

ST. ISAAC THE SYRIAN: A THEOLOGIAN OF LOVE AND MERCY

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In this paper I would like to present the teaching of St Isaac the Syrian, one of the greatest theologians of the Orthodox tradition, on love and mercy.

St Isaac the Syrian, known also as Isaac of Nineveh, lived in the seventh century and was a hermit. Little is known about his life. The chief biographical source is *The Book of Chastity* by the East Syrian historian Isho'denah, which says the following about Isaac: 'He was ordained Bishop of Nineveh by Mar Giwargis the Catholicos in the monastery of Beit 'Abe. But after he had held the office of the Shepherd of Nineveh for five months... he abdicated his episcopacy for a reason which God knows, and he departed and dwelt in the mountains... He ascended the mountain of Matout, which is encircled by the region of Beit Huzaye, and he dwelt in stillness together with the anchorites who lived thereabouts. Afterward he went to the monastery of Rabban Shabur. He was exceedingly well versed in the divine writings, even to the point that he lost his eyesight by reason of his reading and asceticism. He entered deeply into the divine mysteries and composed books on the divine discipline of solitude... When he reached deep old age, he departed from temporal life, and his body was placed in the monastery of Shabur. He was born in Beit Qatraye, and I think that envy was stirred up against him by those who dwelt in the interior parts of Persia'.¹

The province of Qatar, where Isaac was born, was situated on the Western shore of the Persian Gulf (the present Qatar is part of the United Arab Emirates). Around 648 the Bishops of Qatar separated from the Persian Catholicos: the schism lasted until 676, when the Catholicos Giwargis visited Qatar and reconciled its Bishops with the Church of Persia. Possibly, it was at that time that he consecrated Isaac, who was known for his strict asceticism, as the Bishop of Nineveh.

Isaac had little success in his capacity as a Bishop. The following East Syrian legend, preserved in Arabic translation, tells us of his abdication. The first day after his ordination, when Isaac was sitting in his residence, two men came to his room disputing with each other. One of them was demanding the return of a loan: 'If this man refuses to pay back what belongs to me, I will be obliged to take him to court'. Isaac said to him: 'Since the Holy Gospel teaches us not to take back what has been given away, you should at least grant this man a day to make his repayment'. The man answered: 'Leave aside for the moment the teachings of the Gospel'. Then Isaac said: 'If the Gospel is not to be present, what have I come here to do?' And seeing that the office of Bishop disturbed his solitary life, 'the holy man abdicated from his episcopacy and fled to the holy desert of Skete'.²

The precise date of Isaac's death is unknown, as is the date of his birth. It is quite likely that already during his earthly life he was venerated as a saint. After his death his glory increased as his writings spread. Joseph Hazzaya, who lived

¹ Isho'denah, *Le Livre de la Chasteté*, éd.J.B.Chabot, *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire ecclésiastiques* 16 (Paris, 1896), pp. 63-64 (277-278).

² Cf. S.Brock, *Spirituality in Syriac Tradition* (Kottayam, 1989), p. 33.

in the eighth century, called him 'famous among the saints'.³ Another Syrian writer calls him 'the master and teacher of all monks and the haven of salvation for the whole world'.⁴ By the eleventh century, due to the Greek translation of his writings, Isaac became widely known in the Greek-speaking East: in the famous anthology of ascetical texts, the *Evergetikon*, the passages from 'abba Isaac the Syrian' stand on the same footing as those from the classics of early Byzantine spirituality. In the Middle Ages Isaac's writings were translated into several European languages. From this time his name became known and appreciated also in the West.

I will begin this paper by analyzing Isaac's teaching on God as love and on the divine mercy as reflected in the created world. I will then move to the theme of Incarnation as revelation of divine love. Isaac's eschatology, which is directly based on his understanding of God's love and mercy, will be dealt with in a separate section. Finally, I will present Isaac's teaching on the 'merciful heart' in a human being as reflection of divine love and mercy.

Divine love which reveals itself through the created world

God, in Isaac's understanding, is first of all immeasurable and boundless love. The idea of God as love is central and dominant in Isaac's thought: it is the main source of his theological opinions, ascetical recommendations and mystical insights. His theological system cannot be comprehended apart from this fundamental idea.

Divine love is beyond human understanding and above all description in words. At the same time it is reflected in God's actions with respect to the created world and humankind: 'Among all His actions there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and the end of His dealings with us'.⁵ Both the creation of the world and God's coming on earth in flesh had the only aim, 'to reveal His boundless love to the world'.⁶

Divine love was the main reason for the creation of the universe and is the main driving force behind the whole of creation. In the creation of the world divine love revealed itself in all its fullness: 'What that invisible Being is like, who is without any beginning in His nature, unique in Himself, who is by nature beyond the knowledge, intellect and feel of created beings, who is beyond time and space, being the Creator of these, who at the beginning of time was learnt about through hints and was made known as if it were through His mark by means of the establishing of the fullness of creation, who made His voice heard in connection with His handiwork and so the Being of His Lordship was made known, the fountainhead of innumerable natures - this Being is hidden, for as He

³ A.Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies*, t.VII (Cambridge, 1934), p. 268.

⁴ J.B.Chabot, *De sancti Isaaci Ninevitae* (Paris, 1892), p. VII.

⁵ II/39,22. Here and below the figure 'II' refers to Part II of Isaac's writings: Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part*, chapters IV-XLI, translated by Sebastian Brock, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 555, Scriptorum syri 225* (Louvain, 1995).

