

# Voice, word and silence in the writings of John the Solitary and Isaac of Nineveh

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1. The threefold spiritual life at John the Solitary and Isaac of Nineveh; 2. The concept of silence and a specific epistemology; 3. Silence as theological methodology; Conclusion

Silence is a common concept in the ascetical theology as well as in the mystical theology. It describes, on the one side, an ascetical practice, expressed in a negative terminology, as renunciation at external forms of communication, and, on the other side, a mystical state, given mostly by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, which goes beyond any natural state. And along with this practice a specific theology is generated, that stands at the very base of the vision on „spiritual man”.

In this paper I will deal with this concept, described as part of an itinerary, firstly from up to down, from „before” to „after”, within its Christological framework, and, secondly, other way round, from down to up, concretely illustrated in the inner life of man, as a human response. This process is theologically based on Incarnation, when the Son of God made the way from silence to word and voice, and finds its prolongation in the life of the ascetics, when one remakes the same route but other way round – from speech to word, up to silence, as anticipation and foretaste of the eternal life.

1. The threefold spiritual life at John the Solitary and Isaac of Nineveh

John the Solitary is an enigmatic person. His timing was dated from the fifth to the eighth century, and his theological world was argued to have varied from Gnosticism to Messalianism. However, the quite generally accepted idea by the scholars is that he lived at the beginning of the fifth century and is different from his namesake who was contemporary with the Origenist dispute. Regarding Isaac, Bishop of Nineveh, and a well-known monastic Syriac writer of the 7-8<sup>th</sup> century, we know that John the Solitary is one of his essential mentors in matter of spirituality.

One can summarize the theological connections between the two mystical authors evoking three key themes in the theology of Isaac of Nineveh that are undoubtedly borrowed from the author in question: the threefold spiritual life, the twofold itinerary – of the right and perfect man, and the regard towards the life to come or the mystic of hope.

In this paper I will only refer to the first aspect, which stands at the very basis of their theological discourse in matter of dealing with the concept of “silence”. The spiritual itinerary follows three orders and three corresponding spiritual conducts: of the body<sup>1</sup>, of the soul<sup>2</sup> and of the spirit<sup>3</sup>. The bodily stage is determined by corporality – bodily asceticism, avoidance of sin; the prayers and tears are caused by purely human anxieties – this is the state of the servant. John gives a list of passions associated to this stage: “The passions that belong to the body are: sleep, hunger, thirst, desire, intemperance”<sup>4</sup>. The person

1 ܠܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܐ/ܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܐ.

2 ܠܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܐ/ܠܦܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܐ.

3 ܠܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܐ/ܠܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܐ.

4 *Johannes von Lycopolis: Ein Dialog über die Seele und die Affekte des Menschen* (ed. by Sven Dederig), Uppsala, Arbeten utgina med understöd av Vilhelm Ekmans universitetsfond, 1936, 2, 43:5-6.

who is operating according to the order of the body is able to control the negative aspects of these passions with great effort; his vision of the world is not accurate, as “the way of life of the spiritual person is not perceived by people in the body”<sup>5</sup>.

The second stage assumes that the soul begins to awaken and achieve some knowledge; to bodily asceticism is added the struggle against the passions of the soul: anger, zeal, discernment, jealousy, love of power, pride, boasting, lust<sup>6</sup>; prayer is neither clean nor continuous, but foretastes them; it is an intermediate stage – of the mercenaries. In this state, one still fights against temptations: “If someone fights against the evil of his thoughts and does not deliver his mind to his instincts, but forces himself not to do their will, this person, if he perseveres in this resolution, is close to the level of the soul”<sup>7</sup>. At this stage one partakes a glimpse of the truth, as a sign and a foretaste of what means spiritual: “This is why the power of the signs is like the order of the soul for people: just as the soul is placed in between corporeality and spirituality in this life, neither like the body nor it is perfect like the spirituality of the angels, so the power of the signs stands between error and truth, distancing itself from error and approaching truth”<sup>8</sup>.

The spiritual stage requires the knowledge of the “mysteries of the other world”, it represents a foretaste of the new world’s perfection; this condition is accompanied by tears of joy, pure and uninterrupted prayer. It is God’s gift – the stage of the sons<sup>9</sup>. To distinguish the spiritual state from the lower ones, John uses the image of praise: “Whoever sings, suing his tongue and body, and perseveres in this

5 *Johannes von Lycopolis*, 1, 12:15-18.

