



The Fruitfulness of the Eucharist Offered for the Living and the Dead According to Isaac of Nineveh Based on His Discourse XI from the Third Collection

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Abstract: In the recently published *Mistic treatises* of St. Isaac of Nineveh, a passage appeared in Collection III raising the rarely analyzed contemporary issue of the fruitfulness of the Eucharistic Sacrifice offered for the living and the dead. For St. Isaac, this Sacrifice benefits all members of the Church, except for one group, the heretics who reject the truth of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist. Such a view, clearly valuing orthodoxy, recognizing human weakness as a non-excludable element from the Church community, turns out to be, by comparison with other works from this cultural circle (*Letters* of Timothy I and *Dialogue with a Jew by Sergius Stylites*) widespread and emphasizing the role of orthodoxy, the preservation of which gives every member of the Church a share in the saving sacrifice of Christ made present in the Eucharist, both during life and after death.

Keywords: Isaac of Nineveh; Eucharist; sacrifice; Church

Among the many mystics, one of the best known, and no matter which confession is involved, is the Syrian monk Isaac, Bishop of Nineveh, who lived in the seventh century. We have little information about his life. The two documents from which we draw information are quite late and Isaac's writings themselves do not leave many clues. The primary source is his biography contained in the work *Liber castitatis*, dating from 860-870 and attributed to Isho'denah of Basra². In a collection of biographies of the most famous monks, its author includes Isaac. The second source is

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² Isho'denah, *Liber castitatis*, ed. J.B. Chabot, *Le livre de la Chasteté compose par Jésusdenah, Évêque de Baçrah*, Mélanges d'Archéologie et Histoire 16, Rome 1899, p. 225-292. Metropolitan Prat d-Mayshan (Basra). An eastern Syrian Christian writer who lived in the 9th century, author of poems, historical works and lost treatises on logic. His most famous work, *Liber castitatis*, contains the history of various monastic foundations, mostly from the late Samanid period and the early Arab rule. See: J.-M. Fiey, *Isho'denah, métropolitain de Basra et son oeuvre*, "L'Orient Syrien" 11 (1966) p. 431-450. P. Nautin put forward a controversial thesis that he is the author of Chronicle of Siirt. See P. Nautin, *L'auteur de la "Chronique de Séert": Isho'denah de Basra*, RHE 186 (1974) p. 113-126; also 199 (1982) p. 313-314.

a text published by I.E. Rahmani, about which we know little and which contains only a brief biographical note³. ‘Abdisho’ bar Berika (Ebedjesus) states in his *Catalogue of Ecclesiastical Writers* that Isaac left behind 7 volumes on the path of the monk, on the mysteries of God and in them, in a special way, on Judgement and Divine Providence⁴. The discourse under analysis comes from the Third Collection (Collection III).

1. The author and his work

Isaac the Bishop of Nineveh was probably born on the Persian Gulf coast in the region of Beth Qaṭraye. This region covered the western coast of the Persian Gulf with Bahrain all the way to the Masundam peninsula in present-day Oman. We know for certain (the presence of a bishop from this part of the Sassanid Empire at the consecration in Seleucia and Ctesiphon in 410) that Christians have been present there in large numbers since the 4th century. At the time of Isaac, the area was ecclesiastically under the metropolis of Rew-Ardashir, a city on the eastern coast of the Gulf, near Fars. As a result of the conflict over who belonged to these lands, a situation of suspension lasted for some time in these areas. Metropolitan Simeon broke off unity with Catholicos Isho’yahb III (c. 648), and this dispute continued until the conciliar synod in 676 on the island of Darjan during the pontificate of Giwargis (George). It is relevant to our discussion that, although Isaac grew up in a Christian environment, he was nevertheless divided along confessional lines. He therefore often came into contact with situations in which representatives of the feuding parties were present, all professing Christianity together.

In these surroundings, Isaac took up the monastic life. We do not know whether he began his journey as an anchorite and later joined

³ Ephraim II Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca*, v. 1, Beirut, Deir el-Sharf 1904, p. 32-33.

