

# *Šapyuta* and its Meanings According to St. Isaac the Syrian

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**Abstract:** The present paper aims to research and to present the meanings of the Syriac technical term ܫܦܝܘܬܐ (*šapyuta*) in the writings of Isaac of Nineveh. Based on the Syriac texts of him, the study deepens the occurrences of *šapyuta* in diverse ascetical contexts, underlining its semantic and theological content. Isaac's use of *šapyuta* is also related to the usage made by other Syriac writers like Ephrem, John of Apamea and Joseph Hazzaya. The exposition of the difficulties to render *šapyuta* in the Greek translation from Mar Saba completes the approach to this key term for the Syriac spirituality, in which several plans of Syriac spiritual theology come together and connect with one another.

**Keywords:** *šapyuta*, *Isaac of Nineveh*, *limpidity*, *East-Syriac spirituality*, *ascetical terminology*, *ascetical anthropology*, *monasticism*

## **Introduction**

The term *šapyuta* has so far attracted the attention of European scholars and translators who have dealt with Syro-Oriental authors and who, coming across with this concept specific to Syro-Eastern Christian mysticism, have encountered difficulties in rendering it in modern languages. The first to dedicate a study to this term was Father Gabriel Bunge<sup>2</sup>. In the last century, starting from an apophthegm preserved in Syriac, the erudite monk and hermit of Eremo Sancta Croce tried to penetrate the meanings of the expression “place of limpidity” (ܫܦܝܘܬܐ ܕܫܦܝܘܬܐ – *atra d-šapyuta*). An extensive analysis of *šapyuta*, following a thorough investigation of the term in question and the expressions in which it appears in the

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel BUNGE, „Le «lieu de la limpidité». À propos d'un apophthegme énigmatique: Budge II, 494, in *Irénikon*, 45 (1982), pp. 7-18.

whole Syro-Eastern tradition, has recently been published<sup>3</sup>. In this study we aim to approach the term from the perspective of the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian, researching the main occurrences of *šapyuta* in all three collections of his writings<sup>4</sup> and deepening its contextual meanings<sup>5</sup>.

### ***1. The importance of a quasi-untranslatable term***

*Šapyuta* is a specific Syriac term commonly found in Syro-Oriental writings, used by some authors in a narrower and more technical sense, and by others with a more flexible meaning, not always easily distinguishable from the strictly technical meaning. Isaac of Nineveh belongs to the second category of authors, for whom, unlike others, such as Joseph Hazzaya, *šapyuta* is used in a wide variety of contexts, always retaining a semantic core irreducible to synonyms and untranslatable or difficult to render in other languages. Since *šapyuta* is found very often and in extremely varied contexts, it is involved in explaining many aspects of Syro-Eastern spirituality, and studying it introduces us to its mystery.

The absolute necessity of presenting in extenso the meanings of *šapyuta* and its use by Saint Isaac is also claimed by the absence of a satisfactory equivalent in European languages, an absence evidenced by the disconcerting diversity of translations that *šapyuta* has had to this day: γαλήνη, καθαρότης, ἐπιμέλεια, εὐλκρίνεια, ἀπλότης (Greek); limpidity, luminosity, luminous state, serenity, sincerity, transparency, smoothness (English); *limpidité, pureté, sérénité, netteté, transparence, luminosité, splendeur* (French); *Lauterkeit, Klarheit* (German);

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<sup>3</sup> Agapie CORBU, „Šapyuta. An Essential Term to the Syriac Spirituality. Significations and Usage”, in *Le Muséon* 135 (1-2) 2022, pp. 111-142.

