

## THE IDEA OF KNOWLEDGE IN EAST SYRIAN MYSTICISM

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One of the most creative epochs in the history of Syriac literature is unquestionably the heyday of East Syrian mysticism in the 7th and 8th centuries. The most central topic and inspiring force in these writings is, in my opinion, *mystical experience*, in the widest sense of the term. In my previous study (Seppälä 2003) I noticed how the East Syrian mystics refer to a mystical, perhaps ecstatic, experience<sup>1</sup> as a source of “knowledge” (*īdaʿtā*). The concept usually indicates some kind of mystical knowledge, an oriental version of Christian *gnosis*.

In the following I aim to outline some general answers to the following questions: What does the concept of knowledge mean in a mystical context? How is this (mystical) knowledge characterised by East Syrian mystics? How does it relate to the ecstatic mystical experience?

It is to be noted that, in the following, the concept of “ecstasy” is to be understood not only as a mystical experience in a general sense but rather as a more extraordinary “peak experience” with some rather exceptional emotional qualities.<sup>2</sup> More precise definitions cannot be considered very functional, due to the nature of both the phenomenon itself as an obscure mental process and the indistinct literary sources describing it.

This article is based on a systematic analysis of the published texts of the 7th and 8th century East Syrian mystics Isaac of Nineveh, Simeon the Graceful, Sahdona, John of Dalyatha and Joseph/ʿAbdišoʿ Hazzaya.<sup>3</sup> Their texts, in spite of

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<sup>1</sup> For my approach to the definition of these concepts, see Seppälä 2003: 50–52.

<sup>2</sup> For concrete examples of the most unusual ecstatic experiences, see Seppälä 2003: 150–156. These justify the use of the term “ecstasy” instead of the literal “wonder” for *temhā* and *tahrā*.

<sup>3</sup> The editions and translations of Isaac are the following: Bedjan 1909; Brock 1995; Wensinck 1923. The texts of John of Dalyatha are published in Beulay 1978. The corpus of Sahdona (Martyrius) are published in Sahdona 1960; 1961; 1965a; 1965b. The rest of my sources are to be found in Mingana 1934.

their original character, are seldom discussed in scholarly works and have not received the attention they deserve.

## 1. THE CONCEPT OF (MYSTICAL) KNOWLEDGE

In their use of the concept of knowledge, the East Syrian mystics almost invariably<sup>4</sup> refer to something quite unlike to the way in which the concept of knowledge is comprehended in Post-Cartesian Western thought. The latter, to use an Aristotelian division, is quantitative by nature and emphasises the criteria of verification. To put it briefly, the present Western understanding of knowledge deals with the *contents* of knowing, and the discussion on knowledge concentrates on questioning its basis and premises.

As for the East Syrian mystics' concept of knowledge,

Let no one think about reaching Knowledge (*īdarā*) by diligent inner working (*hūfātā*) and human thinking (*renyā*), for this happens by spiritual operation so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any psychic thought (*huššābā naššānāyā*) nor of those things which are perceivable by the senses. (Isaac of Nineveh)<sup>5</sup>

“Knowledge” here is charismatic by its origins and mystical by nature. It obviously refers to somewhere above or beyond the ordinary contents and ways of knowing. In Aristotelian terms, it evidently is qualitative.

According to St. Isaac, each one has his own measure of knowledge, on which his spiritual life is dependent. One may sense the presence of God only according to the measure of his knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In this way knowledge functions as an umbrella concept under which one's inner development takes place.

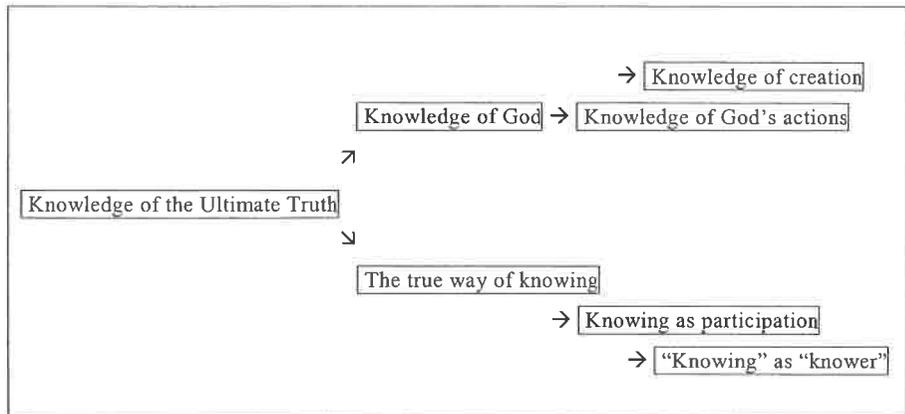
What is the essence of the knowledge described by St. Isaac? The essential meaning of the concept could be defined with two basic meanings both derived from the same basic idea and aim – the Ultimate Truth. This is a concept which refers, on one hand, to its content or object (the uncreated eternal essence, i.e. God, as He is known in His qualities) and, on the other, to the nature of the pro-