⁶ *Chapters on Knowledge* IV,79. The original text of Isaac's 'Chapters on Knowledge' is still unpublished. There is, however, an Italian translation: *Discorsi Spirituali*, Capitoli sulla conoscenza, Preghiere, Contemplazione sull'argomento della gehenna, Altri opuscoli. Introduzione, traduzione e note a cura di Paolo Bettiolo (Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, 1990).

dwelt in His Being for aeons without number or limit or beginning, it pleased His graciousness and He made a beginning of time, bringing the worlds and created beings into existence. Let us consider then, how rich in its wealth is the ocean of His creative act, and how many created things belong to God, and how in His compassion He carries everything, acting providentially as He guides creation, and how with a love that cannot be measured He arrived at the establishment of the world and the beginning of creation; and how compassionate God is, and how patient; and how He loves creation, and how He carries it, gently enduring its importunity, the various sins and wickednesses, the terrible blasphemies of demons and evil men'.⁷

Divine love is a continuing realization of the creative potential of God, an endless revelation of the Divinity in His creative act. Divine love lies at the foundation of the universe, it governs the world, and it will lead the world to that glorious outcome when the latter will be entirely 'consumed' by the Godhead: 'What profundity of richness, what mind and exalted wisdom is God's! What compassionate kindness and abundant goodness belong to the Creator! With what purpose and with what love did He create this world and bring it into existence! What a mystery does the coming into being of the creation look towards! To what a state is our common nature invited! What love served to initiate the creation of the world..! In love did He bring the world into existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised'.⁸

The will of God, which is full of love, is the primal source of all that exists within the universe: 'He it is who dwells in the light of His Nature, who wished all creation to approach the dark cloud of His eternal glory, who has given the crown of His own everlastingness to the creation which He made..., who has caused the fullness of what He has established to participate in the everlastingness of His Kingdom, Being and Lord, exalted beyond any secondary notion; whose will is the fountainhead of natures, with the worlds, created beings and natures flowing from Him as though from a source, without number or limits'.⁹

God is not only the Creator of the universe and its driving force: He is first of all 'the true Father', 'who in His great and immeasurable love surpasses all in paternal affection'.¹⁰ Thus His attitude to the created world is characterized by an unceasing providential care for all its inhabitants: for angels and demons, human beings and animals. God's providence is universal and embraces all.¹¹ None of His creatures is excluded from the scope of the loving providence of God, but the love of the Creator is bestowed equally upon all: '...There is not a single nature who is in the first place or last place in creation in the Creator's knowledge..., similarly there is no before or after in His love towards them: no greater or lesser

⁷ II/10,18-19.

⁸ II/38,1-2.

⁹ II/10,24.

¹⁰ I/52 (254) = B51 (361). Here and below figure 'I' refers to the English translation of Part I of Isaac's writings: *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, [transl. by D.Miller] (Boston, Massachusetts, 1984). The letter 'B' refers to the Syriac original of Part I: Mar Isaacus Ninevita, *De perfectione religiosa*, quam edidit Paulus Bedjan (Leipzig, 1909).

¹¹ I/7 (65) = B7 (103).

amount of love is to be found with Him at all. Rather, just like the continual equality of His knowledge, so too is the continual equality of His love'.¹²

All living creatures existed in God's mind before their creation. And before they have been brought into being, they received their place in the hierarchical structure of the universe. This place is not taken away from anyone even if one falls away from God: 'Everyone has a single place in His purpose in the ranking of love, corresponding to the form He beheld in them before He created them and all the rest of created beings, that is, at the time before the eternal purpose for the delineation of the world was put into effect... He has a single ranking of complete and impassible love towards everyone, and He has a single caring concern for those who have fallen, just as much as for those who have not fallen'.¹³

The providential care of God and His love extends to angels, who were the first product of God's creative act, including those who had fallen away from God and had turned into demons. According to Isaac, the love of the Creator towards fallen angels does not diminish as a result of their fall, and it is not less than the fullness of love which He has towards other angels.¹⁴ 'It would be most odious and utterly blasphemous', Isaac claims, 'to think that hate and resentment exists with God, even against demonic beings; or to imagine any other weakness, or passibility, or whatever else might be involved in the course of retribution of good or bad as applying, in a retributive way, to that glorious Nature. Rather, He acts towards us in ways He knows will be advantageous to us, whether by way of things that cause suffering, or by way of things that cause relief, whether they cause joy or grief, whether they are insignificant or glorious: all are directed towards the single eternal good...'¹⁵

To say that the love of God diminishes or vanishes because of a created being's fall means 'to reduce the glorious Nature of the Creator to weakness and change'.¹⁶ For we know that 'there is no change or any earlier or later intentions, with the Creator: there is no hatred or resentment in His nature, no greater or lesser place in His love, no before or after in His knowledge. For if it is believed by everyone that the creation came into existence as a result of the Creator's goodness and love, then we know that this original cause does not ever diminish or change in the Creator's nature as a result of the disordered course of creation'.¹⁷ Nothing that happens in creation may affect the nature of the Creator, Who is 'exalted, lofty and glorious, perfect and complete in His knowledge, and complete in His love'.¹⁸

This is why God loves equally the righteous and sinners, making no distinction between them. God knew man's future sinful life before the latter's creation, yet He created him.¹⁹ God knew all people before their becoming righteous or sinners, and in His love He did not change because of the fact that

¹² II/38,3.

¹³ II/40,3.

¹⁴ II/40,2.

¹⁵ II/39,3.

¹⁶ II/38,4.

¹⁷ II/38,5.

¹⁸ II/10,23. Cf. II/40,1.

¹⁹ II/5,11.

they underwent change.²⁰ Even many blameworthy deeds are accepted by God with mercy, 'and are forgiven their authors, without any blame, by the omniscient God to whom all things are revealed before they happen, and who was aware of the constraints of our nature before He created us. For God, who is good and compassionate, is not in the habit of judging the infirmities of human nature or actions brought about by necessity, even though they may be reprehensible'.²¹

Even when God chastises one, He does this out of love and for the sake of one's salvation rather than for the sake of retribution. God respects human free will and does not want to do anything against it: 'God chastises with love, not for the sake of revenge - far be it! - but seeking to make whole His image. And He does not harbour wrath until a time when correction is no longer possible, for He does not seek vengeance for Himself. This is the aim of love. Love's chastisement is for correction, but it does not aim at retribution... The man who chooses to consider God as avenger, presuming that in this manner he bears witness to His justice, the same accuses Him as being bereft of goodness. Far be it, that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and Ocean brimming with goodness!'²²

Thus the image of God as Judge is completely overshadowed in Isaac by the image of God as Love (*hubba*) and Mercy (*rahme*). According to him, mercifulness (*mrahmanuta*) is incompatible with justice (*k'inuta*): 'Mercy is opposed to justice. Justice is equality of the even scale, for it gives to each as he deserves... Mercy, on the other hand, is a sorrow and pity stirred up by goodness, and it compassionately inclines a man in the direction of all; it does not requite a man who is deserving of evil, and to him who is deserving of good it gives a double portion. If, therefore, it is evident that mercy belongs to the portion of righteousness, then justice belongs to the portion of wickedness. As grass and fire cannot coexist in one place, so justice and mercy cannot abide in one soul'. Thus one cannot speak at all of God's justice, but rather of mercy that surpasses all justice: 'As a grain of sand cannot counterbalance a great quantity of gold, so in comparison God's use of justice cannot counterbalance His mercy. As a handful of sand thrown into the great sea, so are the sins of the flesh in comparison with the mind of God. And just as a strongly flowing spring is not obscured by a handful of dust, so the mercy of the Creator is not stemmed by the vices of His creatures'.²³

Rejecting with such decisiveness the idea of requital, Isaac shows that the Old Testament understanding of God as a chastiser of sinners, 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation',²⁴ does not correspond with the revelation that we have received through Christ in the New Testament. Though David in the Psalms called God 'righteous and upright in His judgments',²⁵ He is in fact good and merciful. Christ himself confirmed God's 'injustice' in His parables, in particular in the Parables of the

²⁰ II/38,3.

