authors who influenced Isaac (especially Paul, Evagrius, John the Solitary, the Pseudo-Macarius, and the *Lausiac History*), his specific understanding of the human being

¹¹⁵⁴ Particularly by Hausherr, Louf, Chialà, and Bettolo: see Chapter I and previous chapters.

and of God took shape, together with his original view of the role of ‘the negative’ in human existence. These still have something to say to the contemporary reader.

VII.2. THEMES, PROBLEMS, AND MAIN ARGUMENTS

VII. 2.1. *THE WORLD AND HUMAN EXISTENCE*

After a first introductory chapter, Chapter II examined the ontological condition of the creature, the problems it raises, and its relationship to the choice of the desert. It showed that Isaac conceives of the human condition as marked by structural limitations, which make of it a condition of suffering. These concern the world and the human being him/herself.

‘World’ in Isaac means material reality – limited, frail, mutable, and corruptible. It also indicates the totality of the passions that, despite being inner reactions, are closely related to the limited structure of the real. ‘World’ also designates this *katastasis*, an Antiochene concept that indicates the current state of creation as opposed to its future, eschatological state. Lastly, the term ‘world’ alludes to the secular life, conceived as an unavoidable immersion in the ‘world’ as material, limited, and transient. ‘The world’, therefore, in Isaac, appears to be a problematic reality, which is ultimately a source of suffering for the creature.

Also, the human being, who lives in *this* ‘world’, is marked by frailty, vulnerability, and finitude. Creatural vulnerability is, first of all, connected to the suffering and mortal body, that is directly related to the material world. Isaac sees a close connection between suffering and mortality: he understands suffering as a death *in fieri*.

An essential element of Isaac’s understanding of the creature’s condition is his belief that the creature was originally created mortal. Instead of looking at sin as the cause of mortality (as Paul, for instance, does), he regards exposure to death

as the cause of sin. This symbolises an idea that plays a fundamental role in his thought: ‘the negative’, that in this study indicates all that is deficient, insufficient, and imperfect (not exclusively in a moral but primarily in an ontological sense) *precedes*, in the life of human beings, what is positive. The idea of a creature originally being created mortal indicates that, at the root of human experience, lies, not ontological perfection, but a state of imperfection.

Isaac however does not believe that sin merely arises from this ontological condition of limitation. This condition gives rise to the passions (from which sin derives) only when it is feared. Isaac interprets fear as the most original passion, from which all of the other passions develop. He reads it as a reaction to the vulnerable condition of the limited body, exposed to suffering and death. This ultimately implies regarding the passions and sin as phenomena that are intimately related to an original condition of bodily vulnerability. Although Isaac believes that, while one’s condition of bodily vulnerability is intranscendable, fear is not, and also that, while the body is naturally passionate, the soul is naturally non-passional, he is nevertheless convinced that fear is unavoidable to some degree. These reflections are essential for understanding how Isaac interprets the birth of the passions.

Isaac’s first approach to this theme links the birth of the passions to sensible perception. Contact with objects provokes a desire for the transient, marked by immediacy and a lack of reflective mediation, from which the passions are born.

This first level of reading the problem, however, is insufficient for understanding Isaac’s thought. He believes, in fact, that the passions are ultimately rooted in a flight from one’s original condition of vulnerability. This flight involves the role of ‘knowledge’ (i.e. discursive reason, that is a function of the soul), that, under the push of fear, attempts to protect one from adverse conditions. The flight from encountering vulnerability occurs when this ‘knowledge’ unites with the

immediate desire for pleasure, distinctive of the body. The passions are born from this movement, so that they clearly take the shape of defensive moves, efforts to defend the self from a condition of suffering that is *an ontological problem*.

The soul is the noblest aspect of the creature, ontologically open to God. It is characterised by desire, the irascible power, vitality, composite rationality (i.e. discursive rationality), and intuitive rationality (i.e. the noetic faculty, often called the ‘intellect’). However, Isaac conceives the soul as being also ontologically limited. The soul is not immortal, i.e. it is radically creatural. It is marked by ‘inclination’, which prevents the soul from turning to the good in an unchanging way. It is receptive and, if this makes it possible to receive God, it also makes it possible to be sensitive to the body’s vulnerability, and therefore to become subject to the passions through fear.

Subjection to the passions is the specific form of suffering of the soul. This emerges from several images that Isaac employs to describe it: illness, division, and entrance into a space that is not its own. This space, which is the non-passional soul, suffers when invaded by the passions, which Isaac describes as being other than the soul, just like the body and its sensations. This last interpretation of the passions made it possible to draw near to a specific problem that is distinctive of Isaac’s thought.

By describing the passions as ontologically other than the soul, in whose receptive space they occur – so that they ‘enter’, are perceived, and cause suffering –, Isaac is pointing to a difference, within the creature, between his/her subjective and objective dimensions, respectively. Through these terms, the possibility of making oneself the object of one’s reflection is indicated. It means the possibility of saying ‘you’ to oneself, of ‘seeing’ oneself, of developing a distance from experience, i.e. of developing a reflective attitude towards oneself. For Isaac, the

existence of this possibility is so transparent that he does not need to justify it theoretically.

The soul, in this light, is the element of the self that can never become completely a 'you', an object, suggesting that Isaac regards the soul as the place of the deepest belonging to oneself as a subject. The passions act by darkening this subjective dimension of the self. By doing so, they create suffering.

By speaking of a body/soul and passional body/non-passional soul distinction, therefore, Isaac does not point to a dichotomy or opposition between the parts of oneself. Instead, he attempts to describe the creature's experience of him/herself. He alludes to the possibility of developing a relationship with oneself, describing the form of suffering distinctive of passionality as preventing one from entering this relationship. Only when one's subjective dimension is not darkened by any object can one fully belong to oneself, adhering to oneself. Speaking of a non-passional soul alludes to this. It presupposes the capacity for distancing and being in a relationship with one's objective dimension: the body, its sensations and experiences, and the passions.

From this analysis, it has become clear that Isaac conceives of the human condition as radically marked by limitations and suffering. Looking for God by choosing the solitary life means entering a quest for liberation from suffering. He describes the discovery of faith and the choice of the desert as arising from an intimate experience of suffering, in which one perceives the world as corruptible and oneself as mortal. From this experience, a questioning about the destiny of one's 'soul' (i.e. of oneself as a subject) develops.