⁴ ‘Abdisho’ bar Bericha, *Ktābā d- etqre margānitā d- ‘al. šrārā da – krestyānutā*, Mosul 1924, p. 74, tr. G.P. Badger, *Index of Biblical and Ecclesiastical Writings (1298)*, London 1852, p. 138; tr. S.M. Stadel, *The Catalogue of Books of ‘Abdisho’ bar Brikha*, Leiden 2025. The title of the treatise *Pearl* in Polish is proposed by M. Starowieyski in NSWP – for the Polish reader. An extensive biography is included in M.J. Janecki two articles: *W poszukiwaniu ukrytej perły. Mar Izaak z Kataru, biskup Niniwy, duchowy mistrz Kościoła Wschodu*, in: Izaak z Niniwy, *Mowy. Zbiór pierwszy*, ed. M.J. Janecki, PSP 79, Warszawa 2022, p. 13-131; M.J. Janecki, *W tonie milczenia... Izaaka z Kataru mistagogia modlitwy. Wprowadzenie*, in: Izaak z Niniwy, *Mowy. Zbiór trzeci*, ed. M.J. Janecki, PSP 86, Warszawa 2023, p. 9-33. Both introductions also contain a bibliography on the life, activities and work of Isaac.

a community or vice versa. One of his relatives, Gabriel Arya, is named by the encyclopedist 'Abdisho' bar Berika or Ebedjesus, who wrote a catalogue of Christian writers, as the author of many biblical commentaries. What we do know is that he himself spoke of taking up life as an anachorite after resigning from the episcopate as a return to his old way of doing things and seeking in solitude a path to God. He must have distinguished himself with his life to the extent that he became a teacher of other monks. He was also invited to a conciliar synod on the island of Darjan.

The only certain date from Isaac's life is 676-680, the time of this synod as well as some years after it. At that time, having met the young Isaac at the synod, the patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon Giwargis (pontificate 660-680), took Isaac with him on a further journey and probably ordained him bishop of Nineveh during his stay at the monastery of Bet 'Abe. The letters of Giwargis' predecessor, Isho 'yahb III, testify that the Nineveh community was very divided. In addition to the changing political conditions, the area was the arena of the struggle between King of Kings Khosrow/Khosrau II and Emperor Heraclius, also on the religious side it was not at peace. It was here that the proponents of so-called Miaphysitism carried out their missionary action, it was here that representatives of other churches clashed with each other, taking advantage of various political support. Isaac was met with hostility from many of the faithful, with deviations, with incomprehension. His shepherding, therefore, did not last long. After seven months, he resigned and moved to the monastery of Beth Huzaye, taking up a life of solitude as an anachorite. Having lost his eyesight, he returned to the monastery at Rabban Shabur. He was entrusted with conferences for young monks, which have been preserved in several collections⁵. The text analyzed here comes from the third collection of talks. It is worth mentioning that for almost 13 centuries Isaac was known only from the first collection of his *Discourses (Dissertations, Treatises, Homilies* – in literature, we encounter various names). The second was discovered in 1983. The third one, which is of interest to us, was made available to readers by Sabino Chialà on the basis of a photocopy of the manuscript he received from the Archbishop of Tehran.

⁵ Much of the information regarding Isaac is contained in Benedict (Valentin) Vesa article: *The Christology of St. Isaac of Niniveh and the East Syriac Theology of 7-8th centuries*, "Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa" 64/1 (2019) p. 39-52. Addressing the topic of Isaac's Christology and placing it in the context of Christological disputes in the Assyrian Church of the East, the author discusses the inclusion of Isaac in the list of condemned mystics (synods under Timothy I Patriarch of Baghdad and the decisions of his successor Isho bar Nina). See Vesa, *The Christology of St. Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 45-52.

It was supposed to have been found in one of Tehran's antique shops. Unfortunately, after the archbishop's death, the original manuscript was not found among the books he left behind. A critical text with an Italian translation was published in CSCO⁶. The Polish translation was made by Marcin Janecki and published in PSP⁷.