<sup>4</sup> For St. Isaac's exposition on the concept of “knowledge” in its standard “Western” meaning, see homily 51 in Bedjan 1909: 360–362. As an example of the use of *īdarā* in its non-mystical sense, we may note here one interesting remark made by St. Isaac, who states that ordinary knowledge leads one to fear (Bedjan 1909: 362) – the kind of remark that would be totally out of place in modern epistemological discussion. Isaac here makes an existential move: He extends the paradigm of empirical knowledge by connecting it with existential reality. The idea behind his remark is that knowledge as mere mastery of “cold facts” leaves the subject of knowledge alone and in some sense makes him/her subordinate in relation to existential reality, unable to see and realise higher dimensions of creation such as its beauty. This subordination is called fear by Isaac, alienation by existentialists.

<sup>5</sup> Bedjan 1909: 155; cf. Wensinck 1923: 105.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Brock 1995: 30:2–3.

cess of knowing. All the various further meanings of knowledge in the mystical sense are derived from these two basic usages.



“Ultimate truth”, however, is by definition something absolute and non-definable. Consequently, the constituents of this knowledge cannot be controlled as objects of knowing but rather approached, perhaps in some sense participated, in the process of knowing. For this reason, *īdaʿtā* in mystics’ texts often refers to a way of knowing and hence may be translated as “understanding”.

This means that the knowledge discussed by mystics is in fact no knowledge at all in the modern epistemological sense, for it may be without any discursive content. This knowledge is essentially wordless by nature, which means that it is not dependent on any of its particular verbal expressions. This is the reason for the traditional mystics’ claim that knowledge cannot be reached by merely reading descriptions of it.

Since the author of this article, however, is at this very moment treating such knowledge with verbal descriptions, we face the question: How does the genuine mystical knowledge differ from the discursive knowledge of mystical knowledge based on and derived from descriptions of it?

The answer in fact may be seen from the complex form of the question: the former is more immediate, the latter more reflexive and constituted. In other words, the *way* of knowing is different. Mystical knowledge is more internalised and personal and achieved in a realising, inspired, almost inventive way. In this sense it is an active and a creative way of producing knowledge, not only passive reception. To use an analogy, mystical knowledge is like an improvising musician, discursive knowledge of mystical knowledge being like the one playing from a score. For an outsider the outcome may appear cognate or even identical in each case.

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSEQUENCES OF (MYSTICAL) KNOWLEDGE

Each of the various readings of *īdaʿtā* in its mystical contexts can be understood in the light of either of the two above-mentioned possibilities, i.e. actual knowledge of the ultimate reality and truthful way of knowing.

Firstly, there are cases where *īdaʿtā* is categorically defined as spiritual knowledge, which concerns the ultimate realities and is explicitly differentiated from the ordinary “psychic” knowledge, sometimes even by contrasting these with each other. This knowledge ultimately deals with God, even though the mystics quite seldom discuss explicitly the “knowledge of God”: They rather refer to the various ways of His activity, thus making their discourse more relative and unassuming. For example, the perfection of knowledge, according to St. Isaac’s definition, is “knowledge of anything concerning God” (*īdaʿtā dʿ-kul dʿ-ʿal allāhā*).<sup>7</sup> In other words, the object or content of this knowledge is not God as He is in His essence but God as He is manifested in His creative, sustaining, renewing, protective and other actions. The character of this knowledge is described as pure, non-composite and not created by the subject’s psychological mechanisms. “Spiritual knowledge is simple, and it does not radiate through psychic thoughts.”<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, *īdaʿtā* may refer to the process of knowing with no allusion to its contents. In some cases *īdaʿtā* is even used as a kind of cognitive subject. Here the most accurate translation is “understanding”, when it applies to the way of knowing, or even “consciousness”, in the most extreme cases. The following samples are from St. Isaac:

... they are like people who have approached freedom in their understanding (*īdaʿtā*), because of (their) readiness of will to please their Lord.<sup>9</sup>

... the person whose understanding (*īdaʿtā*) is not darkened by contempt, as he travels in perfection (accompanied) by all kinds of virtuous conduct, (his) conscience does not consent to rest or to be quiet from this movement.<sup>10</sup>

Their consciousness (*īdaʿthōn*) is constantly swallowed by various visions and divine revelations.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bedjan 1909: 160; cf. Wensinck 1923: 108.