²¹ II/14,15.

²² I/48 (230) = B45 (323).

²³ I/51 (244) = B50 (345).

²⁴ Ex.20:5; Num.14:18.

²⁵ Ps.117:137.

Workers in the Vineyard and of the Prodigal Son,²⁶ but even more so by His incarnation for the sake of sinners: 'Where, then, is God's justice, for while we are sinners Christ died for us?'²⁷

Thus, Isaac claims, one should not interpret literally those Old Testament texts where the terms wrath, anger, hatred and others are used of the Creator. If such anthropomorphic terms occur in Scripture, they are used in a figurative sense, for God never does anything out of wrath, anger or hatred: everything of that sort is far removed from His Nature. We should not read everything literally as it is written, but rather see within the bodily exterior of the Old Testament narratives the hidden providence and eternal knowledge of God.²⁸ 'Fear God out of love for Him, and not for the reputation of austerity that has been attributed to Him'.²⁹

With God, there is no hatred towards anyone, but all-embracing love, which does not distinguish between righteous and sinner, between a friend of truth and an enemy of truth, between angel and demon. Every created being is precious in God's eyes, He cares for every creature, and everyone finds in Him a loving Father. If we turn away from God, He does not turn away from us: 'If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful, for He cannot deny Himself'.³⁰ Whatever may happen to humankind and to the whole of creation, however far it may be removed from God, He remains faithful to it in His love, which He cannot and will not deny.

Incarnation

According to St Isaac, the Incarnation is the moment when the love of God towards human beings reveals itself to the highest degree and when human beings, in turn, are called to answer the love of God with their own love for God: 'God the Lord surrendered His own Son to death on the Cross for the fervent love of creation... This was not, however, because He could not redeem us in another way, but so that His surpassing love, manifested hereby, might be a teacher unto us. And by the death of His Only-begotten Son He made us near to Himself. Yea, if He had had anything more precious, He would have given it to us, so that by it our race might be His own. Because of His great love for us it was not His pleasure to do violence to our freedom, although He is able to do so, but He chose that we should draw near to Him by the love of our understanding. For the sake of His love for us and obedience to His Father, Christ joyfully took upon Himself insult and sorrow... In like manner, when the saints become perfect, they all attain to this perfection, and by the superabundant outpouring of their love and compassion upon all men they resemble God'.³¹ Therefore the Incarnation took place because of the love of both the Father and of the Son for human beings, and because of the Incarnation a human person is able to attain such a state of love when he becomes godlike.

²⁶ See Mt.20:13-15; Luke 15:20-22.

²⁷ I/51 (250-251) = B50 (357-358).

²⁸ II/39,19.

²⁹ I/51 (251) = B50 (358).

³⁰ 1 Tim.2,13.

³¹ I/71 (345-346) = B74 (509-510).

The Incarnation of the Son of God is, according to Isaac, the new revelation about God. In the Old Testament times, before the Incarnation, people were unable to contemplate God and to hear His voice, but after the Incarnation this became possible: 'Creation could not look upon Him unless He took part of it to Himself and thus conversed with it, and neither could it hear the words of His mouth face to face. The sons of Israel were not even able to hear His voice when He spoke with them from the cloud...³² The sons of Israel made ready and prepared themselves, keeping themselves chaste for three days according to the command of Moses,³³ that they might be made worthy of hearing the voice of God, and of the vision of His revelation. And when the time was come, they could not receive the vision of His light and the fierceness of the voice of His thunder. But now, when He poured out His grace upon the world through His own coming, He has descended not in an earthquake, not in a fire, not in a terrible and mighty sound,³⁴ but "as the rain upon a fleece, and rain-drops that fall upon the earth"³⁵ softly, and He was seen conversing with us after another fashion. This came to pass when, as though in a treasury, He concealed His majesty with the veil of His flesh,³⁶ and among us spoke with us in that body which His own bidding wrought for Him out of the womb of the Virgin'.³⁷ Not only for human beings, but also for angels the door of contemplation and vision was opened in Jesus, when the Word became flesh, as before the Incarnation they could not penetrate into these mysteries, Isaac claims.³⁸

Isaac emphasizes that God's love for creation was the main and only reason of the coming on earth of the Son of God and His death on the Cross: 'If zeal had been appropriate for putting humanity right, why did God the Word clothe Himself in the body in order to bring the world back to His Father using gentleness and humility? And why was He stretched out on the Cross for the sake of sinners, handing over His sacred body to suffering on behalf of the world? I myself say that God did all this for no other reason, except to make known to the world the love that He has, His aim being that we, as a result of our greater love arising from an awareness of this, might be captivated by His love when He provided the occasion of this manifestation of the kingdom of heaven's mighty power - which consists in love - by means of the death of His Son.'³⁹

The Incarnation and the death on the Cross of the Savior, Isaac claims, happened 'not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for His creation. Had all this astounding affair taken place solely for the purpose of forgiveness of sin, it would have been sufficient to redeem us by some other means. What objection would there have been if He had done what He did by means of an ordinary death? But He did not make His death at all an ordinary one - in order that you might realize the nature of this mystery. Rather, He tasted death in the cruel suffering of the Cross. What need was there for the outrage done to Him

³² Cf. Deut.5:25 ff.

³³ Cf. Ex.19:15 ff.

³⁴ Cf. 3 Kings 19:12.

³⁵ Ps.72:6.

³⁶ Cf. Heb.10:20.

³⁷ I/77 (381-382) = B82 (574-575).

³⁸ I/28 (139).