6 *Johannes von Lycopolis* 2, 43:5-6.

7 *Johannes von Lycopolis*, 1, 13:19-22.

8 *Johannes von Lycopolis*, 1, 11:23-12:1.

9 See the synthesis of Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme. Introduction à l'étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*, Chevtogne, 1987, at 118.

worship both night and day, such a person is one of the Just. But the person who has been held worthy to enter deeper than this, singing in mind and in spirit, such a person is a spiritual being, more exalted than the Just. But one becomes a ‘spiritual being’ [only] after being Just”<sup>10</sup>.

As for Isaac of Nineveh, in the same vein with John the Solitary, he speaks about three orders: preternatural<sup>11</sup>, natural<sup>12</sup> and supernatural<sup>13</sup>, corresponding to their own service, and three conducts<sup>14</sup>, integrated within the three stages. More specifically, he returns to the pattern of John the Solitary in the Second Collection, the 20<sup>th</sup> discourse. There he speaks about the “understanding” of he who is in the level of the body (ܦܘܠܟܐ), fearful and concerned with the bodily things. The second category refers to he who lives the level of the soul (ܢܦܫܐ), performing intelligible activity and reflection on resurrection. And, finally, he lists the level of the spirit (ܪܘܚܐ) when one attains the real knowledge and experiences the divine joy. Implying the consecrated biblical expression “I know a person...”, Isaac describes some mystical forms while picturing the spiritual conduct: “stirrings of Spirit”<sup>15</sup>, “lightning flashes”<sup>16</sup>, “particular mystical insights”<sup>17</sup>, when one perceives a hidden joy and consolation<sup>18</sup>.

10 Sebastian Brock, “John the Solitary, On Prayer” I, *JTS* 30 (1979), 84-101, at 98.

11 ܠܒܐ ܗܘܥܐ ܡܢܢܐ.

12 ܡܢܢܐ.

13 ܠܗܠ ܗܘܥܐ ܡܢܢܐ.

14 ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ; (ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ, ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ, ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ).

15 ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ.

16 ܡܢܢܐ; ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ.

17 ܡܢܢܐ ܡܢܢܐ.

18 Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali: capitoli sulla conoscenza, preghiere, contemplazione, sull'argomento della gehenna e altri opuscoli*, Qiqajon, Bose, 1990 (chapter III); Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, transl. by Sebastian Brock, Lovanii, CSCO 225, 1995 (chapter IV-XLI), abbreviated II, 20, 13-19.

In the same Collection, 22<sup>nd</sup> Discourse, Isaac uses a different imagery to express the tripartite ascetic path and the evolution of knowledge according to each stage<sup>19</sup>: initial<sup>20</sup>, intermediary<sup>21</sup> and concluding stage<sup>22</sup>. And, successively, he describes the works according to each level. Specific to the first manner of life is the discipline of fasting and recitation, accompanied by fear and sadness for the previous way of life. The intermediary conduct is concentrated more on spiritual reading and continuous kneeling, while the way of the perfect presupposes meditation and the prayer of the heart. In the second manner of life, penitence generates joyful stirrings and a certain feeling of hope in the mind and thoughts is more present. The amount of laborious works is lessened and some of them replace the others. In this dynamism we can identify a qualitative progress in matter of works; the emphasis is placed not on material virtues, as they become more and more spiritual (*noetic*). This transformation is not so much due to the man's inner powers, but they are out of grace and out of God's power that shadows<sup>23</sup> him every moment.

So as to describe the perfect conduct, Isaac employs some technical terms – stupor (ܩܛܘܠܗ) of God, peace (ܩܠܘܬܐ), joy (ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ), drunkenness (ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ) and sweetness (ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ) of the heart. However, in his argumentation, Isaac makes a sharp distinction between the first two levels and the third conduct. He clearly mentions a kind of stupor before God's Economy, described with the terms evoked above, and the perfect stupor (ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ ܩܝܘܠܗ), before the Nature of the Lord

19 The same idea in II, 3.4, 42-48.

20 ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ.

21 ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ.

22 ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ.

23 ܩܕܝܫܐܘܬܐ; see the concept of “shadowing” Sebastian Brock, “*Magganuta*: a Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background”, *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont—Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux*, Genève, 1988, at 121-129.

of the Lords (Deuteronomy 10:17; 1 Timothy 6:15), when the mind is at peace, exalted behind any perception, and nature surpasses knowledge into what he calls un-knowledge (ܐܘܢܘܢܐ ܠܐ).

