

FROM ASCESIS TO CONTEMPLATION: SCRIPTURE READING, MEDITATION AND PRAYER IN THE WRITINGS OF SAINT ISAAC THE SYRIAN

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ABSTRACT

Saint Isaac the Syrian is one of the most beloved Philokalic Fathers and the study of his texts represents a fascinating journey into the spiritual reality of life, revealing the wisdom, discernment and enthusiasm which only the Holy Spirit can grant. Abba Isaac does not look for skill and method in interpreting the texts of the Scriptures and does not cultivate a certain kind of wisdom which may lead to pride, but longs for that understanding which feeds his faith, enlightens his mind and offers him an occasion to marvel. According to Saint Isaac, prayer, spiritual meditation and Scripture reading are not mere obedience in the spiritual life, but an absolutely necessary experience in acquiring holiness. This unique experience becomes a safe guide for the one who, while keeping the forms of asceticism to the end of his life, obtains the key to the ineffable divine gifts.

Keywords: Saint Isaac the Syrian; Scriptures; meditation; prayer;

INTRODUCTION

The Venerable Isaac envisages a permanent reciprocal reinforcement of Scriptural reading and meditation, the lecture of the spiritual books written by the Fathers of the desert, prayer and daily liturgy¹. The lecture of the books where the Fathers speak of the acquisition of divine grace and the fruits of pure prayer kindles the wish of following this path like a “flame” in one’s soul: “Lord, make us worthy of the truth that is within Scripture!”² On the other hand, living the prayer begets the love of God in man and gives him power to overcome temptations.

According to Saint Isaac, spiritual reading depicts something like a protected space in which the soul comes to know and marvels in contemplation of the “purpose of God’s creation”³.

¹ Prayer and reading are „victuals” on the way of eternal life (Part I, 26, 4, p. 426 – ed. Deisis). For reading the Scriptures, see G.G. BLUM, *Die Geschichte der Begegnung christlich-orientalischer Mystik mit der Mystik des Islams*, Wiesbaden, 2009, pp. 222-233, Sabino CHIALLÀ’ synthesis, *La perla dei molti riflessi. La lettura della Scrittura nei Padri Siriacci*, Ed. Qiçajon, Bose, 2014, and also Hieromonk Agapie CORBU’ synthesis in Avva Iosif Hazzaya Văzătorul de Dumnezeu, *Scrieri duhovnicești*, Editura Sf. Nectarie, Arad, 2019

² III, 7, 42, p. 101. In the Venerable Isaac’s age (the 7th century), the following books were lacking in the biblical canon of the Syro-Oriental Churches: *II Peter, II and III John, Judas and The Revelation*, cf. Sabino Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul – asceză singuratică și milă fără sfârșit*, trad. de Maria-Cornelia și Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2012, p. 158

³ II, 3, C1, 67, p. 145

1. THREE LANDMARKS ON THE WAY TO HEAVENS

Abba Isaac insists upon a thought that he values so much: the entwining of reading and prayer, “the remembrance of the fortifying words that speak of God”, placed in mind by the lecture that edifies and animates “the flame which fells in the heart at the time of prayer”⁴. The lecture stirs the mind to meditating on the meanings that engender joy and hope for the work of the Holy Ghost in our mind. “Que ce soit en méditant les psaumes, ou en étant assidu à la lecture et à la prière, ou que l’entendement médite, tout cela n’a qu’un seul et même but: les faire devenir dignes de l’activité (de l’Esprit) dans l’Intellect.”⁵.