³⁹ *Chapters on Knowledge* IV,78.

and the spitting? Just death would have been sufficient for our redemption - and in particular His death, without any of these other things which took place. What wisdom is God's! And how filled with life! Now you can understand and realize why the coming of our Lord took place with all the events that followed it, even to the extent of His telling the purpose quite clearly out of His own holy mouth: "To such an extent did God love the world that He gave His only-begotten Son"⁴⁰ - referring to the Incarnation and the renewal He brought about'.⁴¹

Therefore, it was the love of God, and not the necessity to redeem the humanity from sin, which was the sole reason of the Incarnation of the Word. God became man because He wanted that men turn to Him as their father. Isaac writes: 'When the entire extent of creation had abandoned and forgotten God and had perfected themselves in every kind of wickedness, of His own will and without any supplication or request from elsewhere He came down to their abode and lived among them in their body just as one of them, and with a love exalted beyond knowledge or description by any created being, He begged them to turn back to Himself, showing them concerning the glorious establishment of the world to come, having intended before all worlds to introduce felicity such as this for creation: He informed them of its existence and forgave them all the sins which they had previously committed, and confirmed this goodwill by means of authoritative signs and wonders, and the revelation to them of His Mysteries; and finally He has stopped down to such an extent that He is willing to be called "Father" of sinful human nature, dust from the earth, despicable human beings, flesh and blood: can these things be performed without great love?'⁴²

Eschatology

How does the notion of God as love correspond to the traditional Christian teaching on life after death, which includes the idea of eternal punishment of sinners? Isaac deals with this issue in two homilies from the concluding part of the second volume of his writings.

Here Isaac emphasizes that God does nothing out of retribution: even to think this way about God would be blasphemous.⁴³ This opinion is all the more unacceptable as God had foreknowledge about man's future sins and falls even before the creation of man, but still created him: '...To suppose that retribution for evil acts is to be found in Him is abominable. By implying that He makes use of such a great and difficult thing out of retribution we are attributing a weakness to the divine Nature. We cannot even believe such a thing can be found in those human beings who live a virtuous and upright life and whose thoughts are entirely in accord with the divine will - let alone believe it of God, that He has done something out of retribution for anticipated evil acts in connection with those whose nature He has brought into being with honour and great love. Knowing them and all their conduct, the flow of His grace did not dry up from them: not

⁴⁰ John 3:16.

⁴¹ *Chapters on Knowledge* IV,78.

⁴² II/40,14.

⁴³ II/39,2.

even after they started living amid many evil deeds did He withhold His care for them, even for a moment'.⁴⁴

Even worse is the opinion that God allows people to lead a sinful life on earth in order to punish them eternally after death. This is a blasphemous and perverted understanding of God, a calumny of God: 'If someone says that He has put up with them here on earth in order that His patience may be known - with the idea that He would punish them mercilessly, such a person thinks in an unspeakably blasphemous way about God, due to his infantile way of thinking: he is removing from God His kindness, goodness and compassion, all the things because of which He truly bears with sinners and wicked men. Such a person is attributing to God enslavement to passion, supposing that He has not consented to their being chastised here, seeing that He has prepared them for a much greater misfortune, in exchange for a short-lived patience. Not only does such a person fail to attribute something praiseworthy to God, but he also calumniates Him'.⁴⁵

'A right way of thinking about God', according to Isaac, rejects the view that 'weakness, or passibility, or whatever else might be involved in the course of retribution' has anything to do with God. On the contrary, all of God's actions 'are directed towards the single eternal good, whether each receives judgment or something of glory from Him - not by way of retribution, far from it! - but with a view to the advantage that is going to come from all these things'.⁴⁶

In the context of the notion of God's kindness and mercy, Isaac refers to the biblical story of the damnation of Adam and Eve by God for the sin which they committed, and of their exile from Paradise. Though the establishment of death and exile were decreed under the guise of damnation, therein was concealed a blessing: 'Just as He decreed death, under the appearance of a sentence, for Adam because of sin, and just as He showed that the sin existed by means of the punishment - even though this punishment was not His real aim: He showed it as though it was something which Adam would receive as a repayment for his wrong, but He hid its true mystery, and under the guise of something to be feared, He concealed His eternal intention concerning death and what His wisdom was aiming at: even though this matter might be grievous, ignominious and hard at first, nevertheless in truth it would be the means of transporting us to that wonderful and glorious world. Without it, there would be no way of crossing over from this world and being there... The Creator did not say: "This will turn out for you to be the cause of good things to come and a life more glorious than this". Rather, he showed it as something which would bring our misfortune and dissolution. Again, when He expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise, He expelled them under the outward aspect of anger... as though dwelling in Paradise had been taken away from them because they were unworthy. But inside all this stood the divine plan, fulfilling and guiding everything towards the Creator's original intention from the beginning. It was not disobedience which introduced death to the house of Adam, nor did transgression remove them from Paradise, for it is clear that God did not create Adam and Eve to be in Paradise, just a small portion of the earth; rather, they were going to subjugate the entire earth.

⁴⁴ II/39,2.

⁴⁵ II/39,2.

⁴⁶ II/39,3.

For this reason we do not even say that He removed them because of the commandment which had been transgressed; for it is not the case that, had they not transgressed the commandment, they would have been left in Paradise for ever'.⁴⁷

Therefore, contrary to widespread opinion, Isaac states that death was a blessing since it intrinsically contained the potential of future resurrection; and the exile from Paradise was beneficial, since instead of receiving a 'small portion of the earth', man was given all of creation as his possession. This approach to the biblical text is unquestionably based on the exegetical tradition of Theodore of Mopsuestia, according to whom death was profitable for man because it opened to him a way to repentance and restoration.⁴⁸

In the establishment of death, God's 'cunning' was revealed, manifesting itself in that He concealed His true intention under the guise of punishment for sin. The same 'cunning' explains the establishment of Gehenna as a punishment whose aim is the profit which may derive from it to the humans: 'You should see that, while God's caring is guiding us all the time to what He wishes for us, as things outwardly appear it is from us that He takes the occasion for providing things, His aim being to carry out by every means what He has intended for our advantage. All this is because He knew beforehand our inclination towards all sorts of wickedness, and so He cunningly made the harmful consequences which would result from this into a means of entry to the future good and the setting right of our corrupted state. These are things which are known only to Him. But after we have been exercised and assisted little by little as a result of these consequences after they have occurred, we realize and perceive that it could not turn out otherwise than in accordance with what has been foreseen by Him. This is how everything works with Him, even though things may seem otherwise to us: with Him it is not a matter of retribution, but He is always looking beyond to the advantage that will come from His dealing with humanity. And one such thing is the matter of Gehenna'.⁴⁹

