Mystic

TREATISES

Ascetical Homilies (Selected)

Isaac of Nineveh

Resurrection Publishing

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Member Edition sample · Resurrection Publishing

This free excerpt includes the Note on the Text and one chapter. It is not the full book.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Primary witness

The text of this Member Edition follows a single copy-text: A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, translated from Bedjan's Syriac (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923)—the twenty-eight Homilies included in this edition only. Wensinck aimed at English as literal as seemed compatible with style.

Scope

This Member Edition presents a curated selection of Homilies from Wensinck's *Mystic Treatises*, numbered as in that edition.

The volume is the **Orthodox** voice (Eastern Christian, patristic through medieval) in Resurrection Publishing's Theme "Dealing with sin," alongside John Owen's *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, Lorenzo Scupoli's *The Spiritual Combat*, and John Cassian's *The Institutes of the Coenobia*. The Homilies included here were chosen for topical coherence with that Theme: repentance, trust in God, the passions, guarding the heart, temptation, mercy, and humility.

Included Homilies (28): 1–10, 30–33, 36–38, 45, 50, 62–63, 66, 72, 74, 76, 79, 83–84.

Each selected Homily is printed in full.

Spelling and punctuation

Spelling and punctuation are lightly modernized for contemporary readers (American orthography). Punctuation is modernized only for readability—quotation marks, dashes, and possessive apostrophes—

without breaking Isaac's counsel into new claims. The serial (Oxford) comma is used throughout. Wensinck's bracketed interpolations (such as `[outward]`) are retained as his editorial clarifications.

Retained vocabulary and forms

Theological and ascetical vocabulary is retained: *excellence* (Wensinck's technical rendering), *passions*, *humility*, *mercy* and *compassion*, *watchfulness* and *vigilance*, *repentance* and *penitence*, *mourning* and *tears*, *solitude* where the included Homilies touch it, and *temptations*. The archaic second person (*thee*, *thou*, *thy*, *ye*) is preserved wherever a Homily addresses the reader directly. Occasional untranslated Syriac terms that Wensinck retained are kept as he set them.

Scripture references

Scripture references embedded in Isaac's Homilies are normalized to a consistent citation form, while preserving the edition's chosen texts, wording, and order of citation. Quotations are not silently replaced with any modern Bible version.

Footnotes

Wensinck's footnotes that help modern readers understand or apply the Homilies are retained as chapter endnotes (Unicode callouts in the text, notes at the end of each Homily). Scripture citations, short English glosses, and brief comparative notes are kept. Cross-references only to Wensinck's omitted Introduction or page apparatus, and unrecoverable Syriac or manuscript philology that does not change the sense for a modern reader, are omitted. No notes are invented beyond the preferred edition.

Structure

Wensinck's Homily numbers are preserved and are not renumbered to later Syriac sequences used by other collections. Where Wensinck supplies a short descriptive title, it appears as a paratextual chapter argument beneath the Homily heading. Homilies 1–6 have no such title in Wensinck and are typeset without an invented one.

Version identification

This first publication is `isaac-ascetical-homilies-rp-2026.1`.

HOMILY 1

The fear of God is the foundation of excellence; for excellence is said to be the offspring of faith. It is sown in a man's heart, when he allows his mind to confine the wandering impulses to continual meditation on the order of things to come, away from the distractions of the world. As to the foundation of excellence, the first among its peculiar elements is the concentration of the self, by freeing it from practical things, upon the enlightened word of the straight and holy ways, the word that by the inspired Psalmist is called the teacher.

There is scarcely to be found a man who is able to bear honors, or possibly such an one exists not; because man is very prone to err, even if he be an angel in his way.

The foundation of the way of life consists in accustoming the mind to the words of God and the practice of patience. For the draught provided by the former is helpful towards acquiring perfection in the latter; and, further, increased development towards accomplishment in the latter, will cause a heightened desire of the former. And the help provided by both of them will quickly bring about the rise of the whole building.

No one is able to come near to God save only he who is far from the world. For I do not call separation the departure from the body, but from the bodily things.

Excellence consists therein that a man in his mind be a void as regards the world. As long as the senses are occupied with [outward] things, it is not possible for the heart to rest from imagining them. Nor do the affections cease, nor evil thoughts end except in the desert and the wilderness.

While the soul has not yet become drunk by the faith in God, in that it has received an impression of its powers, the weakness of the senses cannot be healed and it is not able to tread down with force

visible matter which is a screen before what is within and not perceived [by the senses].

Reason is the cause of freedom[1] and the fruit of both liability to err. Without the first, the second cannot be. And where the second fails, there is the third bound as it were with halters.