## 2. The concept of silence and a specific epistemology

The concept of silence (ܐܘܢܘܢܐ) is well developed in John's and Isaac's visions on prayer, within the process of the "birth of the spiritual man", and, in particular, when they speak about "pure prayer" (ܐܘܢܘܢܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) and "spiritual prayer" (ܐܘܢܘܢܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ).

In John's vision, spiritual prayer is generated by God Himself, Who is spirit, not by learning or experience, and does not consist of words<sup>24</sup>. The one who attains this state, beyond words and sounds, resembles and joins the angelic powers, who glorify God in silence Who Himself is Silence<sup>25</sup>. There is an hierarchy generated by three spiritual stages: voice, corresponding to bodily conduct, word to the conduct of the soul, and silence to spiritual conduct; and, in consequence, the first two material types of prayer pertain to what he calls the state of the "right people" and only the last one to the "perfect people" (spiritual)<sup>26</sup>.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the idea that "God is silence" when John the Solitary displays his vision on Incarnation as reflected in his letter to Eutropius and Eusebius, introduced as "On the man of voice and word"<sup>27</sup>, valuing the perspective of Ignatius of Antioch. In this letter, John assimilates the voice and word to the

24 "It is to Him who is spirit that you are directing the movements of prayer. You should pray in spirit, seeing that He is spirit"; Sebastian Brock, *On Prayer 1*, 89/97.

25 *On Prayer 2*, 89 (97).

26 *On Prayer 3*, 89-90 (98); see the hierarchy in *Liber Graduum*, Patrologia Syriaca 1.3, Paris, 1926, 13-14.

27 *Letter 3*, quoted by Sebastian Brock, *On Prayer*, 86-87.

body and living in the world, while the silence to the spirit, in the new world. Refining this idea, he applies it to the unity in Christ – more excellent than the mingling<sup>28</sup> of the word in the voice, is the mixture of God-Logos endued in the body<sup>29</sup>. As the word and the voice create one unity, one intellection<sup>30</sup>, one understanding<sup>31</sup>, it is the same for the Son of God – one impression<sup>32</sup> perceived in two powers. And from here, it is better to be with God and not in the world of voice, desiring to become silence and not voice and word, attaining to the realm expressly found in the new world. Here the spiritual being begins to foretaste the Kingdom of Heaven<sup>33</sup>.

And yet he gives a great importance to the incarnation of the word in the voice during vocal prayer and, by that, he stresses the continuity of the Incarnation process from the realm of the silence into that of the word and the voice<sup>34</sup>. Thus, spiritual prayer is a form of silent prayer, which resembles spiritual man with God, Who is silence in His essence. Consequently, so will become the one who will be living and moving and participating to His life: “For God is silence (ܠܘܘܘܬܐ) and in silence is he sung by means of that psalmody which is worthy of Him”<sup>35</sup>.

28 André de Halleux shows that John uses here the term “mingling” (ܠܘܘܘܬܐ) of Christ to describe the mystery of communion, as a model of Christ’s association with us/ “Christologie de Jean le Solitaire”, in *Le Muséon*, 94 (1981), 1-2, at 5–36, here 33–35.

29 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܘܘܬܐ; *Letter 3*.

30 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

31 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

32 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

33 For details see Brouria Bitton Ashkelony, “‘More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue’: John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity”, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12 (2012), 2, at 301–331.

34 The author of the article argues that John’s mysticism is neither theophanic, nor ecstatic, but more a spiritual evolution, culminating with the inner liturgical silence (26).

35 *On Prayer* 4, 98/ 90:19-20.

In the frame of the three stages, John sees the individual progressing through five stages of silence: a silence of the tongue, of the whole body, of the soul, of the mind, and a silence of the spirit. The silences of the tongue and whole body are within the order of the body: “The silence of the tongue is merely when it is not incited to evil speech; the silence of the entire body is when all its senses are unoccupied”<sup>36</sup>. The silence of the soul and mind belongs to the order of the soul: “The silence of the soul is when there are no guilty thoughts bursting forth within it; the silence of the mind is when it is not reflection on any harmful knowledge or wisdom”<sup>37</sup>. The four lower silences exhibit the gradual liberation from the chains of the body and its thoughts. The silence of the spirit, as the name says, pertains to the realm of the order of the spirit: “The silence of the spirit is when the mind ceases even from stirrings caused by created spiritual beings and all its movements are stirred solely by the Being (ܠܗܘܘܬܗ) at the wondrous awe of the silence which surrounds the Being”<sup>38</sup>.