Thus Isaac gradually arrives at his key idea that the final outcome of the history of the universe must correspond to the majesty of God, and that the final destiny of the humans should be worthy of God's mercifulness. 'I am of the opinion that He is going to manifest some wonderful outcome', Isaac claims, 'a matter of immense and ineffable compassion on the part of the glorious Creator, with respect to the ordering of this difficult matter of Gehenna's torment: out of it the wealth of His love and power and wisdom will become known all the more - and so will the insistent might of the waves of His goodness. It is not the way of the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction in punishment for things of which He knew even before they were fashioned, aware how they would turn out when He created them - and whom nonetheless He created. All the more since the foreplanning of evil and the taking of vengeance are characteristic of the passions of created beings, and do not belong to the Creator. For all this characterizes people who do not know or who are unaware of what they are doing., for as a result of some matter that has occurred unexpectedly to them they are incited by the vehemence

⁴⁷ II/39,4.

⁴⁸ *Fragmenta in Genesis (Patrologia Graeca 66,637)*.

⁴⁹ II/39,5.

of anger to take vengeance. Such action does not belong to the Creator who, even before the cycle of the depiction of creation has been portrayed, knew of all that was before and all that was after in connection with the actions and intentions of rational beings'.⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that Isaac does not think that the idea of the end of torment leads to laxity and the loss of the fear of God. Quite the contrary, this idea, according to him, causes love of God in a person, and repentance that comes out of the measureless mercy of the Creator. The notion of God as a careful father gives birth in a person to a filial love for, and adherence to Him, whereas the notion of God as a chastiser can only cause a slavish fear and dread before Him.

All afflictions and sufferings which fall to everyone's lot are sent from God with the aim of bringing a person to an inner change. Isaac comes to an important conclusion: God never retaliates for the past, but always cares for our future. '...All kinds and manner of chastisements and punishments that come from Him', Isaac suggests, 'are not brought about in order to requite past actions, but for the sake of the subsequent gain to be gotten in them... This is what the Scriptures bring to our attention and remind us of.., that God is not one who requites evil, but He sets aright evil: the former is the characteristic of evil people, while the latter is characteristic of a father. Scripture shows Him as if He is bringing good and evil by way of requital, whereas His purpose is not in fact this, but to instill in us love and awe... If this were not the case, what resemblance does Christ's coming have with the deeds of the generations which were prior to it? Does this immense compassion seem to you to be a retribution for those evil deeds? Tell me, if God is someone who requites evil, and He does what He does by means of requital, what commensurate requital do you see here, O man?'⁵¹

The idea of love contradicts the idea of requital, Isaac insists. Besides, if we are to suppose that God will punish sinners eternally, this would mean that the creation of the world was a mistake, as God proved to be unable to oppose evil, which is not within His will. If we ascribe requital to God's actions, we apply weakness to God: 'So then, let us not attribute to God's actions and His dealings with us any idea of requital. Rather, we should speak of fatherly provision, a wise dispensation, a perfect will which is concerned with our good, and complete love. If it is a case of love, then it is not one of requital; and if it is a case of requital, then it is not one of love. Love, when it operates, is not concerned with the requiting of former things by means of its own good deeds or correction; rather, it looks to what is most advantageous in the future: it examines what is to come, and not things of the past. If we think otherwise than this, then according to the resulting childish view the Creator will prove to be weak.., for after what He had established had become corrupted against His will, He devised some other plan, preparing ills in return for its corruption. Such are the feeble ways of understanding the Creator!'.⁵²

All of God's actions are mysteries that are inaccessible to human reasoning. Gehenna is also a mystery, created in order to bring to a state of

⁵⁰ II/39,6.

⁵¹ II/39,15-16.

⁵² II/39,17.

perfection those who had not reached it during their lifetime: '...In the matter of the afflictions and sentence of Gehenna, there is some hidden mystery, whereby the wise Maker has taken as a starting point for its future outcome the wickedness of our actions and willfulness, using it as a way of bringing to perfection His dispensation wherein lies the teaching which makes wise, and the advantage beyond description, hidden from both angels and human beings, hidden too from those who are being chastised, whether they be demons or human beings, hidden for as long as the ordained period of time holds away'.⁵³ Thus, Gehenna is a sort of purgatory rather than hell: it is conceived and established for the salvation of both human beings and angels. However, this true aim of Gehenna is hidden from those who are chastised in it, and will be revealed only after Gehenna is abolished.

According to Isaac, all those who have fallen away from God will eventually return to Him because of the temporary and short torment in Gehenna that is prepared for them in order that they purify themselves through the fire of suffering and repentance. Having passed through this purification by fire, they will attain to the angelic state. 'Maybe they will be raised to a perfection even greater than that in which the angels now exist; for all are going to exist in a single love, a single purpose, a single will, and a single perfect state of knowledge; they will gaze towards God with the desire of insatiable love, even if some divine dispensation (i.e. Gehenna) may in the meantime be effected for reasons known to God alone, lasting for a fixed period, decreed by Him in accordance with the will of His wisdom'.⁵⁴

God cannot forget any of His creatures, and for everyone their proper place is prepared in the Kingdom of heaven. But for those who are unable to enter immediately into the Kingdom, the transitory period of Gehenna is established: 'No part belonging to any single one of all rational beings will be lost, as far as God is concerned, in the preparation of that supernal Kingdom which is prepared for all worlds. Because of that goodness of His nature by which He brought the universe into being and then bears, guides and provides for the worlds and all created things in His immeasurable compassion, He has devised the establishment of the Kingdom of heaven for the entire community of rational beings - even though an intervening time is reserved for the general raising of all to the same level. And we say this in order that we too may concur with the magisterial teaching of Scripture. Nevertheless Gehenna is grievous, even if it is thus limited in its extent: who can possibly bear it? For this reason the angels in heaven rejoice at a single sinner who repents'.⁵⁵

Isaac was quite resentful of the widespread opinion that the majority of people will be punished in hell, and only a small group of the chosen will delight in Paradise. He is convinced that, quite the contrary, the majority of people will find themselves in the Kingdom of heaven, and only a few sinners will go to Gehenna, and even they only for the period of time which is necessary for their repentance and remission of sins: 'By the device of grace the majority of humankind will enter the Kingdom of heaven without the experience of Gehenna. But this is apart from those who, because of their hardness of heart and utter abandonment

⁵³ II/39,20.