When grace is abundant in man, then the fear of death is despised on account of the love of righteousness. He finds many arguments in his soul [proving] that it is becoming to bear troubles for the sake of the fear of God. And those things which are supposed to injure the body, and to repel nature unjustly, which consequently are of a nature to cause suffering, are reckoned in his eye as nothing in comparison with what is expected to be. And his mind convinces him firmly of the fact that it is not possible to recognize truth without gaining experience of the affections, and that God bestows great care upon man, and that he is not abandoned to chance. Especially those who are trained in praying unto Him and who bear suffering for His sake, see [these truths] clearly [as if painted] in colors. But when little faith takes root in our heart, then all these things are felt as contrary, not as serving for testing us.

And that we are not always successful in trusting in God, and that God does not care for thee as it is supposed, is often insinuated by those who lay ambushes and shoot their arrows in the darkness.

The foundation of man's true life, is the fear of God. And this does not consent to dwell in the soul as long as there exists the distraction of [outward] things. For the heart, by the service of the senses, is turned away from the delight in God.

The inward impulses are bound up in their sensible faculty with the senses administering to them.

The doubt of the heart introduces fear into the soul. But faith is able to make manly the mind, even under the cutting off of the limbs. As long as the love of the body is strong in thee, thou art not able to be courageous and without fear because of the many adversaries that are constantly present in the neighborhood of him who is loved.

If any one is fond of honor, he cannot be without causes of distress.

There is no man, whose mind suffers not likewise a change with things, in whatever respect it may be.

If there is a second apperception of the senses, which generates and gives birth to desire, as Euagrius says, then those who dwell in doubt must keep silence, promising to preserve their mind in peace.

Not that one is chaste from whom evil impulses that intended to combat him, are withheld, but he whose uprightness of heart renders chaste the gaze of his mind, so that he does not audaciously enter upon lascivious thoughts; and the saintliness of his heart is testified by the gaze of his pupils, which are guarded faithfully, so that bashfulness screens, like a curtain, the hidden place of his thoughts. So that his purity, like that of a chaste virgin, is faithfully guarded for Christ.

There is nothing so apt to banish lascivious customs from the soul, and to restrain inciting memories which quicken the wild flames in the body, as burning for the love of teachings, and prosecuting investigations concerning the meaning of the words of the scriptures.

When the impulses are immersed in delight, after [having tasted] the wisdom contained in the [divine] words, by means of the faculty that absorbs information from them, then every man will leave the body behind him. Forgetting the world and all that is in it, he will also banish from his soul all recollections on which are based the images of the material world. And often the soul in its thoughts during ecstasy will desist from the use of the wonted deliberations—natural practice—by reason of the novel [experiences] which reach it from the sea of their mysteries.

Even when the mind is floating on its upper waters, without being able to make its impulses deep as the depth of the waters (so that it can see all the treasures in its abysses)—still meditation, by its [power of] love, will have sufficient force to bind the thoughts firmly together with thoughts of ecstasy so that they are checked from thinking of

and running after the nature of the body. As one of those, who are clad with God says: "Because the heart is weak, it is not able to bear the evil influences that reach it from without, nor the struggle within. For you know, that the evil thoughts of the body are strong. And if the heart is not accustomed to teachings, it is not possible to bear the troubled thoughts of the body."

As the heaviness of the weight [impedes] the quick swaying to and fro of the tongue of the balance in the wild winds, so bashfulness and fear [impede] the aberration of the mind. And that which is an indication of deficiency in the former, is also a [sign] of the dominion of freedom in the latter.

Just as in that case any additional decrease is the cause of the scales swaying to and fro with greater ease, having no solid foundation, so in this case, by the abolition of fear from the soul on account of freedom, the balance of the mind is able to turn aside quickly. So the faculty of emotion comes in the consequence of freedom; and inconstancy of the mind is the consequence of the faculty of aberration. Be wise enough to lay a foundation for thy course in the way of God; in a few days it will bring thee before the gate of the Kingdom, without windings in the way.[2]

Do not in the way of those who are educated by teachers look at the words which in the way of test, are intended to elevate thy behavior, in order that thy soul may be elevated by the height of sight that is in them. Distinguish the purport of the word in all the stories thou findest in the scriptures; so thou wilt be able to make thy soul deep so that it may dwell with the great wisdom that is in the writings of enlightened men.

Those who, by grace, are directed in their behavior towards illumination, perceive constantly as it were an intelligible ray running between the words [of the scriptures]. This ray distinguishes for the mind the simple speech from those things that are said in spiritual loftiness in order to expand the soul.