<sup>4</sup> In the present study, we will abbreviate Isaac’ writings according to the established system in international research: ISAAC THE SYRIAN I = *Ascetical Homilies*: Mar ISAACUS NINIVITA, *De perfectione religiosa*, (ed.) P. Bedjan, Paris, Otto Harrassowitz, 1909 (Syriac text, hereinafter *BD*); critical edition of the Greek text: ΊΣΑΑΚ ΤΟῦ ΣΥΡΟΥ, *Λόγοι Ἀσκητικοί*, (ed.) Marcel Pirard, Holy Monastery of Iviron, Holy Mount Athos, 2012, a revised edition of the Greek critical text in Sfântul ISAAC SIRUL, *Cuvinte ascetice, Cuvintele I-XXX*, vol. 1, bilingual edition, intro., Romanian translation and comments by Hieromonk Agapie Corbu (*Philocalica Syriaca* 4), Ed. Sfântul Nectarie, Arad, 2022; ISAAC THE SYRIAN II = *Isaac of Nineveh, The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, ed. S. Brock (*CSCO* 555-556, Syr. 223-224), Peeters, Louvain, 1995; ISAAC THE SYRIAN, *KG = Gnostical Chapters*, Syriac text in Ms Oxford, Bodleian Library, syr. e 7, English translation by S. Brock in St ISAAC OF NINEVEH, *Headings on Spiritual Knowledge: The Second Part, Chapters 1-3* (Popular Patristics Series 63), St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2022 (Valentina Duca is currently working on a critical edition). ISAAC THE SYRIAN III = ISACCO DI NINEVEH, *Terza collezione*, (ed.) S. Chialà, (*CSCO* 637-638; Syr. 246-247), Peeters, Louvain, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> For a schematic approach to Isaac’s use of *šapyuta*, see Sfântul ISAAC SIRUL, *Cuvinte ascetice, Cuvintele I-XXX*, vol. 1., pp. LXXIII-LXXX.

*limpidezza* (Italian); *transparencia, limpieza* (Spanish), *luminozitate, limpezime* (Romanian), *prosvetlennost* (Russian).

## **2. Etymological background**

As usual, etymology helps us to understand some of the semantic fields that *šapyuta* opens up and on which its use is based. Our term is derived of the passive feminine participle ܫܦܝܘܬܐ (*šapyā*), formed by using the productive suffix ܫܦܝܘܬܐ - (-*uta*), used, especially since the IV-V centuries, in classical Syriac to create abstract terms<sup>6</sup>. The basic verb ܫܦܝܘܬܐ (*špa*) has meanings that begin at a very concrete level, generating a series of images that led to the appropriation of the term by the spiritual authors. Thus, *špa* has the primary meaning of “polishing wood, sanding it”, an action with a result whose image is found in the meaning of the passive participle: “polished”, “smooth”. Used in the field of liquids, the verb denotes the action of “clarifying the wine from the yeast”, from which the “clarified” bacchic liquid is obtained – an image also at the origin of borrowing the term to name the action of “cleansing from sin”. The passive participle *šapyā* will therefore have meanings that include the result of the aforementioned actions, namely: “polished”, “leveled”, “clear”, “transparent”, meanings which, transposed into the sphere of the soul, generate notions such as: “innocent”, “candid”, “unfeigned”, “simple”.

## **3. Šapyuta in the Development of a Spiritual Terminological Tradition**

Since St. Isaac the Syrian is part of a long spiritual tradition of authors who have used this term in various contexts, for a good understanding of its theological nuances in Isaac’s writings, we must also review some occurrences of *šapyuta* in authors who preceded and influenced his thinking.

First of all, limpidity was the main feature of man’s primordial state. John of Apamea shows that, after the fall, limpidity is again accessible to man through Christ<sup>7</sup>. This is why Isaac considers limpidity to be the natural state of the soul<sup>8</sup>. The state of limpidity ascetically regained in Christ is, in fact, a partaking of the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sebastian BROCK, „Diacronic Aspects of Syriac Word Formation: An Aid for Dating Anonymous Texts”, in *V Symposium Syriacum, 1988. Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 29-31 août 1988*, (ed.) R. LAVENANT, S.J. (OCA 236), Roma, 1990, p. 325.

<sup>7</sup> For a general perspective on John of Apamea’s use of *šapyuta*, see P. HARB, „Doctrine spirituelle de Jean le Solitaire (Jean d’Apamée)”, in *Parole de l’Orient*, 2, 2 (1971), *passim* and Rodrigue J. CONSTANTIN, *Passions, Virtue, and Moral Growth in John of Apamea’s Dialogues on the Soul*, Dissertation in Philosophy, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 2020, pp. 424-430.