⁵⁴ II/40,5.

⁵⁵ II/40,7. Cf. Luke 15:7; 10.

to wickedness and the lusts, fail to show remorse in suffering for their faults and their sins, and because these people have not been disciplined at all. For God's holy Nature is so good and compassionate that it is always seeking to find some small means of putting us in the right, how He can forgive human beings their sins - like the case of the tax collector who was put in the right by the intensity of his prayer,⁵⁶ or like the case of a woman with two small coins,⁵⁷ or the man who received forgiveness on the Cross.⁵⁸ For God wishes for our salvation, and not for reasons to torment us'.⁵⁹

The teaching on universal salvation, which is so explicitly preached by Isaac the Syrian, evokes the following questions: what is the sense of the whole drama of human history, if both good and evil are ultimately to be found on an equal footing in the face of God's mercifulness? What is the sense of sufferings, ascetic labour and prayer, if sinners will be sooner or later equated with the righteous? Besides, how far do Isaac's opinions correspond to the Christian tradition and to the teaching of the Gospel, in particular, to the Parable of the Last Judgment, where the question concerns the separation of the 'sheep' and the 'goats'?

First, in speaking about the absence of any middle realm between Gehenna and the Kingdom of heaven, Isaac does not deny the reality of the separation of the sheep from the goats, and he even explicitly refers to it. But his attention is directed far beyond this separation, for he does not regard it as final and irreversible. As we saw, the Last Judgment is a reality which Isaac recommends one to ponder over every day, and the experience of the separation of a sinner from his fellow human beings is clearly depicted by Isaac when he speaks of the Judgment. However, his main point is that the present life is a time when the separation actually takes place, and the Last Judgment will only reveal that spiritual state which was reached by a person during his life. Thus, the Parable should not be understood as a dogmatic statement concerning the final destiny of the righteous and sinners, but as a prophetic warning against not having and manifesting love for one's fellow humans during one's earthly life.

Secondly, Isaac warns that the torment of Gehenna is terrible and unbearable, even though it is limited in time. Gehenna is a reality that is in no way denied by Isaac. But he understands it in the context of the Gospel's message about God's unspeakable love and boundless mercy. For Isaac, God is primarily a householder making those who worked only one hour equal to those who have borne the burden of the whole day.⁶⁰ A place in the Kingdom of heaven is given to a person not on the basis of his worthiness or unworthiness, but rather on the basis of God's mercy and love towards humankind. The Kingdom of heaven is not a reward, and Gehenna is not a requital: both are gifts of the merciful God 'Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Cf. Luke 18:14.

⁵⁷ Cf. Mark 12:42-43; Luke 21:2-3.

⁵⁸ Cf. Luke 23:40-43.

⁵⁹ II/40,12.

⁶⁰ Cf. Matt.20:1-15.

⁶¹ 1 Tim.2:4.

Thirdly, as we have already pointed out, the eschatological ideas of Isaac correspond to the teachings of the ancient Fathers, such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Diodore of Tarsus and Gregory of Nyssa.⁶² But it would not be just to say that he simply borrowed the ideas of his predecessors and inserted them into his own writings. Isaac's eschatological optimism and his belief in universal salvation are ultimate outcomes of his personal theological vision, whose central idea is that of God as love. Around this idea the whole of his theological system is shaped.

Finally, the theological system of Isaac the Syrian is based on the direct experience of the mystical union of an ascetic with the love of God. This experience excludes any possibility of envy of other human beings, even to those who have reached a higher spiritual state and thus have a chance of receiving a higher place in the Kingdom of heaven. Moreover, the experience of unity with God as love is so full of delight in itself that it is not for the sake of any future reward that a person prays, suffers and toils in ascetical labours: in this very suffering, in this very prayer and ascetical labour, the experience of encounter with God is concealed. The reason for prayer, bearing afflictions and keeping the commandments is, therefore, not one's striving to leave other human beings behind and to obtain a place in the age to come that is higher than theirs. The sole reason for all ascetical toils is the experience of the grace of God which a person acquires through them. An encounter with God, a direct mystical experience of the divine love which one receives during one's lifetime is, for Isaac, the only justification for all struggles and efforts.

'A merciful heart'

How does this radicalism in insisting upon the renunciation of people correspond to the commandment of love of one's neighbour? Is this flight from people not a flight from Christ Himself, who said: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'?⁶³ Does this self-isolation not lead to a loss or absence of love for people, to selfish indifference towards anyone except oneself?

Isaac would give negative answers. On the contrary, he says, flight from people paradoxically leads to the increase of love of them. The commandment of love of God is universal and it embraces the commandment of the love of one's neighbour: 'The commandment that says, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind",⁶⁴ more than the world, nature, and all that pertains thereto, is fulfilled when you patiently endure in your stillness. And the commandment that speaks of the love of neighbour is included within the former. Do you wish to acquire in your soul the love of your neighbour according to the commandment of the Gospel? Separate yourself from him, and then the heat and flame of the love of him will burn in you and you will rejoice over the sight of his countenance as though you beheld an angel of light. And do you

⁶² We would not identify Isaac's idea of the universal salvation with Origen's teaching on the *apokatastasis ton panton* (restoration of all). In Origen, universal restoration is not the end of the world, but a passing phase from one created world to another, which will come into existence after the present world has come to its end. This idea is alien to Christian tradition and unknown to Isaac.

⁶³ Mat.22:39.

⁶⁴ Mat.22:37.

wish that those who love you should thirst for you? See their faces on fixed days only. Truly, experience is the teacher of all'.⁶⁵

It should be emphasized here, for the sake of those readers to whom such an attitude towards other people might seem shocking, that Isaac does not give here recommendations which would be universally applicable. As his writings are addressed primarily to the solitaries, he is usually talking to a very specific readership. Moreover, he speaks only of his own experience of a solitary by vocation, and of the experience of other solitaries around him and those of the past. The question is therefore about the specifically monastic way of acquiring the love of people as a result of giving up all encounters with them.

