

A Stab at Some Syriac

Introduction

For a good number of years I've been reading Syriac texts, having taught myself the language several decades ago. Though I have some knowledge of the Estrangala alphabet as well as the grammar, it isn't as good as it should be. Such are the perils of doing it on your own. In fact, I was hard pressed to find someone with whom to study a fairly esoteric subject as Syriac. Be that as it may, I continue to dedicate about five to six days a week reading patristic texts in that language averaging thirty to forty minutes each time. Sometimes the text is so profound I can only get so far and stop. Actually that's the best part of this whole endeavor.

My current project is Isaac the Syrian (also as Isaac of Nineveh) of the seventh century. I prefer to say that he composed...not write...some wonderful material about prayer in the monastic context. I'm more attracted to use the verb "compose" because it's a bit more eloquent and befitting the author at hand.

Currently I'm on my second go-through of his writings ¹, and I'm pleased to say that I could continue with them for the rest of my life. I am not exaggerating when I say that. As for the excerpts (references in footnote #1) at hand, they are Section Six and section Ten selected more or less randomly. ² Still, I find Isaac's Syriac quite challenging. Nevertheless, I didn't want that to stand in the way. While going through the text, more than once I was tempted to throw in the towel. Both the profundity of Isaac's text and his often difficult way of expressing himself had presented an obstacle from making some notations on the rich material at my disposal. I just couldn't figure out how to do this. At the same time I was struck by the two just mentioned sections which caught my fancy and decided to try my hand at offering some observations.

For what it's worth I offer the following shotgun style notes which hopefully will be more than a definition of words. In essence follow the same pattern I had taken with a number of biblical texts on this homepage. That goes by the catch-word expansion. Expansion means just what it says, fleshing out the text with a specific goal in mind. That means looking at the text from the unique perspective of *lectio divina*. Within the numerous Introductions to documents on biblical texts I had made plenty of

¹Syriac: **Isaac of Nineveh, The Second Part**, Chapters IV-XLI I (vol. 554 and tomus 224; Louvain, 1995); English: **Isaac of Nineveh, The Second Part**, Chapters IV-XLI (vol 555 and tomus 225; Louvain, 1995

²This approach is a kind of test run. There may be the possibility of continuing the same approach with other texts.

observations as to this phrase, so I will forego offering more here. In essence *lectio divina* means not just reading a given text. More importantly, it consists of putting it at the service of prayer or meditation. Other than that approach the document at hand is of no value. I don't like coming across as stark as this but feel the need of putting forth my intent right at the beginning.

The approach I've adopted here is to present the English text sentence by sentence followed by some notes or observations. I give the Syriac words transliterated or more specifically, as consonants minus the vowels. Such as it is in the Syriac text. While this approach may come across as unappealing, I believe it gives a more "authentic" flavor of the text at hand. Since I had written this Introduction before delving into the text itself, what follows became subject to modification as I went along. One thing I noted towards the end of dealing with these two sections is that the person who has gone through the notations deserves a medal. To be sure, reading the notations with transliterated Syriac words (especially because they lack vowels) is no picnic.

In conclusion, I stick by the title, **A Stab at Some Syriac**. "Stab" is appropriate because what follows indeed is as such, that is, a highly unprofessional attempt to make something from an exceptionally profound text.

+

Section Six

Virtue, you see, is the natural way; it consists in humility, labors, almsgiving, integrity of conscience, the mouth's sacrifices and prayers and compassion.

Mytrot' or virtue alternately as the best, the highest of anything; *ytr* is the verbal root, to have over and above the norm, to win, profit. It's not unlike *arete*, the best of anything. The first word of this sentence presents virtue in an appealing manner, namely, as a way or '*orch*' which is literally "of nature" or *kyn'* also as natural disposition, inborn strength. In other words, virtue is not something that's imposed from without.

'*Orch*' or way just noted makes virtue even more attractive because it pertains to a path or road that's well-trodden and therefore already smoothed out.

The rest of this sentence strings out what comes from *mytrot'* or virtue, the first word which shows its importance. Some of the terms at first glance may not sound attractive, but once virtue has been so defined it's a different story. There are seven elements as follows:

- humility or *mkykot'*, from a verbal root meaning to lie down or to be prostrate
- labors or *hml'* from a verbal root (same spelling) meaning to toil
- almsgiving or *zdot'*, that which is due to God as well as to one's neighbor
- integrity of conscience consists of two words: *tqnot'* and *t'rt'*, stability, excellency in fashioning as it applies to the latter, mind
- sacrifices, the first of three words associated with the mouth which seems to apply to verbal utterances as in prayer, mostly public by nature: *dvch'* is the first word from a verbal root meaning to slaughter with regard to a sacrificial animal
- prayers is the second word, *zlot'* usually of a liturgical nature, the verbal root *z/* meaning to incline, to turn towards
- compassion or *rhm'* which is in the plural and connotes tender-heartedness. The verbal root means to desire, to show favor or to render as lovable.