<sup>8</sup> Bedjan 1909: 527; cf. Wensinck 1923: 354.

<sup>9</sup> Brock 1995: 31:6.

<sup>10</sup> Brock 1995: 20:4.

<sup>11</sup> Bedjan 1909: 371; cf. Wensinck 1923: 249.

A wider epistemological context and a systematic presentation for the concept of knowledge is provided in the writings of Simeon the Graceful, an author influenced by Evagrius, Pseudo-Dionysios and Neo-Platonism. Simeon outlines a kind of mystical epistemology by differentiating six<sup>12</sup> or seven modes of knowledge. Their modes and main features may be summarised as follows:

1. First natural knowledge
  - Rational character: acquired by scientific investigation
  - (a) Natural knowledge (*īdaʿtā k<sup>e</sup>yānāytā*)
    - Implanted in human nature
    - Illuminated by good things
  - (b) Unnatural knowledge (*īdaʿtā dal-bar men k<sup>e</sup>yānā*)
    - Inclination towards evil
    - Entangles one with passions
2. Second natural knowledge
  - Object: moral and ethical good
3. Intelligible knowledge
  - Object: spiritual dimension of the physical beings
4. Spiritual knowledge, contemplation (*theoria*)
  - Object: spiritual powers, angelic activity
5. Knowledge of the world to come
  - Object: the Divine Nature, the three Divine Persons
6. Supernatural knowledge (*īdaʿtā dal-<sup>c</sup>al men k<sup>e</sup>yānā*) or “no-knowledge”
  - No object. Loss of identity. Merging in the divine grace and knowledge.

The most important idea behind the scheme is that the character of knowing varies according to the thing known. Angels cannot be known in the same way as moral truths, not to mention physical objects. The vocabularies of most, if not all, languages lead one astray by calling all these divergent modes of knowing by the same name. In Simeon’s system the latter two thirds of the ways of knowing seem to belong – in some sense – to the sphere of mystical experience.

The idea of knowledge, as it is generally used, ultimately comprises all things, due to the obvious fact that *any* thing can be “known”. One remarkable aspect in Simeon’s classification is its emphasis on the ethic-mystical aspects of knowing, empirical knowledge being of lesser interest – probably seen as something self-evident. The criterion of Simeon’s differentiation is the functionality of knowing in the ascetic process of illumination, i.e. the purification of various parts of the mind. This results in an important principle: there is no secret knowledge

<sup>12</sup> Enumeration according to Mingana 1934: 2.



their faculties, and the unspeakable modulations of their glorifications, and to imitate them by the help of God in the measure of its power.”<sup>18</sup>

Through the illumination provided by the mystical experience, one’s cognition may attain the dimension beyond the phenomenal existence. This means that a deeper understanding of the whole creation is reached through knowledge of the ultimate uncreated truth (God), as illustrated in the scheme above. It is important to realise, however, that the inner dimension in question is not a separate ontological entity disconnected from the corporeal world. On the contrary, it is present with each particular object in categories of both time and place. Consequently, the knowledge of inner reality goes together with the knowledge of outer phenomena and illuminates the causality between the two.

The apprehension of this inner dimension of reality also means that one attains a certain understanding of causal relations under the phenomenal surface: How do the empirical and/or inner phenomena effect, and are related to, each other. This is an elementary aspect of the process in which one approaches the apprehension of the world as *totality* – the perspective of God. In this way purification consists not only of ethical and moral improvement but also of enlightenment in one’s world-view. The mystic during his process of illumination realises how the inner nature of purification is deeply related to *totality*. And vice versa, sin is understood by the mystics as a dividing and dispersing force. All this is expressed illustratively by St. Isaac. “And then he may behold the whole world (*‘ālmā kul kulleh*) because of the great delight of the activity (*‘enyānā*) by which the intellect (*mad‘ā*) is led out in drunken fashion (*rawyā’it*) ...”<sup>19</sup>

In other words, mystical illumination is not only an emotional incident but has a cognitive dimension as well. St. Isaac tells how the ascetic struggle in solitude slowly enables one to experience sudden outbursts of joy which every now and then capture the soul; during these “your eyes are opened to see God’s creative power and the beauty of the creatures, in accordance with the amount of your purity.”<sup>20</sup>

Nowadays “gnosis” is often understood as secret knowledge in quite a concrete sense, as a set of facts that are unknown to the majority. It is important to note, however, that mystical knowledge does not necessarily provide actual *new* thoughts but rather illuminates old ones as well as unveils causalities between them. Grace – as the *causa efficiens* of the mystical experience is often named – enlightens the ascetic by opening up for him the ways and functions of thoughts so that he understands the causality of mental phenomena. In the words of St.

