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In search of a spiritual pearl. St. Isaac the Syrian and his works. Presentation by Metropolitan Hilarion at the First International Patristics Conference of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies St. Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy

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St. Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy

Your Eminences and Your Graces,

dear fathers, brothers and sisters,

This present international conference is the first patristics conference of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies held jointly with the philosophy faculty of Moscow State University.

Four years ago, at the initiative of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia at the very first session of the Holy Synod upon his election to the Patriarchal Throne, an institute of higher learning was set up and called upon to become the flagship of theological scholarship in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies is the highest link within the religious educational system of the Moscow Patriarchate. In co-operation with the theological academies and seminaries and leading secular institutes of Russia and abroad it has been putting into effect a wide spectrum of educational programmes. Under the auspices of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies doctoral, masters' and candidate of science programmes are under development and serious scholarly research is taking place.

The hierarchy of our Church in the person of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and the Holy Synod devotes great attention to the development of various branches of theological scholarship and the consolidation of the scholarly resources available.

One such branch is patristics. The study of the works of the holy fathers was one of the priority tasks of the theological academies as far back as the pre-revolutionary period. The academies were the basis for the systematic translation of the works of the holy fathers, thanks to which we now have at our disposal the multi-volume collections of the works of such Greek and Latin authors as Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Augustine and many others, as well as monographs devoted to the holy fathers.

Translation and research work in the field of patristics was renewed in the 1990s, and today there are many scholars labouring in this field. New translations of the works of the holy fathers are appearing based on modern critical editions of their works, and monographs and articles are being published which help us to place patristic theology in the context of modern theological discourse and make the thinking of the fathers more applicable to Church life today.

One of the gaps in pre-revolutionary patrology was Syrian patristics. There were renowned experts of Latin and Greek patrology working in the theological academies, but there were practically no Syrologists in Russia. An eight-volume collection of the works of St. Ephraim the Syrian exists in Russian, more than half of which consists of pseudo-epigraphs translated from the Greek. Only in the last four volumes are there works translated from the Syriac original. The famous Russian philologist and classicist Sergei Sobolevsky, who at the beginning of the twentieth century translated the works of

Isaac the Syrian into Russian from Greek, used the German translation from the Syriac of his works for the collation of the more difficult places.

In the Soviet period there appeared original Russian works in Syriac studies. Here we should mention first of all the works of Nina Pigulevskaya, who made an enormous contribution in acquainting the Russian reader with the classics of Syriac writings. We ought also to note the works of Sergei Averintsev, who opened up for the Soviet secular reader the world of Byzantine and Syriac patristics through the prism of the literary study and research of the 'poetics' of early Christian texts. However, for understandable reasons in the period of militant atheism our secular researchers were unable to study purely religious problems, as a result of which there was no systematic study of Syrian patristics.

Only in the 1990s, after the shackles of militant atheism had fallen, was it possible to develop in full measure patrological scholarship in the Russian Church. Amongst other things it turned out that there was a serious gap in the field of Syriac patrology. A huge layer of untranslated works of Syriac writings still awaits its translator, and the large number of outstanding works of the Syrian church fathers still awaits its researcher.

It has to be said that in the West too it was only in the twentieth century that Syrology as a special branch of theological scholarship was formed definitely. The multi-volume collection of the works of Syrian authors, the publication of which began under the heading of *Patrologia syriaca* in 1897, was then continued under the heading of *Patrologia orientalis* (with the inclusion of not only Syriac but also Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian and Slavonic sources). This collection, intended to complement the two monumental collections that appeared in the nineteenth century - Abbot Migne's *Patrologia greca* and *Patrologia latina* - has become a most valuable collection of Christian texts. Thanks to it a huge number of earlier unknown (or known only from poor quality editions), works of Oriental literature, including Syriac, have become the object of scholarly attention.

Parallel to the publication of texts, significant work is being done on their research, and monographs and articles devoted to Syrian authors have been published. Here we ought to mention the fundamental works of Irénée Hausherr, Arthur Vööbus, Alphonse Mingana and a number of other renowned Syrologists whose works have become classics. Within this galaxy of outstanding Syrologists an important place is occupied by Dr. Sebastian Brock, who is here today present among us and whom I warmly welcome. During my stay in Oxford I had the good fortune to study under him and under his guidance study the texts of St. Isaac the Syrian, and I shall forever retain in my heart a grateful memory of these lessons.

We owe a debt to Sebastian Brock for the publication and bringing to the attention of the scholarly world the second volume of the works of St. Isaac the Syrian, thanks to which our knowledge of the author has

been broadened greatly. It is possible that it is no coincidence that St. Isaac the Syrian, in spite of his significance for the monastic tradition for the Churches of the East and West, until the twentieth century was not considered worthy of a single complete scholarly work on him (if we do not take into account the small book by Abbot Chabot published in Latin in 1892**[1]**). Before the discovery of the second and then right after it the third volumes of the works of Isaac, this research would appeared to have been before its time. It was the introduction of the newly discovered texts of St. Isaac into the scholarly world that became the impulse for a renewed interest in him and has allowed us to interpret his theological and ascetical system in its entirety.

St. Isaac the Syrian As A Spiritual Writer Of The Church Of The East

There is one fact which obliges us to speak of Isaac the Syrian as a 'special case' in the history of patristic writings. In as far as we can judge by the historical testimonies that have survived and by his own works, he belonged to the Church of the East which recognized (and to this day recognizes) only two Ecumenical Councils - in Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 - and is therefore labeled 'Nestorian', even though it has no direct link with Nestorius. In Isaac's times the canonical boundaries of this Church approximately coincided with the borders of the former Sasanian (Neo-Persian) Empire (present-day Iraq and Iran).

The history of the Church of the East goes back to apostolic times. According to tradition, the apostles Thomas and Thaddeus preached in Persia, where Christianity was spread initially among the Jews and then among the Persians, followers of the Zoroastrian religion. In the third and fourth centuries the Christians of Persia suffered from cruel persecutions, especially at the hands of Bahram II (276 - 292) and Shapura II (310 - 379).

