

Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. x + 254 pp; \$110.00.

ROBERT A. KITCHEN, KNOX-METROPOLITAN UNITED CHURCH

The increase of Syriac studies in Finland, the legacy of Jouko Martikainen bearing fruit, is witnessed in Patrik Hagman's monograph on the asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh, derived from his dissertation for the Faculty of Theology, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland.

Hagman's work is worthy to be termed the "thickest" work on Isaac yet, an adjective typically utilized by sociological and anthropological circles to indicate a detailed descriptive study. Employing the methodologies of Victor Turner, Richard Valantasis and others, Hagman states that in the first place this is a monograph on asceticism. He needed, however, to put a human face and voice on this phenomenon of asceticism and it is Isaac of Nineveh's.

The reader benefits from an intensive and detailed analysis, not only of how asceticism functions in Isaac's theology, but also how Isaac lived personally through his asceticism. The result is a nuanced portrait of this theoretician and practitioner of Christian asceticism who remains a critically important source for a wide cross-section of spiritual and ascetical traditions.

The first chapter presents an introduction to the study of asceticism, but rather than dwelling on the less positive aspect of self-denial, Hagman finds convincing Richard Valantasis' identification of asceticism as performance, by which an ascetic performs both to the outside world and to his/her inner person. The symbolic universe constructed by ascetics operates then as positive and rational response in opposition and resistance to the dominant symbolic universe of society, "the world." Asceticism, Hagman summarizes, functions as a performance – and therefore as a message and a text – a transformative venture intending to change a person, intimately involving the body.

Attention is shifted to conceptual and theological influences upon Isaac. As with much of the Church of the East, the most important source is that of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Theodore's primary idea for Isaac is that the Christian lives in a sort of middle age between the present age and the coming one in which the

future age is always present as a type in the sacraments and the church.

It was Evagrius who supplied much of Isaac's mystical vocabulary. Hagman recognizes that the Evagrius read by Isaac may not have been the "real" Evagrius, given the conflict surrounding the reception history of Evagrius from Greek into Syriac. Hagman points towards John the Solitary of Apamea as a third author who exerted significant influence on Isaac, particularly through the former's division of life into bodily, psychic and spiritual parts.

While the phenomenon of asceticism is where Hagman begins, he finds its fulfilment in Isaac's theology that begins with the simple assertion that God is love, from which no one is excluded or beyond salvation. This kind of love exists in God without change and without wrath.

The world for Isaac, therefore, is a type of school, educating human beings for the coming world. In this world while Satan is encountered as a distraction and distortion of God's activity, he is still doing God's work, for Satan cannot do anything without God allowing him to do so. Satan's influence is seen to be most troublesome in convincing ascetics that they have accomplished everything through their own strength and personal creativity. Evil then is simply relative to the limited perspectives of human beings. Isaac is single-minded in one key area, identifying God from an anthropomorphic perspective, as Hagman paraphrases, "the God of a person completely devoted to God: God and nothing else." While anticipating the new world, Isaac's asceticism is fixed firmly in the body, shaping the range of what asceticism is able to do. Giving particular attention to the use of the body in prayer, normally in a standing position, Isaac promotes prostrations and kneeling, an athletic response as "an act of war" against the strategies and effects of Satan. The body is thus perceived as an instrument over which the soul has control and therefore not a negative entity *per se*. Passions, moreover, are good for the soul, for without their challenges and temptations the soul would not progress spiritually.

Yet the body remains a symbol, "the body of passions" as Hagman tags it, a body out of control that is a symbol for society. The most serious offense for Isaac is that of a monk leaving the solitary life and returning to the world and society.

The world is Isaac's term for human society against which he adopts a critical stance. In the coming world there are no differences or hierarchies based on power, a reality that can be experienced in this world now by grace. The solitary who would experience this world of no differences through grace is discouraged by Isaac from contact with people, even for good reason.

Hagman interprets Isaac's understanding of fear as the existential background of asceticism, beginning with the fear of death for which the ascetical life functions as a solution transforming one's person so that one is no longer bound by the negative influences of the world and the body of passions. Indeed, the ascetic strives to live in this world as if the new world were already present – always an eschatological mode of thinking.

