SOME OBSERVATIONS
ON THE THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY
OF ISAAC OF NINEVEH
AND ITS SOURCES

1. Introduction

The anthropological outline of Isaac of Nineveh (7th century) is based primarily on Theodore of Mopsuestia and Evagrius Ponticus, authors who are well known to represent very different, if not contradictory, anthropologies: Antiochian and Alexandrian, respectively. Isaac of Nineveh belongs to the large tradition of East Syriac mystics that flourished from the middle of the seventh century through the end of the ninth century and he is one of the most original theoretical minds among the exponents of this literary movement, like John of Dalyatha, Dadisho Qatraya, Joseph Hazzaya, etc. With regard to its relation to the Alexandrian and Antiochian legacies of Christian thought, this movement as a whole is characterised by a fertile synthesis of the thought of Evagrius Ponticus and of Theodore of Mopsuestia. While the latter had been the main christological and exegetical authority in the East Syriac Church since the last decades of the 5th century, the former became only gradually an authority in matters of ascetical practice and spirituality. It was probably the School of Nisibis, where most of the East Syriac bishops and high clergy received their theological education in the 6th century, that imparted to these two authors such outstanding authority. Babai the Great, in the introduction to his Commentary on Evagrius’ Capita Gnostica, gives us a testimony of their authority by referring to Theodore and Evagrius as “teachers of

(1) This article is a revised form of a paper presented at the “Third Annual Archbishop Iakovos Graduate Student Conference in Patristic Studies” organized by the Stephen and Catherine Pappas Patristic Institute of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts (March 15–17, 2007).

the church.”

Of course, the substantial differences between these two theologies could not have escaped the attention of the best East Syriac theologians, who tried in fact to mediate between them.3

This short article intends to contribute to a better understanding of the explicit and, mostly, implicit answers that Isaac of Nineveh gives to the question of what a human being is. In order to understand Isaac’s own thesis one would have to investigate the way in which he modifies his main theological sources, namely Theodore and Evagrius, and uses them to compose a new synthesis. In this article I will try to make only a rough sketch of his synthetical method of working, which I intend to investigate further on,4 at the risk of sacrificing accuracy and completeness. Nevertheless, I hope to focus on the most important elements of Isaac’s anthropology.

2. The Character of Isaac’s Anthropology

Isaac of Nineveh considers Man as a being whose existence is based on his relationship with God. In Isaac’s thought Man’s constitutive components, according to the common concepts of Late Antiquity, i.e. a body and a two-part or three-part soul, become, as it were, different means of communication in the all-inclusive relationship between God and humans, losing thus their “ontological independence.” Accordingly Isaac is not especially interested in defining these components or describing in an exact manner the activities assigned to each. On the contrary, he is rather inconsistent in using anthropological or psycho-

(2) Babai the Great, Commentary on the Capita Gnostica (W. Frankenberg (ed.), Evagrius Ponticus, AGWG.PH NS XIII.2 (Berlin, 1912), 17).


(4) A thorough investigation of this subject would need to overcome a number of essential difficulties: firstly, Isaac did not expose his anthropology or his theological thought on the whole in a clearly structured dogmatic treatise, but rather in numerous mostly short passages scattered in his voluminous Oeuvre, so that the researcher has to reconstruct the outline of his “system” by comparing his sometimes seemingly inconsistent statements; secondly, the anthropologies of both of his precursors have not been sufficiently explored, in spite of the progress of research in patristics in the last 4–5 decades, one of the reasons being the precarious state of the surviving sources (on these difficulties as regards Theodore of Mopsuestia, see F. G. McLeod, The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition (Washington, D.C., 1999) 63).