In twining prayer and meditation, there shall not be mere meditation, as relaxation; rather, a deepening into the fathomless meanings of creation and God’s providence⁶. This meditation represents a dialogue between man and the Scriptures: the man asks and wonders, at the same time; he is amazed at the beauty of God’s creation and terrified by the fall of man, by his disobedience, and, more than anything, he discovers “the abundance of God’s mercy” manifested in his call “dans le Christ Jésus, notre Seigneur, et qui t’a fait retourner vers la beauté de ta première origine en Dieu [...] mais il t’a spontanément nourri de ces biens et il est venu pour te rendre la vie.”⁷

Both reading and meditation on the Scriptures, as well as prayer, fill the soul with light. It is a reciprocal support. “La prière te sera ainsi douce à cause de la lecture, et tu seras à nouveau éclairé dans ta lecture par les clés de la prière.”⁸ Abba Isaac mentions very often, in his *Ascetical Homilies*, the fruitful intertwining of prayer, reading and meditating upon the texts of the Scriptures. “The great wonders hidden in the lines [of the Scriptures]” make the man speak to God in “wise words” which “attract all the parts of the soul to God and His love, and keep her awake in order to keep her eyes ardently fixed on God”. Love of God cannot spring in our soul only by reading and meditating upon the Scriptures, as it cannot be reached at either by command or endeavor.

“Knowledge of the Scriptures” awakes the soul’s awareness of God’s greatness and counsels man towards virtue; yet, love of God is still far away⁹. The absolute condition remains the revelation of the Holy Spirit, Who makes possible an understanding “from beyond this world”¹⁰, and a certain feeling of the work of God “inside him”. Only now “it is possible for him to come close to this glorious savour (of love).”¹¹

By a founding role, the Scriptures reveal God’s love for man and the sense of their communion. For Saint Isaac, “pure prayer” is a “wise prayer”. Why “wise words” when we speak of prayer? There are two sources of this spiritual foundation of prayer full of wisdom:

⁴ II, 3, C2, 13, p. 160. On this topic, see S. CHIALÀ, *Isaac Sirianul*, pp. 157-168

⁵ II, 3, C2, 14, p. 160

⁶ „Organise-toi afin qu’il y ait à tout prix, et tous les jours, un laps de temps entre l’office de la nuit et celui du matin, pour une méditation qui te fasse croître dans la connaissance divine. Elle aussi est une partie importante de l’ouvrage de la veille.” (II, 3, C2, 85, p. 194)

⁷ II, 3, C2, 84, p. 194

⁸ II, 1, 31, pp. 102-103; „Car c’est à l’aide de la prière que la porte des intuitions s’ouvre à la Pensée, et qu’en retour des intuitions merveilleuses réveillent à nouveau l’envie de prier conformément à la contemplation reçue (dans la lecture).” (II, 1, 31, p. 103)

⁹ „Anyone who wishes to attain to a taste of our Lord’s love should ask Him that this door be opened to Him.” (II, 35, 5, p. 153)

¹⁰ „divine mysteries which (exist) in a luminous state above the world” (II, 19, 6, p. 104)

¹¹ „Someone who has not actually drunk wine will not become inebriated as a result of being told about wine; and someone who has not been himself held worthy of a knowledge of the lofty things of God cannot become inebriated with love for him.” (II, 18, 2, p. 96)

one is “God’s wisdom”¹², which pervades all evidence of the Scriptures, and the other is the “luminosity of the soul” itself, suffused by the work of God. Is it the acquisition of the wisdom of this world that guides the soul to pure prayer? Saint Isaac answers: “Lorsque je fais mention d’une prière sage, je ne pense pas à celle qui viendrait de la sagesse du monde, ou d’une érudition loquace et stupide, et qui devrait faire rougir l’âme en prière devant Dieu, à cause de la vaine gloire qu’elle excite en elle et qui éloigne le secours que Dieu lui donnerait. Mais je pense à ces paroles sages qui jaillissent dans la prière à partir de la sagesse de Dieu et de la lumière de l’âme. Des motions ardentes les ont fait monter dans le coeur à cause de l’amour de la vraie vie qui a précédé la prière et qui, rechauffant le coeur, fait sortir des paroles qui ne sont pas voulues, mais que le souvenir (de Dieu) force à jaillir. Combien de fois, sur ce même chemin, des larmes n’ont-elles pas jailli à partir de l’ardeur du coeur et du secours de Dieu! C’est cela que (les Pères) appellent la prière pure.”¹³