Going further to Isaac of Nineveh, one may easily observe that he uses the term “silence” in a double sense – ascetical as well as mystical. In the ascetical endeavor, one needs first to refrain from the world in the solitude and silence<sup>39</sup> for the creation of a propitious space for inner unification. This withdrawal generates the zeal for other ascetic

36 *On Prayer* 5, 99/ 91:9-11.

37 *On Prayer* 5, 99/ 91:12-14.

38 “Letter to Hesychius” in Sebastian Brock, *Malpanuta d-abahata suryaye d-al slota*, Monastery of St. Ephrem: Glane, Holland, 1988, at 33-44; and English translation in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Cistercian Studies 101, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987, at 81-98, here 34:17-18/ 20, 86.

39 Mar Isaacus Ninivita, *De perfectione religiosa* (ed. by Paul Bedjan), Paris-Leipzig, 1909 (Syriac/ abbreviated B); *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh translated from Bedjan's Syriac text with the introduction and registers by A.J. Wensinck*, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel XXIII, 1, Wiesbaden, 1969 (English translation, abbreviated I) I, 35, at 243 (B, 163-164).

labors<sup>40</sup>. And in consequence, there is a silence of the body (ܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܠܥܝܢܐ), reflected in choosing solitude and ascetical efforts; the silence of the mind (ܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܠܠܒܐ) and the silence of the spirit (ܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܠܪܘܚܐ), described as spiritual contemplation of the divine mystery.

We are more interested in this paper on the mystical silence, specific mostly to the third stage – spiritual conduct, which pertains to the spiritual man. As in the case of John the Solitary, Isaac makes a clear difference between the “pure prayer” and the “spiritual prayer” and here the concept of silence places an essential role. Spiritual prayer gets a vast signification, as generically describing the third rank of the spiritual itinerary.

In Isaac’s discourses there are some important concepts referring to the highest level of spiritual life – knowledge, divine vision/contemplation and revelation. The Bishop of Nineveh indicates a synonymy between them and adds a fourth one, already anticipated – spiritual prayer. He argues words are weak so that to express the spiritual experience. This is why there is no fixed terminology for that. I will quote an illustrative paragraph in this sense:

*The Holy Fathers are accustomed to designate all profitable emotions and all spiritual working by the name of prayer<sup>41</sup>... But sometimes they designate by spiritual prayer<sup>42</sup> that which they sometimes call theoria<sup>43</sup>; and sometimes knowledge<sup>44</sup>; and sometimes revelations of intelligible things<sup>45</sup>. Doest thou see, how the Fathers change their designations of spiritual things? This is because accurate designations can only be established concerning earthly things<sup>46</sup>.*

40 I, 45, at 300 (B, 447-448).

41 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

42 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܠܪܘܚܐ.

43 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

44 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

45 ܠܘܘܘܬܐ ܠܪܘܚܐ ܠܘܘܘܬܐ.

46 I, 22, at 114 (B, 168-169).

The Bishop of Nineveh describes the evolution of prayer within the tripartite scheme of spiritual life in accordance to Paul's anthropology. In this frame, vocal prayer pertains to the bodily stage, pure prayer<sup>47</sup> occurs in the second stage, the intermediary stage of the soul, while the spiritual prayer, during the spiritual stage, which anticipates the life after the Resurrection. About pure prayer Isaac states that it is generated by impulses or stirrings<sup>48</sup> and, consequently, it is a particular stage that depends on the type of impulses occurring during it. One can find a partial description of pure prayer in connection with the impulses, in the Second Collection. I will quote a short paragraph:

*The intensity of stirrings in prayer is not an exalted part of pure prayer... it belongs only to the second or third rank. I do not mean to say that you are not traveling on the right path when these things apply to you; rather I just mean that these things belong not to the highest, but only to the intermediate stages. What is the most precious and the principle characteristic in pure prayer is the brevity and smallness of any stirrings, and the fact that the mind simply gazes as though in wonder during this diminution of active prayer. From this, one of two things occurs to the mind in connection with that brief stirring which wells up in it: either it withdraws into silence, as a result of the overpowering might of the knowledge which the intellect has received in a particular verse; or it is held in delight at that point at which it was aiming during the prayer when it was stirred, and the heart cultivates it with an insatiable yearning of love<sup>49</sup>.*

The most important element here is the mind's activity that constitutes the boundary between pure and spiritual prayer. Isaac establishes some limits of mind's activity in the spiritual realm and makes a difference between the active and the passive prayer which occurs in silence and without any bodily or mental movements. Prayer, as a

47 ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ.