Faith in God *does not precede, but follows this experience of suffering*. It arises from one's confrontation with the concrete problem of existence. One's awakening to God is intimately related to one's awakening to oneself. Although

also, before this experience God's existence was formally acknowledged, it is only *in the light of this experience of suffering* that God is believed to be the source of consolation of suffering and to be this consolation itself, i.e. understood in his true nature.

The phenomenology of this experience points to another essential element of Isaac's understanding of the inner life, which continuously recurs in his writings and throughout this study: the fundamental role of *the perception* of 'the negative'. This idea means that, in Isaac, every quest for fulfilment, perfection, and completeness is born only from and after *the perception* of what is marked by unfulfillment, imperfection, and incompleteness. Isaac firmly believes that 'the negative', that in the form of exposure to suffering and death ontologically precedes all positive elements of existence, should be perceived and acknowledged first. Only when perceived and acknowledged can something else emerge from it – never, however, as something which is deserved or given for granted. One should enter, instead, the risk of the perception of 'the negative' and accept being challenged by it.

In the case of the choice of the solitary life, the experience of suffering and perception of 'the negative' which awakens the creature to his/her 'soul'/self, inaugurates the possibility of saying 'you' to oneself, of a reflective attitude, which 'sees' oneself as limited and mortal. The discovery of this reflective attitude begins to deconstruct one's immediate, automatic adherence to the body and the passions that obfuscates the possibility of belonging to oneself. The more this relational attitude is found, the more one can discover a way to belong to oneself. In Isaac's categories, taken from John the Solitary, by leaving aside the life 'at the level of the body', one enters the life 'at the level of the soul', that means the life of *askesis*. This birth of a reflective attitude, however, should not be understood as a mere

exercise in reflection. It originates *within an experience of suffering* which involves one at an existential level.

It is in the light of this experience that the human being leaves the world and enters the desert. At first glance, this action is understood to be an attempt to transcend one's limited and suffering condition. On closer inspection, however, it appears that Isaac is profoundly aware that the limited condition of the creature *cannot be transcended*, in the current *katastasis*. Isaac calls this condition 'weakness' (*mhilutā*), a term which has a technical meaning in his *corpus*: it refers to the ontological creatural condition of exposure to suffering, of body and soul (the body's passibility, subjection to death, the limitations of the soul, and the passions).

This condition does not disappear when individuals enter the ascetic life, which causes a problem regarding the relationship between one's desire to transcend limitations and their factual, unremovable existence. To this issue, a further issue is added: Isaac states that God 'desires' that those who search for him should experience suffering. Why so, if God is the source of consolation and consolation itself? The solitary life constitutes a practical deciphering of these problems.

VII.2.2. *THE SOLITARY LIFE: AN INITIATORY PROCESS AND AN ENCOUNTER WITH SUFFERING*

Chapter III examined these problems by analysing Isaac's understanding of the solitary life as a condition which implies a contact with suffering. Although Irénée Hausherr alluded to the fundamental role of suffering in Isaac, and Sabino Chialà and André Louf highlighted the value of difficult conditions in his thought, no thorough study of this theme has yet been conducted.

Isaac reads the solitary life as an immersion into the mystery of suffering and a practical deciphering of its meaning, as an *initiatory process*, where one inevitably encounters the problem of existence: one's creatural vulnerability. He believes that encountering God is profoundly related to encountering one's creatural self. What is at stake in the solitary life is something far deeper than every quest for moral perfection.

Isaac describes the solitary life as marked by a conscious contact with suffering. His strong terminology, vivid descriptions, and attention to the impact of suffering on the creature show a profound understanding of its destructive power and its central role. This role cannot be reduced to the self-infliction of pain or expiation of sins, but is far more fundamental. Isaac reads it as an opportunity to encounter the problem of existence: through suffering, a profound contact with 'the negative' occurs. The solitary life, in this perspective, is not an entrance into the peace and light of God, but in the first instance means crossing through difficulties, disharmony, and aporiae, which bring to light the problem of existence. Due to the delicate nature of this quest, relationships of trust which guide and protect the creature are essential on this journey.

The fact that encountering one's vulnerability is at stake in the solitary life emerges from Isaac's taking Lazarus, the martyrs, and Job as figures of the suffering solitary. In this way, Isaac connects the solitary life with the life of all suffering human beings. Isaac speaks of a universal possibility of human existence, which transcends the boundaries of the monastic condition. This condition is conceived as a space in which the problem of existence can be deciphered in a rigorous, embodied way.

Isaac's attention to Job demonstrates how he conceives of 'the negative' as structurally connected to the question about God's reliability: it is God who puts to

the test both Job and the suffering solitary. In this way, Isaac poses a problem of theodicy, with which he deals, however, *from the perspective of the sufferer*, i.e. focussing on the experience of the subject rather than on abstract reflection on God. This problem, Isaac believes, can be answered only on an existential ground. In this perspective, he interprets the process of *askesis* as the opportunity to learn in one's own flesh who one's God is and, ultimately, that he does not abandon the suffering creature. This, however, is discovered only by passing through suffering, and by discovering *how* to pass through it.

Suffering, in fact, awakens and puts to question the creature, at the same time forcing him/her to face his/her vulnerable self. Suffering urges the creature to look for the *internal attitude* to keep before it. Finding this *internal attitude* is more important than any search for external solutions. It is also the only way to discover how to withstand the encounter with God. God 'desires' that the creature knows suffering only because it is a path to these discoveries. In this sense, it is a "gift" and an "honour".

In order to pass through the process outlined above, certain human beings choose the desert, which in its utter nakedness forces the creature to face the problem of existence in a very direct, stark way. The solitary choice, therefore, is born from a desire to find a solution to the existential, universal problem of human beings.

VII.2.3. *INTERPRETING ASKESIS: 'PRACTICE' AS ENCOUNTERING CREATORIAL VULNERABILITY*

Chapter IV explored several crucial concepts in Isaac's understanding of the ascetic life, that he receives from his tradition. All of these concepts are intimately connected to his understanding of the solitary life as an encounter with suffering

and a quest for a solution to the problem of existence. This, however, is not always apparent for a contemporary reader, unfamiliar with these concepts. This chapter attempted to bring some of these connections to light.

