

Appendix D to *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*,  
Mar John the Solitary: *An Epistle on Stillness*

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## APPENDIX D

Mar John the Solitary

*An Epistle on Stillness\**

**T**HE PERFECTION OF THE TRUTH that is fulfilled in the knowledge of the Divinity is understood by knowledge through the perception of perfect wisdom. This is the 'full stature'<sup>1</sup> and the 'light of knowledge'<sup>2</sup>: knowledge which is the vision of Him Who promised through prophecy that He would appear to those who love Him and keep His commandments.<sup>3</sup> But concerning the blessedness of the riches of the vision of Him, it is too much to speak of. The truth is the knowledge of natures. And knowledge, indeed, is implanted in [human] nature. The nature of every man is known from his works, is revealed by the light, and is distinguished by its origin. The works of the truth are discerned by knowledge and are manifested by a discipline of lowliness. As it pleases, knowledge teaches lowliness, demonstrates and practises works.

The truth of knowledge dictates<sup>4</sup> that a man must first believe that knowledge exists and love it; only thereafter will he seek it. He should not, however, seek it as being outside himself, but within himself. Knowledge is found in him through an excellent way of life. And the beginning of an excellent way of life is this: for a man to go afar off from those near to him<sup>5</sup> and his loved ones after the flesh, and thereafter to deprive himself of anything whereby the intellect is taken captive. This means not only possessions, but he should renounce even his own senses, sight, hearing, and the rest, for they are the bonds

\* Translated from the Syriac text ed. by L. Rignell in *Drei Traktate von Johannes dem Einsiedler*, (Lund, 1960), pp. 3-12.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eph. 4:13.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 4:6.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John 14:21.

<sup>4</sup> Lit. *is*.

<sup>5</sup> Or *neighbours, fellow men*.

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of that which is within and is unperceived.<sup>6</sup> The soul, indeed, cannot even see herself without the stillness of the outer members. The soul is bound by their faculty of perception; she dies through them while they live through her. For this reason she is dragged along with all the perturbing impulses of the body.

Therefore, my brethren, let stillness be reckoned by you as greater than any other way of life. For by continual abiding in stillness the wandering thoughts are mortified along with empty recollections and deadly passions, since continual abiding within itself makes the intellect stronger than anything else. Thus it mightily defeats the thoughts, it destroys the memory of wrath, and it slays the passions through patience, whereas these very things are the ruin of the intellect and the death of the true man. There is nothing that destroys them like the weapon of stillness conjoined with the building up of instruction in the knowledge of the truth. For it is by knowledge that passions, sins, and vain thoughts (both those of the body and those of the soul) are separated from the soul. The passions of the body are as follows: the mouth's sense of taste, service of the belly, natural desire, the dissipation of pleasure and fornication, the laxity of sleep, and so forth. The passions of the intellect are: ignorance, forgetfulness,<sup>7</sup> conceit, and unbelief. The sins arising from the body of [those living] a lowly way of life are: envy, malice, hatred, wrath, boastfulness, vanity, pride, and insubmissiveness. These are extinguished by fasting, emaciation, vigil, bodily afflictions, and patience conjoined with fear of God. But the passions of the intellect are mortified by keeping distant from all things, by stillness, by love, and by the nurturing of the knowledge of the truth together with the edification of the word.<sup>8</sup>

The stillness of the body is the restriction of the body from wandering about. The stillness of knowledge is for a man to make himself distant from uninstructed<sup>9</sup> men and from the sight of many persons, and continually to abide in this knowledge alone. For such men continually drag us to an abased state, envelop us in dullness, and compel us to go forth from our intellects by their empty speech. They forcibly draw us toward their vain customs; they demand that we conform to their ways; and they enslave us to their laws. These things seem good to them, but they steal from us what is ours. It is impossible for us not to be enslaved to them as long as we are found in their proximity. Therefore withdrawal and stillness, more than anything else, are needed for our life.

This is not, however, so that we might give ourselves over to fasting beyond measure or to many unrestrained afflictions, but so that we might be assiduous in the building up of knowledge by means of persevering study of the word of light,<sup>10</sup> by insight into the mysteries of [created] natures, by the explanation of the [two] worlds, and by the narra-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. St. Isaac, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Or *going astray*.