48 ܩܘܪܒܢܐ.

49 II, 3.4,66 (English translation: S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Cistercian Publications inc., Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1987, note 1).

concept, presupposes struggle and movement by definition, described in the text above as “various stirrings” of the mind or of the soul. In this framework appears the idea of the mind’s limitation in correspondence with the spiritual conduct, and, in particular, spiritual prayer. Isaac argues that, as there comes a moment when all psychic and noetic impulses cease, there is a state beyond pure prayer, described with the terms already mentioned – “amazement”, “vision” and, finally, “spiritual prayer”:

*As soon as the spirit has crossed the boundary<sup>50</sup> of pure prayer and proceeded onwards, there is neither prayer, nor emotions, nor tears, nor authority, nor freedom, nor beseeching, nor desire, nor longing after any of those things which are hoped for in this world or in the world to be. Therefore there is no prayer beyond pure prayer and all its emotions and habits by their authority with freedom conduct the spirit thus far and there is struggle in it; but beyond this limit it passes into ecstasy<sup>51</sup> and is no longer prayer. From here onwards the spirit desists from prayer; there is sight,<sup>52</sup> but the spirit does not pray<sup>53</sup>.*

So, pure prayer is an intermediary state towards the spiritual stage, when there are no impulses, sensations or other movements concerning anything, but an ineffable silence<sup>54</sup>. The mind experiences here another kind of knowledge, non-discursive, in a state of wonder<sup>55</sup>. The reflections on the life to come are replaced by the gazes at this reality that are qualitatively different. Isaac highlights this idea: “Spiritual insights which arise concerning matters of this world are quite different in their power from the luminous reflection on the things to come, for by gazing at such things the mind is changed into a state of

50 ܠܘܫܘܬܐ.

51 ܠܘܫܘܬܐ.

52 ܠܘܫܘܬܐ.

53 I, 22, at 115 (B, 165-166).

54 II, 34, 2.

55 II, 30, 6.

wonder<sup>56</sup>. For Isaac this means going out of oneself (or better, going in oneself – entasy) and out of this world and lack of mind awareness. In that time “the saints... do not pray, when the mind has been engulfed by the [divine] spirit, but they dwell in ecstasy<sup>57</sup> in that delightful glory,<sup>58</sup> so the mind, when it has been made worthy of perceiving the future blessedness, will forget itself and all that is here, and it will not be moved any longer by the thought of anything<sup>59</sup>”.

In the evolution of his argumentation he argues that, despite the fact this state is called “spiritual prayer”, from an epistemological point of view, one cannot speak properly about it as prayer and yet, it is called prayer as it is granted during prayer, when the mind of the saints is “snatched”<sup>60</sup>. In order to illustrate his vision, he makes appeal to some biblical events as Zacharias’ vision in the temple, the vision of Peter on the roof, the apparition during Cornelius’ prayer, the dialogue of God with Joshua the son of Nun. And finally, he establishes parallels with the sanctification of the gifts of bread and wine when the Holy Spirit, during Eucharistic Epiclesis, descends upon them<sup>61</sup>.

The border between “pure prayer” and “spiritual prayer” is established by the activity of the mind. So spiritual prayer is not acquired by any human effort, but it is a gift. This idea is suggested in the paragraph that follows:

*What should be called? The fruit of pure prayer, which is engulfed in the spirit. The mind has ascended here above prayer. And, having found what is more excellent, it desists from prayer. And further there is no longer prayer, but the*

56 II, 5, 8.

57 ܠܡܘܬܐ.

58 ܠܡܘܬܐ ܠܡܘܬܐ ܠܡܘܬܐ.