Meditation passes from the revealed text of the Scriptures to the divine economy¹⁴, to everything that God has done for men in His ineffable wisdom. Saint Isaac prays for the opening of the path of understanding God’s will and mysteries: “Écarte de moi une Pensée stupide qui médite sur des enfantillages, et excite en moi celles qui sont belles et qui font penser à ta gloire, afin que je reçoive de réfléchir à tes divins jugements non pas selon l’ordre d’une Pensée humaine et malade de ses passions, ni en pensant à toutes sortes de passions humaines, lorsqu’il s’agit des chemins empruntés par ta conscience pour sauver nos âmes. Aplanis en moi les chemins de ta sagesse, et ouvre-moi la porte pour méditer sur ton désir glorieux, car j’ignore, Seigneur, par quel chemin entrer chez toi.”¹⁵ Thus, meditation leads to the act of knowing God in Trinity, in which Christ makes Himself “the Door”, “the Key”, and “end of all mystery”¹⁶. “Ô Christ, porte des mystères, fais-moi communier à la sensation de tes mystères: c’est par toi que j’entrerai auprès du Père, et que j’accueillerai dans mes motions la grâce de ton Esprit Saint. [...] c’est par toi, mon Seigneur, que s’ouvre pour nous la porte des mystères cachés depuis des siècles dans ton Père.”¹⁷

Abba Isaac says that meditation “est une réflexion sur Dieu seul, qui s’émerveille seulement de ce qui le concerne, la Pensée scrutant et fréquentant uniquement lui et sa majesté, sans réfléchir aux choses d’ici-bas ni se souvenir de la beauté et de la noblesse du corps [...] En effet, (la Pensée) méprise désormais tout ce qui appartient à la nature, son excellence ou la peur qu’elle lui inspire, grâce au souvenir de Dieu qui est seul à être célébré dans l’entendement.”¹⁸

For Saint Isaac, there is almost no boundary between spiritual meditation and the thought of prayer. One inspires the other; one strengthens the other and is inflamed by it. Remembrance of God makes man “un temple pur pour Dieu, car grâce au souvenir continu de Dieu, Dieu habitera sans cesse en nous. De pareils souvenirs sont d’un grand secours pour nous, qui vivons de cette philosophie divine.”¹⁹

Saint Isaac recommends to divide the hours of the day in different parts: one for reading, one for the liturgy, and another for meditation, and “lorsque ceux-ci céderont la

¹² He further calls it „the wisdom of the Spirit” (II, 3, C3, 20, p. 175)

¹³ II, 3, C3, 13, p. 202

¹⁴ Isaac defines it as “the ocean of all mystery” (III, 7, 31, p. 95)

¹⁵ III, 7, 30, p. 95

¹⁶ III, 7, 31, p. 95

¹⁷ III, 7, 31, p. 98

¹⁸ III, 9, 6, p. 112

¹⁹ III, 6, 45, p. 85

place à la sublime beauté des motions, nous arriverons aussi à accomplir le reste.”²⁰ In order to emphasize once more the value of reading, meditation and prayer, Saint Isaac offers an allegorical interpretation of the text from *Matthew* 18: 29: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”. “Les trois sont l’âme, le corps et l’esprit; ou bien: l’entendement, la méditation et la prière.”²¹ Man cannot “marvel in front of God” “as long as the power of the Spirit is not yet united with his noetic meditation”. It is “the Power of the Spirit” that fills the intellect.

Paradoxically, this work of meditation on God is “strenuous”. It is “difficile, oui, mais étonnante; facile aussi et douce”²². Sometimes, Saint Isaac does not distinguish between meditation, the thought of God and prayer itself any more: “There are times when a person is transported from prayer to a wondrous meditation on God. And there are times when prayer is born out of meditating on God”²³.