<sup>8</sup> I.e. verbal instruction.

<sup>9</sup> I.e. men who are ignorant of spiritual matters. This word could also mean *strangers*.

<sup>10</sup> I.e. Scripture.

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tions of the Godhead's revelations together with all that builds up to knowledge of the new world. These are the works of the truth which compose the discipline of knowledge. For with fasting, vigil, and the labours of the body, knowledge knows how to order itself with the rules of wisdom, everything in measure and moderation. But to put it concisely: the entire discipline of knowledge is accomplished through withdrawal and stillness. Without these two a man will not be able to see himself. Indeed, this is the true foundation of the entire edifice of the works of knowledge and of all good disciplines; by stillness all the virtues are accomplished. For by stillness the intellect is collected from its vain wandering, the passions (which take the intellect captive) are deadened, a man's shameful devices perish, and the passions that kill him are destroyed. For the eye is at rest from the sight of many men who are engaged at every hour in vain affairs. The ear is at rest from hearing and from fruitless speech which every moment compels it to pay attention.<sup>11</sup> And by stillness the mind is set free from the vexation of the turmoil that continually assails it. A man becomes collected within himself and turns away from the distraction that lies outside of him. He returns from the captivity whereby he was forcibly carried off. Then little by little he begins to be enlightened and to perceive the good that lies in his own nature. Thus he is formed in the image of his Maker and he is made to resemble His beauty. The light of life dawns upon him; he sees his God; he discerns his Creator and rejoices over his Father. He is resurrected from the dead; he arises from the tomb; he returns from captivity; he is at rest from griefs; he is liberated from darkness and saved from the passions.

Now it is meet also that he be a partaker of faith, but by faith I mean the faith of knowledge, since faith has a distinction between inward and outward things. For a man to believe that God exists is not a great thing, because such faith is shared by all beings.<sup>12</sup> By the faith that Christ has come we are born again.<sup>13</sup> However, the faith of knowledge attains to God so as to ask and to seek from Him precious things that other men cannot even believe exist. Hereby a man becomes so firm and strong that nothing can shake him, because he reflects that, 'Good is He in Whom I believe, and true is He for Whose promise I sorely yearn, and He cannot be wanting, for He is the Fountainhead of all riches!'

We do not desire something that is not in our own nature, but something that we are, which is implanted in and given to us by the Bestower of all. Wisdom is one of the man of God's great members, as it were. Indeed, it is not acquired or revealed to a man without the experience of struggles, and that, only when he has embraced stillness and the patient endurance of struggles and temptations. When a man is liberated from the passions, then all his members begin to come to life, and especially that member which is wisdom, whereby he searches. By means of stillness a man is brought near to himself. And

<sup>11</sup> Or *draws it toward conversation*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jas. 2:19.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John 3:5.

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he brings his intellect to life by the annihilation of the passions, those which are destroyed by patient endurance. Then wisdom grows and becomes strong, and it searches out hidden things. It praises all the glories of the Holy Trinity. Wisdom distinguishes and declares the distinctions and diverse orders found in creation. [In such a manner] it truly exists, is revealed, and possessed [by a man].

But if a man considers only the struggles and the endurance of their afflictions, his thoughts will make the span of his endurance to seem very protracted to him, they will cause his struggle to appear very lengthy and to be immeasurable. This, however, belongs to the ignorance of those who have no experience of the discipline of stillness. For when the body passes some time in meagre living and changes its custom of taking much food, it is afflicted by the lack of those things which it had previously long enjoyed; but little by little it subdues and prevails upon its habit of eating much food. In just the same way a man who undertakes to perfect his soul in the knowledge of the truth by means of a glorious way of life will not be oppressed by his labours for long; but the longer he perseveres in stillness, the more his passions weaken; and the more his passions weaken, the more he becomes strong, recovers his health, and finds peace. Our Lord, indeed, plainly said the same thing with the words, 'A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the former anguish for the joy that a man is born into the world.'<sup>14</sup> The passions are afflictions,<sup>15</sup> for because a man is not free from the passions, the pains, illnesses and chastisements that are common to men befall him. But he is liberated from all these afflictions by deliverance from the passions which occurs in stillness through Christ's grace.