2. The Eucharist as a purifying sacrifice for the living and the dead

As the translator into Polish of the Ninevite writings, Marcin Janecki, points out, the issue of the Eucharist and its efficacy appears in several places in his *Discourse*⁸. The analyzed *Discourse* 11 from the third collection reveals two interesting issues from the point of view of the patrologist and dogma historian. The first is the question of the sacrificial character of the Eucharist as well as the efficacy of its offering not only for the living, those participating in the liturgy, but also for the dead. Let us address the second issue.

The whole discourse is an argument related to a commentary on the Apostle Paul's words "Risen with Christ". Syrian mystic reminds us that notions of God's harshness, wrath, retributive justice or vindictiveness are associated with an infantile approach to the Creator⁹. He reminds listeners that, above all:

God is good, that he forgives and pardons sins. Precisely on this occasion, wishing to recall God's great mercy, he points out that also to those who have already died in sins and who have already departed from here, by his mercy he [the Creator] subdues the multitude of their sins¹⁰.

This is also expressed in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Sacrament of Body and Blood, which, among other things, is offered as a sign of hope

⁶ See Textus: Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, ed. S. Chialà, CSCO 637, *Scriptores Syri* 246, Leuven 2011, tr. Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, CSCO 638, *Scriptores Syri* 247, Leuven 2011; tr. M. Hansbury, *Issac the Syrian's spiritual works*, Piscataway 2016.

⁷ Izaak z Niniwy, *Mowy. Zbiór trzeci*, tr. M. Janecki, PSP 88, Warszawa 2023.

⁸ See Izaak z Niniwy, *Mowy. Zbiór trzeci*, note 742, p. 137.

⁹ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 3, CSCO 637, p. 84. All translations of Isaac's texts into English used in this article were done by the author for the purposes of this article.

¹⁰ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 5, CSCO 637, p. 85.

of forgiveness¹¹ for the dead as well. This custom, an ancient one, as Ninivite points out, is present in the Church as making present the hope that God can – and will – forgive the sins of the dead too¹². For if the dead had no benefit from the Eucharistic sacrifice offered for them, Ninivite asks his listeners, why would it be offered for them?

This formulation is very interesting because of certain anthropological assumptions which were generally made in the Assyrian Church, and which are recorded in a letter, living a generation later than Isaac of Nineveh, by the patriarch Timothy I, to Bektisho, deacon and physician of the Caliph. The letter is in the form of a treatise in which, in the following chapters, Timothy presents the basic issues of understanding the soul and the body, their relationship and also what happens to man after death, before the resurrection. The patriarch emphasized that we speak of a human being only when the soul is united to the body¹³. As a corollary, he stated that after death there can be no merit of the soul for the body, and that, in general, all the senses of man cease, being reborn only at the resurrection. So, the dead in relation to their salvation are completely passive, they can do nothing, and they await judgement. But, as Timothy notes in chapter 6 of his Epistle, “does it [the soul] have any help, rest and sweetness and remembrance which become for it at the altar of Our Lord”¹⁴ the greatness of the mercy and power of the Eucharist are so great that they reach beyond the limits of death and in the same way assist both the living and those for whom and for whose sake it is fulfilled. It is noteworthy that the Patriarch devotes a separate chapter to this subject. This shows that the view concerning both the sacrificial nature of the Eucha-

¹¹ In the East Syriac tradition, it is very strongly emphasised that the Eucharist is not only the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood but also the reconciliation and purification of sinners, i.e. it has a parallel function to the sacrament of reconciliation. See T. Mannooprampil, *Syro – Malabar Qurbana and reconciliation*, “Christians Orient” 28 (2007) p. 47-58.

¹² At the same time, the practice of celebrating not one but many masses offered for the deceased develops in the West through, among other things, Gregorian Masses (the so-called Gregorians are born), see J. Królikowski, *Patrystyczne początki kultu eucharystycznego poza Mszą*, *VoxP* 87 (2023) p. 184-185.

¹³ The unity of body and soul present in the Syriac tradition, the biblical identification of one with the other and not their separation in the perspective of salvation and the Eucharist is discussed, among other things, by T. Mannooprampil in his article: *Eschatological Dimension of the Syro – Malabar Qurbana*, “Christian Orient” 12 (1986) p. 77-94 (esp. 84-86).