“The various and wonderful understanding”²⁴ issued by prayer grants strength unto the mind and protects it from “becoming a vessel of passions, as Evagrius says”²⁵. Along with the acquisition of a higher comprehension by the experience of prayer, there come the trials, “the hard warfare”²⁶, “the storms”²⁷, which cannot yet overcome “the one who loves walking on this path”²⁸. This is not at hand for anyone, for it supposes a life of prayer, of divine meditation; “c’est là l’ouvrage parfait. Celui qui désire, grâce à l’Intellect, dresser l’échelle divine, a besoin de s’asseoir en solitaire, d’abandonner toute préoccupation du monde, (attitude) qui engendre la tranquillité et la quiétude du cœur. De la sorte, grâce au repos continu en Dieu et à la quiétude loin des projets (de toutes sortes), la Pensée pourra scruter toutes sortes de prières, pour en recevoir la connaissance sur Dieu.”²⁹

Prayer and meditation reveals in man the courage to feel that he is a son of God, for “c’est donc la prière qui, grâce à la méditation, rend à tout moment la Pensée proche de Dieu.”³⁰; this helps the one who perseveres in prayer to climb “l’échelle divine au-delà du monde”³¹. Prayer and meditation are inseparable; Abba Isaac deems prayer “done with discernment”³² as “a very good word”³³, while meditation rendered in a spirit of prayer brings about that deep understanding “by perceiving the mysteries contained in its words”³⁴, and, by “la variété de ses (formes), fortifie et purifie l’entendement, et lui donne la sainteté grâce à la rumination. [...] elle lie nécessairement l’entendement à Dieu. Elle éclaire celui-ci sur les réalités cachées en son sein.”³⁵

²⁰ II, 3, C2, 87, p. 167; „Si l’entendement venait à s’obscurcir par la suite, ajoutes-y quelque lecture appropriée au temps. Là se trouve, en effet, la source abondante dont jaillissent sur lui des eaux pures, en toute beauté.” (II, 3, C2, 87, p. 167)

²¹ II, 3, C2, 88, p. 195

²² III, 3, 1, p. 47

²³ II, 10, 39, p. 51

²⁴ III, 3, 24, p. 47

²⁵ III, 3, 24, p. 47. Here, Saint Isaac makes reference to the Evagrian texts in *Praktikos* 49, *Gnostikos* 49.

²⁶ III, 3, 26, p. 48

²⁷ III, 3, 27, p. 48

²⁸ III, 3, 27, p. 48

²⁹ III, 3, 29, p. 54. „And love is through prayer; and prayer through dwelling alone.” (I, 63, p. 295)

³⁰ III, 3, 30, p. 54

³¹ III, 3, 32, p. 55

³² Saint Isaac quotes a short apophthegmata of Saint Mark the Hermit: “He who prays with discernment suffers in truth what it happens to him” (*On the Spiritual Law* 115)

³³ III, 3, 24, pp. 53

³⁴ III, 3, 29, p. 54

³⁵ III, 3, 30, pp. 54-55

In all this communication, from reading and meditation to prayer and vice versa, the aim stays the same: “knowledge of the mysteries of the Holy Spirit”³⁶. It is not a linear movement, but an unceasing growth, “from comprehension to comprehension, and whence, to contemplation”³⁷. “Meditation is brought forth by prayer”³⁸, “l’Intellect pénètre dans une hauteur indicible, alors que l’esprit, durant la prière, est secouru par la grâce”³⁹. “Cette prière, qui vient de (Dieu) et s’adresse à lui, lorsqu’elle n’est pas accompagnée de méditation et de lectio, est trop faible et obscure pour faire monter l’Intellect et lui faire rejoindre les réalités du ciel.”⁴⁰ At the same time, Saint Isaac urges us “not to leave aside prayer even though it may be weak and obscure”⁴¹.

2. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE – THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE ASCETICAL ITINERARY

As “not any reading is useful to growing in the Holy Spirit, but only that which persists in godly things”⁴², reading feeds meditation, granting it the opportunity to “apprehend the hidden mystery of divine wisdom”⁴³. Interestingly, Saint Isaac does not speak of a strictly intellectual reflection, an effort of the mind to grasp reality. He actually reveals man’s longing for “the way of life of immortality”⁴⁴, guiding thinking towards its “progress in spiritual mysteries”⁴⁵.

