BOOK REVIEWS

Nestor Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine* Kephalaia Gnostika. *Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext*. Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 128 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015). Pp. IX +193; € 99/$128.

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The Syriac writings of the famous ascetic and mystic author Isaac, who for a short time was bishop of Nineveh (ca. 676–680), are extant in three collections, or "parts." The first part was published by P. Bedjan in 1909 and translated into English by A. J. Wensinck in 1923; most of the second part was published by S. Brock in 1995 (with English translation); and the third part by S. Chialà in 2011 (with Italian translation—an English translation by M.T. Hansbury appeared in 2015). The focus of the present monograph is on a long chapter of the second part that has remained unpublished and that in the sole manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Syr. e. 7) is given the title "Chapters of Knowledge," reflecting the title of the *Kephalaia Gnostica* of Evagrius of Pontus, one of Isaac's main sources of inspiration.

Isaac's *Kephalaia Gnostica* (*KG*) consist of four "centuries," or collections of one hundred short passages each, succinctly expressing key ideas of his theological and spiritual worldview. Since the central topic of the *KG*—and a pervasive theme for Isaac's entire oeuvre as well—is the "spiritualization" of the ascetic's life, or "its transformation into a spiritual mode of existence through the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit" (p. 1), the "pneumatological" approach almost naturally imposes itself.

In the absence of a critical edition of the *KG*, the author had to turn to the Oxford manuscript, whereas the reader is entirely dependent on the author's selection of passages and on his decision to provide in the footnotes Syriac text for certain passages and simple references to manuscript folios for others. This obviously hampers a full understanding, but the author's generosity in providing Syriac text and, additionally, in quoting parallel texts from other parts of Isaac's work for which editions are available mitigates this problem.

The book consists of two parts. The first part (pp. 3–51) addresses general questions and deals with some characteristics of the

East Syriac mystical tradition: the interconnectedness of a distinct group of authors; the accusation of "Messalianism" to which they were subject; the tension between the anchoritic lifestyle and coenobitism; the oftentimes problematic relationship with the established church; and the widespread skepticism toward "scholastic" wisdom (both secular and theological), even though all known ascetic authors hailed from the East Syriac school tradition (see p. 43). The second part (pp. 53–177) focuses on Isaac's views of the workings of the Spirit in the present world and in the "new" world, a process that starts with the commitment to ascetic life and ultimately leads to the ascetic's *theosis*, understood as "becoming spiritual" ("Geistlich-Werden"), both in an "onto-theological" and in a salvation-historical sense (see esp. pp. 141–152).

Overall the author's analysis is convincing and illuminating. He fully succeeds in bringing to life important aspects of Isaac's theology and anthropology for a readership that is conversant with present-day theological discourse. Both Isaac's wrestling with the perennial theological questions and the particularities of his specific cultural and religious location receive ample consideration. The author's balanced methodology and his clear and careful style of writing help articulate insights that are often new and refreshing.

Even though the author's approach is mostly synchronic and aims at understanding Isaac's world in its own right, he often touches upon the question of Isaac's sources and of his dealing with the different currents that existed in the East Syriac world of his day. As is well known, Isaac and other East Syriac authors with him (starting perhaps with Babai the Great) were committed to bringing together Theodore of Mopsuestia, the main theological authority of the East Syriac tradition, and Evagrius of Pontus, who represented the Origenist tradition. The author discusses this fascinating topic in great detail and with much insight. He shows how Isaac interweaves the two different worldviews, of Theodore and Evagrius, and he highlights some of the remaining incompatibilities and tensions. Isaac adopts the Theodorean framework of the two ages, or catastases ("Zwei-Welten-Ökonomie", see e.g., p. 65), along with God's pedagogy as the leading principle in salvation history. He reads the story of humanity's creation and disobedience through the lens of Theodore's exegesis of the Letters of Paul rather than through his *Commentary on Genesis* (p. 156). In addition, Isaac's strong intellectual approach and his belief in the proper