Isaac is convinced that the main task of a Christian is the purification of his inner person: this is more important than encounters with people and any activity for the sake of them. This activity is especially dangerous when the soul of a monk is not yet purified and the passions are not yet exterminated from it. There were many people, Isaac says, who were known for their deeds of philanthropy, but because of their constant dwelling within the world with its passions and temptations, they failed to take sufficient care for their own souls: 'Many have accomplished mighty acts, raised the dead, toiled for the conversion of the erring, and have wrought great wonders; and by their hands they have led many to the knowledge of God. Yet after these things, these same men who quickened others, fell into vile and abominable passions and slew themselves, becoming a stumbling-block for many when their acts were made manifest. For they were still sickly in soul, and instead of caring for their soul's health, they committed themselves to the sea of this world in order to heal the souls of others, being yet in ill health; and, in the manner I have stated, they lost their souls and fell away from their hope in God. The infirmity of their senses was not able to confront or resist the flame of things which customarily make wild the vehemence of the passions'.⁶⁶

Thus Isaac does not reject good deeds but only points to the necessity of being spiritually healthy before going into the world to heal others. One can bring more profit to others when one is spiritually strong and has acquired necessary experience of the inner life. Inner depth cannot be substituted for external activity, even if it is an apostolic activity which is indeed very useful for others: 'It is an excellent thing to teach men that which is good and by constant care to draw them away from delusion and into the knowledge of life. This is the path of Christ and the apostles, and it is very lofty. But if a man perceives in himself that through such a way of life and continual communion with men his conscience is weakened by seeing external things, his serenity is disturbed, and his knowledge is darkened..., and that while he seeks to heal others he loses his own health, and departing from the chaste freedom of his will his intellect is shaken; then let him... turn back, lest he hear from the Lord the words of the proverb, "Physician, heal thyself",⁶⁷ let him condemn himself, let him watch over his own good health. Instead of audible words let his excellent manner of life serve for education, and instead of the sounds of his mouth let his works teach others, and when he keeps his soul healthy, let him profit others and heal them by his own good health. For

⁶⁵ I/44 (220) = B41 (312-313).

⁶⁶ I/4 (32) = B4 (46).

⁶⁷ Luke 4:23.

when he is far from men he can benefit them even more by the zeal of his good works than by his words, since he himself is sickly and is in greater need of healing than they. For "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch".⁶⁸

Therefore it is necessary for the solitary, according to Isaac, first to heal his own soul and then care for the souls of others. Inner life in God is higher than any philanthropic and missionary activity: 'Love the idleness of stillness above providing for the world's starving and the conversion of a multitude of heathen to the worship of God. It is better for you to free yourself from the shackles of sin than to free slaves from their slavery. It is better for you to make peace with your soul... than by your teaching to bring peace among men at variance. For, as Gregory the Theologian says, "It is a good thing to speak concerning the things of God for God's sake, but it is better for a man to make himself pure for God" ...⁶⁹ It is more profitable for you to attend to raising up unto the activity of intuitions concerning God the deadness of your soul due to the passions, than it is to resurrect the dead'.⁷⁰

This does not mean that Isaac disapproved of works of charity in general; he simply wanted to emphasize that these works are not the primary task for hermits: they are more fitting for laymen.⁷¹ The latter should do charitable work; as for the hermits, their first task is to look after their own inner thoughts and purify their intellect: 'For the fulfilling of the duty of love with respect to providing for physical well-being is the work of men in the world, or even of monks, but only those who are imperfect, who do not dwell in stillness, or who combine stillness with brotherly concord and continually come and go. For such men this thing is good and worthy of admiration. Those, however, who have chosen to withdraw from the world in body and in mind... should not serve in the husbandry of physical things and visible righteousness... Rather, by mortification of their members which are upon the earth - after the apostolic utterance⁷² - they should offer Him the pure and blameless sacrifice of their thoughts, the first-fruits of their husbandry, and also the affliction of their bodies through their patient endurance of perils for their future hope. For the monastic discipline rivals that of the angels. It is not right for us to abandon this celestial husbandry and to cleave to material things'.⁷³

Speaking outside the narrow context of the eremitical life, Isaac emphasizes the necessity of good deeds for the sake of one's neighbour. He objects to the words of a certain monk who says that 'monks are not obliged to give alms': only that monk, Isaac says, is not obliged to do so who 'possesses nothing upon the earth, who earns nothing for himself among material things, who in his mind clings to nothing visible, and does not endeavour to acquire anything'.⁷⁴ The cenobitic monks are not free from the necessity to give alms and to perform acts of philanthropy for their neighbour. As to hermits, they cannot give alms, but they must have mercy, which should be revealed not so much in good deeds as in prayer concerning the whole world. At the same time deeds

⁶⁸ I/6 (57) = B6 (89). Cf. Mat.15:14.

⁶⁹ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 3,12.

⁷⁰ I/4 (32) = B4 (45-46).

⁷¹ I/54 (270) = B53 (385).

⁷² Cf. Col.3:5.

⁷³ I/21 (109) = B18 (147-148).

⁷⁴ I/21 (110) = B18 (148-149).

cannot be avoided, especially if the situation requires immediate action for the sake of someone who suffers: “Blessed is the merciful man, for he shall obtain mercy”,⁷⁵ not only yonder, but here also in a mystical way. Indeed, what mercy is greater than this, even that when a man is moved with compassion for a fellow man and becomes a partaker in his suffering, our Lord delivers his soul from the gloom of darkness - which is the noetic Gehenna - and brings her into the light of life, thus filling her with delight... And when it is in your power to deliver the iniquitous man from evil, do not neglect to do so. I do not mean that if the affair is far removed from you, you should go and cast yourself into the work of this sort, for deeds of this kind do not belong to your way of life. If, however, the affair is placed directly into your hands and is within your power..., then take heed to yourself, lest you become a partaker of the blood of the iniquitous man by not taking pains to deliver him... Instead of an avenger, be a deliverer. Instead of a faultfinder, be a soother. Instead of a betrayer, be a martyr. Instead of a chider, be a defender. Beseech God on behalf of sinners that they receive mercy’.⁷⁶

Thus even the hermits, who have no task to perform good deeds, should act as deliverers and defenders of people in some situations. In general, they should strive to obtain love of their neighbour as an inner quality, to acquire a universal merciful love towards every human being and every creature. Through being merciful they may heal their own souls, Isaac says, thus making an important addition to his own opinion that good deeds should not be accomplished before one’s soul is healed. If good deeds cannot heal the soul of someone who performs them, the inner mercy does heal his soul: ‘Let the scale of mercy always be preponderant within you, until you perceive in yourself that mercy which God has for the world. Let this our state become a mirror where we may see in ourselves that likeness and true image which naturally belong to the Divine Essence. By these things and their like we are enlightened so as to be moved toward God with a limpid intellect. A harsh and merciless heart will never be purified. A merciful man is the physician of his own soul, for as with a violent wind he drives the darkness of passions out of his inner self’.⁷⁷