As meditation, it does not stagnates at the level of a fruitless understanding, but “leads the intellect to discernment”⁴⁶. As prayer, it mediates the remembrance of God and elevates the man, according him with the spiritual realities he discovers: “such a prayer elevates man to heaven; its work lasts up to the order of revelation and stands for a ladder. This is its work: it makes man elevate up to the height he prayed for.”⁴⁷ Saint Isaac sees prayer as a ladder “leaning upon the Heavens”⁴⁸, “so that by it we may be worthy of the heavenly light.”⁴⁹

Far from seeing in lecture the pleasure of reading something, Abba Isaac discovers its fruits, pouring “the old wine” of experience and grace which enlightens him in “the

³⁶ III, 9, 18, p. 116

³⁷ III, 9, 18, p. 114. „Lorsqu’il est secouru à partir de la méditation et de la lectio, personne n’est capable de raconter jusqu’à quelles motions merveilleuses il est élevé pendant son intercession, vers quel désir il s’est étendu, et en quelles délices est établie la Pensée. C’est un tel ouvrage et une telle méditation qu’une lectio de qualité donne de pratiquer, et dont elle assiste les merveilles, de sorte que se prolonge ainsi l’ordre de la lectio, nécessaire à ce labeur.” (III, 9, 7, pp. 112-113)

³⁸ III, 9, 9, p. 113

³⁹ III, 9, 7, p. 112

⁴⁰ III, 9, 15, p. 115

⁴¹ III, 9, 16, p. 115

⁴² III, 9, 8, p. 113; „Fais usage de la lecture, non pas de celle qui ferait de toi un érudit, mais de celle qui mortifie tes passions et qui te montre le sentier familier et bien précis, conduisant vers Dieu [...] Celle qui t’élève rapidement vers l’ouvrage lumineux que vise ta conduite solitaire.”; and in the same *Chapter*: „Quelle connaissance est meilleure que la pureté? C’est elle, en effet, qui révèle toute chose à ton entendement, si tu mets tout ton zèle pour qu’elle t’appartienne, et qui te rend proche du don qui te fera voir Dieu.” (II, 1, 45; 49, pp. 108-109)

⁴³ III, 9, 9, p. 113

⁴⁴ III, 9, 8, p. 113

⁴⁵ III, 9, 8, p. 113

⁴⁶ III, 9, 11, p. 114

⁴⁷ III, 9, 12, p. 114

⁴⁸ III, 9, 13, p. 115

⁴⁹ III, 9, 13, p. 115

wineskins” of his words: reading “stirs up the senses of the reader’s soul so that he may apprehend the hidden mystery of divine wisdom; it draws him closer to the knowledge of its boundlessness and the truth of its essence; it makes him contemplate in wonder the hidden Being; it makes his thoughts deem the mysteries of future hope, it shows him the abundance of Christ’s love revealed to all and ready to be fulfilled.”⁵⁰ Meditation founded on spiritual lecture receives divine revelation as an answer, making man⁵¹ and angel⁵² rejoice “dans les beautés divines qui transcendent tout.”⁵³

Is it necessary to assume the lecture all along the spiritual itinerary? Saint Isaac specifies that “lorsque cet ouvrage (de la méditation) se sera raffermi et rendu vigoureux dans l’âme, celle-ci n’aura plus besoin de la lectio, non pas qu’elle puisse devenir parfaite sans elle, mais parce qu’elle ne doit plus la prolonger.”⁵⁴

The secret work of the monastic in “reading the Holy Scriptures”, his seeking and meditating on its spiritual meanings, seems to be void of sense and realism in the eyes of those who think like this: “„«However much you read or toil away, (your) labor is useless. What is the point of your searching out, and what advantage do you get by making yourselves idle as you hunt for spiritual meaning and the like? (Active) work is what is required.”⁵⁵ If we do what we know about, we do not need any immense labor over the Scriptures or things of that sort.”⁵⁶ The call of the monastic remains his advance towards God “by means of the reading (of Scripture), prayer, the search to this end involving the stirrings of the mind, consolation and hope of what lies hidden: who, by means of these, harnesses his intellect, preventing it from wandering among the passions; by means, too, of the delight that comes from converse with God.”⁵⁷