Isaac, like Evagrius, conceives of *askesis*, or ‘practice (*pulhānā*)’ as the necessary pre-condition for encountering God in ‘theoria’. Isaac also interprets this in the light of John the Solitary’s idea of a life ‘on the level of the soul’, which differs from a life ‘on the level of the Spirit’. *Askesis* or ‘practice’ is the time for exercising the soul, i.e. *the human being as a subject*. Therefore, Isaac does not understand this time as the mere application of ascetic techniques or practices (in the plural), but as a complex process, that he compares to the ‘tillage’ of the ground. It is a work of the subject on him/herself, which requires commitment, effort, discernment, and patience. The more one enters the ascetic process, passing from an effort mainly related to the body (the ‘practice of the body’, such as fasting or the office) to an effort mainly related to the soul (the ‘practice of the soul’, such as discernment of the hidden passions), the more the need to be actively present and awake as a subject increases. Isaac connects this movement from the outer to the inner to the fact of gradually accessing ‘contemplation’, that he interprets according to Evagrian distinctions (‘second natural contemplation’; ‘first natural contemplation’, which for him involves the contemplation of the angels, not of the primordial *noes*, as in Evagrius; the ultimate form of contemplation, the contemplation of God).

Contemplation, in Isaac, is not a matter of discovering new, deep ‘spiritual’ contents, but is connected to a revelation of *meaning*. This is primarily the disclosure of a *meaning-for-oneself*, which concerns personal existence. If ‘second natural contemplation’ involves the revelation of the inner aspect of things and of God’s Providence in creation (i.e. God’s care for it), the discovery of this care

begins with discovering God's care *'for us'*, which is acknowledged only when one accesses *the meaning of one's journey* through the ascetic process. This ultimately refers to finding an answer to the problem of theodicy: through 'theoria', one begins to see God's Providence for oneself, acting through both positive and negative events. 'Knowledge' or contemplation, therefore, emerges *from within* experience *as the meaning* of experience, and is never independent from consciousness and existence.

Askesis – understood as the initiatory process of contacting suffering and as the work of the subject on him/herself – therefore plays a fundamental role in the acquiring of knowledge. It cannot be read as a mere prerequisite for entering contemplation. It is its very foundation, its root.

'First natural contemplation' implies subtler revelations of meaning. Isaac does not describe these in detail, but does describe in detail the inner condition of the creature who, having passed through 'practice', accesses this contemplation. In this study, this condition is described as 'integrity', an expression which alludes to an internal experience of oneself, marked by groundedness and rootedness, a capacity for remaining whole and non-fragmented in the encounter with perceptions, images, and passional reactions. It is the possibility of inhabiting one's subjective pole. Isaac describes this in many ways: perceiving one's light, beauty, or splendour; accessing the 'nakedness of the intellect'; finding 'health', 'soundness', or 'stability' of the soul; discovering its 'freedom'; and accessing impassibility (or purity-limpidity). It can be found only through 'practice', whose essential value emerges once again.

This condition always remains creatural. Isaac describes it as being the "place of God", or the place that God can 'overshadow', as the Spirit did with Mary. These images allude to an encounter between *incommensurable alterities*: the

naked creaturality of the human, and the Omnipotent God. This incommensurability of creature and Creator provides the foundation of their encounter, and therefore the limited nature of the creature plays, here, a fundamental role. The mind, in this state, is “empty” of objects, but *this does not imply that one is empty of oneself*. One finds this state, in fact, after having passed through a personal history, through ‘practice’, which alone *structures* a subject as able to be empty. Speaking of the central value of ‘practice’, then, implies speaking of the central value of one’s creatural existence.

‘Integrity’ also alludes to an accomplished relational capacity. It is both the capacity for being open to the manifestation of the real in ‘theoria’, and of concrete relationships. Both of these imply that the passions, that Isaac describes as “dense substances” which alter the perception of the real by blinding one’s sight, recede. Isaac, therefore, closely links this relational capacity to the ability to belong to oneself, to dwell within, rooted and grounded (‘integrity’). Only finding this state makes it possible not to manipulate the other but to let the other be (if *by Grace* it wishes to appear). Also, this capacity for relationship can be accessed only through ‘practice’.

In this sense, ‘practice’ has an essential value in acquiring knowledge, because it creates the possibility of encountering the real and the Truth, which, in Isaac, is ultimately God. This involves one’s flesh and blood, one’s existence. Truth, in Isaac, emerges as a *Truth-for-oneseif*, which is intimately related to personal existence. ‘Practice’ *structures* and *forges* the internal place in which Truth can be welcomed.

How does this essential value of ‘practice’ relate to Isaac’s understanding of the solitary life as a place where contact with one’s ontological vulnerability can occur?

Isaac reads the exercise of the soul/subject in *askesis* as an exercise of ‘natural knowledge’. This should be understood primarily as an exercise of relationship of one’s subjective pole with other elements of one’s being, which are ‘seen’ and become objects of reflection. This continuous relationship with oneself allows one to place at a distance the immediate adherence to stimuli and the passions, leading to ‘integrity’, understood as a profound capacity of dwelling within. This exercise, however, *is not merely mental*. Instead, it involves a living, concrete contact with the body’s limitations, sensations, passions, etc. As in the original experience of suffering that causes one’s entrance into the solitary life, also now *this exercise involves encountering one’s limited condition*.

This, however, remains insufficient to grasp the connection of *askesis* with the encountering of suffering. This emerges with further clarity from Isaac’s understanding of *askesis* as obedience to God’s ‘commandments’. By this, he means the concrete actions and rules of the solitary life (poverty, silence, fasting, the office, etc.). These have a limited value according to Isaac, and he reads this limited value in the light of Paul’s understanding of the ‘law’ (Romans; Galatians).

Isaac, however, does not put ‘commandments’ and ‘laws’ aside, but instead holds them in high regard. Why so?

For Isaac, following the ‘commandments’ is an attempt to correspond to the radical nature of his God – the vertical, transcendent Mystery who, from his utter transcendence, bends down towards creatures that are radically other than him. *This* God demands that the human being undergoes a test of virtue of the same stature, which leads him/her beyond virtue. The radical nature of the ‘commandments’ of the ascetic life does not aim at ‘virtue’, but at passing beyond virtue or ‘dying’ to virtue – the only way to obey the deepest commandment: the love of God and human beings. This dimension beyond *askesis*, however, is discovered *only through*

askesis. Not in the sense of performing something, which would remain merely a ‘work’ but, rather, in the sense that it is through confronting the difficulties of *askesis* that oneself as a subject is awakened and challenged, through *the labour and exercise that ‘the law’ provokes* in oneself. This subject alone, Isaac believes evoking Pauline reflection, is capable of faith, which is greater than ‘works’. Again, the role of the ‘the negative’ is essential here.

