

**St Isaac the Syrian and his understanding of universal salvation
and of ‘the mystery of Gehenna (Hell)’**

by Dr Sebastian Brock

Isaac the Syrian, who is also known as Isaac of Niniveh, belongs to the late seventh century, and was thus roughly a contemporary of St Mildred and the Venerable Bede. He originated from the region of Qatar, on the west side of the Gulf, which at that time was an important intellectual centre for the Church of the East. For a brief period he was bishop of Niniveh (modern Mosul, in north Iraq), but retired to live as a hermit in the mountains of western Iran, where he was connected with the monastery of Rabban Shabur, famous at that time. His extensive writings belong to the end of his life and come down to us in three ‘Parts’, the first of which was translated into Greek at the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St Sabbas, south of Jerusalem, in about AD 800; from Greek his monastic discourses reached Latin and Slavonic (where, in later Russian translations, they have proved very influential). The Second and Third Parts have only recently come to light, and are available in French translations by the late Fr. André Louf in the series *Spiritualité orientale*. At present only about half of the *Second Part* is available in English.

Isaac’s teaching lays great emphasis on the love of God, and of the need for human response to this, by way of reflecting this divine love. For Isaac, the whole aim of the Incarnation is to disclose the extent of God’s love:

The entire purpose of our Lord’s death was not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for creation. Had all this astounding affair taken place solely for the purpose of the forgiveness of sin, it would have been sufficient to redeem us by some other means. (Chapters on Knowledge IV.28 = excerpt no. 120 in *The Wisdom of St Isaac* [Fairacres Publications, 1997]).

Human response needs to reflect this divine love, and in this way it can itself become theophanic. Such a response involves a profound sense of humility, which itself reflects Christ’s own ‘garment of humility’ that He put on at the Incarnation (Syriac writers make very creative use of clothing images and metaphors). Profound humility in turn involves tears of repentance, which can also become tears of joy, the outcome of which will be the acquisition of a compassionate heart, which implies the ability to see everyone and every thing as it were through the eyes of God, and from his, rather than a human, perspective. Those who have attained to this profound humility see themselves as worse than the worst of sinners, thus underpinning them through compassion, in imitation of Christ’s undergoing a death reserved for the worst of criminals. (One might compare this with the Seventh Step

of humility in the Rule of St Benedict, where ‘a person not only admits with his tongue, but is also convinced in his hearth, that he is inferior to all’).

Isaac’s teaching on the immensity and limitless nature of divine love inevitably involves him in having to come to some understanding of what he calls ‘the difficult matter of Gehenna (Hell)’. How is the concept of an eternal Gehenna compatible with that of a God who ‘is love’ (I John 4:16). In the First Part of his Discourses Isaac only gives some passing hints of his tentative thoughts on the matter; thus in Discourse 26 he says, beginning with a quotation from Evagrius:

‘Sin, hell and death do not at all exist with God, for they are events, not persons’. There will be a time when sin will not exist. Gehenna is the fruit of sin; it had a beginning in time, but its end is not known.

It was only with the publication (in 1995) of much of the Second Part that Isaac’s more detailed thoughts on the matter became known, for in the final chapters he returns to the subject. Here it will be best for the most part to allow St Isaac to speak in his own words. First of all, in chapter 38 he provides his starting point, thus preparing the reader for what is to follow:

1. What profundity of richness, what mind and exalted wisdom is God's! What compassionate kindness and abundant goodness belongs to the Creator! With what purpose and with what love did He create this world and bring it into existence! What a mystery does the coming into being of this creation look towards! To what a state is (our) common nature invited! What love served to initiate the creation of the world! This same love which initiated the act of creation prepared beforehand by another dispensation the things appropriate to adorn (the world's) majesty which sprung forth as a result of the might of His love.

2. In love did He bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during this its temporal existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised. And since in the New World the Creator's love rules over all rational nature, the wonder at His mysteries that will be revealed then will captivate to itself the intellect of rational beings whom He has created so that they might have delight in Him, whether they be evil or whether they be just. With this design did He bring them into existence, even though they, among themselves have made, after their coming into being, this distinction between the just and the wicked. Even though this is so, nevertheless in the Creator's design there is none, from among all who were

created and who have come into being that is, every rational nature who is to the front or to the back of God's love. Rather, God has a single equal love which covers the whole extent of rational creation, all things whether visible or invisible: there is no first place or last place with Him in this love for any single one of them, as I have said.