<sup>8</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 1, 24; KG 3, 61. The same statement made by S. Brock: „In Isaac, *šapyuta* is the original state of the soul, a concept he derives from John the Solitary” (ISAAC OF NINEVEH, *The Second Part*, translation, p. 29, note 2.

limpidity of God. This idea is common to East-Syriac authors, the first to whom we can meet it being St. Ephraim the Syrian. In his Hymns we find expressions that speak of “the nature of the limpidity of God”<sup>9</sup>, or portray God as “the limpid One,” “the luminous One,”<sup>10</sup> or “an ocean of limpidity”<sup>11</sup>. St. Isaac uses these metaphors to express the Evagrian idea of the motionlessness of the divine nature, translating it into St. Ephraim’s metaphorical terms, when he shows that “the smoothness of the ocean”<sup>12</sup> of His nature’s peace is not disturbed by any contrariness on our part”<sup>13</sup>.

Limpidity is not, in the case of St. Isaac, a distinct stage in the spiritual ascent, as it appears well defined in Joseph Hazzaya, but neither is it confused with the stage of purity, respectively of the soul, during which limpidity is attained. A definition of *šapyuta* by A. Louf outlines some characteristics of limpidity in Isaac’s thinking:

Limpidité: état de l’âme ayant retrouvé sa nature créée originelle, d’avant la chute. Le degré d’innocence et de pureté ainsi acquis est plus conséquent que la simple pureté qui, elle, peut encore aller de pair avec la présence de passions ou de pensées, sous la forme de tentations ou de distractions ; ce que l’état de limpidité exclut totalement.<sup>14</sup>

Isaac the Syrian speaks of an inhabitation in the surroundings of limpidity and of a partial occupation of the lands of limpidity<sup>15</sup>, making a certain distinction between purity and limpidity from the perspective of spiritual knowledge, which the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. EFREM, *Contra haereses* 29, 4, 16: ܟܝܢܐ ܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܟܝܢܐܝܬܐ – *kyana d-šapyuteh d-alaha* (*Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrischen Hymnen contra Haereses*, edited/translated by E. Beck (CSCO, 169-170; Syr., 76-77), Louvain, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> In Syriac ܟܝܢܐ – *šapyta*. This is how it is used in St. Ephraim’s hymns: *De azymis* 11, 25; *De Eccl.* 29, 1; 32, 1; 51, 3; *De ieiunio* 1, 3; *De Nativitate* 1, 82; 3, 8; 4, 65; *apud* BROCK, „Comment les cœurs purs verront Dieu: saint Éphrem et quelques auteurs syriaques”, in *Le visage de Dieu dans le patrimoine oriental*, vol. I, Antélias, 2001, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> EPHRAIM, *De virginitate* 15, 3: ܟܝܢܐ ܟܝܢܐ – *yama šapyta*, in *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syriers Hymnen de Virginitate*, herausgegeben/übersetzt von E. Beck (CSCO, 223-224; Syr., 94-95), Louvain, 1962.

<sup>12</sup> In Syriac, ܟܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ – *šapyut yama*.

<sup>13</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 10, 23.

<sup>14</sup> A. LOUF, „Glossaire”, in ISAAC LE SYRIEN, *Œuvres spirituelles - II. 41 Discours récemment découverts* (*Spiritualité orientale* 81), French translation by André Louf, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, Bégrolles-en-Mauges, 2003, p. 85. The definition is taken up by M. Pirard in his Introduction to ISAAC LE SYRIEN, *Discours ascétiques*, French translation of Archim. Placide Deseille, Introduction and corrections by Marcel Pirard, Cerf, Paris, 2020, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ISAAC THE SYRIAN KG 3, 64.

monk reaches only through the latter<sup>16</sup>. In doing so, he foreshadows Joseph Hazzaya's clear distinctions between purity and limpidity<sup>17</sup>, states which the authors prior to Isaac did not distinguish terminologically very well<sup>18</sup>.