He who simply reads lofty words, his heart will also remain simple and devoid of the holy power, that imparts to the heart a sweet taste by the meanings that stupefy the soul.

All things are accustomed to move towards that which is akin [to them]. And the soul that possesses something of the spirit, on hearing anything wherein a spiritual force is hidden, fervently embraces that which it hears; and yet a tale that is told spiritually and wherein a great force is hidden, is not able to arouse every one unto admiration.

A word concerning excellence requires a heart free from the earth and earthly occupations.

If a man's mind is beset with care for transitory things, tales concerning excellence will not incite his thought to the desiring of its possession.

Solution from matter precedes the bonds in God. And though, as if by Providence of Grace, in some people the latter precede the former, so that love covers love, in the usual order of Providence the common sequence is otherwise. So thou hast to keep the common order. If Grace in thee comes first, it is for its own sake. If it does not, then, along the way that every man goes by tradition, ascend the spiritual tower.

Everything which is mentally performed and the commandment of which is fulfilled thus also, is entirely invisible to the eyes of the flesh; whereas everything which is performed in practice, is wholly of a composite nature. For it is only one commandment that necessitates these two, viz. theory and performance. Because corporeity and non-corporeity and the adaptation of the two belong to all. Therefore the enlightened intellect—as has been ordered formerly by the blessed Moses—understands in a twofold way the commandment [lying at the bottom of theory and practice]: the simple as well as the complex is understood.

Works performed carefully by the pure, do not remove the impression of the recollection of previous reprehensible things; but they abolish in the mind the painful nature of recollection, so that

what has passed through the mind often enough, now becomes something excellent.

The longing of the soul for the acquiring of excellence vanquishes the desire of its partner[3] for visible things.

All things have their mean. Lacking that, even those things the use of which is apt to help, may turn aside and become harmful without meeting any obstacle.

If thou wishest to have mental communion with God, by acquiring the impression of that delight that is not subject to the senses, then cling to mercy. For the holy beauty is formed by that element within thee, which resembles mercy. And all the practices of mercy bring the soul, immediately, into communion with the unique splendor of the divine glory.

Spiritual unification is a perpetual recollection, that is vivid in the heart without variation, with burning love. By constancy in clinging to the commandments, it acquires the force to remain in union; and there is found, in a way neither secondary nor natural, matter for spiritual vision, in which the soul may confide absolutely. So a man is drawn towards ecstasy by the closing of the two classes of senses: those of the flesh and those of the soul. There is no other way towards spiritual love which is modeller of invisible images, than to begin in the first place with mercy in accordance with the word of our Lord who commands it to those who obey him, in connection with the perfection of the Father, the foundation.

Very different is the word of practice from words of beauty. Even without experience wisdom knows how to adorn its words and to speak the truth even without having any acquaintance with it, and to express itself concerning excellence without any experience of [practical] performance. A word proceeding from practice, is a treasure to confide in. But idle wisdom is a pawn causing shame; it is as when an artist paints water on walls, without being able to quench his thirst by it; or as a man who dreams beautiful dreams.

He who from practical experience speaks about excellence, brings the word to his hearers as it were from the capital won by his own commerce; and, as from the stock of his soul, sows his teachings in the ears of his audience. He opens his mouth freely before his spiritual sons, in the manner of old Jacob before chaste Joseph, [saying]: I have given thee one portion above thy brethren, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow.[4] So every man whose behavior is stained, will love temporal life; so will also he who falls short of knowledge. Some one has well said: The fear of death distresses a fleshly man. But he who has a good witness in himself, will desire it as life.

Do not reckon as a truly wise man that one whose mind is subject to fear on account of temporal life.

All good and evil things which befall the body have all of them, to be reckoned by thee as dreams, which thou canst escape from not only by death, but which often leave thee even before death and disappear.

If thy soul is bound to some of them, then estimate them as thy possession for ever, accompanying thee also in the world to be. If they are beautiful, then rejoice and thank God in thy mind. If they are evil, then be sorry and sigh and seek to be delivered from them while being in the body. If any good is done to thee, open or concealed, then be sure that thy mediators concerning it have been baptism and faith, by which thou wert called in Jesus Christ unto good works; to whom and to the Father and to the Holy Ghost belong praise, honor and adoration, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen.

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[1] This term nearly always has the meaning of free will.

[2] Cf. Book of the Dove, Sentence 85: "Every serene soul seeks its original country, and directs itself towards it on the straight way, which is the nearest." And the inscription of chapter XVII: On the short paths to God.

[3] the body

[4] Gen. 48:22.

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