For a number of centuries the Church of the East had only sporadic contact with the Christians of the 'land of the Romans' (the Eastern Roman Empire). At the Local Council of 410 in Seleucia-Ctesiphon the Church of the East, which earlier had come under the Church of Antioch, proclaimed its independence, and the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon became the head of all Christians in Persia. The decision of the Synod was confirmed by Shah Yazdegerd I (399 - 420) who treated Christians favourably. At the Council at Markabte in 424 the powers of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as head of the Persian Church were confirmed and broadened. As a result the leader of the Persian Christians became known as the Catholicos-Patriarch of the East.

The isolated position of the Church of the East to a significant degree determined the specific nature of its historical development. It formed its own liturgical traditions, its own theological schools came into being and its own independent theological language arose.

A huge influence on the development of Syrian Christianity was exerted by the movement of the so called 'sons of the covenant' (*bnay qyama*), which blossomed in the fourth century**[2]**. The 'sons of the covenant' gave an oath of chastity and led an ascetic way of life. They often united into small communities for the purpose of communal living. As a result the basic ideas of the 'sons of the covenant' became the foundation of Syrian monastic spirituality.

An important theological centre of all Eastern Syrian Christianity was the so called 'school of the Persians' (i.e. Persian refugees), founded in the fourth century in Edessa. The main subject that was taught was Scripture: disciples listened and noted down the commentaries of their instructor**[3]**. The school was attended by the Syriac-speaking youth of Edessa and the surrounding regions, as well as by immigrants from Persia**[4]**. The commentaries of St. Ephraim the Syrian, who interpreted some of the books of the Bible, was used as a model for the interpretation of Scripture until the mid-fifth century.

However, in the fifth century the decision was taken to translate completely all of the exegetical works of Theodore of Mopsuestia from the Greek into Syriac. After the translation was completed Theodore of Mopsuestia became the main biblical commentator of the Eastern Syrian tradition: subsequent spiritual writers of this tradition, including Isaac the Syrian , referred to him as the 'Blessed Interpreter'.

The translation of Theodore's works had exceptional significance for Syrian Christianity: alongside Theodore's biblical commentaries his Christological views also became a part of the Syrian tradition. Theodore of Mopsuestia spoke, in particular, of the fact that God the Word had 'assumed' the human person Jesus; the Word of God which has no beginning 'abided' in Jesus who had been born of a Virgin. The Word lived in Christ as in a 'temple': it was arrayed in human nature as in clothing; the human person Jesus, thanks to his feat of redemption and death on the Cross, had assumed the divine dignity too. Theodore in essence spoke of God the Word and the human person Jesus as of two subjects whose coming together in the one Person of the incarnate Word of God was not so much ontological and essential as conditional and existing in *our* perception: in worshiping Christ *we* unite the two natures and confess not 'two sons' but one Christ - God and man.

In the 420s it was this teaching that lay at the foundation of the Christological doctrine of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, who was opposed by Cyril of Alexandria. The latter in his polemic with Nestorianism insisted upon the unity of the hypostasis of God the Word: the Word that has no beginning is the same Person as Jesus who was born of a Virgin; therefore it was wrong to speak of the Word and of Jesus as two different subjects. Cyril's Christology was upheld by the third Ecumenical Council which condemned Nestorius. As a result, at the fifth Ecumenical Council the 'father of Nestorianism' - Theodore of Mopsuestia - was also condemned. However, for the Eastern Syrian Christians he was remained forever an incontrovertible authority in the field of theology. To a significant degree this

explains the fact that the Church of Persia and the entire Eastern Syrian theological tradition was labeled 'Nestorian' - a label which this Church never applied to itself.

At the end of the sixth century Inana, who led the 'school of the Persians' in 572, tried to substitute Theodore's biblical interpretations for his own. This endeavour was not crowned with success: the Council of 585 upheld Theodore's unassailable authority and forbad anyone from 'openly or in secret slandering this teacher of the Church or oppose his holy books'. Consequently, the two Councils in 596 and 605 condemned Inana's interpretations and repeated the anathemas against those who 'reject the commentaries, interpretations and teachings of the true teacher, the blessed Theodore the Interpreter and who try to introduce new and strange interpretations replete with madness and slander'**[5]**.

The turn of the seventh century was marked by the theology of Babai the Great who wrote much on Christological topics. His Christology is a continuation and a type of synthesis of the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodorus of Tarsus**[6]**. In leading the party fighting for a strict observation of Theodore's teaching, Babai headed the opposition to the Council of Chalcedon. In developing Theodore's Christological views, Babai used the *Book of Heraclides*, written by Nestorius as an apology after his condemnation by the third Ecumenical Council and translated into Syriac in the middle of the sixth century**[7]**. By the middle of the seventh century the diptychs of the Church of the East already mentioned 'three teachers' - Diodorus, Theodore and Nestorius**[8]**.

The political circumstances of the seventh century did not allow Persia and Byzantium to become close. On the contrary, the first decades of this century were marked by a series of armed conflicts between the two great empires. At the end of 672 the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius defeated the Persian army at Nineveh. And yet the Byzantine presence in Persia was short lived. By the 730s the hordes of Arab Muslims had begun their incursions into Persia. In 637 the capital of the Sasanians Ctesiphon had fallen and the last Shah Yazdegerd III had fled to Zagros. By the middle of the seventh century Persia was in the hands of the Arabs.

The irrevocable loss of political links with the Byzantine oecumene and the Islamization under the Arabs of Persia and Syria did not lead in the seventh and eight centuries to a crisis in Christianity in this regions, nor to a decline in theology and Church life. Quite the contrary: it was these two centuries that were the period of the greatest blossoming of Syriac-language theology. At this time there lived and worked great writers such as Martyrius-Sahdona (who supported the Council of Chalcedon), Dadisho Qatraya, Symeon d'Taibute (the Merciful), Joseph Hazzaya (the Seer) and John of Dalyatha. They were all in the main writers of a mystical orientation. Little known beyond the confines of the Eastern Syrian tradition, they nevertheless heralded the 'golden age of Syrian Christian literature'. The sole representative of this golden age who was to acquire world-wide fame was St. Isaac the Syrian.

