

One of the most characteristic spiritual states which are described by mystical writers is ecstasy, commonly accompanied by a feeling of spiritual elevation and compunction, tears and not infrequently, loss of self-consciousness, weakening of the bodily members, withdrawal of the mind from the body. The Greek word *ekstasis*, which literally means 'separation', 'withdrawal', does not have a direct counterpart in Syriac: the closest equivalents are the terms *temha* and *tehra*, which are both translated as 'wonder', or 'astonishment', or 'amazement'. The first of them is more frequent in Isaac and it refers to the same mystical state that was called *ekstasis* by the Greek mystical authors; in the Greek version of Isaac both *temha* and *tehra* are normally translated as *ekstasis*.

The state of wonder in Isaac is closely linked to the states of the 'stillness of mind' and 'spiritual contemplation', which were described above.

When someone receives all the time an awareness of these mysteries, Isaac writes, by means of that interior eye which is called spiritual contemplation (*te'orya d-ruh*), which consists in a mode of vision provided by grace, then the moment he becomes aware of one of these mysteries, his heart is at once rendered serene with a kind of wonder. Not only do the lips cease from the flow of prayer and become still, but the heart too dries up from all thoughts, due to the amazement that alights upon it; and it receives from grace the sweetness of the mysteries of God's wisdom and love by means of the mode of vision which has knowledge of events and natural beings.^[1]

Wonder may stem from different reasons. It can be a fruit of someone's withdrawal from the world and a solitary life: 'The soul's separation from the world and her stillness naturally move her towards the understanding of God's creatures. And by this she is lifted up toward God; being astonished, she is struck with wonder, and she remains with God'.^[2] Wonder-astonishment can be born from a prayerful meditation: 'For stillness and... meditation... kindle great and endless sweetness in the heart and swiftly draw the intellect to unspeakable astonishment'.^[3] Wonder-ecstasy may come out of the reading of Scripture.^[4] It can also derive from the recollection of God: 'From long continuance in His recollection, a man is transported at times to astonishment and wonder'.^[5] Finally, Isaac points to the action of the Holy Spirit as one of the causes of wonder: 'Just as with certain species of trees, sweetness comes upon them as a result of the sun, likewise, when the Spirit shines out in our hearts, then the movements of our meditation - which is called "spiritual conduct" - are brought close to luminosity; then our intellect, not through any act of will on its part, is drawn up, by means of some kind of reflection, in wonder towards God'.^[6]

In Isaac's writings, we can find several kinds of wonder, which differ from one another by the intensity of the mystical experience that is lived through by an ascetic. The first kind of wonder is a spiritual amazement during prayer or the reading of Scripture, when a person does not lose a self-control, though his mind can be entirely 'captured' by God:

...He even forgets himself and his nature, he becomes like a man in ecstasy, who has no recollection at all of this age. With special diligence he ponders and reflects upon what pertains to God's majesty... And so the ascetic, being engrossed in these marvels and continually struck with wonder, is always drunken as he lives, as it were, in the life after the resurrection... Then as one in ecstasy he muses and says: 'How long will this age continue? When will the future age commence?' ...Then he stands up, bends his knees, and with many tears offers up thanksgiving and glorification to the God Who alone is wise...[\[7\]](#)

The second kind of wonder is the one accompanied by a weakening of bodily members:

It often happens that when a man bends his knees in prayer and stretches his hands to the heavens, fixing his eyes upon the Cross of Christ and concentrating all his thoughts on God during his prayer, beseeching God all the while with tears and compunction, suddenly and without warning a fountain springs up in his heart gushing forth sweetness: his members grow feeble, his eyesight is veiled, he bows his head to the earth, and his thoughts are altered so that because of the joy which surges throughout his entire body he cannot make prostrations.[\[8\]](#)

The third kind is characterized by a loss of the sense of one's corporeality, loss of self-consciousness and withdrawal of the mind from the body. Isaac speaks of such a state of an ascetic when 'ecstasy, awestruck wonder and stillness overcome him and his perception of his corporeality is stolen away, and for a long time he abides in silence'.[\[9\]](#) There are some ancient saints of whom it is known that they spent several hours or even days in such a state: 'For we see that when Saint Anthony was standing at the prayer of the ninth hour, he perceived that his intellect was taken up.'[\[10\]](#) And when another Father stretched out his hands while standing at prayer, he entered an ecstasy for the period of four days. And likewise many others through prayer were taken captive by their strong recollection of God and their love for Him, and thus came to ecstasy'.[\[11\]](#) Isaac tells us of his contemporary who told him: 'When I wish to get up for my office, I am permitted to say a single *marmita*; but as for the rest, if I stand for three days, I am in awestruck wonder with God, and feel no weariness at all'.[\[12\]](#)