Here he is making two fundamental points: first, that the distinction between the just and the wicked is something secondary, seeing that it was introduced by the actions of individual human beings, *subsequent* to the creation of humanity; secondly, that God's love is even and changeless: there is no before or after in his love, for he knows everyone *before* they became just or wicked, and his love does not change when people became just or wicked:

The Creator and His love did not change because they underwent change after He had brought them into being, nor does His purpose which exists eternally (change). And if it were otherwise, He would be subject to change just as created beings are a shocking idea.

Realising that what he is saying may seem difficult to some readers, he goes on:

4. My brethren, if there is anyone to whom these things are difficult to believe, he should be careful lest, by running away from one element in the argument he fall into blasphemy at another: imagining that he is spurning the words of a fellow human being, he may find himself arming himself against what concerns the divine Nature, being forced (by the logic of his case) to reduce the glorious Nature of His Creator to weakness and change.

5. But we know that everyone is agreed on this, that there is no change, or any earlier and later intentions, with the Creator: there is no hatred or resentment in His nature, no greater or lesser place in His love, no before or after in His knowledge. For if it is believed by everyone that the creation came into existence as a result of the Creator's goodness and love, then we know that this original cause does not ever diminish or change in the Creator's nature as a result of the disordered course of creation.

The next chapter (39) has the title 'Contemplation on the topic of Gehenna, in so far as grace can be granted to human nature to hold opinions on these mysteries'. After quoting the Psalms 33:4 and 111:3, he exclaims:

How unattainable is the unfathomable purpose of the Lord! Such is the inalterable kindness that is for ever, such is the love, such is the outpoured compassion of His nature, and, with all this, the foreknowledge of His creative activity so what is the reason for the establishing of this difficult matter of Gehenna? All who have

knowledge of truth are full of wonder and amazement at this mystery: since the contemplation of this escapes all enquiry, all rational beings endowed with the faculty of knowledge and who are conversant with the spiritual meaning of the divine mysteries retire and have recourse to silence, and they fall down in worship before the mysteries of the wisdom of Him who should be worshipped in silence, for all His actions are to be wondered at in adoration.

Isaac then goes on:

2. That we should imagine that anger, wrath, jealousy or the such like have anything to do with the divine Nature is something utterly abhorrent for us: no one in their right mind, no one who has any understanding at all can possibly come to such madness as to think anything of the sort about God. Nor again can we possibly say that He acts thus out of retribution, even though the Scriptures may on the outer surface posit this. Even to think this of God and to suppose that retribution for evil acts is to be found with Him is abominable. By implying that He makes use of such a great and difficult thing out of retribution we are attributing a weakness to the divine Nature. We cannot even believe such a thing can be found in those human beings who live a virtuous and upright life and whose thoughts are entirely in accord with the divine will let alone believe it of God, that He has done something out of retribution for anticipated evil acts in connection with those whose nature He had brought into being with honour and great love. Knowing them and all their conduct, the flow of His grace did not dry up from them: not even after they started living amid many evil deeds did He withhold His care for them, even for a moment. If someone says that He has put up with them here on earth in order that His patience may be known with the idea that He would punish them there mercilessly, such a person thinks in an unspeakably blasphemous way about God, due to his infantile way of thinking: he is removing from God His kindness, goodness and compassion, all the things because of which He truly bears with sinners and wicked men. Such a person is attributing to God enslavement to passion, supposing that He has not consented to their being chastised here, seeing that He has prepared them for a much greater misfortune, in exchange for a shortlived patience. Not only does such a person fail to attribute something praiseworthy to God, but he also calumniates Him.