This universal love, about which Isaac speaks, cannot be obtained by deeds of philanthropy or, in general, by human effort: it is a gift which we receive directly from God. Isaac’s teaching on how the love of neighbour is acquired can be depicted in the following scheme: a person withdraws himself from his neighbour for the sake of life in solitude and stillness; through this he acquires an ardent love of God; this love gives birth in him to the ‘luminous love’ (*hubba šapya*) of humanity. St Isaac writes: ‘A person who has stillness and converse of knowledge will easily and quickly arrive at the love of God, and with the love of God he will draw close to perfect love of fellow human beings. No one has ever been able to draw close to this luminous love of humanity without having first been held worthy of the wonderful and inebriating love of God’.⁷⁸

The scheme which is offered by Isaac is therefore different from the one we find in the 1st Epistle of John: ‘He that loveth not his brother whom he hath

⁷⁵ Cf. Mat.5:7.

⁷⁶ I/64 (313-314) = B65 (456-457).

⁷⁷ I/64 (312) = B65 (455).

⁷⁸ II/10,33-34.

seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?'⁷⁹ According to Isaac, someone should first love God whom he does not see and by means of this draw near to the love of his neighbour whom he sees, or rather whom he does not see either as he has deliberately withdrawn from seeing him. To acquire the love of one's neighbour by means of good deeds is as impossible as to acquire the love of God by means of the love of neighbour: 'To come from the toil and struggle with the thoughts to the luminous love of humanity, and from this, to be raised up to the love of God - for someone to complete such a course in this life, even up to the time he departs from the world, is impossible, however much he struggles. Because of the commandments and out of discernment it is possible for someone to compel his thoughts and to purify his sensibility with respect to them (i.e. the others), and he can even perform good towards them. But for him to attain to a luminous love of humanity by means of struggle, I am not persuaded to admit as possible: there is no one who has so attained, and none who will attain it by this path in this life. Without wine no one can get drunk, nor will his heart leap with joy; and without inebriation in God, no one will obtain by the natural course of events the virtue that does not belong to him, nor will it remain in him serenely and without compulsion'.⁸⁰

The question is here of a special and highest form of love of one's neighbour, which is called by Isaac 'luminous' and 'perfect', and which is a gift from God that does not belong to human nature. It is not therefore a natural love of human beings, domestic animals, birds, wild animals and so on, which we might encounter in some people,⁸¹ but a supernatural love, which is born from 'inebriation' with the love of God. The luminous love of neighbour is that sacrificial love which makes one like God, who loves sinners and righteous equally: 'In the case of the person who has been held worthy to taste of divine love (*hubba alahaya*), that person customarily forgets everything else by reason of its sweetness, for it is something at whose taste all visible things seem despicable: such a person's soul gladly draws near to a luminous love of humanity, without distinguishing (between sinners and righteous); he is never overcome by the weakness to be found in people, nor is he perturbed. He is just as the blessed Apostles were as well: people who in the midst of all the bad things they endured from the others, were nonetheless utterly incapable of hating them or of being fed up with showing love for them. This was manifested in actual deed, for after all the other things they even accepted death in order that these people might be retrieved. These were men who only a little previously begged Christ that fire might descend from heaven upon the Samaritans just because they had not received them into their village!⁸² But once they had received the gift and tasted the love of God, they were made perfect even in love for wicked men: enduring all kinds of evils in order to retrieve them, they could not possibly hate them. So you see that perfect love of fellow human beings cannot be found just as a result of keeping the commandments'.⁸³

⁷⁹ 1 John 4:20.

⁸⁰ II/10,35.

⁸¹ II/10,35.

⁸² Cf. Luke 9:54.

⁸³ II/10,36.

Therefore, basing himself on the Gospel's teaching about the two greatest commandments, Isaac offers his own interpretation of them, his own path of attaining to the love of God and neighbour. But this path is not for the majority of people who live in the world: it is only for those who have chosen solitude as their way of life, who have renounced the world and who draw near to God by means of life in stillness.

Living far from people and remaining internally alone, one can and must show love to others: 'Rejoice with the joyous and weep with those who weep,'⁸⁴ for this is the sign of limpid purity. Suffer with those who are ill and mourn with sinners; with those who repent rejoice. Be every man's friend, but in your mind remain alone. Be a partaker of the sufferings of all men, but keep your body distant from all. Rebuke no one, revile no one, not even men who live very wickedly. Spread your cloak over the man who is falling and cover him. And if you cannot take upon yourself his sins and receive his chastisement in his stead, then at least patiently suffer his shame and do not disgrace him... Know, brother, that the reason why we must remain within the door of our cell is to be ignorant of the wicked deeds of men, and thus, seeing all as holy and good, we shall attain to purity of mind'.⁸⁵ Thus the luminous love of neighbour, when someone does not want to see another person's sins and infirmities, seeing only his advantages, is born from the heart that is purified and the mind that dwells in stillness and that is totally freed from worldly affairs.

Isaac's understanding of human love is directly connected with his view of the divine love, and his teaching on God as mercy is reflected in his notion of a 'merciful heart' in humans. If God is love by His nature, everyone who has acquired perfect love and mercy towards all creation, becomes godlike: his perfect state of love towards creation is a mirror where he can see a true image and likeness of the Divine Essence.⁸⁶ All the saints 'seek for themselves the sign of complete likeness to God: to be perfect in the love of the neighbour'.⁸⁷ Characteristic in this connection is Isaac's famous text, with which I would like to conclude this paper: 'And what is a merciful heart? - It is the heart's burning for the sake of the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing; and by the recollection of them the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. From the strong and vehement mercy which grips his heart and from his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in creation. For this reason he offers up tearful prayer continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner he even prays for the family of reptiles because of the great compassion that burns without measure in his heart in the likeness of God'.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Cf. Rom.12:15.

⁸⁵ I/51 (247) = B50 (349-350).

⁸⁶ I/64 (312) = B65 (455).

⁸⁷ I/71 (346) = B74 (510).

⁸⁸ I/71 (344-345) = B74 (507-508).