However, at stake here is not only limitation, but also something more radical: the negation of oneself. *Askesis* is not a quest for sobriety and harmonious living, but implies encountering the radical ‘negative’ that lies at the base of creatural existence: finitude and passibility, which negation reveals. It is a matter of contacting one’s creatural being in its most naked form, and those reactions that encountering this problem triggers. It is *this encounter* which *structures* and *forges* the subject, during the ascetic process.

From this perspective, ‘practice’ in Isaac takes on a precise shape: it involves encountering the problem of existence, i.e. one’s ontological frailty; encountering the passions which arise in reaction to this original condition; searching for a relationship other than the passional with one’s intranscendable vulnerability (‘integrity’). What is at stake in *askesis* is not immediately a quest for perfection, but facing and inhabiting the problem of human existence. If ‘perfection’ can be found, this is related to this inhabiting.

VII.2.4. ‘WEAKNESS’: BEING A HUMAN

Chapter V examined ‘weakness (*mḥilutā*)’ and the process of relationship with it. Isaac employs this term to refer to the fact of *being a human*.

Mḥilutā does not indicate, primarily, human ‘weaknesses’ (in the plural), a condition of moral deficiency, or a state of psychological frailty, as the common

contemporary use of the term ‘weakness’ might suggest. It indicates, instead, the *ontological* condition of human beings who are exposed to suffering, finitude, and mortality, as outlined in Chapter II. Isaac demonstrated this clearly in one of his *Centuries*: he describes the experience of a martyr who, whilst under torture, did not feel any pain, being sustained by the Spirit, but who, when he finally *perceived* pain, stated that this occurred *so that he might know that he is a human being*. In the same way, all of the difficult conditions that the creature encounters can make this ‘weakness’ known, in an embodied way: sickness, involuntary afflictions, the violence of the passions, or the labours of *askesis*. Isaac insists on the *moment of perception*: only when perceived can suffering fulfil this function. Isaac reads this experience in the light of Paul’s affirmations in 2 Corinthians, where Paul mentions a mysterious ‘thorn’ that was given to him by God, which caused a powerful contact with his ‘weakness’ (*krihutā*, in the Peshitta).

Isaac conceives of all conditions of suffering and negation as opportunities for discovering one’s creatural ‘weakness’. These are dialectic elements which, like every expression of ‘the negative’ in Isaac, awaken and challenge the subject, urging him/her to create a relationship with him/herself. More specifically, here, they urge a relationship with the root of the problem of existence: one’s ontological ‘weakness’. From this study, it emerges that this acknowledgement is possible only through contact with one’s suffering self. The solitary life provides the space in which this contact occurs and a relationship with one’s suffering self can be learnt. Isaac refers to this process by the phrase ‘knowledge of weakness’.

This ‘knowledge’ is found only through encountering the limitation/negation of the self. Isaac refers to this experience by using the concept of ‘trial (*nesyōnā*)’, the essential role of which was first highlighted by André Louf. Although Louf focused mainly on a particular aspect of ‘weakness’ (one’s

insufficiencies in *askesis*, which he examined in relation to God's Grace), rather than on the more fundamental 'weakness' as an ontological problem, he correctly states that 'weakness' can be realised only within 'temptations' (the Syriac term *nesyōnā* means both 'trial' and 'temptation').

Isaac conceives of trials/temptations as involving negative conditions, the suffering subject, and the 'horizon of God', i.e. the future of consolation that belongs to God alone, and that God alone *is*. This horizon is other than the present, but this alterity makes it possible for the present to be oriented towards meaning. This perspective leads Isaac to read suffering as a transformative, initiatory event.

This process takes place within a relational context: it is a training that Grace effects, which involves the subjective feeling of its presence and absence. Isaac describes it by drawing on multiple sources (the Syriac Pseudo-Macarian *corpus*, Abba Isaiah, Evagrius, the *Lausiac History*, Luke's Gospel, and Paul), and interprets it as being effected by the 'Power (*ḥaylā*)' of God, that is the Holy Spirit. As in the case of the martyr mentioned above, one's 'weakness' is perceived when this 'Power' (or 'strength') journeys afar and one feels oneself subject to 'changes (*šuhlāpe*)' (i.e. the alternation of positive and negative inner states) and 'abandonment (*meštābqānutā*)', often due to pride. These experiences are intimately related to creatural existence in this *katastasis*, and will never end completely. It is possible, however, to develop a relationship with them, which implies finding a relationship with the 'weakness' that they reveal. Again, this can be discovered only by passing through them: they possess a vital value.

Isaac conceptualises the process of contacting and 'knowing' one's 'weakness' as the process of 'being made humble', or 'humiliation' (*mukākā*). The term *mukākā* in Syriac bears both meanings, and both translations are employed in this study. Contemporary sensibility often tends to dismiss the concept of

‘humiliation’, which is usually interpreted as involving abuse and injustice, as well as being wounded by these. The concept of ‘being made humble’ would have the advantage of pointing to the transformative nature of the process and to its ultimate aim, which is humility (*makikutā*). Referring to this transformative aim is essential, which is why ‘being made humble’ is a translated phrase that is frequently used throughout this study. Dismissing the term ‘humiliation’ can be an oversimplification, however, because this risks downplaying the role of what is essential in Isaac’s phenomenology of encountering ‘weakness’, which is suffering. This can easily lead to forgetting the nature of the problem of existence, which lies at the root of Isaac’s reflection.

Suffering, moreover, as in the case of Christ, can also include abuse and injustice. From Isaac’s writings, it emerges that the difference between ‘humiliation’ as annihilation and ‘humiliation’ as ‘being made humble’ is not primarily connected to outer events (although there are abusive attitudes that Isaac definitely criticises) but, rather, to *how* the subject passes through these events, i.e. to his/her relationship with the conditions of suffering. This suggests that accessing the second possibility (‘humiliation’ as ‘being made humble’) is related to *how structured and whole* the subject is who encounters suffering. Isaac conceives of the solitary life as the place where one can discover this ‘how’: it is a matter of finding the *internal attitude* to cultivate within suffering.

‘Humiliation/being made humble’ can be experienced in both the body and soul. In both cases, Isaac reads this as a making contact with one’s creatural self.