Biographical information on Isaac is to be found in two Syriac sources: the *Book of Chastity* by the ninth-century Eastern Syrian historian Isho'denah, bishop of Basra**[9]**, and an anonymous Western Syrian source, the time and place of the writing of which are not known**[10]**. These sources are so will known that there is no need to quote them here. On their basis and on the basis of meager autobiographical information dispersed throughout the works of Isaac it is possible to reconstruct his biography only partially.

He was born in Qatar on the shore of the Persian Gulf. Here, by the sea, he spent his childhood. Sea images are often encountered in Isaac's works: he speaks of ships, of captains and sailors, of sea storms and winds, of divers and oysters plumbed from the depths of the sea. Here is one of them: 'If in each oyster a diver was to find a pearl, then every man would quickly become rich. And if the diver immediately got the pearl and the waves did not beat him and the sharks did not encounter him, he would not have to hold his breath to the extent he suffocated, and he would not be deprived of fresh air which is available to all and he would not go down to the sea bottom - then more often than lightning strikes pearls would appear in abundance**[11]**.'

It is possible that Isaac became a monk not in his homeland but elsewhere. We may infer this from his own story beginning with the words: 'At another time I went to see an old, venerable and virtuous elder...'. In this story the saint gives the reply of the elder to his question which contains these words: 'Nobody knows you in this land, they do not know of your life...'**[12]**. And yet the anonymous Western Syriac source says how Isaac 'was a monk and teacher in his own region', i.e. in Qatar, and it is from there that Catholicos Givargis took him to Bet Aramaye**[13]**.

Of the life of St. Isaac before he became a bishop nothing more is known. As regards his episcopal consecration, then the information on this event contained in the *Book of Chastity* with great clarity outlines the time and geography of his life, as well as his place in the diptychs in the Nineveh diocese of the Church of the East. The Catholicos Givargis (George), who ordained Isaac, administered the Church of the East from 660 to 680**[14]**, and the text mentions too Catholicos Henanisho from 685 to 700. The years that Givargis was Catholicos coincide with the rule of Muawiyah I, the first Caliph of the Umayyad Dynasty, who chose Damascus as the capital of the Arab Caliphate**[15]**. It fell to Givargis to unite the bishops of Qatar, from where Isaac originated, with the Church of the East**[16]**. It is possible that while reuniting the bishops Givergis decided to ordain Isaac, a native of Qatar renowned for his ascetic life, as bishop of Nineveh**[17]**. If this presupposition is true, then Isaac became a bishop in 676 or later, but no later than 680 when Catholicos Givargis died.

The anonymous Western Syriac source adds several insignificant brush strokes to his portrait. In particular, this source says how when Isaac became blind, his disciples wrote down his teachings for him. 'He was called the second Didymus**[18]**, for he was calm, kind and humble, and his speech was

always mild. He ate a piece of bread with vegetables three times a week... He compiled five volumes, known to this day, replete with most sweet teachings...'.

Isaac did not stay long in his episcopal see. An eloquent story on the abdication of his episcopacy has survived in Arabic. When Isaac, on the first day after his episcopal consecration, was in his residence he was visited by two men, one of whom, a wealthy man, demanded that his friend return his debt: 'If this man refuses to return to me what belongs to me I will be forced to take him to court'. Isaac said to him: 'Since Scripture teaches us not to take away from a debtor, you ought to give this man at least a day so that he can repay you'. But the wealthy man replied: 'Do not bother me with the Gospel!' Isaac then said: 'If the Gospel is not to be reckoned with here, then why have I come here?' Seeing that episcopal ministry was in conflict with his tendency toward the hermit's life, 'the saint abdicated his episcopacy and withdrew to the holy monastery of Sketes'**[19]**.

The last detail of the story contradicts the *Book of Chastity* which states that Isaac withdrew to the mountains surrounding Khuzestan**[20]**, and not to the Egyptian monastery of Sketes. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that Isaac's abdication of his episcopacy was caused by a single trifling incident. It is essential to remember that at the time of Isaac Nineveh**[21]** was a centre of activity for 'Monophysite' Jacobites with whom Isaac as a 'dyophysite' bishop was to fight**[22]**. It is possible that, as he was a not a man inclined towards arguments on dogmatic topics, Isaac preferred to withdraw from Nineveh, which had become an arena of conflict between contending parties.

The remaining years of his life Isaac spent in the monastery of Rabban Shabura on Mount Shushtar**[23]**. The exact date of Isaac's death is unknown, as the date too of his birth is unknown.

It is probably that Isaac was venerated as a saint during his lifetime. After Isaac's death his fame spread at the same time as his writings. Joseph of Hazzayah, living in the eighth century, called him 'famous among the saints'**[24]**. By the eleventh century Isaac, thanks to the Greek translation of his works, became widely known in the Greek-speaking East: in the famous anthology of ascetical texts called *Euergetinos*, excepts from the writings of 'abba Isaac the Syrian' take their place alongside selections from the classics of early Byzantine ascetical literature.

And the same time the Church of the East continued to venerate Isaac: his writings acquired greater recognition and his name acquired greater authority. This is confirmed by the many written sources. One of these goes back to the thirteenth century and is a collected catalogue of Eastern Syriac writers, the author of which is Abdisho of Nisibia: the catalogue mentions 'seven volumes' of Isaac 'on the spiritual life, on the divine mysteries, on destinies and on Providence'**[25]**. In another source which cannot be accurately dated, but compiled no later than the fourteenth century, Isaac is called the 'instructor and teacher of all monks, the harbour of salvation for the whole world'**[26]**.

In the Orthodox Church Isaac the Syrian has been venerated for more than a millennium. This began with the appearance of the Greek translation of his works and continues to this day. The memory of St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Nineveh, is kept by the Orthodox Church on 10th February (28th January according to the Old Style calendar), together with the memory of another great Syrian writer and ascetic, St. Ephraim the Syrian. The image of Isaac the Syrian is often present in iconostases and frescos of Orthodox Churches as well as in book miniatures. One of the well-known depictions of Isaac, which the participants of this conference can see for themselves, dates back to the beginning of the sixteenth century: it is located in the local row of the original iconostasis of the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin. At present this iconostasis covered by other, later images; however, through a 'window' in the local row there are visible images of three saints, one of whom is St. Isaac the Syrian.