A special kind of wonder is described by Isaac in a particular homily of Part I: it is the wonder which begins in sleep, causes awakening and continues when one has risen.[\[13\]](#)

Isaac often speaks of the joy which arises in a person who is in a state of wonder. It is a supernatural and divine joy that has come about from a feeling of freedom and love of God, and is also accompanied by a liberation from fear:

So, once a person has been raised up above the ministry on the level of the soul in his reflection and understanding... and is being raised up to the mode of the life of the spirit., immediately a state of wonder at God (*tehra db-alaha*) attaches itself to him, and he becomes serene and tranquil... He is in a state of joy of soul... And because he exists in a state of understanding which is more lofty than the soul, and exalted above

fear, he is in a state of joy at God in the stirring of his thoughts at all the times - as befits the rank of children.[\[14\]](#)

Joy and wonder at God can become the constant experience of a person. However, as Isaac emphasizes, joy in mystical experience is intermingled with suffering. The first derives from a feeling of fervent love of God and the unspeakable closeness of God to a person; the second, from the impossibility to remain in this state unceasingly. In this sense Isaac claims that 'there is no suffering more burning than the love of God'. And immediately adds: 'O Lord, hold me worthy to taste of this fountain!'[\[15\]](#) The closer a person is to God, the more his thirst increases for communion with God, and this thirst cannot be satiated. This is why joy and suffering are lived through simultaneously, being two different aspects of one and the same experience:

...Through that sweet suffering that takes place in the mind for the sake of God at the life-resorting sorrow... the following are born in the mind in accordance with the various directions its meditating takes: grief for the sake of God, or joy at Him, and a heart that is diffused with the hope for which it is continually peering out. With their sharp warmth this suffering and joy burns and scorches the body, drying it up at the seething infusion of blood which provides heat and spreads through the veins... This hidden ministry causes to burst forth all the time a wondrous sort of transformation which either gives joy to both soul and body, or anguishes it with a sharp suffering.[\[16\]](#)

The state of wonder which is experienced by ascetics during their lifetime is a symbol of that wonder in which the saints in the age to come live; it is 'a taste of the Kingdom of heaven' and 'a revelation of the New World'.[\[17\]](#) To confirm his idea, Isaac refers to Evagrius:

And this is what Evagrius, recipient of boundless spiritual revelations, names 'the hundred-fold reward which our Lord promised in His Gospel'.[\[18\]](#) In his wonder at the greatness of this delight he did well to call it 'the key to the Kingdom of heaven'.[\[19\]](#) I say in truth, as before God, that the body's limbs are incapable of holding up before this delight, and the heart is incapable of receiving it because of the magnitude of its pleasure. What more is there to say, seeing that the saints name it 'the apperception of the Kingdom of heaven'. For it is a symbol of that future wonder at God... when the intellect is raised up, as though on a ladder, to Him Who is the Kingdom of the saints, and it abides in wonder. Well has this apperception been called 'the mystery of the Kingdom of heaven',[\[20\]](#) for we are, during these mysteries, in a state of knowledge of Him Who is the true Kingdom of all.[\[21\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) II/35,4.

[\[2\]](#) I/3 (16) = PR 3 (20).

[\[3\]](#) I/37 (182) = PR 35 (259).

- [4] I/37 (179) = PR 35 (254).
- [5] I/5 (48) = PR 5 (73).
- [6] II/10,2.
- [7] I/37 (179-181) = PR 35 (254-257).
- [8] I/4 (39) = PR 4 (58).
- [9] I/37 (181) = PR 35 (257-258).
- [10] Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of St Anthony* 62.
- [11] I/37 (183) = PR 35 (260-261).
- [12] I/54 (272) = PR 53 (388).
- [13] I/App.A III (392-393) = PR 71 (492-493).
- [14] II/20,10-11.
- [15] II/18,16.
- [16] II/24,2.
- [17] II/8,1-4.
- [18] *Kephalaia gnostika* IV.42. Cf. Matt.19:29.
- [19] *Kephalaia gnostika* IV.40.
- [20] This phrase is characteristic of John of Apamea.
- [21] II/35,12-13.