Continual stillness conjoined with the discipline of knowledge is not slow or tardy in bringing a man to rest in the harbour of life and joy. But the word of knowledge pertains to true nature and also belongs to truthful men.<sup>16</sup> I mean that as long as we are of one mind as regards the knowledge of God, we are supporters and sources of rest for one another, there is none among us who causes a hindrance, and the quiet in our assembly is not disturbed. This is because we are all one body and men of one mind, and all the members of the body are in agreement with one another, inasmuch as all look to one goal. Since one member resembles the other members, they will together compose, as it were, one man<sup>17</sup> in their common mind as regards the knowledge of God. For when we see one another, we see ourselves, because our image and our mould<sup>18</sup> are in each other; and we are supported by each other as we are supported by the knowledge of ourselves. Those,

<sup>14</sup> John 16:21.

<sup>15</sup> In Syriac this is the same word as *anguish* employed in the Gospel quotation.

<sup>16</sup> There are variant readings in the MSS for this sentence and many translations are possible.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rom. 12:4.

<sup>18</sup> Or *stamp, seal*.

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however, who are not men bearing our image and our likeness hinder us exceedingly in the knowledge of God. They do us much injury and cause us no little loss. They are not blameworthy, however, because they are ignorant. But we, who know what our wealth is, should depart into stillness so as to attend to our own lives. Albeit, if we prolong our association with the likes of these, our intellect will be enfeebled, our love will cool, our knowledge will be strangled, and we shall forget ourselves. Therefore it behooves us to know the path that befits our life and to journey in it without hindrance.

Now there is also another hateful thing that harms us and hinders us from attaining purity: the love of authority and power and of the praise of men. All these things are empty and vain, they are a deceitful hope and strong passions. They vex those especially who possess eloquence and a [venerable] appearance. It is not easy for us to find many men who have freed their will from these passions; it is a great thing, however, for a man to be liberated from them. Fornication, gluttony, sleep and all similar passions are readily suppressed by means of stillness and the building up of knowledge. But the love of authority and honour and vainglory are strong fetters, because the entire man is encased in and shrouded by them, he is distracted beyond measure and endlessly divided up. These are not passions which act upon us for a short time. They are fetters loosed only with difficulty; they are appendages of lordly and powerful men and lovers of honour who are engaged with the world. They can, however, be destroyed by whoever has no communion with their way of thinking.

Let us, then, the sons of light, destroy these passions in ourselves and cleanse our souls from the vanity of this world and all meditation upon its nocturnal phantasy. Our dominion, our honour and our authority are reserved for us on high by Jesus Christ in the presence of the worshipful Father. When we comprehend this, we shall cleanse our souls from these passions.

More than other beautiful things it is fitting that the love of Christ should abound in us. For the love of Christ is a fire, in very truth, whereby the passions of the soul are consumed, even as brushwood is consumed by a fiery blaze. It extinguishes anger, it puts an end to hatred, it holds envy in contempt, and it withers lust. The love of Christ destroys avarice, it abhors the love of glory, it gathers together into one the sons of light, it unites and fastens together its adherents, causes them to have concord among themselves, and makes them into one body. The love of Christ fashions them into a single image and causes them to dwell in one another; the love, I mean, which has stirred up the worlds with the desire of the vision of Him, that vision which is more desirable than all things. For the man who is deemed worthy to see Him, there no longer exists any adversary who can craftily draw him away from his desire, even until his will be accomplished in Him Who in light is entirely perfect. Let us, then, with our knowledge seek the realm of life

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and joy, lest perchance when we are loosed from this world we shall be like blind men who do not know whither they are going.

Now I have testified to you concerning all these things. From henceforth let no man trouble me, for I behold upon my members the bonds of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the world is dead to me.<sup>19</sup> Unto Him and to His Father and to the Holy Spirit be glory, honour, dominion, and majesty from the celestial powers and the denizens of earth, now and at all times and unto the ages of ages. Amen. Amen.