<sup>18</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 164b–166b, pp. 284–286 (tr. 12–15).

<sup>19</sup> Bedjan 1909: 254; cf. Wensinck 1923: 170. The section is quite complex in its syntax.

<sup>20</sup> Bedjan 1909: 471; cf. Wensinck 1923: 316.

Isaac, "he will easily attain to their understanding (*sukkālḥōn*), their interdependence and seductiveness, their connections with each other, and how they are born in order to destroy the soul."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, a large part of ascetic-mystical literature analyses the operations and inner mechanisms of various desires and attitudes.

The illumination provided by the influence of grace, according to St. Isaac, means a "hidden light" (*nūhrā kāsyā*) so that one perceives everything, even the power of the subtlest mental movements (*zawʿay ḥūšābē qaṭṭīnē*). "And the grace shows him as if with finger what would have happened to him, if he had not got to know these."<sup>22</sup>

One of the most interesting perspectives opened by mystical illumination deals with the position of evil in creation, and one's psychological approach to it. The illuminated one, as mentioned above, sees things as if through their phenomenal level. In the case of evil, however, there seems to be nothing beyond to be perceived. In other words, evil exists in the phenomena only, and for that reason it is considered by the mystics to be without substance of its own. "The one whose eye is pure sees no evil",<sup>23</sup> states Simeon the Graceful. This seems to indicate that evil is a way of viewing. Consequently, during the process of illumination one starts to see anger and lust as unnatural, as something which do not belong to man's real substance: as an alien force that aims to dissipate one from outside. By realising this, one becomes capable of viewing passionate men in accordance with their real substance, as if filtering their passions away. Simeon the Graceful expresses this as follows:

When grace visits us, the light of love of our fellow-men which is shed on the mirror of our heart is such that we do not see in the world any sinners or evil men; but when we are under the influence of the demons we are so much in the darkness of wrath that we do not see a single good and upright man in the world.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most interesting features of mystical knowledge is that its totality and wholeness do not exclude relativity. The mystics are the first to admit that mystical experiences, like all experiences, are always subjective and therefore relative. This results in a paradoxical notion: perfect knowledge also means its own negation. "The one who has penetrated into the mysteries of all spiritual natures and masters the wisdom concerning all created beings, with all exactness, knows that

<sup>21</sup> Bedjan 1909: 530; cf. Wensinck 1923: 356.

<sup>22</sup> Bedjan 1909: 530; cf. Wensinck 1923: 356.

<sup>23</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 186b, p. 305 (tr. 46).

<sup>24</sup> Mingana 1934/Simon, 179a, p. 298 (tr. 35).

he knows nothing.”<sup>25</sup> This apparently incoherent notion can be understood as a kind of semantic discharge that opens the grounds of semantic fields and epistemological borders. It basically indicates that each part of reality – in macrocosm, in microcosm, in mental phenomena – has an immeasurable and endless number of aspects and dimensions to be known. And this fact must be realised by the “knower” in the course of his/her illumination.

The relativity of human knowledge is reflected in an illustrative way by St. Isaac when he connects it with the chronological dimension and eschatological horizon.

... 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.<sup>26</sup>

On the basis of this extremely honest remark, one might even suggest that mystical knowledge represents a kind of emotional reality rather than a discursive and epistemological one.

These aspects and examples suffice to show how the “knowledge” opened up by mystical experience, according to the East Syrian mystics, is able to colour one’s world view in all possible respects. The one who is mystically illuminated views everything in a different way, from a changed perspective.

### 3. FROM ECSTASY TO KNOWLEDGE

Now we may continue to make some further remarks on the relationship between ecstatic mystical experiences and knowledge. How does the actual transition from ecstasy to gnosis take place? How does “knowledge” spring forth from ecstasy?

As a preliminary remark it is to be noted that, according to the view prevalent in East Syrian mysticism, the achievement of an ecstatic state or mystical knowledge is not an unattached action but a constituent of an ascetic way of life, a deeper dimension of the whole existence. The aim of the mystics is not to attain experiences but to transform one’s whole life. For this reason the Syrian mystics do not have detailed methods for arousing ecstasy, and even their techniques of meditation are not as detailed as in some other religions. Moreover, any forced experience is not considered valid. Instead, when an ascetic stays in solitude and

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<sup>25</sup> Bedjan 1909: 579; cf. Wensinck 1923: 387. In the end I have followed the Greek translators’ understanding of the syntax. The Syriac would rather read: “knows with all exactness that he knows nothing.”