“The reading (of Scripture) manifestly is the fountainhead that gives birth to prayer – and by these (two things) we are transported in the direction of the love of God whose sweetness is poured out continually in our hearts like honey or a honeycomb, and our souls exult at the taste which the hidden ministry (of prayer) and the reading (of Scripture) pour into our hearts.”⁵⁸ Reading the Scriptures “for the sake of truth” feeds the mind and enlightens it in searching out their mysteries and symbols”, making up together “the excellent converse which leads to God”⁵⁹.

The spiritual meaning of the Scriptures cannot be grasped but “by grace”, thus being able to “perceive the very holy of holies of their mysteries”⁶⁰. The Gospels are reflected in Saint Isaac’s thinking and therefore we can find biblical images and patterns in all his homilies: “Tu as caché ton trésor dans notre corps, par le moyen de la grâce qui habite dans

⁵⁰ III, 9, 9, p. 113

⁵¹ „le monde des hommes mortels” (III, 9, 9, p. 113)

⁵² „le monde des créatures spirituelles” (III, 9, 9, p. 113)

⁵³ III, 9, 9, p. 113

⁵⁴ III, 9, 10, p. 113. „Les écrits du Nouveau (Testament) et ceux qui traitent de la conduite des solitaires en vue de la connaissance parfaite et d’une Pensée limpide devraient te suffire.” (II, 3, C4, 72, p. 270)

⁵⁵ „For someone to fulfil works which are performed just with the body is the way and norm of secular people.” (II, 29, 3, p. 130)

⁵⁶ II, 29, 1, p. 339. The gift of spiritual living „cannot be acquired without the continual reading (of Scripture) in stillness and the reflective search for things hidden, and prayer.” (II, 29, 4, p. 131)

⁵⁷ II, 29, 3, p. 131

⁵⁸ II, 29, 5, p. 131

⁵⁹ II, 29, 7, p. 132; „Blessed is that intellect which has been held worthy to be enfolded in continual meditating on God, and is reflective wandering on his mysteries.” (II, 29, 9, p. 132)

⁶⁰ II, 30, 9, p. 132. „For every event, natural being and utterance in this creation there is a Sanctuary and a Holy of Holies.” (II, 30, 10, p. 137)

la table élevée de tes mystères. Fais-nous voir, Seigneur, notre renouveau, parce que nous t'avons enseveli en nous-mêmes."⁶¹ Christ's treasure hidden in man is nothing else but a deep inner noblesse of "the hidden man of the heart" (*1 Peter 3: 4*), "la beauté spirituelle (déposée) au coeur de notre condition mortelle. Ébranle (en nous) les signes de l'immortalité."⁶²

Reading the Scriptures represents a real therapy for the soul: "reading alleviates depression and darkness from a brother during the time spent in his cell, and he (begins) to rejoice and exult in God; the weight of his labors becomes lighter for him, and he finds consolation and receives a conviction of hope and of awareness in his mind."⁶³; By "the soul's concern with God" manifested in prayer, lecture, asceticism and many prostrations⁶⁴, the monk is a person for whom "the world is crucified, and he unto the world." (*Galatians 6: 14*) having suspended himself on the cross through abandonment of everything"⁶⁵.

When the mind searches out the Scriptures "in watchful, well-guarded peace", thanking God for everything and keeping its eyes open to the grace of God, the state of acedia is followed, little by little, by an inexplicable joy, a detachment of thinking from all things in the world; all that we need is patience full of hope in God's help, like the seed fallen under the furrow, which only by shriveling and waiting for the bad time to pass, can expect its fruition: "How blessed is the person who, out of hope for God's grace, has endured the dejectedness which is a hidden trial of the mind's virtue and growth"⁶⁶.