¹⁴ Timotheus patriarch I, *Ep.* 2, 6, *CSCO* 74, p. 56-58. See S. Athappilly, *The Theological Anthropology of the Syro Malabar Qurbana*, “Christian Orient” 14 (1993) p. 76-90 (see *Conclusion*, p. 116).

rist and its efficacy in relation to those who participate in it and to those for whom and for whom it is offered was widely held.

For the Ninevite, the Eucharist is a sacrifice offered also for the dead. He writes: “The prayer and supplication which the priest offers on the altar, on which, together with the act of offering Our Lord, the memory of the dead is invoked, precisely in reference to this hope”¹⁵. An essential element of the Eucharist, then, is the act of offering of Our Lord, to which we add our supplications, also for the dead¹⁶. God “has instituted for us a protector who is not subject to corruption: the Body and Blood of our Saviour, the One on whom there is no guilt for even one sin among all kinds of sins of creatures!”¹⁷. This gift has been deposited in the Church and endures as a sign of His mercy to all believers:

For we know that in the power of the mysteries of the economy of His only-begotten [Son] is such that it can bring remission even to the dead and even in Sheol come to the aid of those who during their lifetime believed in Him. This is also confirmed by the teaching with regards to the resurrection of those who have hope for their dead as well, because with great faith they convince themselves of this and ask forgiveness also for the dead¹⁸.

3. Excluded from the fruits of the Eucharist

But the question arises whether all people share in the fruits of this sacrifice. And here Isaac’s teaching clearly limits the scope of the Eucharist. It should be mentioned that the entire text of *Discourse 11* we are analyzing was written as a commentary on the Apostle Paul’s words: you have risen with Christ (Col 3,1). According to the Ninevite, we already share in it through the successive stages taking place in our lives:

(...) for we are resurrected by the way we live in perfection. We are resurrected by faith in what is to come. We are resurrected by the knowledge of the nature of God, by the perception of His Being; by the glory of His

¹⁵ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio XI 7*, CSCO 637, p. 85.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, reflecting on his grief after his mother’s death, emphasizes the role of prayer and remembering her at the altar, see M. Terka, *Spotkanie ze śmiercią jako doświadczenie nieobecności w świetle “Wyznań” św. Augustyna*, *VoxP 78* (2021) p. 280.

¹⁷ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio XI 27*, CSCO 637, p. 90.

¹⁸ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio XI 19*, CSCO 637, p. 88.

greatness, in the heights of His nature by the hope as to the goods that are preserved for us, by the knowledge of the mysteries concerning the new world, by faith in the delightful transfiguration that is prepared for creation. (...) by the renewal of our mind¹⁹.

Note that the emphasis is on faith and knowledge and not on perfection of conduct!

Is the Eucharist then the food of salvation only for the perfect? The Ninevite emphasizes strongly:

Or does it benefit only the righteous? What benefit, then, would there be for sinners, for whom the sacrifice is offered, and with it the prayer and supplication which the priest makes on the altar, together with the act of offering Our Lord, precisely in the reference to that hope on which the memory of the dead is invoked?²⁰

This formulation is important for understanding Isaac's thought, because: "sinners are helped through sacrifices and liberation from their yoke every time a sacrifice is offered for a large number of sins"²¹. The passages presented from the Ninevite's *Discourse* make it clear that, firstly, the Eucharist is an act of self-sacrifice from the part of Christ, and an act performed for the living and dead members of the Church²². It is not just for Christ's contemporaries, but every time the Mysteries are celebrated, they benefit both the just and the sinners, the living and the dead. The Eucharist unites man to God and brings grace to the living and the dead. The whole Church, a community of saints and sinners, shares the benefits of this sacrifice.