#### 4. The „Place of Limpidity” (ܫܘܒܘܬܐ ܕܫܘܒܘܬܐ – *atra d-šapyuta*)

A specifically Syriac formulation for spiritual states is one in which the noun ܫܘܒܘܬܐ (*atra*), “place”, equivalent for some authors to “stage”, is used. St. Isaac, avoiding definitive and rigid classifications, speaks of the “limpid place” as an experience of prayer, equivalent to “clean place of the nature,” a moment when the man is

“like in the new world, drunk with God in everything that man does. Some remain in delectation and resting of struggle for days on end. [...] Every single time he stays in this grace, the hermit does not need to follow neither the religious service, nor the prayers, neither the readings, nor any other rules established for creatures, for this grace does not depend on his will.”<sup>19</sup>

This grace is lived as a “divine sweetness” and only a few monastics get to taste it, and it represents “the crossing over from the land of the passions to luminosity and to the stirrings of freedom.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 4, 2: “Purity is a stripping off of the passions; limpidity is a stripping off of opinions and a transformation of thinking to the exact knowledge of the mysteries.”

<sup>17</sup> Distinctions highlighted by Joseph Hazzaya's translators: „Ziel der Stufe der Seelenhaftigkeit und zugleich Eintritt in die Stufe der Geisthaftigkeit, die sich „von da an und darüber hinaus“ erstreckt. Die Läuterung der Seele führt zur Lauterkeit des Intellektes, der in ihr wohnt, wie in einem Tempel, wie die Reinigung des Leibes zur Reinheit der Seele führt, da die Seele den Leib als ihr Haus bewohnt” (G. BUNGE in Rabban JAUSEP HAZZAYA, *Briefs über Das Geistliche Leben und verwandte Schriften*, introduction and translation by Gabriel Bunge, Paulinus-Verlag, Trier, 1982; 2nd Edition revised in the collection *Paradies Der Väter – Schriften Syrischer Mystiker*, edited by Schiarchimandrite Gabriel Bunge, Grigory Kessel and Gerd Vatter, Beuron Kunstverlag, Beuron, 2020, p. 288); „Šapyuta, “limpidezza”, è lo scopo della tappa psichica e l'accesso alla tappa spirituale, che si estende da qui in avanti. La purificazione dell'anima conduce alla limpidezza dell'intelletto, che in essa abita come in un tempio, come la purificazione del corpo conduce alla purezza dell'anima, siccome l'anima abita nel corpo come nella sua dimora” (V. Lazzeri in GIUSEPPE HAZZAYA, *Le tappe della vita spirituale*, introduction, translation and notes by Valerio Lazzeri, Edizioni Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, Magnano, 2011 pp. 188-189).

<sup>18</sup> G. BUNGE, „Le «lieu de la limpidité»“, pp. 10-11.

<sup>19</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 4, 25, 56.

<sup>20</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 35, 11. Syriac: ܫܘܒܘܬܐ ܕܫܘܒܘܬܐ ܕܫܘܒܘܬܐ ܕܫܘܒܘܬܐ ܕܫܘܒܘܬܐ ܕܫܘܒܘܬܐ.