The ‘being made humble’ of the body, in Isaac, is more original, in the sense that it connects the creature to his/her most original form of vulnerability, which is physical in nature. Isaac describes this ‘being humbled’ of the body as taking place through ascetic practices, but also through weariness, illness, and the difficulties of

solitude, which may all play a similar role. It is a matter of deeply adhering to one's frail, suffering body, of a descent *towards and through the body*, by inhabiting its creatural state. Isaac believes that this can be a source of protection for the soul itself, in the sense that this deep adherence to oneself as creatural which occurs through the body has the power to unify the mental sphere. This emerges with force from Isaac's descriptions of fasting, that he reads as an experience that connects one with oneself as hungry and needy, leading one to inhabit an internal 'place of hunger'. Physical *askesis*, in Isaac, therefore, fulfils this fundamental function: it leads one to adhere to one's creatural 'weakness', in an experiential, embodied way.

The 'being made humble' of the soul usually refers to repentance, which Isaac interprets as contacting one's creatural status by seeing oneself in truth. This implies a capacity to perceive one's inner state and feel suffering for it. This makes of this 'descent' of the soul towards its real state something that is less immediate than the physical descent of the body. The structure of the two experiences, however, is the same, in the sense that repentance is also used to contact one's creatural condition, which is limited and imperfect: the humbling vision of one's true self re-connects the subject to his/her creatural being.

This 'humiliation/being made humble' by accepting the contact with one's creatural self, however, is not automatic. Suffering can be a source of both unification and disintegration, depending on *how* one enters into it. Instead of 'being made humble', one can react to the experience of suffering (that should ideally favour contact with oneself) by fleeing into a myriad of passional flights, that are defensive reactions against the experience of oneself as vulnerable. Of these defences, the most dangerous is pride, since pride has the power to pull one away *completely* from contact with oneself. It is a refusal and bypassing of one's creatural status.

This loss of contact with oneself radically undermines the possibility of a relationship with God, because this relationship *is impossible if there is no subject that is able to be in a relationship*. First, one loses contact with oneself, and *then* one “falls away from God, like a dry leaf falls from a tree”. The fact of losing contact with oneself as creatural leads to a gradual loss of contact with reality – something that can even create a mental imbalance. This loss of mental balance, that Isaac vividly describes in his *corpus*, is ultimately rooted in an ontological misunderstanding: a misunderstanding concerning one’s ontological condition, which is creatural in nature. It takes the form of a refusal of ‘practice’, of its ‘laws’ and ‘rules’, which, by limiting the subject, would both protect and force him/her to discover his/her creatural status. Again, ‘practice’ as a path towards adherence to the ‘boundary of the creatures’, as Isaac calls it, is essential: by delimiting this space, it makes it possible for the creature to abide in a ‘place of his/her own’. This ‘place’, in this way, can have an ‘above’ (God), and a ‘below’ (the demonic universe), which no longer invades the space of the subject.

If it is possible to pass through suffering without either being submerged by its weight or fleeing into the passional defences, this is related to finding *a specific attitude* within it. This is what in this study has often been described as finding *how* to be in a relationship with suffering, *how* to sail on the “rough sea of stillness”, and *how* to remain whole within difficulties. Finding this *inner attitude* is related to finding the way to a form of ‘humiliation’, which makes the creature humble rather than destroying him/her. In this study, the phrase ‘bearing suffering’ is used to refer to this attitude and the exercise of its quest.

Through this concept, which Isaac expresses in several ways (in particular, the verbs *sbal*, *saibar*, *ʔ’en*, and *ħamsen*), Isaac does not allude to mere resistance. Resistance and strength are necessarily implied in this attitude. ‘Bearing’, however,

refers to something deeper and wider, which is related to *perceiving* the full weight of suffering, while also enduring it. It implies placing oneself *under* the weight of suffering, *below* this weight, while *remaining perceptive*, and sustaining this weight. It implies remaining in contact with one's negative condition, dwelling in the only 'low place' from which this suffering can pass upon oneself without fragmenting and shattering oneself.

Positioning oneself in this way implies great suffering, because *it implies accepting being fully in relationship* with all that is experienced and with oneself, challenged by a negation which continually exposes one to the revelation of one's 'weakness'. The role of 'perception' is essential in this attitude, and it is this *perceiving* that makes it possible for this attitude to be *relational*, open to the suffering self. In this sense, although involving strength and endurance, 'bearing' is never a move of power, because what it faces is a vulnerability and 'weakness' which is intimately one's own. This 'bearing' is the maximum expression of the exercise of the relationship with oneself, distinctive of 'practice'. It implies *remaining in a relationship with one's suffering self*, whatever that may be.

The "perseverant sitting" in the cell is the symbol of this 'bearing', of one's patiently 'staying there', in contact with 'the negative'. Even blasphemy and vainglory, in this perspective, become a path towards God, when 'borne' and inhabited: they are the "perfect practice of God", in Isaac's words. The core of 'practice', in this light, does not consist of merely avoiding the passions, but in learning to remain firm and receptive, even in their midst. This involves accepting to remain at the centre of a conflict, between opposing forces, *without removing this conflict*. Isaac conceives of this inhabiting of conflict as the condition within which a transformation can mysteriously occur.

This capacity for inhabiting conflict and negativity is the accomplishment of ‘practice’. It is no accident that, in creatures capable of this, as Isaac writes, “knowledge enters” and “dwells”. These creatures, whom Isaac describes as crucified, “inhale life from within death”. They do not remove the cross but, rather, inhabit it, having a relationship with consolation and life *from there* – from the place of the cross, the place of conflict. ‘Remaining there’ in this way, in connection with one’s suffering self and with the horizon of consolation and meaning of God, *without using this horizon to avoid the conflict*, is described by Isaac as the deepest form of creatural prayer, that he conceives as an expression of ‘bearing’.

This is, then, the essential intuition that lies at the heart of all of Isaac’s writings: suffering and ‘weakness’ can be ‘borne’ and inhabited. There is a way for the creature not to flee from his/her creaturalty – even when this is difficult, unpleasant, and painful. It is possible not to abandon one’s creatural place.

This ‘bearing’ reverses the flight into the passional defences which attempts to remove one’s original vulnerability. This creatural vulnerability, through ‘bearing’, can be ‘taken on’. This ‘taking on’ marks one’s entrance into ‘integrity’, and Isaac reads humility, which is the goal of the process of ‘humiliation/being made humble’, as the accomplished expression of ‘integrity’. This humility is always a gift but, at the same time, blossoms from the process of ‘knowledge of weakness’, as something intimately one’s own. It can be accessed only by a subject that has been *forged* and *structured* by the process of confrontation with ‘weakness’, which involves personal existence.

Isaac reads *this* humility born from ‘bearing’ as being both an accomplished relational capacity and as a capacity for remaining whole within negation.