This text is one of the first texts in the Oriental tradition to speak so explicitly not only of the sacrificial nature of the Mystical Feast, but also to address the benefits that accrue to the faithful, the members of the Church for whose intentions the sacrifice is offered, living and dead. As we have already mentioned, especially in relation to the anthropological conception of man that prevailed in this milieu, the meritorious, sin-cleansing character of the Eucharist offered for and to man is particularly significant. Since, after the separation of soul and body, there is no human being and there can be no talk of meriting or cleansing from

¹⁹ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 2, 3, CSCO 637, p. 84.

²⁰ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 7, CSCO 637, p. 85.

²¹ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 8, CSCO 637, p. 85.

²² A. Młotek, *Eucharystia w kanonach synodów IV wieku*, VoxP 7 (1987) p. 299.

sins, the Sacrifice of Christ made present in the Mass becomes the way to regain the dignity of a child of God and to participate in the promises given to believers. But the question arises as to whether this applies to all believers. We already know that this is a good reserved for members of the Church, that sin, understood as transgressing God's commandments, making a child of God a sinner, is not something that excludes one from the fruitfulness of the Eucharist and therefore, from the Church. The question arises: Does this apply to every sin? Despite sin, does a Christian remain a member of the community, sick, weak, committing evil, but still a member of God's family?

For Isaac, there is one important limitation. All sinners are helped, and this help "is great, except for those who have not so much committed sin as joined in heresy, committed apostasy or spread blasphemy, and yet continue to participate in [the sacrament of] salvation"²³. The Bishop of Nineveh clearly distinguishes one group of people who do not share the fruits of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. These are not, however, all sinners, but only those whose deeds and words are related to the question of faith, of joining heresy, verbal or active, and who nevertheless took part in the Eucharist. Isaac recalls the exhortation in the liturgy: "and for all, the children of the Church, who are worthy before you to receive this sacrifice"²⁴. In his view, this invocation does not exclude sinners, but only those who are not worthy to be counted among the children of the Church. This occurs through heresy, disregard for the sacraments, and not through sin, which stems from our frailty, because of which some do not have full hope, since "by reason of their weakness they have in some way become guilty of sins"²⁵. Therefore, the weakness inherent in human nature is not, therefore, what separates the believer from communion with God²⁶. In this context, according to the Bishop of Nineveh, sin, although it is evil and distances one from

²³ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 8, CSCO 637, p. 85-86.

²⁴ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 8, CSCO 637, p. 85-86.

²⁵ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 10, CSCO 637, p. 86.

²⁶ V. Duca notes that, according to Isaac of Nineveh, only by understanding the weakness inherent in our human nature, both physical and spiritual, does a person open up to true humility and to God's action. This is not just a passive opening, but an opening with an awareness of what are the consequences of the weakness inherent in each of us of our nature. Thus, weakness is not an obstacle to our relationship with the Creator. It should be taken into account in our actions, especially in the practice of the spiritual life of a monk, but in itself it is not an obstacle to the development of the spiritual life and relationship to the Savior. See V. Duca, *Human Frailty and Vulnerability in Isaac the Syrian*, in: *Papers presented at the Fifth British Patristic Conference, London*,

the Father, does not cause a break in the relationship. It is worthwhile to be a member of the Church, because as long as what distances a believer from the Creator is only his weakness and its consequences, nevertheless, thanks to each Eucharist and especially the one offered for him and to him, he has the possibility of purification and return to the Father, both in this life and after death.

4. The essence is orthodoxy?

Another question that arises, why heresy exclude more strongly from the community of the Church than weakness and sin? Explaining St Paul's words to the listeners, Isaac states:

(...) and this is in accordance with what the Apostle said: 'whoever eats the bread of the Lord and drinks from his cup, not being worthy of it, eats and drinks his own condemnation, because he has not discerned the Body of the Lord'. As for the unworthiness and dignity of which the Apostle speaks here, it does not depend on evil or good works, but on discernment by reason²⁷.

A clear transfer takes place. Orthodoxy²⁸ becomes essential, rather than orthopraxy. It is no longer the most important thing how a believer lives, but what he believes, how he believes, what his concept of God is, because this determines whether he belongs to the community of salvation, that is, the Church. If his orthodoxy is true, he always benefit from Christ's sacrifice; if not, they are excluded from its fruitfulness.