### 5. The Limpidity and the Cognitive Faculties of the Soul<sup>21</sup>

#### a. Limpidity of Thinking (ܠܫܘܬܐ ܕܬܘܪܐ – *šapyuta d-tar'ita*)<sup>22</sup>

Isaac, like other Syro-Eastern authors, uses the term *šapyuta* with adjectival value in addition to various nouns pertaining to ascetical anthropology. Thus, “limpidity of thinking” is the foundation of faith and hope in God, through which the power of God overshadows (ܠܫܘܬܐ – *magen*) the hermit into all spiritual perception<sup>23</sup>. The perception of spiritual shadow is also the feeling of God’s “wonderful gift of mercy”, felt “only in the limpidity of the thinking”<sup>24</sup>, which, although pertaining to the discursive-logical part of the soul, is nevertheless “above the word<sup>25</sup>” and is realized in the “light of the thought” (ܠܫܘܬܐ ܕܪܝܘܬܐ – *nuhra d-re'yana*).<sup>26</sup> The verb ܠܫܘܬܐ (*agen*), used by Isaac to denote divine overshadowing in the limpidity of the thinking, comes from the root ܠܫܘܬܐ (*gnn*), the root underlying the important technical term *maggnanuta*. This term designates a divine work of either sanctification (for example, of the Holy Eucharistic Offerings) or protection, being translated into Greek as χάρις, “grace”.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, the phrase “limpidity of thinking” expresses both the workings of the grace in the mind and the spiritual state resulting from the it<sup>28</sup>. The same goes for the other expressions built with *šapyuta*. The absence of thoughts from thinking is also

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<sup>21</sup> To render these terms into English we have adopted the same options as Valentin VESA (*Knowledge and experience in the Writings of St. Isaac of Nineveh*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, NJ, 2018, p. 131, note 45). Also in the context of St. Isaac’s theology, the terminology of the cognitive faculties was presented by Valentin (Benedict) Vesa, from the perspective of their role in spiritual knowledge, in „The doctrine of knowledge and the cognitive powers in Isaac of Niniveh”, *Altarul Reîntregirii* 1 (2017): 7-32.

<sup>22</sup> This Syriac term received a lot of equivalences in the Greek translation of the First Part: δίανοια, φρόνημα, νοῦς, καρδία, συνείδησις, ἐνθυμήσεις, ἔννοια. Modern translators rendered it as follows: Engl. thinking, mentality, thought, mind, intelligence; Fr. *conscience*; It. *conscienza*, *intelligenza*, *ragionamento*; Rom. *cuget*, *conștiință*, *înțelegere*, *inteligență*.

<sup>23</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *BD* 526, 8. Trans. gr. in I, 63, 50. where *šapyuta* is rendered by καθαρότητα.

<sup>24</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 2, 38.

<sup>25</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN III, 13, 11.

<sup>26</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN III, 13, 12.

<sup>27</sup> S. BROCK, *Maggnanuta*: “A Technical Term in East Syriac Spirituality and its Background”, in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont. Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux (Cahiers d'Orientalisme, 20)* (ed.) R.-G. Coquin, Geneva, 1988, pp. 121-123.

<sup>28</sup> The same verb is used by John of Dalyatha to show the descent of grace upon the monk (ܠܫܘܬܐ ܕܪܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܫܘܬܐ), Descent accompanied by spiritual perceptions (*Omilia* 6, 3 in JEAN DE DALYATHA, *Les Homilies I-XV*, critical edition of the Syriac text, translation, introduction and notes by N. Khayyat, *Sources syriaques* 2, Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales, Antonine Antélias University, 2007).

called by St. Isaac by the syntagm “limpidity of thinking”, which, along with the fulfillment of God’s commandments, leads the monk to know from experience the deep truths contained in the Holy Scriptures<sup>29</sup>. We must note the constant misunderstanding by the ancient Greek translators of St. Isaac of the expression “limpidity of thinking”, which generated the approximate translation “simplicity of thought” (ἀπλότητα τῆς διανοίας<sup>30</sup>). Note that, due to the fluidity of meanings that *šapyuta* has in the writings of St. Isaac, the expression “limpidity of thinking” is sometimes, for him, synonymous with the “purity of heart”, since “purity of heart is a limpid thinking without struggles”<sup>31</sup>.

**b. Limpidity of the Thought (ܠܡܝܕܝܘܬܐ – *šapyut re’yana*)<sup>32</sup>**

The expression “limpidity of the thought” denotes, for Isaac, the state in which, once arrived, the hermit will be able to read without being harmed at all any book, even worldly, as well as in the state of soul’s limpidity<sup>33</sup>. The state of thought’s limpidity can be attained only in the hesychast retreat, because this “makes us partakers of the godlike Mind” (ܡܕܝܬܐ – *mad’a*) and brings us closer, “in a short time and without any impediments, to the limpidity of the thought.”<sup>34</sup> The state of limpidity of the thought is a condition for receiving the workings of the Holy Spirit<sup>35</sup>. When the soul has got into the state of limpidity (ܠܡܝܕܝܘܬܐ – *eštapyat napša*) the monk’s mind becomes extremely sensitive to the workings of the grace: “when encountering some subject about God, in that moment the thought (ܠܡܝܕܝܘܬܐ) is compelled to silence, and it arises in it a spiritual fervor and a quiet, amazed love.”<sup>36</sup> The thought that has been enlightened (ܠܡܝܕܝܘܬܐ ܝܘܨܐ – *nhar re’yana*) becomes aware of its own limpidity and