The fact that Isaac reads humility as an accomplished relational capacity emerges from his description of the humble person, who is capable of a relationship

even with evil human beings, wild animals, and demons. This trait of Isaac's thought impresses modern readers due to the depth of compassion that it implies. This study showed what the root of this depth of compassion is: by finding an *internal relationship* with 'the negative' and with one's suffering self, one discovers a way to be in relationship with 'the negative' outside and *with the suffering self of others*. The fear that lies at the root of the passional reactions, then, recedes and so, with it, the fear of the other. The creature is able to tame wild animals because he/she has first tamed what is within. The origin of the well-known compassionate attitude of Isaac is *the experience of suffering and the quest for a relationship with it*. It is the fruit of an initiatory process, the tough process of relationship with oneself.

Humility appears from this process as *the only reliable defence* against the destructiveness experienced within suffering, other than all passional defences. It is real protection – the capacity for remaining *naked, but whole* within shattering. In this sense, Isaac describes it as the capacity to dwell within oneself, to belong to oneself, despite everything – it is the accomplishment of 'practice'. Being in relationship and being capable of this collectedness are intimately related.

Only *after* one has accessed this condition can something new appear: God's Grace manifests itself – it is the full access to 'theoria'. Previously, Grace remains at a distance (albeit always ontologically present). This implies a specific vision of Grace, which is not conceived as a consolatory element in existence, which would prevent the creature from entering the difficult journey of searching for a relationship with him/herself. This also suggests a specific view of the relationship between the human being and God that acknowledges the central value of personal experience and the role of the subject within this relationship. Isaac regards this role in a specific light, however: the personal experience involved here is not a generic

idea of experience, but human experience marked by the challenge of suffering, by the questioning which arises from it.

VII.2.5. FAITH IN 'DARKNESS'

The dynamics described above find their maximum expression in an experience that Isaac calls 'darkness (*amṭānā; heškā; hešōkā*)'. 'Darkness' implies passing through what Isaac considers to be the most extreme form of suffering for human beings: a possible loss of faith. This experience is examined in Chapter VI and concludes this analysis. In Isaac's descriptions of this experience, the depth of his understanding of 'bearing' emerges sharply.

In 'darkness', which is a form of 'abandonment', one's faith wavers, and one experiences fear and doubt. Fear and doubt, however, are not merely cognitive, but states of utter inner prostration. Fear is, here, a form of anguish, and doubt is not a doubt of a discursive kind but, as the Syriac word *pligutā* (doubt/division) suggests, refers to a state of inner division. This doubt/division, which opposes faith, assumes a precise form: *it doubts God's care for the suffering creature*. It is, therefore, a relational and existential doubt, in the sense that it attacks the relationship with God, suggesting that he betrays one's trust in him, and that therefore existence has no meaning, because its meaning, which is God, is unreliable, non-credible. This implies experiencing suffering as something that will never be consoled – a state of extreme solitude. Isaac calls this a "noetic Gehenna".

Just as this fear and doubt are not merely cognitive or discursive in nature, and involve a lack of trust, so also the faith that they undermine is not cognitive and discursive, but deeply related to trust. Isaac does not employ the term *tawditā*, 'confession of faith', to describe this faith, tending to use the term *haymānutā* instead, that also points to an attitude of entrustment. He also often uses *tuklānā*,

‘trust’, openly stating that the faith which dissipates fear and doubt is only this ‘faith of entrustment’, while correct doctrinal statements, which can remain merely exterior, are insufficient for this task. This does not imply that Isaac attributes no value to the confession of faith, but shows that he is primarily interested in *its place of origin*, which is the connection of the faith-trust with human beings’ existence, put to the test by suffering. Faith as entrustment concerns trusting God as the one who cares for the suffering self.

This fundamental value of human beings’ suffering in connection to faith first emerged when Isaac described the experience that led the creature to leave the world. This originated from an intimate experience of suffering (perceiving oneself as limited and mortal), from which faith in God, as the source of consolation, emerged. Already in this initial experience it appears that Isaac reads the emergence of faith as being related to trust and to a desire for consolation and meaning. It was only through inhabiting this experience of suffering that one realised that what is at stake when one speaks of God is the consolation and meaning of existence. One discovered, then, almost forcefully, existential entrustment to this God. As always in Isaac, these discoveries are born from an experience of ‘the negative’. Faith itself, in its deepest sense, is born from the experience of ‘the negative’.

Isaac reads the initiatory process of *askesis* as the attempt continually to re-enter this possibility: it is the attempt to remain ‘on the ridge’, where existential entrustment can be discovered, through the fading away of all mundane consolations. This occurs through accepting the encounter with one’s most naked creatural being, which is the only place where God can be encountered. When this encounter occurs, one’s faith-trust transgresses into its fulfilment: a condition of inner certainty *of a non-discursive kind*, that Isaac calls “the consolation of faith”.

This “consolation of faith” is related to becoming ‘persuaded’ of God’s care, and Isaac interprets it as being the presence of the Spirit itself, the ‘Power’ of God.

In Isaac, this is another way of alluding to the passage from ‘practice’ to ‘theoria’, in the sense that this experience is a true ‘knowledge’ of God or, in Isaac’s own terms, “acknowledging God *as God*”. This ‘as God’ is related to God’s care for the suffering self. One can understand, in this light, how ‘theoria’ begins when one realises the depth of God’s Providence-for-oneself, of his care. Isaac calls this faith a “noetic light”, which frees one from divisive doubt and fear. It is a new way of knowing and being in a relationship with the real.

Although not coinciding with the confession of faith, this faith-trust remains radically Christian, according to Isaac. He understands this ‘being Christian’, however, from a specific perspective, which regards the way of Christianity as a path which deals with the problem of existence. On the one hand, it implies having experienced suffering and loss, which the cross powerfully symbolises; on the other, it implies regarding Christ as the first to pass through this experience and access its ‘beyond’. In Isaac’s reading of faith as entrustment, the existential experience of the human being, and the faith in Christ of the human being are intertwined.

Within ‘darkness’, ‘bearing’ assumes specific traits. While, in other conditions of suffering, the creature ‘bears’ suffering in connection with the horizon of the consolation of God, here, it is precisely this horizon that fades away, and one is exposed with powerful violence to the destructiveness of suffering. If prayer, in other experiences of suffering, is a form of ‘bearing’ in connection with the horizon of God, here, prayer takes the shape of a mere ‘remaining there’, inhabiting even the lack of faith, the lack of trust. This prayer, however, in its utter nakedness, maintains open within oneself the possibility of God, confessing this God even

when he seems absent. It is, in this sense, *the profoundest act of faith of the creature, the profoundest act of trust*, which is born precisely within an absence of faith and trust. It is a form of loyalty to God *even against what seems to be God*. At the same time, it is the profoundest act of loyalty to one's suffering self as, even in this condition, one does not abandon one's desire for consolation and meaning.