How then, should one approach this ‘difficult matter of Gehenna’? Isaac now explains his own approach:

3. A right way of thinking about God would be the following: the kind Lord, who in everything He does looks to ways of assisting rational beings,

directs thought concerning judgement to the advantage of those who accept this difficult matter. For it would be most odious and utterly blasphemous to think that hate or resentment exists with God, even against a demonic beings; or to imagine any other weakness, or passibility, or whatever else might be involved in the course of retribution of good or bad as applying, in a retributive way, to that glorious divine Nature. Rather, He acts towards us in ways He knows will be advantageous to us, whether by way of things that cause suffering, or by way of things that cause relief, whether they cause joy or grief, whether they are insignificant or glorious: all are directed towards the single eternal good, whether each receives judgement or something of glory from Him not by way of retribution, far from it! but with a view to the advantage that is going to come from all these things.

4. Just as He decreed death, under the appearance of a sentence, for Adam because of sin, and just as He showed that the sin existed by means of the punishment even though this punishment was not His real aim: He showed it as though it was something which Adam would receive as a repayment for his wrong, but He hid its true mystery, and under the guise of something to be feared, He concealed His eternal intention concerning death and what His wisdom was aiming at: even though this matter might be grievous, ignominious and hard at first, nevertheless in truth it would be the means of transporting us to that wonderful and glorious world. Without it, there would be no way of crossing over from this world and being there.

By thus showing the existence of sin, the Creator did not say 'This [sc. death] will turn out for you to be the cause of good things to come and a life more glorious than this'. Rather, He showed it as something which would bring our misfortune and dissolution.

Again, when He expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise, He expelled them under the outward aspect of anger: 'Because you have transgressed the commandment, you have found yourselves outside Paradise' as though dwelling in Paradise had been taken away from them because they were unworthy. But inside all this stood the divine plan, fulfilling and guiding everything towards the Creator's original intention from the beginning. It was not disobedience which introduced death to the house of Adam, nor did transgression remove them from Paradise, for it is clear that God did not create Adam and Eve to be in Paradise, just a small portion of the earth; rather, they were going to subjugate the entire earth. For this reason we do not even say that He removed them because of the commandment which had been transgressed; for it is not the case that, had they not transgressed the commandment, they would have been left in Paradise

for ever.

5. So you should see that, while God's caring is guiding us all the time to what He wishes for us, as things outwardly appear it is from us that He takes the occasion for providing things, His aim being to carry out by every means what He has intended for our advantage. All this is because He knew beforehand our inclination towards all sorts of wickedness, and so He cunningly made the harmful consequences which would result from this into a means of entry to the future good and the setting right of our corrupted state. These are things which are known only to Him. But after we have been exercised and assisted little by little as a result of these consequences after they have occurred, we realize and perceive that it could not turn out otherwise than in accordance with what has been foreseen by Him.

This is how everything works with Him, even though things may seem otherwise to us: with Him it is not a matter of retribution, but He is always looking beyond to the advantage that will come from His dealings with humanity.

Now, after all these preliminary considerations, Isaac finally comes to the key issue, with the words 'And one such thing is this matter of Gehenna'. He goes on to express his own view:

6. I am of the opinion that He is going to manifest some wonderful outcome, a matter of immense and ineffable compassion on the part of the glorious Creator, with respect to the ordering of this difficult matter of Gehenna's torment: out of it the wealth of His love and power and wisdom will become known all the more and so will the insistent might of the waves of His goodness.

It is not the way of the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction in punishment for things of which He knew even before they were fashioned, being aware how they would turn out when He created them and whom nonetheless He created. All the more since the fore-planning of evil and the taking of vengeance are characteristics of the passions of created beings, and do not belong to the Creator. For all this characterizes people who do not know, or who are unaware of, what they are doing or thinking when something has happened with us human beings, for as a result of some matter that has occurred unexpectedly to them they are incited by the vehemence of anger to take vengeance. Such action does not belong to the Creator who, even before the cycle of the depiction of creation had been portrayed, knew of all that was before and all that was after in connection

with the actions and intentions of rational beings.

Isaac goes on to quote the 'Interpreter', in support of his views, Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) being the great authority in the Church of the East on all matters of exegesis; he then continues (Chapter 39, section 15):

Accordingly all kinds and manner of chastisements and punishments that come from Him are not brought about in order to requite past actions, but for the sake of the subsequent gain to be gotten in them. He does not bring to mind the existence of things that are past except in order that they may instil in us hatred of sin.