We may consider it an 'ecclesiastical phenomenon' the fact that a humble bishop of the Church of the East from a remote province of Persia became a holy father of the post-Chalcedon Orthodox Church. Among Russian patrologists the first to note this phenomenon was Fr. Georges Florovsky. In his book *The Byzantine Fathers of the V - VIII Centuries* he wrote: 'There is much that is not clear in the life of St. Isaac... He was made a bishop in the monastery of Bet-Bai by Patriarch George (660 - 680)... We are here in the Nestorian milieu, and at the same time it is here that Isaac stands out from this milieu. It is unclear why he left Nineveh; we may surmise that is was because of disagreements with the local clergy. He lived a solitary life in the monastery, and yet his teaching was a temptation.... He left behind the Antiochian tradition, and yet he refers to the Interpreter**[27]** many times.'**[28]**

Since the fact that Isaac the Syrian belonged to the Church of the East had already been established by scholars at the time of Florovsky, throughout the twentieth century this fact has never been disputed by either Russian or Western scholars. And yet he poses a problem for Orthodox scholars: how could a great saint who is venerated throughout the Orthodox Church be a Nestorian? There have been various attempts to answer this question. Florovsky preferred not to enter into discussion of the problem, limiting himself to a remark that St. Isaac 'stood out' in the Nestorian milieu. Some have seen a solution to the problem by saying that Isaac only 'formally' belonged to the Nestorian Church. This opinion was adhered to by the well-known Russian patrologist Archbishop Basil (Krivoshein): 'In as far as we can judge by the historical data that has come down to us, St. Isaac was for a short period bishop of the city of Nineveh which came under the jurisdiction of the Church in the Persian Empire, as though his whole life's activity was carried out within the confines of this Church. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church has since times of old venerated him as a saint and esteems highly his spiritual works, which of course do not contain any "Nestorianism" whatsoever. And I if course shall never dare to take away his title of 'saint', even though the fact of his belonging (albeit formally) to the Nestorian Church challenges the Orthodox theological consciousness with serious problems on the nature of the Church and of the possibility of a life of grace and sanctity beyond its visible boundaries'**[29]**.

The thesis of the 'formal' belonging of St. Isaac to the Nestorian Church has been repeated in our days by Alexei Sidorov: 'Isaac the Syrian, in belonging *formally* to the Nestorian Church and even being, (albeit for a short time) a Nestorian bishop, revealed in his works the depths of the Orthodox contemplation of God... The translation of the works of St. Isaac into Greek and their recognition in Byzantium and Old Russia as works of a holy man and ultimately his canonization by the Orthodox Church, we believe, show that the Holy Spirit permeates and sees all things and that he knows no formal confines and boundaries of crude matter'.**[30]**

The scholar advances the thesis that St. Isaac the Syrian could have belonged to the pro-Chalcedon movement within the Nestorian Church. In monastic circles of the Church of the East from the end of the sixth century there existed a current which had a tendency towards an affinity or even merging with the Orthodox of the Chalcedon orientation. To this current belonged Inana and Martyrius-Sahdona. If Isaac the Syrian also belonged to this current, his abdication from the episcopal see could also be interpreted as a break with the Church of the East and a secret going over to the Chalcedonian position**[31]**.

This hypothesis offers an elegant way out from the contradiction of Isaac the Syrian belonging to the Church of the East and his veneration in the Orthodox Church. This hypothesis, however, is not confirmed by a single trustworthy source. The writings of Isaac, in particular the texts in which he reproduces the anathemas of the Councils at the turn of the seventh century**[32]**, convoked against Inana, testify to the opposite - to the fact that the preferred to adhere to the official doctrine of his Church and was not in sympathy with oppositionist currents. At the same time nothing explicitly Nestorian can be found in his Christology. In any case, he was far from an extreme dyophysite interpretation of the person of Jesus Christ by which his image is divided into 'two sons': Isaac the Syrian understands Christ to be a single Person - God who has appeared in the flesh.

Regarding the question of the holiness of St. Isaac, then we believe that as it has never caused any doubt with any of the Byzantine or Russian fathers who have revered him for many centuries, then we too have no reason 'to remove from him the title of saint'. It ought to be borne in mind that the borders between the Churches at the time of Isaac the Syrian were not defined as rigidly as they are today. During the period of dogmatic controversies (the fourth to the eighth centuries) these boundaries had yet to be formed and not all saints were to be found in a dogmatically pure ecclesiastical jurisdiction. It is sufficient to recall St. Isaiah of Sketes, the compiler of a well-known collection of teachings and St. Peter of Iberia, Bishop of Majuma, a renowned ascetic venerated in the Georgian Orthodox Church: both saints lived in the latter half of the fifth century, did not recognize the Council of Chalcedon and adhered to monophysite views.

The Works Of St. Isaac

The Syriac sources speak first of five and then of seven volumes of works of Isaac of Nineveh; however, we do not know whether we are dealing with a different division of the same corpus of texts which have come down to us or with other lost works of Isaac. At present we have at our disposal three volumes of works of Isaac the Syrian that have become part of scholarly attention.

The original text of the first volume of the works of Isaac has come down to us in two redactions - Eastern and Western**[33]**. The first redaction is given in Bedjan's edition**[34]**, the second in a number of manuscripts, the earliest of which is dated from the turn of the tenth century**[35]**. The main differences between the two redactions are the following: 1. the Eastern redaction contains numerous texts and eight Discourses that are absent in the Western redaction; 2. the Western redaction contains few texts that are absent in the Eastern; 3. the Eastern contains citations from Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodorus of Tarsus: in the Western these texts are ascribed to other authors. Although there is no critical edition of the text of the first volume, a textological analysis of both redactions carried out by D. Miller has shown that the Eastern redaction reflects the true text of Isaac, whereas the Western redaction is a reworking of this text**[36]**.