Prayer, an authentic "daily liturgy"⁶⁷, shall receive form and brightness only accompanied by the reading of Scriptures. Reading and meditating on the meaning of Scriptures illumine our mind and sweetens our heart. "The mysterious words" one can find in "the orchard of Scriptures"⁶⁸ become words of prayer, ceaseless remembrance of God. The theme of unceasing prayer recurs insistently in Abba Isaac's *Homilies*. The unceasing remembrance of God purifies our mind and guides our soul towards spiritual vision.

Self-knowledge issues in man "the reconciliation of earth and heaven"⁶⁹. As the Ladder of the Kingdom is hidden in man's soul, it is only the inner meditation that makes man open to communion with God. In this state of inner examination, the soul shall find climbing steps towards "the things of the world-to-be"⁷⁰, as they have also been depicted by Saint Apostle Paul (cf. *1 Corinthians 2: 9*).

CONCLUSION

From the "ground of passions" to the "valley of purity", the man feeds upon the lecture and meditation on Scriptures, for "the word of God warms the mind"⁷¹, and „(the

⁶¹ III, 10, 9, p. 123

⁶² III, 10, 10, p. 123

⁶³ II, 33, 1, p. 144

⁶⁴ „sweet prostration" (Partea I, 21, 1, p. 418 – ed. Deisis)

⁶⁵ II, 30, 5, p. 135; „by means of body and intellect being crucified, he spends his days in life with Christ." (II, 30, 6, p. 135)

⁶⁶ II, 34, 3, p. 147. Before Isaac, *akedia*, as an "anchorite sickness" par excellence, had been an essential element in Evagrius Ponticus' description of the eight evil thoughts (cf. *Praktikos 12*).

⁶⁷ „Les prières continuelles (sont) une méditation continue sur Dieu." (III, 3, 1, p. 41)

⁶⁸ I, Epist. IV, p. 500

⁶⁹ I, 2, p. 8

⁷⁰ I, 2, p. 8

⁷¹ I, 6, p. 64

recitation of the Scriptures) is a fortification of the mind and, principally, a cause of prayer, a helper and a companion of vigils, a light of the mind, a guide on the way.”⁷² .

The image of holiness is mirrored in the pages of the Scriptures, for, in it, “the faith mingles with behavior”⁷³: ”Do not approach the mysterious words in the Scriptures without prayer and without asking help from God, saying: Lord, grant me to perceive the power that is in them. Deem prayer as the key to the insight of truth in Scripture.”⁷⁴

If ”light shows the veracity of things entirely”⁷⁵, ”the light of the soul consists in constant meditation upon the Scriptures. For they trace in the intellect profitable recollections with regard to watchfulness against the affections and for perpetual abiding with God, in love and in purity of prayer. They trace before us the way which is made peaceful by the steps of the saints.”⁷⁶

Knowledge of created beings, of God’s creation, is hidden in the Scriptures and the books of the saints who have been taught by God. Therefore, Abba Isaac always sends us to the sources: ”Be occupied with the books of God’s providence intensely, without becoming satisfied. They have been composed by holy men and show the aim of His establishing the different species of the world. [...] Read in the two Testaments which God has destined for the instruction of the whole world, so that it should be dazzled by the power of His Providence in every generation and be enveloped in wonder”⁷⁷. Reading and deepening the meanings of the Scriptures by meditation are not intellectual exercises, but part of the spiritual life in which psalmody and prayer of tears awaken the senses of the soul to the rousing experience of repentance.

⁷² I, 17, p. 92. „The Scriptures are thus made a guide full of hope on the way of repentance, so that man could know the subtle movements prompting to sin.” (cf. I, 56, note 317 – Pr. D. Stăniloae, p. 288)

⁷³ I, 53, p. 254

⁷⁴ I, 45, p. 220

⁷⁵ I, 27, p. 133

⁷⁶ I, 53, pp. 254-255

⁷⁷ I, 4, p. 34

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