dynamics of the process of spiritualization and salvation exert pressure on the concept of free will, which was central to Theodore's worldview—an emphasis shared by most of the early Syriac tradition. Isaac followed Theodore in his view that humanity was created mortal (rather than becoming mortal through sin), but he goes further than Theodore by blaming human mortality for causing sin through free will (see pp. 61–62), thus downplaying human agency. Further on in the process of spiritualization, human free will is de-emphasized even more and is in fact suspended during prayer, when the spiritual regime sets in and the human intellect "at that point is entirely being steered rather than doing the steering itself" (ܘܡܬܕܒܪܘ ܡܬܕܒܪ ܗܝܕܝܢ܆ ܘܠܐ ܡܕܒܪܘ ܡܕܒܪ); see p. 167 and ed. Bedjan, p. 170,12–13. The driving force throughout the process of spiritualization and salvation is divine grace (ܛܝܒܘܬܐ), which may overwhelm, or "swallow up" (ܒܠܥ), all things human (see e.g., p. 129). Human free will ultimately will give way to the process of universal salvation (p. 164).

As for the centrality of scripture in Isaac's ascetic system, there is much that reminds one of Theodore, but in the end Isaac's Evagrian orientation leads him to accept *theoria* as an important hermeneutical tool. As the "spiritual insight into the deep-structure of Holy Scripture" (p. 123), *theoria* may include spiritual reading and even produce "contra-textual" interpretations ("kontratextliche Schriftinterpretationen"), which seem to go against Theodore—see esp. pp. 87–88 and 107–119.

The author discusses the ways in which Isaac adopts, modifies, and elaborates exegetical-theological insights of Theodore (p. 61); his "very free" reception of his sources (p. 83, note 20); and his "implicit harmonization work on Evagrius and Theodore" (p. 151: "seine implizite Harmonisierungsarbeit an Evagrios und Theodor"). While Evagrius obviously represents for Isaac "the highest authority in the area of ascetic theology" (p. 92), the question arises as to how much Theodore there still is in Isaac's writings, beyond a number of concepts re-used in a radically rebuilt thought system. Should Isaac's self-professed loyalty to Theodore be seen as formal traditionalism—his own traditionalism and that of his church—rather than as deliberate engagement with Theodore's legacy? Interestingly, the author does not give much attention to Isaac's reception of the writings of John the Solitary, which may constitute a potential third source of inspiration; see

especially his comment on p. 147, note 40, which seems to minimize John's possible contribution.

This very rich and thought-provoking monograph has few imperfections. Unfortunately, the Syriac texts and translations are not free of errors. Several typos and small mistakes (as well as the infelicitous decision not to reproduce the supralinear dot for the pronominal suffix of the third person feminine) make some Syriac passages less accessible than they should have been. Some examples are given: p. 10, note 6: ܡܫܡܫܢܐ > ܡܫܡܫܢܝܐ | ܚܝ > ܕܝ ܚܝ | ܪܒܝܬ ܡܠ > ܪܒܝܬ ܡܠܝ | ܒܝܬܗܘܢ > ܒܝܬܗܘܢ ; p. 24, note 50: ܪܫܝܡܐ ܪܥܝܐ > ܪܫܝܡܐ ܥܝܐ ; p. 68, note 7: ܐܝܬ ܒܠܝ cannot possibly mean "hat Er sie…eingeführt"; p. 81, note 13: ܩܥܝܕܐ ܒܠܝ > ܩܥܝܕܐ ܒܠܝ | ܐܒܫܐ > ܒܫܐ ; p 96, note 53: ܡܝ ܪܝܫܐ > ܡܝ ,ܪܫܐ ; p. 156, note 69: ܪܫܝܫܐ > ܪܫܝܫܐ ; p. 167, note 111: ܒܡ > ܒܡ. On p. 12, note 11 the word ܕܠܝܬܐ "the man from Dalyatha" is missing from the translation.

A final note has to do with layout and typesetting. When a footnote shifts from the left-to-right to the right-to-left writing direction (i.e., from German to Syriac), it seems obvious that the right-to-left layout should be respected until the end and that the final words of an incomplete final line should be at the right, not at the left. This is the case, e.g., on p. 10, note 6, where ܪܝܫ should be at the right end, followed by a period. See also pp. 44, note 57; 59, note 4; 61, note 15; 79, notes 8 and 9; 81, note 13 and many more footnotes.

None of these comments detract from the very fine quality of this monograph, which offers a wonderful exploration of Isaac's rich thought world both for readers who are (somewhat) familiar with him and for those who are new to his writings.