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<sup>29</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 3, 99: “One thing is the education [drawn] from books and the knowledge gained from exercise in them, and another is the knowledge of the truth of the books. The former is consolidated through extensive study and laborious learning, the latter arises from the practice of the commandments, and limpid thinking directed to God.”

<sup>30</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN I, 63, 81.

<sup>31</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 4, 33.

<sup>32</sup> The Greek translation of the Isaac’s *First Collection* renders the Syriac *re’yana* by φρόνημα and δίανοια; Its modern translations are: Engl. mind, thought; Fr. *pensée, esprit*; It. *pensiero, opinione, riflessione*; Rom. *gândire, opinie, gând*.

<sup>33</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 4, 72; II, 1, 44.

<sup>34</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 2, 31.

<sup>35</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 2, 90.

<sup>36</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN III, 4, 24.

remains in the peace of heart<sup>37</sup>. Perhaps it was precisely this connection between the limpidity of the thought and the monk's ability to reach the spiritual meaning of Scripture that was the basis for the translation of the Syriac phrase "limpidity of the thought" (ܠܡܝܕܘܬܐ ܕܠܒܐ – *šapyut re'yana*) into ancient Greek, through a surprising construction: "diligence of mind" (ἐπιμέλεια τοῦ νοῦ)<sup>38</sup>. In fact, St. Isaac shows that the spiritual reading of Scripture is the ascetical work through which the thought becomes clear, thanks to the light received from the biblical words.<sup>39</sup>

**c. Limpidity of the Mind (ܠܡܝܕܘܬܐ ܕܠܒܐ – *šapyut mad'a*)<sup>40</sup>**

At a superior level of depth, according to Syriac ascetical anthropology, the mind or "the understanding" – as ܠܡܝܕܘܬܐ (*mad'a*) is also translated – also reaches limpidity, a state in which the monk can contemplate the divine mysteries<sup>41</sup>. One of the ways to achieve limpidity of the Mind is to meditate on "the wondrous words set out in the Odes which are appointed in the Holy Church", meditation that brings the hermit close to "to the luminosity of mind and wonder at God."<sup>42</sup> The mind can be characterized by limpidity when it is thoughtless and stripped of passions<sup>43</sup>, spiritual state followed by the purification of the heart. For Isaac, the heart is the last to reach limpidity, behind all the other cognitive faculties of the soul, which "are easily purified, but also easily defiled." But the heart which has been purified and reached limpidity, does not easily lose this state<sup>44</sup>.

**6. The relationship between asceticism and limpidity**

Limpidity is also used by Isaac to characterize various ascetical works, which, as we have shown in the etymological analysis of the term, have, for Syrians, precisely the role of "smoothing" the soul, therefore bringing it into the state of limpidity, by removing the roughness and growths of the passions. Asceticism therefore aims to

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<sup>37</sup> SIMON TAYBUTEH, *On the Division of the Stages* (in MINGANA, *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies VII, Cambridge, 1934), Syriac text, p. 293, col. 2; English translation, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Syriac text in *BD* 113, 10, Greek translation in I, 8, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG* 4, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Rendered in Greek through νοῦς, διάνοια or ἐννοια; other modern translations: Fr. *entendement, esprit*; It. *mente*; Rom. *minte, înțelegere, inteligență*.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. ISAAC THE SYRIAN I, 128, 11.