This is what the Scriptures bring to our attention and remind us of, as has frequently been shown by us in sound expositions above, namely, that God is not one who requites evil, but He sets aright evil: the former is the characteristic of evil people, while the latter is characteristic of a father. Scripture shows Him as if He is bringing good and evil by way of requital, whereas His purpose is not in fact this, but to instil in us love and awe, so that by the latter we might make our conduct chaste, while, by means of love, we might grow in excellency of understanding.

16. If this were not the case, what resemblance does Christ's coming have with the deeds of the generations which were prior to it? Does this immense compassion seem to you to be a retribution for those evil deeds? Tell me, if God is someone who requites evil, and He does what He does by means of requital, what commensurate requital do you see here, O man? Show me!

17. So then, let us not attribute to God's actions and His dealings with us any idea of requital. Rather, we should speak of fatherly provision, a wise dispensation, a perfect will which is concerned with our good, and complete love. If it is a case of love, then it is not one of requital; and if it is a case of requital, then it is not one of love. Love, when it operates, is not concerned with the requiting of former things by means of its own good deeds or correction; rather, it looks to what is most advantageous in the future: it examines what is to come, and not things that are past.

If we think otherwise than this, then according to the resulting childish view the Creator will prove to be weak. I speak as a human being for after what He had established had become corrupted against His will, He devised some other plan, preparing ills in return for its corruption. Such are the feeble ways of understanding the Creator!

At this point Isaac (like Ephrem before him) stresses that biblical terms used of God must not be taken literally: it is part of God's coming down to our level that he has allowed himself to be depicted in human language and human terms in the Old Testament.

19. Just because the terms wrath, anger, hatred, and the rest are used of the Creator, we should not imagine that He actually does anything in anger or hatred or zeal. Many figurative terms are employed in the Scriptures of God, terms which are far removed from His true nature. And just as our rational nature has already become gradually more illumined and wise in a holy understanding of the mysteries which are hidden in Scripture's discourse about God that we should not understand everything literally as it is written, but rather that we should see, concealed inside the bodily exterior of the narratives, the hidden providence and eternal knowledge which guides all so too we shall in the future come to know and be aware of many things for which our present understanding will be seen as contrary to what it will be then; and the whole ordering of things yonder will undo any precise opinion we possess now in our supposition about Truth. For there are many, indeed endless, things which do not even enter our minds here, not even as promises of any kind.

20. Accordingly we say that, even in the matter of the afflictions and sentence of Gehenna, there is some hidden mystery, whereby the wise Maker has taken as a starting point for its future outcome the wickedness of our actions and wilfulness, using it as a way of bringing to perfection His dispensation wherein lies the teaching which makes wise, and the advantage beyond description, hidden from both angels and human beings, hidden too from those who are being chastised, whether they be demons or human beings, hidden for as long as the ordained period of time holds sway.

21. If the world to come is entirely the domain of grace, love, mercy and goodness, and because the resurrection from the dead is also a demonstration of the mercifulness of God and of the overflowing abundance of His love which cannot be repaid, how can one think of a dispensation in which is included requitals for our own good or evil actions? For one speaks of requital when the person who is the requiter is gradually instructed about the requital needed as a result of, and corresponding to, the good and bad actions that take place: along with actions which differ from day to day, he acquires a different knowledge, and his consequent thoughts are subject to external causes and take their origin from temporal circumstances.

22. If the Kingdom and Gehenna had not been foreseen in the purpose of our good God, as a result of the coming into being of good and evil actions,

then God's thoughts concerning these would not be eternal; but righteousness and sin were known by Him before they revealed themselves. Accordingly the Kingdom and Gehenna are matters belonging to mercy, which were conceived of in their essence by God as a result of His eternal goodness. It was not a matter of requiting, even though He gave them the name of requital.

That we should further say or think that the matter is not full of love and mingled with compassion would be an opinion full of blasphemy and insult to our Lord God. By saying that He will even hand us over to burning for the sake of sufferings, torment and all sorts of ills, we are attributing to the divine Nature an enmity towards the very rational beings which He created through grace; the same is true if we say that He acts or thinks with spite and with a vengeful purpose, as though He was avenging Himself.