Through this experience, the role of inhabiting 'the negative' shines again. But, above all, the value that Isaac attributes to the role of the suffering creature in the relationship with God emerges. Only by perceiving all of the desperation and solitude hidden within the absence of consolation, and simultaneously refusing to abandon one's human, *creatural need* for consolation, one preserves *intact*, within, a space in which consolation can appear. *Faith is taught by its absence*, as it were.

There are forms of darkness, however, where even this prayer is impossible. When these occur, Isaac says, one should simply remain there, in mute resistance. This silent remaining, however, confesses God and one's human dignity, in the attempt to abide within this experience without fleeing from it. By struggling to preserve the space for God's self-giving within, the creature calls for his advent. Only then, from 'darkness', can something new appear.

This 'something new' emerges as Grace, like the plant from the seed, hidden under the ground and exposed to the violence of the "blustery weather". This "germination", "transformation", and 'birth', as Isaac calls them, are not due to the will. They come from Grace alone. Nevertheless, they emerge as something that is intimately one's own. In this profound connection between personal experience and God's mysterious action, the creature existentially inhabits the meaning of the Christian faith.

VII.3. SOME ANSWERS

In light of the analysis outlined above, it is now possible to answer the questions with which this study begun.

In response to the question concerning the nature of the ontological condition of human beings, this study showed that Isaac conceives of it as radically limited, marked by suffering, death, and ‘weakness’, that he understands as the creatural condition of exposure to suffering. ‘Weakness’ is *the fact of being a human*, a creature.

In response to the second question, about Isaac’s understanding of *askesis* and its relationship to the human ontological condition of finitude and limitation, the analysis of his writings demonstrated that he conceives of the solitary life as the place where an *initiatory process* takes place. Through this process, the problem of existence can be deciphered. This occurs in a practical, embodied way, by encountering limitations and negation in *askesis*. Through these, the difficult quest for a relationship with one’s ‘weakness’ and one’s suffering self occurs, which involves one’s awakening and labour *as a subject*.

In response to the question concerning Isaac’s understanding of God, it can be said that he interprets God as being the radical *consolation* of suffering, and the encounter with him as access to the *meaning* of personal existence. God can be understood in this light – which, in Isaac, is the only credible light – only by those who accept to be challenged by the experience of suffering.

In response to the question concerning the role of suffering in awakening the creature to the problem of his/her existence, this study demonstrated that this role is vital. Isaac believes that suffering and what can be called ‘the negative’ – i.e. every condition of limitation, imperfection, and incompleteness – ontologically precede perfection and completeness. They awaken the creature to the quest for

these, and also urge the necessity of seeking a relationship with oneself, both before and within the solitary life. For this reason, they play a fundamental role in Isaac, both related to discovering the nature of one's being a human and to desiring God, who is consolation and meaning. *Askesis* continually re-affirms this experientially. Isaac believes that suffering, 'the negative', and limitations can be transformative places.

Concerning the questions about how is it possible to pass through suffering and if is it possible to remain whole within it, Isaac is aware that neither this nor the transformative value of suffering is automatic. They require, instead, the development of a specific relationship with suffering, that here is called 'bearing'. This attitude implies endurance and strength, but above all the effort of *remaining in contact* with one's suffering, without fleeing from it. This *internal attitude* implies placing oneself *under* the weight of suffering while *perceiving* all of its destructive force, accepting this condition of conflict and inhabiting it. Within the exercise of this attitude, a relationship with 'the negative' can be born and one can discover a way of remaining *whole* within it. This occurs mysteriously, while one remains in contact with difficulties, in the 'low place' of 'bearing'. God's Grace does not remove the creature from this creaturely 'duty', which consists of seeking a relationship with 'the negative'. Currently hidden, but present, Grace manifests itself only when this way is discovered. It plays no consolatory role and *cannot be used* for one's own interests, as if it were an object.

In response to the question concerning the nature and meaning of the faith that emerges from this process, Isaac is convinced that faith is born from the experience and desire of the suffering self. It is a faith that Isaac primarily reads as a profound experience of *trust* rather than as adherence to doctrinal statements. Its Christian nature is existentially rooted: the cross symbolically (in a strong sense)

connects the experience of personal suffering and the Christian narrative; the figure of Christ symbolically manifests as *credible* the possibility of wholeness. Isaac believes that *even the experience of the deficiency or absence of faith*, when inhabited and ‘borne’, has a value. It is an encounter with one’s ‘weakness’, that can provide a way to find the faith-trust in God as consolation and meaning. The act of inhabiting even the anguish and divisive condition of the lack of faith confesses God, even when one experiences his absence – a confession that accepts the confrontation with one’s inability to confess, with unbelief, and a lack of trust. *This* loyalty to God is simultaneously a loyalty to one’s suffering self, in the impossibility of renouncing consolation and meaning despite the destructive power of suffering. It is suffering itself that reveals this impossibility to consciousness. Its role, again, is vital.

Lastly, in response to the question about when suffering can be regarded as a transformative experience, it emerges from Isaac’s *corpus* that this is possible when suffering is ‘borne’. Although it has no value *per se* – instead, it invokes consolation –, suffering can become a place of transformation and meaning for the creature who accepts a close confrontation with his/her creatural status and takes it on. From this poverty, *when inhabited*, something new can emerge. It is a gift, Grace, but intimately one’s own: it is the fruit of the process through which one has passed. Isaac believes that this is an encounter with the Creator, made possible by inhabiting one’s being a creature. This belonging to oneself, in one’s creatural difference from God, makes it possible to see God in his alterity. From difference, a relationship arises.

VII.4. ISAAC AND BEYOND

In this thesis, Isaac's thought has been examined in his own historical and cultural context, as well as, when this was essential for an understanding of his ideas, in the light of the influences of other writers upon it. This analysis often referred to universal, existential questions, that still have a value – but this thesis was not the place to discuss these further. Certain essential elements of Isaac's thought that are still meaningful today can now be examined in greater detail. They have a value for theological reflection, but also for a more general reflection on the meaning of existence.

The first element that visibly emerges from this analysis as distinctive of Isaac's approach is the fundamental role of creatural existence and experience in his understanding of the quest for God. Isaac rarely begins from God, when he speaks of God, in the sense that he usually begins *from creatural existence*.