<sup>42</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 21, 7: ܠܡܝܕܘܬܐ ܕܠܒܐ ܠܡܝܕܘܬܐ ܕܠܒܐ (šapyuta d-mad'a w-tehra da-b-alaha).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. ISAAC THE SYRIAN I, 21, 13-17.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. ISAAC THE SYRIAN *BD* 29, 4-14; I, 3, 192-207.



help the monk to return, by grace, to the original state, identified with that of limpidity, a state devoid of passionate additions and irregularities.

Thus, we find the phrase “limpid ascetical practice” (ܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܦܘܠܗܢܐ – *pulhana šapyta*), explained by Isaac in an extensive passage where he tells us that one of the kinds of spiritual work of the mind (ܠܘܡܢܐ – *hawna*) is the “knowledge of the limpid ascetical practice”,<sup>45</sup> which is accomplished only in God. The “limpid practice” goes through three stages before it reaches its fullness: at first, the practice is “opaque”, but gradually “it becomes luminous. Just as it happens in the case of certain of trees, where their sweetness comes from 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 (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܦܘܠܗܢܐ).<sup>46</sup> “The limpid ascetical practice of the mind” (ܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܕܡܕܐ – *šapyut pulhana d-mad’a*) is a particular case of the expression already presented, denoting a spiritual work of the mind attained, according to St. Isaac, by killing the memory of the world and through “the remembrance of good things”<sup>47</sup>.

By this understanding of ascetical practice as gradual removal of the passions and as gradual impartation with limpidity, we can also grasp the other expressions in which *šapyuta* is joined to various terms denoting ascetical works. We mention here expressions such as “luminous stirrings”<sup>48</sup> “luminous love”<sup>49</sup>, “luminosity of the thoughts”<sup>50</sup>, “limpid thoughts”<sup>51</sup>, “limpid faith”<sup>52</sup> and “limpidity of mercy”<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 10, 1: ܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܕܦܘܠܗܢܐ – (*ida ‘ta d-pulhana šapyta*).

<sup>46</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 10, 2.

<sup>47</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN III, 1, 6.

<sup>48</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 9, 11: ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ – (*zaw’e šapye*).

<sup>49</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN, II, 10, 34, 35: ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ (*huba šapyta*). This clear love cannot be attained ascetically, but is a divine gift, and must be distinguished from the mere natural attribute of the soul which, Saint Isaac points out, can be found in some brothers and sisters without being a state coming from the divine grace (*cf. KG IV, 71*).

<sup>50</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 10, 31; 21, 8; *KG II, 59*: ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ – *šapyuta d-hušabe*. Limpidity of thought is also a criterion for appreciating and choosing a particular form of asceticism (*cf. ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 31, 4*).

<sup>51</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *KG 3, 29*: ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ – *hušabe šapye*.

<sup>52</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN II, 19, 4: ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ – *šapyut haymanuta*.

<sup>53</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN *BD 84, 16*: ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ – *šapyut d-mrahmanuta*. Translated into Greek as: τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης ἢ ἀκρίβεια, “precision of mercy” (*I, 6, 83*). Another equivalent expression is ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ, “limpidity that comes from the abundance of mercy” (*BD 85, 1*). In Greek the term ܘܦܘܠܗܢܐ was omitted. St. Isaac also states that, when united, faith and mercy quickly lead to limpidity (*BD 95, 4*).

### 7. Šapyuta in the Greek translation of the Ascetical Homilies of Isaac of Nineveh

As regards the translation of *šapyuta* into European languages, I have already pointed out the great diversity of equivalences this term possesses. Behind this disconcerting variety hides, in fact, the effort, without much success, to find in European languages a signifier that is suggestive and nuanced enough to address the richness of *šapyuta*'s meanings. The difficulty, if not the inability, of European languages in rendering *šapyuta* satisfactorily is paradigmatically illustrated by the ancient Greek translation of Isaac's *First Part*. The ancient Greek translators of St. Isaac not only did not find a satisfactory equivalent for *šapyuta*, but apparently were not even interested in finding it, as they do not seem to have grasped the new meaning that this Syriac term generates when it appears in phrases such as "limpidity of soul", "limpid ascetical practice", "limpid meditation", etc. All these syntagms were rendered by them through formulas already existing in Greek and perfectly intelligible to Byzantine readers. It is obvious that the Greek translators of St. Isaac did not understand these expressions as having a new, unitary meaning, different from the meaning of each word taken separately, and therefore they translated them erroneously, thus generating false meanings, in which each term retains its own semantic individuality.