The longest and most detailed chapter is the sixth, which focuses upon Isaac's explication of the function and meaning of ascetic practices. Hagman is attracted to Victor Turner's concept of "liminal" experience in which ritual invokes a symbolic reality where the rules of ordinary society do not apply. It is here that Isaac appeals to the imperative of the solitary life, which in his urgency and rigor Hagman finds both traditional, yet radically extreme. Isaac understands living in a monastic community to be deeply inadequate, for community life means continuing to live in the world. Part of this understanding comes from Isaac's notion, almost certainly autobiographical, that the rights of the individual are paramount over those of the community. The ideal of being "dead to the world" means that one is no longer influenced by the world and its passions, nor is one bothered by being a victim of injustice and oppression.

While not as popular or as widely practiced as fasting and prayer, Isaac is eager to promote the vigil, which, while not as popular or as widely practiced as fasting and prayer, is nonetheless a pleasurable and joyful experience. Vigils initiate a departure from this reality and enable the ascetic to live the life of angels, an elevation to a new community of saints and angels and a mystical taste of the goal of ascetic labour.

Prayer is the fundamental activity of asceticism. Isaac takes the distinctive position that purity of heart and soul is not a prerequisite for authentic prayer, but that purity of heart is attained through the practice of prayer. The highest form of prayer for Isaac

is termed “non-prayer,” similar to ‘spiritual prayer’ of other church fathers, essentially a prayer of silence beyond words. Once again for Isaac, engagement in non-prayer enables the one praying to perceive the bliss of the New World. This leads to Isaac’s experience of ecstasy, spiritual knowledge, and fittingly, humility. Ecstasy again is a delightful experience, essentially a kind of sacrament in which one is “leaving the body,” although Isaac explains that this ecstasy can come upon the hermit suddenly and unexpectedly, even violently, without provocation or preparation. The body here is symbolic for the disturbances which distract the ascetic.

The goal of the ascetic life ultimately is for the ascetic to become a type of God, to reach a unity with God pointing towards the mystery of the Triune God. Humility needs to become central because of the awesomeness of God which human beings are unable to endure. Isaac describes God putting on the garment of divinity in the form of our body – in essence, the incarnation. Humility, therefore, is the garment of divinity and to put on Christ is to have a body full of holiness, marked by humility.

The most striking aspect of Isaac’s ascetic theology derives from his eschatological perspective that due to God’s love, God will not leave fallen beings in their present state, but will bring them all to the perfect state which angels already possess. God’s nature does not change, Isaac insists, in response to what happens in the creation, and the Fall has no effect on God’s love. Along with other church fathers Isaac assumes that Gehenna is limited in time. In this world there is nothing higher than prayer, but in the New World human beings will be living constantly in a state beyond prayer because then all will be perfect and lack nothing. Indeed, when Isaac is describing the future world he is more concerned with faults of this world, since the future world is indescribable. The ascetic tries to replace the world-view given to him by society – primarily to uphold its present structures – with an ascetic world-view. Once again, this leads Isaac to see the ascetic’s contact with other human beings as mostly harmful, a path Hagman admits is difficult to comprehend and follow. Nevertheless, Hagman does grasp the nature of the conflict between the ascetic and society which works to undermine his/her commitment to life in the New World. The ascetic needs to create his or her own virtual desert in which one is able to live

uncorrupted by society, recognizing that a significant part of those societal distortions come from within his/her own person.

Hagman concludes that the symbolic acts with which the ascetics are occupied are directed not only at themselves, but also back at the society from which they have separated. The ascetic therefore becomes the message that is communicated to society by these acts. In the end, Hagman concludes, the life of the ascetic becomes theology. The medium is the message.

Hagman utilizes all three Parts of the extant Isaac corpus, noting where he sees problems with the authenticity of Isaac's authorship in certain passages in the Third Part. In an appendix, an annotated summary and evaluation of modern scholarship on Isaac is presented, helpfully noting which studies focus on Part One and/or Part Two, as well as the major work by Sabino Chialà on the Third Part (Chialà has very recently published the Syriac text and translation in the CSCO series).

What is striking about this monograph is how well Hagman narrates an anthropological investigation into the nature of asceticism with Isaac of Nineveh, the ascetic's ascetic, as the exemplar. Well-written, yet methodical and thorough, Hagman has provided an essential starting-point for further studies of Isaac of Nineveh. Since scholars seem to keep finding new works of Isaac, this starting-point should prove to be useful to a new generation of Isaac's readers.