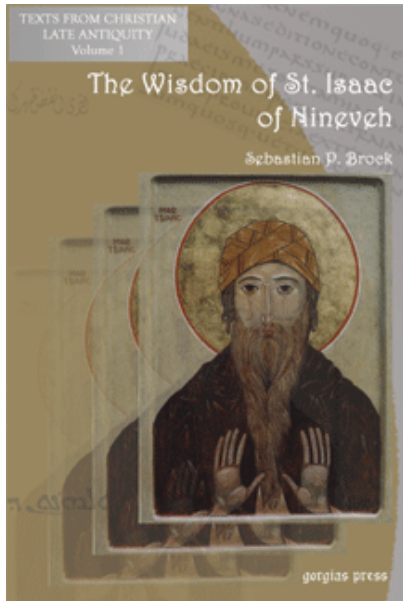


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**Brock, Sebastian P.**

***The Wisdom of St. Isaac of Nineveh***

Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 1

Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias, 2006. Pp. xx + 41. Paper.  
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The late-seventh-century Syriac author Isaac of Nineveh belongs to many different worlds. The region of Bet Qatraye, from which he hailed (and which gave its name to present-day Qatar), was of mixed Aramaic and Persian language and culture. Isaac was appointed by the East-Syrian Catholicos-Patriarch Giwargis (661–681) to be the bishop of Nineveh in northern Mesopotamia (present-day Mosul), but after only five months of service he resigned and returned to eremitic life in Bet Huzaye (Huzistan, in western Iran). As a solitary ascetic he is said to have reached old age. He witnessed in his lifetime the islamization and arabization of much of the Middle East, even though this is not reflected in his writings.

*The Wisdom of St. Isaac of Nineveh* provides 153 short extracts from Isaac's writings. They are printed in Syriac *Serta* script, with full vowels, along with an English translation. There is a short, well-written introduction, presented both in English and translated into Classical Syriac by Awgen Aydin, followed by a useful bibliographical survey of the main editions and translations of Isaac's works. The 153 English extracts already had been published (1995, 1997, and 1999) and had led to further translations into Arabic (1998), Dutch (2002), and German (2003). The 2006 updated edition, however, is the first to include the original Syriac texts, based on existing editions. The target readership thus

shifts from students and scholars having a general interest in late ancient asceticism to students of Syriac and Syriac Christianity, or those who, in their exploration of Isaac's wisdom, want to be reminded of his original linguistic and cultural background. The convenient juxtaposition of vocalized Syriac and English allows the edition to serve as a perfect tool for beginning students.

Isaac's literary oeuvre has reached us in three different "collections" (or "parts"; in Syriac the term *pālgutā* is used), each consisting of a number of treatises, or "homilies," sometimes transitioning into lists of short sayings (*rēšē*, or *kephalaia*). The first part has been known to scholars since P. Bedjan's 1909 edition (*Mar Isaacus Ninivita: De perfectione religiosa* [repr., Piscataway, N.J., 2007]) and A. J. Wensinck's 1923 English translation (*Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* [repr., Wiesbaden, 1969]). The second part, which Bedjan had seen in an old manuscript in Urmia (northwest Iran) but which was lost during the First World War, was rediscovered in 1983 in a manuscript of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and most of it was subsequently published and translated by S. P. Brock: *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): 'The Second Part,' Chapters IV–XLI* (CSCO 554–555/Syr. 224–225; Leuven, 1995). The third part was identified only a few years ago in a manuscript in Tehran dated 1900 C.E., while a few extracts exist in much earlier manuscripts. The Syriac text of the third part has not yet been published, but an Italian translation was made available in 2004 by S. Chialà: *Isacco di Ninive: Discorsi ascetici: Terza collezione* (Magnano, BI).

The interrelationship between the three parts has received little scholarly attention. Do they reflect different stages in the author's spiritual or literary career, or did they come into being only in the later process of the transmission of the texts? The first part had a more complex history than the two other collections, for in the eighth or early ninth century it found its way into Byzantine Orthodox circles in Palestine, where, in the Monastery of St. Sabas, it was translated into Greek. In this process Isaac's text was slightly revised, stripped of what was seen as their most obvious "Nestorian" features, and expanded with five texts that are given under Isaac's name but have a different origin: four belong to the East-Syrian author John of Dalyatha, and one belongs to the Syrian-Orthodox (Miaphysite) bishop Philoxenus of Mabbog. The Greek translation (which provides a *terminus ante quem* for the existence of the first part more or less as we know it in Syriac, albeit differently structured) subsequently became the basis for further medieval translations into Georgian, Arabic (and thence Ethiopic), Latin, and Slavonic. The Greek translations and its derivative versions secured Isaac's great popularity in the Byzantine and Slavic worlds. No other Syriac author—with the exception of the fourth-century Ephrem "the Syrian"—has obtained such a high status in non-Syriac Christian traditions. Isaac "the Syrian" truly has become a citizen of many different worlds!

Among the 153 texts Brock selected, 95 are from the first part, the rest from the second part. The English translations are not very literal and seem to aim at aptly conveying Isaac's ascetic message rather than his exact wording. With the Syriac text at hand, however, the reader is invited to walk the semantic distance between the Syriac and the English and to explore the dynamics of Isaac's rich ascetic language.

Quite appropriately the title highlights the "wisdom" of Isaac, as there is in fact a strong intellectual component to his ascetic approach. Prayers must be wise (no. 31: *slotā hakkimtā*), and we are warned not to be "inept" (*pakkih*: "insipid, insensitive, nonsensical") in the requests we make to God, in order not to insult him through our ignorance (no. 3). It also is a stupid request (*pyāsā pakkihā*) to ask God for the things of the body, something that is as despicable as asking a prince for a load of dung (no. 4). Similarly, our dealings with God should be measured: if we owe him a small coin, he is not going to accept a pearl (no. 13), and we should not run more quickly than the divine Will wishes (no. 125). The book concludes with an index of subjects that is conceptual rather than focused on the exact phrase.

Unfortunately, within the format of this booklet no room is left for any substantial discussion of the many interesting questions that surround Isaac's work, despite the author's intimate familiarity with the world of East-Syrian asceticism. With the many short extracts, taken out of their context and lacking further annotation, the reader is given only a foretaste of Isaac's spiritual universe, not a full exposure to it. But in spite of these limitations, one is truly impressed with the quality of the selections, the elegance of the translation, the careful presentation, and the impeccable Syriac: a real gem for students of Syriac and for those interested in late ancient asceticism.