In the New World, however, none of these things is required: the spiritual mode of life consists in a different kind of knowledge; its ministry is not put into motion by and does not consist in the labors of the body and of the soul.

The noun *hlma'* for world often in the common sense as the one with which we're familiar. Also it can mean age, generation, lifetime. However, here it's modified by the adjective *chdt'* or new which is contrasted with what was said in the previous verse. I.e., none of them are required, *mtbhy'*, the verbal root *bh* as to seek, to desire. This is a radical contrast where Isaac is not denying good works and the like but pointing out their limitations.

The New World consists of a spiritual mode of life, *dovr'* or way (of life) also as course or rule of behavior. This is a knowledge quite different from the one we're familiar with, *chrt'* or other. Nevertheless it has a ministry, *polchnh* literally work also as labor or service which does not consist of what pertains to the body or the soul *pgr'* and *nphsh'*. The verbs associated with such ministry are *qom* and *zoh*. The first literally means to rise and suggests a kind of stable constituting action while the second implies vigorous motion or shaking.

To those ministering in these (latter) modes of life there indeed belongs reflection, whereas the mode of life of the spirit is without reflection and without thought and without any slightest stirring.

Plch is the verb to minister and is the root for *polchnh* as in the section just above. Reference is to the labors both of body and of soul described as modes of life or *dovr'*, "life" not in the Syriac. To both belongs reflection, *my'* also as the subject of

thought with the verb *nqyph* which fundamentally means to cleave, belong to.

On the other hand, the mode of life (*dovr'*) proper to the spirit or *roch* is marked by the following three posited as negative but in essence are wholly positive and desirable: lacks reflection or *rny'*, is without thought or *choshv* and hasn't the slightest stirring or *zoh'* with the negative *rphl'*. The positive meaning of the three are as follows: *rny'* as to think, to meditate, to devise; *choshv* as to reckon, to recount; *zoh'* as to be in motion, to shake along with *rphl'* or to throb, to vibrate, to pulse.

Thoughts are put into motion on the level of the soul, whereas on the level of the spirit there is no thought in that the intellect has been raised above the forms of this world and it operates with a different kind of knowledge.

In essence this verse contrasts thoughts/soul and no thought/ spirit. Note a distinction between two levels or *tk's'* (similar to the Greek *taxis*): thoughts or *choshv'* and the lack of *choshv'*. With regard to the first, thoughts are put into motion *zoh* on the level of the soul, *nphshny'* (*nphsh* in Hebrew), seat of emotions and passions and the spirit or *roch* (*ruch*, Hebrew).

The intellect or *hohn'* is that faculty endowed with reason and has been raised (*qom*, also as Hebrew) above this world's forms, '*skm*' also as manner or way and can be applied to a garment; *hlm'* also as eternity, age, generation. There in this *qom*-ness, if you will, it operates with a different kind of knowledge or *ydht'* (*ydh*, Hebrew verb connoting intimacy) also as foreknowledge.

The knowledge of those (on the level of the soul) is described in verbal fashion as is current among us; in the case of those (others, their) knowledge is not even described in the mode of the intellect's existence there.

Knowledge or *ydht'* as pertaining to the soul is described by means of words, *zn* or sort, kind with *mltny'* or verbally. This is how we communicate, *mt'mr'* or what's proper to words towards us, *lotn..*

On the other hand—and I find this section hard to understand so what's presented here is uncertain—with regard to people other than those just mentioned, their knowledge isn't described *mt'mr'* (the verbal root '*mr*' as in Hebrew, to say or to speak) in the mode or '*skm*' of the intellect's existence (*qom* and *hohn'*: literally, as 'which rises in it the intellect') there, *tnn* also as in this place.

The knowledge that belongs here certainly involves the pulsation of thoughts, but that

(spiritual) mode of life is exalted above all things:

This sentence extends into the next one below but is separated for the sake of convenience.

Knowledge or *ydht'* (*mn kl pros*: by every means) is tied in with the pulsation of thoughts, *rph't* from a verbal root meaning to throb, to vibrate or show signs of life and *choshv'*. This is secondary compared with a spiritual way of life, *dovr'*, the adjective being presumed which is high above all things, *mhly* from a verbal root suggesting that which is more excellent.

it represents the mode of our existence at the resurrection from the dead when we are with the holy angels—a mode of life in which the angels already are at the present.