It is from the text of the Western redaction that at the turn of the ninth century Abramius and Patricius, monks of the Monastery of St. Sabbas the Sanctified in Palestine, that the Greek translation of the works of Isaac was made. Thanks to this translation the Christian world discovered St. Isaac, for it was from this translation that subsequent translations of Isaac the Syrian into many other languages were made.

The first volume of Isaac the Syrian was known to the Russian reader until recently only from translations done from the Greek translation, of which St. Philaret of Moscow says: 'Most likely the translator was not a scholar, i.e. he did not know the rules of grammar and therefore confused words and instead of the correct expression he put in incorrect and dubious words, and it is possible too that mistakes and improbabilities crept in from copyists'**[37]**. I shall quote too the opinion of Fr. Georges Florovsky: 'This translation is clearly imprecise... In the Syriac original there is less order, more directness.**[38]**' I should add on my own behalf that in the Syriac there is greater clarity, although there are many places which could be understood and therefore translated in various ways. In comparing the Greek translation of these places with the original it is impossible not to notice that in many instances the translator, who has not completely understood the meaning of St. Isaac's thought, has conveyed the words but not the meaning.

The difference between the Syriac original of the works of St. Isaac and their Greek translation concerns too the content up and order of the Homilies. First of all, as Archbishop Philaret (Gumilevsky) justly

noted, 'in the Greek translation less than half of the works of St. Isaac are made know**[39]**', since the second and the third volumes of his works were not translated into Greek at all. And yet, from the original eighty two Homilies of the first volume, fourteen Homilies were not translated into Greek**[40]**.

On the other hand, the Greek translation has Homilies which do not belong to the pen of St. Isaac; these are Homilies 43, 2, 7 and 29, corresponding to Homilies 8, 68, 9 and 20 of the Russian translation of *On Ascetical Life*. In the Syriac corpus of the works of St. Isaac the Syrian these Homilies do not exist. Yet they are to be found in the corpus of works of another Syrian mystical writer living in the eight century - John of Dalyatha; moreover, the manuscript tradition attributes them precisely to this author**[41]**. The 9th Homily of the Russian translation of *On Ascetical Life* of St. Isaac the Syrian is none other than the 18th Epistle of John of Dalyatha**[42]**. The remaining three Homilies belong to the collection of *Discourses* of John of Dalyatha, the text of which has not yet been published**[43]**.

Moreover, the Greek translation of the works of St. Isaac contains the Epistle to St. Symeon of the Wonderful Mountain who lived in the sixth century. On the basis of this epistle some of our pre-revolutionary authors, as well as Archbishop Sergei (Spassky) have claimed that St. Isaac lived not in the seventh but in the sixth century. However, this Epistle (Homily 55 in the Russian translation) does not bear the signature of Isaac the Syrian in a single Syriac manuscript. In all the Syriac manuscripts, as well as in the Arabic and Ethiopian versions, the Epistle bears the signature of Philoxenes of Mabbug. The epistle has survived in two versions - a full one and an abbreviated one. The majority of extant manuscripts contain the full version in which the work is called the Epistle to Patricius of Edessa. The authorship of Philoxenes is confirmed by the entire manuscript tradition and all modern scholars working in the field of Syriac studies**[44]**.

Yet another peculiarity of the Greek translation is that in it all the quotations from Theodore of Mopsuestia, Diodorus of Tarsus and Evagrius that are to be found in the Syriac original of the works of St. Isaac the Syrian are either excluded altogether or ascribed to other authors, in particular, to St. Gregory the Theologian or St. Cyril of Alexandria. Thus, for example, Homily 19 from the Syriac text of the first volume contains a number of references to Theodore of Mopsuestia: in the Greek translation this Homily is omitted. In the Greek translation of the Syriac Homily 22**[45]** two quotations from the *Thoughts* of Evagrius ('prayer is purity of the mind which alone, to the amazement of the human person, comes forth from the light of the Holy Trinity' and 'purity of the mind is the disappearance of that which is thought. It is likened to the heavenly flower, during prayer the light of the Holy Trinity shines forth within it'**[46]**) are ascribed to 'the divine Gregory'**[47]**. The quotation from the *Commentary on the Book of Genesis* by the blessed Cyril which is contained in the Greek Homily 48 (Russian Homily 90**[48]**) is in actual fact a quotation from the commentary of the same name by Theodore of Mopsuestia**[49]**. This re-attribution was fully permissible and legitimate according to the notions of Byzantine translators and copyists**[50]**.

And yet, the quotations from Theodore, Diodorus and Evagrius were ascribed to other authors in the Western Syriac version of the works of St. Isaac, which was used for the translations of Abramius and Patricius. This version is a sort of 'monophysite' reworking of the works of St. Isaac; a number of Homilies from the original Eastern Syriac version have been omitted in it. The difference between the Greek translation of the works of St. Isaac and the Eastern Syriac original is to a significant degree determined by the fact that Abramius and Patricius were translating from the Western Syriac version.

The Greek translation of Isaac is literal and therefore preserves many ambiguities of the Syriac original: in some instances the text has evidently been translated without sufficient attention to its meaning. Moreover, numerous mistakes have crept into the text via the translation. This translation was first published in 1770 in Leipzig and has been republished many times since. Quite recently the Monastery of the Iberian Icon on Mount Athos prepared and published a critical edition of the Greek translation done by Marcel Pirar**[51]**, who is here today among us.

A complete translation of the Greek collection of the Homilies of Isaac the Syrian into the Slavonic language was done by the Bulgarian monk Zacchaeus at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Before that in Slavonic there existed only fragments of the works of Isaac (in particular those that formed part of the *Pandects* of Nicon of Montenegro). In the second quarter of the fourteenth century on Athos there appeared yet one more Slavonic translation of the Homilies of Isaac made by the elder John. Both translations had become widespread by the fourteenth century, especially in monastic circles: this is attested by the numerous surviving manuscripts**[52]**. At the end of the eighteenth century Paisius Velichkovsky edited anew the Slavonic translation of Isaac the Syrian, published in 1812, but suppressed by the censorship of the time and therefore was not widespread until 1854 when it was published for a second time by the Monastery of Optina Pustyn.