In doing so, Greek translators "naturalized," that is, Hellenized and Byzantinized everything that was foreign to their understanding, by levelling the Syriac text down and losing countless nuances<sup>54</sup>. Thus, *šapyuta*, as a term with its own semantic universe, remains absent in the Greek translation of St. Isaac, because of the translators' effort to fit into the horizon of expectation of the Byzantine reader, whose lexical and doctrinal sensibilities they wanted to spare, but at the cost of sacrificing some of the specifically Syriac nuances of St. Isaac's text and teaching. They avoided any neologisms, such as *šapyuta*, and preferred to render them in terms already existing in Greek.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, the introduction into Greek Philokalical terminology, and hence into European languages, of this Syriac Philokalical term, new to the Byzantines, old to the Syrians, was missed, and with it was lost for many centuries the possibility of expressing high and thin experiences, for which Greek still has no distinct term<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> S. BROCK, „Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba”, în Joseph PATRICH (ed.), *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, Peeters, Leuven, 2001, p. 206; Vezi și Marcel PIRARD, *Introducere* la ΙΣΑΑΚ ΤΟΥ ΣΥΡΟΥ, *Λόγοι Ασκητικοί*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Marcel PIRARD, „Critical Edition of the Greek Version of «The Ascetic Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian» (Monastery of Iviron, 2012), în vol. *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy*, p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> As evidenced by the equivalences prudently chosen by the Greek scholar Nestor Kavvadas in his Modern Greek translation of the *Second Part* (ΙΣΑΑΚ ΤΟΥ ΣΥΡΟΥ, *Ασκητικά*,

### **Conclusions**

For Isaac the Syrian, as for the entire Syro-Eastern spiritual tradition, the term *šapyuta* refers to a certain spiritual experience. The use of the concept of clarity in various forms and contexts – as a noun, as an adjective, and in combination with different terms of ascetical anthropology – has enabled us to trace some characteristics of the place of this technical term in the theology of the best-known Syriac mystic. At the same time, we were able to frame his teaching on clarity in the context of spiritual writers of the same tradition. Thus, we have shown on the basis of textual analysis that Isaac, with regard to clarity, makes some additional clarifications to John of Apamea, but does not systematize it as Joseph Hazzaya would later do.

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vol. B1, B2, B3, Ed. Thesbitis, Thyra, 2006), where *šapyuta* is rendered, cautiously, with the same well-known nouns καθαρότητα and γαλήνη. The terminological precautions of Nestor Kavvadas can be understood if we consider that this book, well received in the Orthodox monastic world, nevertheless aroused some criticism among the hyper-Orthodox zealots of Greek theological scholasticism, who hastened to call it “pseudepigraph and Nestorian” and demanded, in the most inquisitorial style, “its withdrawal from the market and the melting down of all specimens” (Ioannis ΦΩΤΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, „Αββάς Ισαάκ ο Σύρος, ο «αδικημένος» Άγιος”, in *Orthodoxos Typos*, no. 1659/06.10, 2006, pp. 1-2; no. 1660/13.10.2006, p. 1; no. 1661/20.10.2006, pp. 1-2; no. 1662/27.10.2006, pp. 1-2, ideas taken over by Fotopoulos in the book with the same title, published in 2010 at Ed. Tinos). This fundamentalist and theologically illiterate position, in contrast to all scientific research, which firmly concluded that Syro-Eastern theology “respects the integrity of divinity and humanity and admits no hint of Nestorianism” (Wilhelm BAUM, DIETMAR W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, Routledge, 2003, p. 30). For the criticism of this position, vide Pr. Georgian PĂUNOIU, *Asceza și îndumnezeirea omului în opera Sfântului Isaac Sirul*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2019, p. 90, note 341.