59 I, 22, at 115 (B, 170).

60 See the radical ܡܘܬܐ (ܡܘܬܐ).

61 For details see my article: “The Motherhood of Virgin Mary and the Motherhood of the Spiritual Man (and the Church) in the Syriac Tradition. Kinship and Imagery”, in *Eastern Theological Journal* 1 (2015), at 349-362.

*gaze in ecstasy<sup>62</sup> at the unattainable things which do not belong to the world of mortals, and peace without knowledge of any earthly thing. This is the well-known ignorance<sup>63</sup> concerning which Evagrius says<sup>64</sup>: Blessed is he who has reached, during prayer, unconsciousness<sup>65</sup> which is not to be surpassed<sup>66</sup>.*

There is one important observation to make from the paragraph above. Despite the fact that spiritual prayer is not the result of any ascetic effort, Isaac stresses that it comes, in the spirit of the synergetic eastern ascetic tradition, as a consequence of pure prayer. But to express the transcendent character of this state he equalizes the spiritual prayer with “wonder” as well as “un-knowledge” and “silence”. The two concepts pertain to two different principles of action-active (given by good noetic impulses) and passive (silence of the mind<sup>67</sup>). The first type corresponds to pure prayer, while the second to spiritual prayer and is given by the revelation of the intellect<sup>68</sup>, out of any human struggle or the strength of the will<sup>69</sup>. This is also called “apperception of God”<sup>70</sup>, that occurs spontaneously and motionlessly, and the “wonderment of mind<sup>71</sup>, free from all images, and the spiritual silence<sup>72</sup>”<sup>73</sup>. One may call this state “contemplative silence”<sup>74</sup>.

62 כַּמְּבֹרָךְ וְכִיּוֹ.

63 כְּחֵלֶם לֵל.

64 *Les six centuries des Kephalaia Gnostica d'Evagre le Pontique* (ed. by Antoine Guillaumont), PO, Paris, Brepols, 1958 (KG) 3.88.

65 Literally un-knowledge: כְּחֵלֶם לֵל.

66 I, 22, at 118 (B, 175).

67 כְּחֵלֶם לֵל וְכִיּוֹ.

68 כְּחֵלֶם לֵל; see also ‘the revelation of mind’ (כְּחֵלֶם לֵל וְכִיּוֹ), I, 20, at 109 (B, 161).

69 II, 15, 7.

70 כְּחֵלֶם לֵל וְכִיּוֹ. See also KG 4.48.

71 כְּחֵלֶם לֵל וְכִיּוֹ.

72 כְּחֵלֶם לֵל וְכִיּוֹ.

73 II, 15, 10-II.

74 Cf. Ioan I. Ică jr., “Sfântul Isaac Sirul necunoscutul – operă, profil istoric și gândire spirituală pe fundalul tradiției siro-orientale”, in Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cu-*

### 3. Silence as theological methodology

Isaac claims that the first contact between God's silence and the word was Creation. God created eight intelligible natures<sup>75</sup>, the first seven – the angels – in silence<sup>76</sup> and the eighth one – the light – by voice<sup>77</sup>.

The word had a creative role. Since then, the word has played an essential role in knowledge, becoming an intermediary between God and creation. From the very beginning, the Bishop of Nineveh supports the epistemological value of the word in his gnoseological system: "The rational beings have been taught by the Creator to use the sensible sound (ܐܠܗ) of the word (ܐܠܗܐ) from the beginning; his first use was to bring praise to the Creator... And we, men, we have received in a sensible way the sounds of the sensitive word that we use"<sup>78</sup>.

One may find in Isaac's discourses an epistemology starting from the language. The spoken word (voice), as well as the written word

*vinte cãtre singuratici. Partea a doua recent descoperitã*, Sibiu, Deisis, 2004", at 17.

75 ܐܠܗ.

76 ܐܠܗܐ.