In the same year of 1854 there was published a complete Russian translation of Isaac the Syrian made by the Moscow Theological Academy. In 1911 professor of the Moscow Theological Academy Sergei Sobolevsky translated anew the Homilies of Isaac the Syrian from the Greek**[53]**. Only separate Homilies from this volume are today in the translation from the Syriac, which are Homily 76, translated by Sergei Averintsev**[54]**, Homily 54, translated by me**[55]**, Homilies 19, 20 and 21, also translated by me**[56]** and Homily 1, translated by Alexei Muraviev**[57]**. I express the hope that sooner or later in the hands of the Russian reader there will appear the complete text of the first volume in translation from Syriac, which would become a landmark in the mastering of the legacy of the great Syrian by our contemporaries.

As for the second volume of the works of Isaac, then scholars knew of its existence at least since Bedjan's edition appeared: he published fragments from it according to the text of the manuscript which

later in 1918 was lost**[58]**. However, in 1983, professor Sebastian Brock discovered in the Bodleian Library at Oxford another manuscript containing the complete text of the second volume and dated at the tenth or eleventh century**[59]**. From this manuscript Dr. Brock made his own edition of the *Discourses* 4 - 44 from the second volume**[60]**, comprising about half of its content. The other half of the volume includes *Discourses* 1 -3, from which the latter is divided into 400 chapters under the general heading of *Chapters on Knowledge*. This collection still awaits its publication, although there have already appeared its complete or partial translations into a number of European languages.

On the second volume of the works of Isaac the Syrian Sebastian Brock writes: 'The entire manuscript tradition, including the various manuscripts from the three Churches (the Church of the East, the Byzantine Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox Churches) is unanimous in attributing the second volume to St. Isaac... The contents of both volumes testify to the fact that they have a single author: in both volumes there are common characteristic terms, as well as numerous coincidences in phraseology... All this testifies to the fact that the burden of proving who is right lies not on those who believe that the author of the first volume is also the author of the second, but on those who are convinced of the opposite**[61]**'.

Thus, the second volume belongs to the one who wrote the first. And yet as there were Russian writers in the 1990s who expressed doubt regarding the authenticity of this volume, we shall show the basic evidence in favour of its authenticity.

First of all, it ought to be said that the Discourses from the second volume are fully or partially to be found in general totality in the nine manuscripts known to scholars today, and all of them here have the name of Isaac written upon them. If we bear in mind that the works of some fathers (not to mention the works of many authors of antiquity) have come down to us in one or two manuscripts, then in itself the number of manuscripts containing writings from the second volume and unanimously attributed to Isaac are weighty evidence in favour of the writings precisely being his.

We must too mention that the Syriac manuscripts containing the corpus of the *Homilies on the Ascetical Life* that we known about are concluded with the following remark: 'Here ends, with the help of God, the first part of the teaching of Mar Isaac the monk'**[62]**. The manuscripts containing the second volume, by contrast, begin with the words: 'We are copying the second volume of Mar Isaac, bishop of Nineveh'. In this way in the Syrian manuscript tradition the second volume is thought of as a continuation of the first.

We notice too that the two Discourses from the second volume are identical to the two Homilies from the first volume, which are: Discourse 16 from the second volume corresponds to Homily 54 from the first volume**[63]**, and Discourse 17 from the second volume corresponds to Homily 55 from first volume**[64]**.

Moreover, in the text of the second volume there are several references to the Homilies from the first volume. Thus for example, in the third Discourse from the second volume (that is, in chapter 41 from the first century) the author says: 'I have written this book for my memory in as far as I have learned from Scripture and a little from my own experience: I have indicated this at the beginning of the book'. By 'the beginning of the book' it is meant the 14th Homily of the Syriac text of the first volume**[65]**, where the author writes: 'I have written this for my memory and for every reader in as much as I could learn from Scripture... and a little from my own experience'**[66]**. In the 32th Discourse from the second volume the author says: 'Regarding this rank, if anyone desires to hear precisely, then let him read the Homily above on spiritual prayer'**[67]**. In this place in the Bodleian syr. e 7 manuscript there is a scholia: 'This Homily was written in the first part'. This refers**[68]** to Homily 22 from the first volume devoted to prayer. Thus it is quite evident that the texts of the first and second volumes have been written by the same author who views them as a single 'book'.

There are many other factors which confirm that both volumes belong to the same author. One and the same ascetical vocabulary is used in both volumes: this concerns such terms as *ihidaya* (hermit, monk), *šelya* (silence), *dubbara* (behaviour, way of life, way of being, asceticism), *sukkale* (insights, thoughts), *zaw'e* (movements, arousings, breakthroughs), *temha* (amazement), *lebba* (heart), *hawna* (mind), *re'yana* (reason), *mad'a* (thought, thinking, consciousness, reason), *herga* (meditation), *te'orya* (contemplation), *pulhana* (ministry, service), *'enyana* (discourse), *maggnanuta* (signing), *gelyana* (revelation), *nahhiruta* (illumination), *qutta'a* (despondency *'arpella* (dark cloud, darkness) and others. Even such a rare term as *qestonare* (tormentors, guards, investigators), borrowed from the Latin through the Greek transcription is encountered in the works of St. Isaac the Syrian twice - once in the first volume (Homily 58**[69]**), and once more in the second volume (Discourse 9), even though at the mention of *qestonare* - 'tormentors' - in the second volume St. Isaac adds 'of whom it was spoken earlier', which may be interpreted as a reference to the first volume.

