

A Recapitulation of the Three Degrees of Knowledge: St. Isaac the Syrian, c. AD 688



St. Isaac the Syrian, (c. AD 613- c.A.D. 700). Ordained Bishop of Nineveh. Great ascetic and teacher. illuminated monastic writer.

On the First Degree of Knowledge

When knowledge cleaves to the love of the body, it gathers up the following provisions: wealth, vainglory, [[honor]], adornment, rest of the body [[special means to guard the body's nature from adversities]], assiduity in rational wisdom, such as is suitable for the governance of the world and which gushes forth the novelties of inventions, the arts, sciences, [[doctrines]], and all other things which crown the body in this visible world. Among the properties of this knowledge belong those that are opposed to faith, which we have stated and enumerated above. This is called shallow knowledge, for it is naked of all concern for God. And because it is dominated by the body, it introduces into the mind an irrational impotence, and its concern is totally for this world. This measure

of knowledge does not reckon that there is any noetic power and hidden steersman over a man, nor any Divine care that shelters and takes concern for him. It takes no account of God's providential governance; but on the contrary, it attributes to a man's diligence and his methods every good thing in him, his rescue from what harms him, and his natural ability to avert the plights and many adversities that secretly and manifestly accompany our nature. This degree of knowledge presumes that all things are by its own providence, like those men who assert that there is no Divine governance of visible things. Nevertheless, it cannot be without continual cares and fear for the body. Therefore it is a prey to faintheartedness, sorrow, despair, fear of the demons, trepidation before men, the rumour of thieves and the report of murders, anxiety over illnesses, concern over want and the lack of necessities, fear of death, fear of sufferings, of wild beasts, and of other similar things that make this knowledge like a sea made turbulent by great waves at every hour of the night and day. For knowledge does not know how to cast its care upon God through the confident trust of faith in Him; wherefore in all things that concern it, it is constantly engaged in devising devices and clever contrivances. But when in some instance the modes of its contrivances prove fruitless, it strives with men as though they hindered and opposed it, since it does not see in this the mystical hand of providence.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree that uproots love, is implanted in this very knowledge. It investigates the small faults of other men and the causes thereof, and their weaknesses; and it arms a man for stubbornly upholding his opinion, for disputation, and aids him in cunningly employing devices and crafty contrivances and other means which dishonour a man. In this knowledge are produced and are found presumption and pride, for it attributes every good thing to itself, and does not refer it to God.

On the Second Degree of Knowledge

But when a man renounces the first degree and turns toward deep reflections and the love of the soul, then he practices the aforementioned good deeds with the help of his soul's understanding, in co-operation with the senses of his body, and in the light of his soul's nature. These deeds are: fasting, prayer, mercy, reading of the divine Scripture, the modes of virtue, battle with the passions, and the rest. For all these good things, all the various excellences seen in the soul and the wondrous means that are employed for serving in Christ's court ["Church of Christ" *in Syriac*] in this second degree of knowledge, are made perfect by the Holy Spirit through the action of its power. This knowledge makes straight the pathways in the heart which lead to faith, wherewith we gather supplies for our journey to the true age ["our true world" *in Syriac*]. But even so, this knowledge is still corporeal and composite; and although it is the road that leads us and speeds us on our way toward faith, yet there remains a degree of knowledge still higher than it. If it goes forward, it will find itself raised up by faith with the help of Christ, that is, when it has laid the foundation of its action on seclusion from men, reading the Scriptures, prayer, and the other good works by which the second degree of knowledge is made perfect. It is by this knowledge that all that is excellent is performed; indeed, it is called the knowledge of actions, because by concrete actions, through the senses of the body, it accomplishes its work on the external level.

On the Third Degree of Knowledge

Hear now how knowledge becomes more refined, acquires that which is of the Spirit, and comes to resemble the life of the unseen hosts which perform their liturgy not by the palpable activity of works, but through the activity accomplished in the intellect's mediation. When knowledge is raised above earthly things and the cares of earthly activities, and its thought begins to gain experience in inward matters which are hidden from the eyes; and when in part it scorns [[the recollections of]] things (whence the perverseness of the passions arises), and when it stretches itself

upward and follows faith in its solicitude for the future age, in its desire for what has been promised us, and in searching deeply into hidden mysteries: then faith itself swallows up knowledge, convert it, and begets it anew, so that it becomes wholly and completely spirit.

Then it can soar on wings in the realms of the bodiless and touch the depths of the unfathomable sea, musing upon the wondrous and divine workings of God's governance of noetic and corporeal creatures. It searches out spiritual mysteries that are perceived by the simple and subtle intellect. Then the inner senses awaken for spiritual doing, according to the order that will be in the immortal and incorruptible life. For even from now it has received, as it were in a mystery, the noetic resurrection as a true witness of the universal renewal of all things.

These are the three degrees of knowledge wherein is brought together a man's whole course in the body, in the soul, and in the spirit. From the time when a man begins to distinguish between good and evil until he takes leave of this world, his soul's knowledge journeys in these stages. The fullness of all wrong and impiety, and the fullness of righteousness, and the probing of the depths of all the mysteries of the Spirit are wrought by every movement, whether the intellect ascends or descends in good or in evil or in things midway between the two. The Fathers call these stages: natural, supranatural, and contranatural. These are the three directions in which the memory of a rational soul travels up or down, as has been said: when the soul works righteousness in the [confines of] nature, or when through her recollection she is caught away to a state higher than nature in the divine vision of God, or when she recedes from her nature to herd swine, as did that young man who squandered the wealth of his discretion and laboured for a troop of demons.

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The first degree of knowledge renders the soul cold to works that go in

pursuit of God [“of good things” *in Syriac*]. The second makes her fervent in the swift course on the level of faith. But the third is rest from labour, which is the type of the age to come, for the soul takes delight solely in the mind’s meditation upon the mysteries of the good things to come. But since a man’s nature is not yet completely elevated above the state of mortality and the burdensomeness of the flesh, and it is not yet perfected in the spiritual state that transcends the former erring state, it is unable to attain the perfection that knows no cessation in its liturgy, and while a man is in this world of deadness, he cannot entirely take leave of the flesh’s nature. So long as a man still abides in the nature of the flesh, he is in continual transition from one [state] to the other. At one time, as a poor man and a pauper, his soul performs her service in the second, middle degree, working virtue that is inherent in her nature by means natural to the body.

At another time, like those who have received the Spirit of adoption in the mystery of freedom, the soul enjoys the gift of the Spirit, given according to the beneficence of its Bestower, but afterward she again returns to the lowliness of her works, that is, those wrought by the body...

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