Sergius the Stylite, writing at the same time, believes that the peace of man and societies with the Gods depends on the orthodoxy of the believer and is reflected in the miracles that accompany believers²⁹.

3-5 September 2014, ed. M. Vinzent – A. Brent, *Studia Patristica* 74, Leuven – Paris – Bristol 2016, p. 429-439.

²⁷ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 11, CSCO 637, p. 86.

²⁸ The question arises as to what Isaac means by orthodoxy. He himself is a representative of the Assyrian Church of the East. However, it is worth remembering that Patriarch Timothy I, writing several decades later, clearly distinguishes between the Orthodox faith and the principles of the Orthodox faith. The former is a broader category and transcends denominational boundaries. See J. Želazny, *Relations between Monophysites and the Church of the East in the light of the correspondence of Timothy I, Patriarch of Baghdad*, "Patristic Theology" 20 (2023) p. 111-124.

²⁹ See J. Želazny, *Pax deorum/pax dei in the disputation of Sergius the Stylite "Against a Jew"*, "Parole de L'Orient" 49 (2023) p. 337-345.

The basic element is the same – it is not the conduct, but the professed faith, the concept of God that is supposed to ensure His protection and help. And so, the emphasis shifts to understanding, to intelligible cognition with the moral conduct of man itself left in the background. As Isaac states later in his *Discourse*:

You see, O man, that the Apostle neither condemned nor regarded as alien to the good he expects from these mysteries, people who are not worthy because of their way of life, but those who are not worthy of the sacraments because of the corruption of their reason³⁰.

In Isaac's conception of the centrality of God's mercy towards man, the problem in the relationship between creature and Creator is not sin due to man's weakness, but closure to God's love, which expresses in him a rejection of faith in its aspect of knowledge. It must be remembered, however, that for Isaac cognition is more than knowledge, it is also a philosophy of life that prescribes and signifies at the same time the will to transform one's entire life, man's metanoia, his adherence to the Saviour which also results in the transformation of life. What is at stake here, however, is the priority of knowledge – love – over conduct, that is, doing and keeping the commandments. Man's weakness does not distance him from the love of God. As free people, however, we can turn away from it, which means heresy and closure to God's Presence in sacramental signs. The mysteries deposited in the Church "are full of hope and there is great discernment hidden in them for those who fulfil them, also as to how immense is the power of faith, how sublime is the knowledge of Christians and what understanding of God they possess"³¹. What takes away their effectiveness is the rejection of this discernment, the negation of the love of God, present in the Church and in its Mysteries.

5. Conclusion

It seems that from Isaac's point of view, human weakness is not the same sin as the rejection of knowledge of God. For the Oriental Fathers, the sin of the first parents did not consist in transgressing the prohibition and eating the apple, but it began earlier – when they began to listen not to God but to Satan, who was personified by the serpent. In other words, we

³⁰ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 16, CSCO 637, p. 88.

³¹ Isaacus Ninive, *Oratio* XI 19, CSCO 637, p. 88.

follow in the footsteps of Adam and Eve when we start listening to Satan, when we do not listen to God, when we reject His Mysteries. Weakness is inscribed in the being of man and the Father is aware of it³². He knows that the child learns, sometimes faster, sometimes slower. But as long as it wants to learn, wandering is not an obstacle. Likewise, weakness resulting from nature, which is the result of negligence, does not distance as much as hardness. As long, therefore, as the Christian sincerely believes, so long does he enjoy the Eucharist. God's banquet benefits him both in this life and in the life to come. Therefore, it is worthwhile, to be a believer, for by receiving the dignity of a son and by guarding against being excluded from the community of the Church by an evil attitude, I have the assurance of salvation and of the fruitfulness of the Sacrifice of Christ both during earthly life and after death.

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³² See Duca, *Human Frailty*, p. 429-439. In it, the author emphasizes that the recognition of man's weakness and imperfection, including his sinfulness and weak resistance to temptation, was one of the basic conditions for the beginning of the monk's spiritual life effort. Thus, since weakness is inherent in our nature, its Creator judges its consequences differently from voluntary human choices.

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