Among all His actions there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and the end of His dealings with us.

Isaac concludes the chapter with the words:

How much to be worshipped is our Lord God's gentle compassion and His immeasurable munificence: He makes many threats, but He makes the punishment small out of grace, all in order to increase love for Him.

In Chapter 40, it becomes clear that, for Isaac, ultimate salvation is indeed universal, involving all rational beings (thus including the fallen angels). God does not have 'a kind of love that originates as a result of events that take place in time'.

3. Rather, everyone has a single place in His purpose in the ranking of love, corresponding to the form He beheld in them before He created them and all the rest of created things, that is, at the time before the eternal purpose for the delineation of the world was put into effect. ... God has a single ranking of complete and impassible love towards everyone, and He has a single caring concern for those who have fallen, just as much as for those who have not fallen.

4. And it is clear that He does not abandon them the moment they fall, and that demons will not remain in their demonic state, and sinners will not remain in their sins; rather, He is going to bring them to a single equal state of completion in relationship to His own Being in a state in which the holy angels are now, in perfection of love and a passionless mind.

A little further on he continues:

6. Who can say or imagine that the Creator's love is not prior to the ordering of this matter which He carries out because of the advantage that comes from it, something which is known to Him alone, but which subsequently He will make known to all?
7. No part belonging to any single one of (all) rational beings will be lost, as far as God is concerned, in the preparation of that supernal Kingdom which is prepared for all worlds.

All this of course does not mean that the reality and experience of Gehenna is not terrible, and this is why, Isaac says, 'the angels rejoice over every single sinner who repents'. Whereas the 'medicine' of repentance that God has provided is something that the majority of humanity benefit from in this life, thus avoiding Gehenna, for the utterly depraved a stronger 'medicine' is required; these are people 'who, because of their hardness of heart and utter abandonment to wickedness and the lusts, fail to show any remorse'. What that 'strong medicine' consists of was explained by Isaac in chapter 27 of the First Part:

I say that those who are scourged in Gehenna are tormented by the scourgings of love. The scourgings that result from love - that is, the scourges of those who have become aware that they have sinned against love - are harder and more bitter than the torments which result from fear. The pain that gnaws at the heart as a result of sinning against love is sharper than all other torments that exist.

The contrition that comes from the realization of God's love is itself the harsh torment. As Ephrem, in his meditation on the Last Judgement, had already pointed out, the pain and torment of Gehenna are psychological rather than physical, and, moreover, they are self-inflicted, since they are brought about as the result of one finally becoming aware of the immensity of God's love, against which one has sinned. As Isaac stresses, the idea that the torments of Gehenna are retributive punishment is in fact blasphemous, for it attributes to God motives and actions that belong solely to the realm of human beings.

On the surface it might seem that Isaac's view that Gehenna was not eternal comes into conflict with the various Gospel passages which speak of 'eternal fire', but Isaac clearly understands the term 'eternal' in these passages as referring to linear time, which, at the end of Time, comes to an end. With this understanding Isaac is able to conceive that 'the mystery of Gehenna' will finally, and in sacred time, no longer exist, when 'God will be all in all' (I Cor. 15:28).

It was probably with reference to Isaac's thoughts on this matter that a later Syriac writer tells us that 'Isaac of Niniveh's teaching was not accepted by many'. A certain Daniel even wrote a treatise against it; another more perceptive writer, however, commented that

‘St Isaac speaks the language of heaven, but Daniel speaks the language of earth’. In the face of the utterly terrible evils that some human beings have perpetrated just in the course of our own lifetimes, let alone in past centuries, it is easy enough to see how Daniel was able to take offence at Isaac’s teaching (and others have done so since then), but in order to understand Isaac’s point of view, one needs to hold on firmly to his emphatic insistence that, since God is love, his love must finally overcome all evil, and above all, that any idea of a God of infinite love *must* imply that there is a divine purpose which goes *beyond* Gehenna.

St Isaac’s views on these matters are by no means unique, for they are shared by St Gregory of Nyssa and a number of other great saints.