In both volumes we encounter identical idioms such as 'spiritual contemplation' (*te'orya d-ruh*), 'spiritual prayer' (*slota ruhanayta*), 'pure prayer' (*slota dkita*), 'secret prayer' (*slota kasya*), 'prayer of the heart' (*slota d-lebba*), 'the labour of prayer' (*'amla da-slota*), 'silence of reason' (*šetqa d-re'yana*), 'the treasured light' (*nuhra kasya*), 'treasured ministry' (*pulhana kasya*), 'spiritual way of life' (*dubbara ruhana*), 'spiritual knowledge' (*ida'ta d-ruh*), '(ascetical) life in silence' (*dubbare dab-šelya*), 'spiritual mysteries' (*raze ruhane*), 'spiritual insights' (*sukkale ruhanaye*), 'humility of the heart' (*mukkaka d-lebba*), 'movement of the soul' (*zaw'e d-napša*), 'ministry of virtue' (*pulhana da-myattruta*), 'sea of the world' (*yammeh d-'alma*), 'ship of repentance' (*elpa da-tyabuta*), 'new age' (*'alma hadta*), 'the discourse of knowledge' (*'enyana d-ida'ta*), 'childlike way of thinking' (*šabrut tar'ita*), 'inebriation in God' (*rawwayuta db-alaha*), 'writings of the Spirit' (*ktabay ruha*), 'divine revelation' (*gelyana alahaya*), 'divine providence' (*huššaba alahaya*), 'inner silence' (*šelyuta gawwayta*), 'humility of reason' (*mukkaka d-puršane*), 'amazement in God' (*tehra db-alaha*), 'sea of silence' (*yamma d-šelya, yamma d-šelyuta*),

'perfection of knowledge' (*gmiruta d-ida'ta*) and many others.

Both volumes are characterized by a similar construction in imagery. In particular, both volumes use sea images - the ship, the sea, waves, sailing, rudder, diver, pearls and so on.

The thematic of both volumes coincides to a significant degree. In both we are dealing with the love of God, silence and the life of the hermit, the reading of Scripture and night vigils, prayer before the Cross and supplications, despondency and the abandonment of God, humility and tears, amazement and 'inebriation' with the love of God.

Both the first and second volume contain references to authoritative writers in the Eastern Syriac tradition such as Evagrius of Ponticus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodorus of Tarsus.

And finally, the style, grammar, syntax of both volumes incontrovertibly testify to the fact that they were written by one and the same author. Those who wish to verify this should turn to the Syriac texts of both volumes and compare them. It is impossible to make such a comparison by using only the Russian translations.

What has been said above regarding the authenticity of the second volume in full measure relates to the third volume of the works of Isaac the Syrian that have known only become the object of scholarship. It is true that this volume is known only from a single later manuscript**[70]**. However, this manuscript, dated approximately at 1900, is a copy of a far earlier manuscript. It contains 133 pages, of which the first eleven contain the works of Isaac the Syrian - 17 Homilies which in content, language, style and syntax are close to those that form part of the first and second volumes. At the same time, Homilies 14 and 15 from the third volume correspond to Homilies 22 and 40 from the first volume, while Homily 17 corresponds to Discourse 25 from the second volume**[71]**.

Discourses 1 and 2 and 4 to 44 from the second volumes of the works of Isaac the Syrian have been translated into Russian. This translation, done by me in 1998, has in the intervening years undergone seven editions**[72]**. Moreover, there have been translated some parts of the *Chapters on Knowledge* (Discourse 3 from the second volume)**[73]**. Regarding the third volume, it remains untranslated with the exception of Homily 17 (translated as part of the second volume as Discourse 25).

There is no evidence of the existence in the Syriac manuscript tradition of a fourth volume of Isaac's works. However, a number of manuscripts mentioned in the catalogues of the libraries of the Christian East contain a small collection of Homilies from the 'fifth volume of the divine man Isaac, a saint and hermit, bishop of Nineveh'. The texts of these manuscripts have been insufficiently studied and scholarly opinion differs on whether they can be attributed to Isaac**[74]**. Bearing in mind, however, that a number

of Syriac sources speak of five volumes of Isaac's works**[75]**, then we may expect that in this little studied collection genuine works of the saint may be found.

Conclusion

The present conference, which has brought together the leading world specialists in the field of Syriac patristics, is a show of the scholarly resources that have already made a significant contribution to the cause of the study of the legacy of St. Isaac the Syrian. Each of the conference speakers will share the results of his research and speak of the scholarly discoveries which he has made in reading the works of the Syrian church father. The conference will examine both various problems connected to the existence of the works of Isaac in the manuscript tradition, in published editions and translations, and the various aspects of his theological, moral, ascetical and mystical teaching.

I would like to hope, however, that this conference will be new step in the cause of studying the legacy of Isaac the Syrian, that it will inspire young scholars, including students represented here, to new research. Patrology is a boundless sea in which experienced divers find newer and newer pearls. The most significant of these pearls at the end of the twentieth century was the discovery of the second volume of the works of Isaac the Syrian, while the beginning of the twenty-first century heralded the advent of scholarly work upon a new find - the third volume of his works. Yet even those works which are well known have been far from studied and many remain unpublished and untranslated into modern languages. The works of Isaac the Syrian, upon which more than one generation of monks of both East and West have been brought up, are a vast field for new research. And the more we know about St. Isaac, the more important and attractive his image becomes for us.

I would like to express the hope that after the First Patristics Conference of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies there will follow other conferences devoted to the works of the church fathers - Greek, Latin and Oriental. The cause of mastering the patristic legacy in our homeland demands a qualitative breakthrough, and I would like to believe that scholarly forums such as ours will be become a good tradition, will enable the education of a new generation of scholars for whom the search for the spiritual pearl in the sea of patristic writings has become their life's work.

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[1] *Chabot, J.-B.* De sancti Isaaci Ninevitae vita, scriptis et doctrina. Paris, 1892.

[2] For the 'sons of the covenant' see: *G. Nedungatt*. The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church. — Orientalia Chriatiana Periodica 39. Roma, 1973. Pp.191—215; 419—444; *P. Escolan*. Monachisme et Eglise. Le monachisme syrien du IV^{e} au VII^{e} siècle: un monachisme charismatique. Paris, 1999. P. 11—69.

[3] *Archpriest Georges Florovsky*. Восточные Отцы IV века. Париж, 1937. С. 227.For more detail on the Edessa and Nisibia schools, see: см. в: *A. Vööbus*. History of the School of Nisibis. Louvain, 1965; *N.V. Pigulevskaya*. Культура сирийцев а средние века; *Hieromonk Hilarion (Alefeyev)*. Духовное образование на христианском востоке в I—VI вв. // Христианское чтение. Журнал Санкт-Петербургской Православной Духовной Академии. № 18, 1999. С. 105—143.