<sup>26</sup> Brock 1995: 39:19.



mental reality. The preconditioned cognitive elements, however, are not able to present actual new knowledge, but the old knowledge may be activated and vitalised through them.

Mystical knowledge, gnosis, as we have seen, is basically quite a static phenomenon. However, the appearance of (mystical) knowledge takes place not only by an equivocal opening up of one's perspective as a *consequence* of an ecstatic experience, but also as more definitive "units" appearing during the experience as a *part* (or mode) of it. Such a single "entity of gnosis" is called *sukkālā* by East Syrian mystics; it is a terminological peculiarity which basically means "understanding" but which in most contexts indicates something transmitted from above during the mystical experience. The nature of the concept is characteristically shown by its frequent use in the plural (*sukkālē*), signifying acts of understanding, the most functional translation often being "intuitions".<sup>31</sup> *Sukkālē* are like intuitive flashes that appear in the soul, illuminating it and opening up new considerations and scenes.

According to 'Abdišo' the Seer, the immaterial impulses during prayer are inward spiritual knowledge hidden in the nature of creation, "ecstatic intuitions" (*sukkālē t'hirē*) of the incorporeal, and the sight of divine providence.<sup>32</sup> The ecstatic aspect of these intuitions is expressed by 'Abdišo' in his remark that the "ecstatic wonder of the Wisdom of God" makes the intuitions (*sukkālē*) of the judgement and providence of God shine in the soul.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, according to St. Isaac of Nineveh, the soul is intoxicated by the sweet taste of mystical experience through these intuitions (*sukkālē*).<sup>34</sup>

How then do *īdā'tā* and *sukkālē* differ? I would illustrate the relationship between them with an analogy adopted from quantum physics: *īdā'tā*, (mystical) knowledge, is like waves, *sukkālē* like particles, but the subject remains the same (i.e. quanta), only the perspective and the method of apprehension are altered.

Accordingly, in some cases gnosis might also be defined as a static version of what ecstasy represents as a dynamic incident and emotional peak. This implies that a "gnostic" way of viewing the world is preconditioned by the mind so that

<sup>31</sup> The term has been translated as 'intellections' (Beulay 1978), 'Einsicht' (Bunge), 'understanding' (Wensinck 1923), 'ecstatic understanding' (Mingana 1934) and 'intuition' (Teule). 'Abdišo' the Seer uses the plural *sukkālē* ('intuitions') in the same way as Isaac of Nineveh. In my Finnish translation of Isaac's works I have produced an apt equivalent for *sukkālē* from a slightly poetical expression *ymmärryksen säteet*, 'rays of understanding', which expresses well the supernatural, given the rather definite character of these intuitive understandings.

<sup>32</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 154b, p. 273 (tr. 164), 275 (tr. 167).

<sup>33</sup> Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 148a, p. 266 (tr. 154). Mingana translates as 'Ecstasy in the Wisdom of God' (*tahrā d-ḥekmteh d-allāhā*).

<sup>34</sup> Bedjan 1909: 6–7; Wensinck 1923: 4.

the aspects of gnosis are in one way or another present during the ecstatic experience.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In the texts of East Syrian mystics, "knowledge" is a mystical concept that basically refers to the understanding of the ultimate reality present in (or beyond) all possible aspects of the visible and invisible cosmos. As it may also refer to any actual case of such knowing, its usages are extremely varied. This kind of knowledge is reached in the mystical process of illumination by participation rather than discursive learning. The knowledge in question is often opened for the consciousness by particular ecstatic experiences. The various aspects of mystical knowledge have been described in East Syrian mystical literature from various viewpoints, yet with no real disparity in the basic understanding of the concept itself. These aspects have been discussed in great detail with psychological insights by St. Isaac of Nineveh, more systematically by Simeon the Graceful, and rather poetically by John of Dalyatha, an outstanding author whose discourse stands comparison with any mystical author from any era. In the following quotation, spoken by him to God about an illuminated one, he shows in a beautiful way how the mind enlightened by knowledge may function when viewing the world and everything in it:

When he is eating, in his food he sees You; when he is drinking, in his drink You are sparkling; when he is crying, in his tears You are shining. Everywhere he looks, there he sees You.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Beulay 1978: 51:5, pp. 474–475.

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