77 ܐܠܗ; Professor Paolo Bettiolo argues that Isaac's position goes along the exegetical East Syriac tradition, which reflects a specific and original reading of the Bible. In his argumentation, Prof. Bettiolo quotes in his article «*Avec la charité comme but: Dieu et création dans la méditation d'Isaac de Ninive*» (*Irénikon*, 63, 1990, 3, at 327), a fragment from the letter of Catholikos George, who ordained Isaac bishop of Nineveh: «Pendant de l'espace de douze heures les natures spirituelles demeurèrent dans les ténèbres, ainsi que toutes les natures qui fuit créées. Pour l'instruction des anges, notre Dieu bon dit: 'Que la lumière soit', et aussitôt, en même temps que cette parole, la nature admirable de la lumière exista, et les natures spirituelles furent dans l'admiration, et furent excitées à la louange du créateur de la lumière. Comme Dieu lui-même l'apprend au juste job en disant: 'Quand je créai les étoiles du firmament, toutes les anges s'exclamèrent et me louèrent'» (*Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens* (ed. and transl. by J.B. Chabot), Paris, 1902/ SO 227–245, here 230; 490–514, here 494).

78 II, 3.1, 8.

(Scripture) and thought, is a means of revelation and, consequently, part of the natural knowledge. Speaking about the use of the word in the cognitive process, Isaac develops a scale of three steps or three orders<sup>79</sup> – referring to the communicated reality, expressing more than that reality, or describing less than the situation appears. But, when this principle is applied to God’s truth, one may find only one of these three orders – the word expressing less than the reality itself<sup>80</sup>.

In the same context, Isaac speaks about three categories of words—the word clothed in matter, but which does not take the seal of matter, being verbally communicated; the immaterial word which does take the form of matter; and thirdly, a simple word, which has no connection to matter. According to these three stages, there is also an itinerary from the material word, to the immaterial word, up to the simple word. The first category refers to the voice of the words, the second to the intellectual thoughts verbally communicated, and the third pertains exclusively to prayer and more and spiritual prayer<sup>81</sup>. Any linguistic form remains a partial and inadequate way of expressing the divine truth and yet represents a medium of revelation.

Commenting on this issue, Nestor Kavvadas associates the three levels with the corresponding type of knowledge: what is inferior to the subject with a material-sensitive knowledge; what is the communicated reality with a noetic knowledge of the intellectual beings (the second natural contemplation on Evagrius’ line); and the third with the “theoria” or the eschatological knowledge<sup>82</sup>.

79 ~~κατά~~.

80 II, 3.1, 3; In a more flexible interpretation, Nestor Kavvadas argues that here Isaac reflects the three meanings of the word – literal, the inner signification and the outer signification. See Nestor Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika. Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2015, at 104.

81 II, 3.2, 2; II, 3.1, 98.

82 *Isaak von Ninive*, at 104-105.

The eschatological state changes the knowledge communication register. Language remains a form of mediation between object and subject, but spiritual knowledge implies direct communication, which St. Isaac calls “ignorance” (Pseudo) Dionysius speaks about, that can no longer be expressed by words. We can see here also the influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia with his doctrine about the two worlds – the one prior to Incarnation and the second, inaugurated by the Incarnation (eschatological), which, spiritually, anticipates the life after death. So the word remains circumscribed to the first period, as long as there is meditation, prayer, movement, labor and knowledge, in general. From there onwards, the form of communication is silence.

Silence is the language of the ascetic who is in astonishment and receives divine vision or stands in holy ignorance before God: “The soul that has once, in faith, entrusted itself unto God and, under many temptations, has received the taste of faith’s help, no longer thinks of itself, but is made speechless by ecstasy (ἔκστασις) and silence (ἥσυχια), nor is it allowed to return unto the means of its knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) or to make use of it”<sup>83</sup>.

Silence characterizes the life of God Himself, as well as the glory and praise that the angels and the saints bring in the eschatological kingdom. This aspect is clearly underlined by Isaac when he states: “Silence (ἥσυχια) is a symbol of the future world. Speech (ὁμιλία) is an organ of this world... By these mysteries (silence and fasting) is accomplished, even through those invisible forces, the holy service of the Essence which governs the world... others have been entrusted with the office of examining, for the universal renovation, the secrets that were hidden in the mysterious silence of the Lord of the universe”<sup>84</sup>.

From here, within the three fold spirituality, one identifies a clear epistemology – the voice is specific to the conduct of the body, the

<sup>83</sup> I, 51, at 242 (B, 360).