[4] *D. Miller*. Translator’s Epilogue. P. 489. In: The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian. Boston, Massachusetts, 1984.

[5] Cited in *D. Miller*. Translator’s Epilogue. P. 503. The decisions of the Councils of the Church of the East at the turn of the seventh century concerning the theological heritage of Theodore were determined not only by Inana's struggle with him but by the condemnation of Theodore at the sixth Ecumenical Council (533), of which they would have known in Persia, albeit with a delay.

[6] *G. Chediah*. The Christology of Mar Babai the Great. Kottayam, 1982. P. 194.

[7] *D. Miller*. Translator’s Epilogue. P. 504.

[8] Ibid. P. 507—508.

[9] *Isho’denah*. Le Livre de la Chasteté. Ed. J.-B.Chabot. — Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire écclesiastiques 16. Paris, 1896. P. 63—64.

[10] Studia Syriaca. Ed. I. Rahmani. T. I. Beiruth, 1904. P. 33.

[11] Vol. II. Discourse 34, 4. Cited from.: *St. Isaac the Syrian*. О божественных тайнах и о духовной жизни. Перевод с сирийского, предисловие, примечания митрополита Илариона (Алфеева). Издание седьмое, исправленное. St. Petersburg., 2013. p.250.

[12] Vol I. Homily 11. Cited from: Иже во святых отца нашего аввы Исаака Сириянина Слова подвижнические. [Перевод с греческого С. Соболевского]. Sergiev Posad, 1911. С.

[13] Studia Syriaca. Ed. I. Rahmani. vol. I. P. 32-33.

[14] On the Catholicos Givargis see: *V. Bolotov. И*з истории Церкви Сиро-Персидской. — Христианское чтение. Т. CCVII. Часть 1. St. Petersburg,, 1899. p.1028 (Bolotov believes that Givargis 'was made Catholicos at the end of 660 or the beginning of 661... and died in 680, i.e. he was patriarch for almost twenty years or more'). See also: *N. Pigulevskaya*. Культура сирийцев. С. 219.

[15] The father of St. John Damascene served at the court of this Caliph. See: *R. de Coz*. Histoire de l'Eglise d'Orient. P. 139.

[16] There was in Qatar a Christian Church under the Catholicos of the East. Around 648 the bishops of Qatar separated from the Eastern Syrian Catholicos: the schism lasted until 676 when Catholicos Givargis visited Qatar and united his bishops with the Church of Persia.

[17] At present Nineveh is located in Iraq..

[18] After Didymus the Blind, the great Alexandrian theologian of the fourth century.

[19] *J.-B. Assemani*. Bibliotheca Orientalis I. Roma, 1719. P. 445.

[20] At present Khuzestan forms part of the territory of the Islamic republic of Iran. The territory of this province is separated from the rest of Iran by the Zagros mountain range.

[21] At present the city is located on the territory of Iraq.

[22] *D. Miller*. Translator's Introduction. P. LXIX—LXX. В кн.: The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian. Boston, Massachusetts, 1984.

[23] See: *P. Bettiolo*. Introduzione. — *Isacco di Ninive*. Discorsi spirituali. Bose, 1985. P. 18. This mountain is located in the north of Khuzestan. The city of Shushtar is located in its foothills.

[24] *A. Mingana*. Woodbroke Studies. Vol. VII. Cambridge, 1934. P. 268.

[25] *J.-B. Assemani*. Bibliotheca Orientalis. Vol. III, 1. P. 174.

[26] *J.-B. Chabot*. De sancti Isaaci Ninevitae vita, scriptis et doctrina. Paris, 1892. P. VII.

[27] Theodore of Mopsuestia.

[28] *Archpriest Georges Florovsky*. Византийские Отцы V—VIII веков. pp.185-186.

[29] *Archbishop Basil (Krivoshen)*. Ангелы и бесы в духовной жизни по учению восточных Отцов. Moscow., 2000. pp.43—44.

[30] *A. Sidorov*. Блаженный Феодорит Кирский — архипастырь, монах, богослов. —*Блаженный Феодорит Кирский*. История боголюбцев. Moscow, 1996. p.121. In his course on patrology the same author calls Isaac a 'Nestorian ascetic and bishop who was deigned to be canonized among the saints of the Orthodox Church': *A.I. Sidorov.*. Курс патрологии. М., 1996. С. 48.

[31] *. A. Sidorov*.. Блаженный Феодорит. pp.121—122

[32] See: Vol. II, Discourse 39, 7 in: *St. Isaac the Syrian*. О божественных тайнах и о духовной жизни. Изд. седьмое. pp.272–273.

[33] *D. Miller*. Translator’s Introduction. P. LXXVII—LXXVIII.

[34] See: *Mar Isaacus Ninevita.* De perfectione religiosa, quam edidit Paulus Bedjan. Leipzig, 1909.

[35] Codex Synaiticus Syriacus 24.

[36] See: *D. Miller*. Translator’s Introduction. P. LXXVIII.

[37] Жизнеописания отечественных подвижников благочестия XVIII—XIX веков. Сентябрь. Moscow, 1909, p.497.

[38] *Archpriest Georges Florovsky*. Византийские Отцы V—VIII веков. Paris, 1933. p.186.

[39] Историческое учение об Отцах Церкви. Vol. 3, p.175.

[40]These are Homilies 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 31, 49, 54, 56, 71, 75, 76 from the edition: *Mar Isaacus Ninevita*. De perfectione religiosa, quam edidit Paulus Bedjan. Leipzig, 1909. The Greek translation contains 86 Homilies and 4 Epistles, but this number is arrived at by dividing up further the Syriac Homilies of Isaac into smaller Homilies (each with its own number), as well as by the addition of five unauthentic works to the authentic works of the Homilies of Isaac..

[41] For more detail on these four Discourses ascribed to Isaac, see: *R. Beulay*. Introduction. — La Collection des lettres de *J*

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