This can be regarded as a real methodological approach in Isaac, which recurs at every level of his reflection. In this light, God can be acknowledged as meaningful (and *as meaning itself*, as Isaac suggests) *only* when he is regarded *from the perspective of the subject*.

Speaking of *the perspective of the subject*, when employed for Isaac, does not refer to a perspective related to one's subjective ideas, beliefs, and (Isaac would say) passional drives. It refers, instead, to oneself as marked by the experience of limitation and suffering, as has emerged from this study. Isaac's approach implies speaking *from this ontological place of 'weakness'*.

This way of approaching the question about God is still telling, because it roots the question about God in a universal problem, which concerns human beings *even before* and independently of the birth of this question. This, rather than

undermining the value of this question, highlights its vital nature and *its place of origin*, that is creatural existence.

Within this approach, a few essential traits are discernible. First, the role of ‘the negative’, that has a fundamental value in Isaac.

This value of ‘the negative’ refers to the fact that, in Isaac, *the imperfect always precedes the perfect*. The perfect becomes understandable only when regarded *from the perspective of the imperfect*, just as the question about God becomes understandable only when examined using the living experience of the suffering creature as a starting point.

This role of ‘the negative’ recurs at every level of Isaac’s thought: the value of one’s being mortal and passible; the value of the confrontation with the passions; the value of physical *askesis* and of its laborious difficulties; the value of the experience of ‘humiliation/being made humble’; the value even of a deficiency or absence of faith.

This value of ‘the negative’ ultimately alludes to the value of a dimension of void, within existence, of a dimension of thirst and hunger, and of *knowing oneself as thirsty and hungry*. This dimension of void and thirst is, here, *the root* of all searches and all quests – it is their source. This dimension, that is generally avoided and fled, rejected as unpleasant and meaningless, in Isaac, becomes a vital place, a meaningful place, which awakens oneself to oneself, and then to God, to others, and to the cosmos. Besides their other significance, Isaac’s writings present a witnessing to a human being’s attempt to give voice to this original ‘place of thirst and hunger’.

The essential role of ‘knowing’ one’s thirst, hunger, and void points to another crucial element of Isaac’s approach: the role of *perception*. This ‘place of thirst and hunger’ can provide a source of meaning only when *perceived*, and the

whole discourse on suffering in Isaac can be interpreted as a discourse on the importance of developing this capacity for *perceiving*, for *becoming sensitive* to one's thirst, hunger, and void. This points to the important role of the creature, that is not a mere receiver of experience but is, as it were, *called out by experience* to develop a *relational attitude* towards what he/she experiences. It is the importance of developing *a relationship with oneself*, that 'the negative' awakens.

To the importance of *perceiving* and *developing a relationship* with oneself another fundamental trait of Isaac's approach should be added: his constant stress on *remaining in contact* with 'weakness', on *remaining open* to the presence of thirst, hunger, and void. This presupposes *experiencing* and *perceiving* 'the negative', but also involves *sustaining the experience* of it. As shown in the course of this thesis, this requires profound courage, endurance, and strength – a strength, however, that is put at the service of one's contacting 'weakness', of one's relationship with it. When regarding the importance of 'weakness' in Isaac, this aspect of strength should always be considered, because it shows how his discourse, which truly values what is vulnerable and frail, *does not imply one's coinciding completely with this frailty*. Within this non-coincidence between strength and 'weakness', one's contact with 'the negative' can gradually become a 'bearing', and this 'bearing' is transformative in nature. This alludes to the possibility of *inhabiting one's creatural condition up to the end*, despite the difficult and even tragic nature of this condition. It is the possibility of being a human, of *remaining human*, even in nakedness, deficiency, and incompleteness.

Isaac's firm belief in the possibility of 'integrity' as a condition of 'weakness' that has been *taken on* alludes therefore to the fact that it is possible to remain *totally creatural*, within suffering, without fleeing into destructive reactions, untrue and *inflated* ideas about oneself, attempts to remove this problem through

techné, ‘knowledge’ (the term that Isaac employs), the loss of perception of reality that suffering may cause, and without fashioning supposed absolutes which would remove and fill one’s state of deficiency. These absolutes are not the Truth; they are not God, who is instead the Desired, the Horizon, that can appear by Grace alone.

Inhabiting ‘weakness’, however, makes one open to a possible relationship: with the Mystery that is God (if by Grace it wishes to appear), as well as with the other passible creatures, marked by suffering, *as is oneself*. This relationship will be compassionate, Isaac states with force, since it is born *from the experience of one’s suffering self*.

This path, Isaac believes, is a Christian path. This word can be used in several ways, however, and Isaac is consistent in viewing the fact of being Christian as something that relates the narrative and symbols of the Christian faith to living existence. The incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection appear to be far more than merely words, for the creature who inhabits the place of ‘weakness’.

Lastly, within *this* understanding of the Christian faith, Isaac develops a discourse on faith that includes its deficiency and absence. For Isaac, a faith that is existentially based is intimately related to trust, not to mere intellectual certainty – and he contemplates the possibility that this condition of trust may fade away. This shows a profound understanding of one of the most difficult experiences of human beings, who, in many contexts, different from the dynamics of the inner life and the relationship with God, due to wounds, abuse, and injustice, find it impossible to trust ‘the other’. Isaac accepts the need to face the root of this problem: he does not invite his reader to re-create trust artificially, which would show a lack of respect for his/her real condition of mistrust, i.e. for his/her suffering, nor does he accept the need to resign himself to this condition, which would imply a betrayal of the

human desire for consolation and meaning. He suggests, instead, that there is a way of inhabiting even this ‘darkness’ – and this also can be a form of faith, deeper than a faith that is based on certainty alone. These insights have a strong universal value.

Isaac’s words examined in this study touch, therefore, upon issues that are central to human existence. They can also make sense in deserts and ‘darkness’ that differ from those found in Isaac’s writings. They go far beyond the boundary of the solitary life. Nevertheless, they are its foundation.

If any discourse about God could have a meaning tomorrow, in a fragmented, deeply suffering world – where this fragmentation and suffering are increasingly *concealed and negated*, although *they cry aloud* in manifold conditions of utter injustice, war, domination, and suffering of the psyche –, it will only be a discourse about God that will take on the creatural duty to listen to this fragmentation and suffering. This will be possible only by refusing to abdicate the human capacity to *perceive* suffering, primarily *one’s own*. Something *credible* will then be born.

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