This spiritual mode or *dovr'* is with respect to the way (*zn'*, sort, kind) of our existence at or literally “in the resurrection” from (*byth*, literally house and a common expression) the dead. Both existence and resurrection (*qym'* and *qymt'*) are derived from the same verbal root meaning to arise, to stand up, to be present.

This continuous rising, if you will, happens when we are in the company of the angels or *m'l'k* (also as messenger) who are holy, *qdys'h'* fundamentally as set apart. As for these messengers, the *dovr'* or mode of life is one where they are present, *hsh'* being an adverb also as “now” whose same form means “this.”

For unless they are sent by God on some ministry to our world, they do not depart from this kind of (faculty of) vision (which operates) in their intellect's situation.

On occasion God sends (*sdr* or to summon) angels or messengers on a mission, *tshmsht'* (also as service, attendance) to our world, *hlm'*. Use of the first person plural refers to our way of life which is far more limited than the place from which the angels are sent. If this isn't so, the messengers don't leave (*rchq*, to put far away) the mode of vision, '*skm'*: also as shape; from *schema* and *chzt'* (from a verbal root also as to perceive) operative in their intellect. The last two words The last two words, *qom'* and *hon'*, are the verb to rise and mind.

Section Ten

So once a person has been raised above the ministry (on the level) of the soul in his reflection and understanding—which consists in excellence of deeds and of conscience

in the process of (his) being raised up to the mode of life on the spirit, (excellence, that is) to the fullest measure attainable here by human nature—immediately a state of wonder at God attaches itself to him,³

Hl or to raise or lift up is with respect to the soul's ministry, *polchn'* as work, labor or occupation which is modified by the adjective *nphshny'*, that which belongs to *nphsh* or breath of life. Such lifting up is in one's reflection and understanding, *rny'* and *ydht'*; the former also as subject of thought and the latter as apprehension. Once this has happened, at once (*brshhth* or in the beginning or akin to *arche*, first principle) wonder or astonishment (*thr'*) literally in god or *lh'* becomes attached to that person, *nqph* also as to stick or to cleave.

What follows now is within the two hyphens, the bulk of this excerpt and deals with the ministry at hand. It consists of an excellence or *mytrot'* (connotes that which is over and above) with regard to deeds and conscience, *sohrn'* and *t'rt'*, the latter also as mind. Both are being raised up (*holy'*, also as to exalt) to (*dlot*, direction toward-which) the way of that which pertains to the spirit, *dovr'* also as path and *rochn'*, the later of the roch or spirit.

Next follows *yk km'* rendered something like "as how" followed by *l-* prefaced to (human) nature or *kyn'*. At issue is *mshcha'* with *tnn*. The form is suggestive of measure or degree and the latter rendered as "here."

and he becomes serene and tranquil after the stirrings of (his) former thoughts, as his entire mind vibrates with spiritual stirrings, accompanied by love.

Bhl and *shl'* to become quiet with emphasis upon being stayed or to remain and to cease, to desist are the two verbs which happen after the stirrings or movements (*zoh'* which take place literally in one's thoughts or mind, *hon'*. Now one's mind or *rhyn'* vibrates or *rph'* (also as conscience) in love or *chov'* which intimates affection.

In this state of understanding fear is removed from a person, and after the manner of that New World, the mind is stirred with freedom from thoughts concerning any fear or suffering (incurred) in reflection:⁴

This particular type of understanding or knowledge (*dht'*) removes fear from a

³This extended sentence continues but is cut off here for the sake of convenience.

⁴Another instance where an extended sentence is broken up into two parts for the sake of convenience.

person, *dchlt'* also as dread with *shql* or to lift up, to carry. Once this burden has been taken away, in the order of the new world (*tkš'* and *hlm'*: that which has been arranged and age, era or eternity), the mind is stirred (*rny'* and *zoh*, the latter also as shaken) with freedom from thoughts (*ch'rot'* and *choshv'*, continence and generosity along with that which is recounted or enumerated). This is with regard to fear or suffering (*dchlt'* and *chsh'*, the latter also as sorrow, sadness) resulting from reflection, *rny'* also as mind.

This is because he has been held worthy, thanks to the grace of Christ which belongs to the way of life of the New Person, of the stirrings which arise naturally then in the kingdom of heaven.

Sho' also as to be even or equal, on the same plane resulting from Christ's grace or *tyvot'* (also as goodness). This belongs to the way or *dovr'* of the New (*chdt'*) Person. Also included are those stirrings or *zoh'* arising naturally (*nvh'*, to arise or awaken and *kyn'* or nature) in the kingdom of heaven, *shmy'* also as ceiling, roof, that which is highest.

+