

Preaching *Apokatastasis*: St. Isaac the Syrian and the Grammar of the Kingdom

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How do we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as *good news*, as news that converts, liberates, and deifies sinners? One answer immediately comes to mind – tell the biblical story. Yet there are many ways to tell this story, and some of them most decidedly do not convert, liberate, and deify. We need a grammatical rule. Underlying the argument of my essay is a simple premise: *how we understand the conclusion of the gospel story necessarily informs and shapes how we tell that story from its beginning*.

If we believe that the final destiny of human beings is ultimately determined by the historical choices they make, we will focus our homiletical energies on persuading our hearers to believe in Jesus, act righteously, and avoid sin. In this case, Moses becomes our model of sound preaching:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long

in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deut. 30:15–18, RSV)

All that the Christian preacher adds to the Mosaic exhortation is a note of eschatological finality.

But if our faith is determined by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and thus by the final future that he freely grants, a different kind of preaching opens to us. Hope anticipates the Savior's fulfillment of his promises and therefore authorizes the preacher to proclaim the gospel as good and liberating news. In the name of the risen Lord, by the power of his Spirit, the preacher declares the paschal promises. The sermon or homily becomes an eschatological gift and a salvific event.

St Isaac the Syrian and Apokatastasis

The seventh-century bishop and ascetic writer St. Isaac the Syrian is celebrated as, above all, a mystical theologian of divine love. He delights in speaking of the unconditional love of God. No doubt this is why his discourses have captured the hearts of so many believers over the centuries. As Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev writes, "In Isaac's understanding, God is above all immeasurable and boundless love. The conviction that God is love dominates Isaac's thought: it is the source of his theological opinions, ascetical recommendations, and mystical insights."¹ The love of the Creator fills the heart of this great ascetic with wonder and awe, inciting him to rhapsodic praise:

What profundity of richness, what mind and exalted wisdom is God's! What compassionate kindness and abundant goodness belongs to the Creator! ...In love did He bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during this its temporal existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these

¹ Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 35–36.

things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised (2.38.1–2).²

The world begins in love, is ordered, maintained, and sustained in love, and concludes in love. The divine love is absolute, unconditional, unmerited, gratuitous, extravagant, prodigal. It has as its object every human and angelic being, the righteous and the wicked. St. Isaac is clear: no one is “to the front or to the back of God’s love,” since God has a “single equal love” for saint and sinner alike (2.38.2).

Any suggestion that God might, in response to sin, alter his attitude toward rational beings compromises divine immutability and destroys the Love that God is. God is not a creature: he does not live in time, he is not affected by the events of history, and he is not subject to the passions. “In the mind of the Creator,” Isaac explains, “there exists a single even intention with respect to all rational beings, and there exists with Him a single love and compassion which is spread out over all creation, (a love) which is without alteration, timeless and everlasting” (2.40.1). This divine love precedes God’s creation of the world and does not change in response to the actions of his creatures; it preveniently embraces both the righteous and the unrighteous. “God has a single caring concern for those who have fallen, just as much as for those who have not fallen” (2.40.3).

If the omnibenevolent Deity is so promiscuous and indiscriminate in his love, what then of his justice? Isaac famously replies, “Do not call God just, for His justice is not manifest in the things concerning you” (1.51.250).³ How can we call God just, when we see the owner of the vineyard giving the same wages to those who worked the entire day and to those who

² Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part*, ed. and trans. Sebastian Brock (Peeters: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1995). Parenthetical citations of quotes from Isaac the Syrian beginning with Arabic numeral 2 are from the above source and translation; parenthetical citations beginning with Arabic numeral 1 are from the collection of homilies cited in footnote 3, below.

³ Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, rev. 2nd ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011).