<sup>84</sup> I, 64, at 471 (B, 470).

word (in the thought) pertains to the conduct of the soul, while silence describes the spiritual knowledge and the anticipation of the new world. He clearly differentiates between two types of perception of truth, the first one strictly related to words and human reason (what we might call discursive knowledge, deductive, or philosophical), followed by a second way of perceiving the truth, out of grace (inductive or intuitive knowledge, or the knowledge of the saints). Both categories are capable of studying and perceiving the rationality of creation, but the spiritual things are opened only to the second type. In the first category he includes the worldly sciences and arts, while the second refers strictly to the perception of God. Below is a suggestive excerpt where Isaac, using Basil the Great's and Evagrius' insights, speaks about the two types of knowledge:

*The blessed Bishop Basil<sup>85</sup>... makes a distinction between this perception<sup>86</sup> of creation<sup>87</sup> that saints receive – that is the ladder of the intellect of which blessed Evagrius spoke<sup>88</sup>, and the being raised up above all ordinary vision – and the perception of the philosophers. There is, he says a converse which opens up the door so that we can peer down into knowledge of created beings<sup>89</sup>, and not up into spiritual mysteries<sup>90</sup>. He is calling the philosophers' (knowledge) downwards knowledge<sup>91</sup>, for, he says, even those who are subject to passion can know this kind (of knowledge); this perception<sup>92</sup> that the saints receive through their intellect as a result of grace, he calls knowledge of the spiritual mysteries above<sup>93</sup>.<sup>94</sup>*

85 Letter 2; Syriac translation Add. 17192 190r; for details see note 7/2 of Brock (II, 35, 7), at 153.

86 Literally ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ – knowledge.

87 ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

88 KG 4.31, 43.

89 KG I.32, 71; V.76,

90 ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

91 ܕܘܚܕܐ ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

92 ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܝܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

93 ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ; see also KG IV.2, 66.

94 II, 35, 7-8.

It is evident that the latter type of knowledge is not a gnosis in any usual epistemological sense. It seems not to have any actual discursive content. Its *causa efficiens* refers to God's grace intervention, in the intellect. It is "silence of intellect"<sup>95</sup>. The first lies in the natural capacity of human nature that is his reason, while the second is a free gift from above. Isaac calls the first one natural (حسنة), and the latter one supernatural (الحل من حسنة). The necessary instrument for this knowledge is faith, which represents the next step of it:

*Knowledge (معرفة) is made perfect by faith (إيمان) so that it acquires the power to ascend and to perceive<sup>96</sup> that which is above all perceptibility and to behold<sup>97</sup> the splendor of Him that is not attained by the mind or the knowledge of the creatures. Knowledge is the ladder on which the man ascends to the heights of faith, but which does not use anymore when he has reached faith... Faith shows us as it was before our eyes the reality of that future perfection. By faith we are instructed above those unattainable things, not by investigation or by the power of knowledge<sup>98</sup>.*

One may find the same epistemology at John the Solitary. Faith surpasses words and thinking and reaches its material in faith and silence:

*If we knew Christ through faith, we would seal His mystery with silence, without words. If, however, we believe that we can know it through knowledge, then we must persuade ourselves to ask: How did His conception and his generation have no sexual union, something extraneous to nature? And how did he take care, heal and purify the lepers, open [the eyes] of the blind and raise the dead? We want to talk about the operation of his deity, but this is a talk of faith and not of knowledge! That these things have come to pass, in fact, we have received it as a tradition of faith,*

95 *معرفة*.

96 *إيمان*.

97 *معرفة*.

98 I, 51, p. 246 (B, 367).

*but as these things have happened, we do not perceive it (ⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓ). It is not possible for us to be in the clearness and joy of Christ, otherwise that through faith<sup>99</sup>.*

## Conclusion

From this short analysis, I will draw two short conclusions. Firstly, one can identify the triple connection and succession between voice, word and silence so to describe the spiritual itinerary from the bodily stage to the stage of the soul, up to the spiritual stage. This highlights the strong theological connection between the two authors. But the ground for this vision is Incarnation, evidencing the Christological frame of their spirituality. This argumentation goes along with the Pauline Christological centrality of Christian life. Spiritual life is participation to Christ's very life in a mysterious way.

Secondly, silence, as it appears at both authors, has a double meaning – ascetical, describing the negative expression of man's endeavor to come close to God, as well as mystical, picturing God's direct spiritual intervention. The latter one, in fact, designates a specific theological methodology, by the means of faith. One may call this theantropism, that discloses the synergy between God's loving and free intervention and, in consequence, the free and loving response of man.

99 *Johannes von Apamea* (ed. by W. Strothman), *Patristische Texte und Studien*, Berlin, 1972, 7, at 85.