

**THE SOUL'S POWERS AND THE PROCESS OF
KNOWLEDGE IN THE WRITINGS OF SIMON TAIBUTEH:
BETWEEN ANATOMY AND SPIRITUALITY**

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ABSTRACT. In the line of the ascetical tradition, the knowledge of God is the very aim of spiritual life. Divine knowledge is possible, on the one hand, because of God's revelation and, on the other hand, due to human's anatomical and spiritual structure. Thus, one may find specific cognitive powers of the body and, in correspondence, of the soul, that stand at the very basis of the process of knowledge, worldly or spiritual. Simon Taibuteh is one of the mystical writers of the East Syriac Church who, having also a medical education, describes spiritual life and, in consequence, divine knowledge, using an anatomic terminology next to the anthropological-theological language, specific to his religious community. His special merits focus on the endeavour of creating bridges between these two domains and, eventually, of describing the soteriological itinerary as a process of healing both physically and spiritually. He is an example of the medical preoccupation in the monastic communities. This paper is divided into three sections, following a general short introduction, dealing firstly with the process of knowledge as described by the author himself, then a synthesis of the way of using the concept "powers of the soul" by some representative Syriac authors, and, finally, the use of the same concept in Simon's writings and the way he involves them in the very process of knowledge.

Keywords: knowledge, soul's powers, cognitive faculties, Simon Taibuteh, East Syriac Church.

According to the Patristic tradition, the process of divine knowledge is the very aim of the spiritual life. It is based on two aspects – the divine revelation, that is a free gift from above, on the one hand, and the anthropologic structure, in the image of God, which pertains to participating to God's life, on the other hand.

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And next to the two elements one finds it necessary to underline the ascetic participation of human, as an affirmative answer to God's initiative.

Regarding the concept of knowledge, the ascetical tradition deals quite differently from the manner in which it is interpreted in the Post-Cartesian thought. Serafim Sepälä, using an Aristotelian division, argues that the modern understanding of the concept is quantitative and needs criteria for verification, that the process of knowledge deals with the content of knowing and questions its basis and premises, while in the mystics' case, knowledge is experiential/empirical and spiritual by its nature, it goes beyond ordinary contents and the way of knowing is qualitative¹. Knowledge is considered experiential, for it is connected to experiences that occur suddenly, and spiritual (mystical), since these are interpreted as being of divine origin. To briefly explain this difference, we may refer to a short fragment where Isaac of Niniveh deals with this process. Ascetic exercises are able to generate a state over passions, physical mortification or silence of thoughts, but they are not able to produce mystical knowledge. He emphasizes that knowledge is not the result of investigation: "By zealous efforts and human thoughts no one can imagine that he has found knowledge; this happens by spiritual power² so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any thoughts of his soul, nor of those things which present themselves to his senses; neither does he use them nor he is acquainted with them"³.

The second observation refers to the cognitive finality. The process of divine knowledge aims to the Ultimate Truth, ultimate realities, beyond the ordinary level. In particular, we refer to God's works in creation, his revelations, and not his essence. This knowledge is simple, without any psychological intervention or the mind's imaginative function.

From an epistemological point of view, this implies two elements: the object and the way. While the Ultimate Truth is hardly definable, the object refers to God as revealed in creation, in Scriptures and in different spiritual forms of revelation, and the way points directly to intuitive methods, rather than discursive ones. This is why, sometimes, the concept "knowledge" is rendered with "understanding". Based on this, one can argue that, from an epistemological point of view, mystical knowledge goes beyond what is naturally called knowledge.

¹ Serafim Sepälä, "The idea of knowledge in East Syrian mysticism", *Studia Orientalia* 101 (2007): 265-277, here 266.

² *ܟܘܨܘܣܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ*.

³ A.J. Wensinck, ed., *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Niniveh translated from Bedjan's Syriac text with the introduction and registers* (Wiesbaden: Nieuwe Reeks Deel XXIII.1, 1969 (abbr. I), I.19, 105; (Mar Isaacus Ninivita, *De perfectione religiosa* (Paris-Leipzig: 1909)/ (abbr. B, 155), I.6, 84 (B, 124). See also Isaac of Niniveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO 224-225 (Lovanii: In aedibus Peeters, 1995) (abbr. II), II.18, 20.

The patristic authors admit both ways of knowing, discursive as well as intuitive, only that the latter one represents a superior level of the former and it is its very aim. Even mystical knowledge has a descriptive content, but it is part of what one may call "knowledge of philosophers". The former is more reflexive and constituted; it "handles" information, while the latter is immediate, internalized, personal and active, and "is produced" by inspiration, revelation.

The process of knowledge at Simon Taibuteh

Going one step further, we will deal in this paper with one representative author – Simon Taibuteh – in particular in reference to the gnoseological process, described at the interference between theological anthropology and medicine, the author under discussion having a profound theological education as well as deep medical knowledge.

Simon Taibuteh⁴ lived in the time of Patriarch Henanisho I and most probably died in 680. He was contemporary with Isaac of Niniveh and Dadisho Qatraya. He is one of the important spiritual and theological personalities of the East Syriac Church. A particular importance of this author comes from the fact that he was also a physician and, in consequence, he tried to scientifically explain the different powers / faculties of the soul in their relation to the body in the process of asceticism and, in particular, in the process of knowledge. He was educated in the medical science in the line of Hippocrates and Galen and the methodology professed by him referred to the knowledge of healing both the body and the soul.

The first thing to point out is that Simon divides knowledge into six parts. The first one he calls "first natural knowledge", acquired by means of scientific investigation in good or evil things. It is interesting to observe that he calls knowledge both the positive process and the negative one, in reference to the content. He makes a terminological differentiation between the former– the natural knowledge and the latter– unnatural knowledge (the Greek "defective knowledge", or "ignorance"), which is considered to have deviated from the right path – inclination towards evil, entangled with passions. The second stage is called "the second natural knowledge", characterised by a moral life, and it occurs within the moral and ethical sphere. The third rank refers to the "intelligible knowledge" or "theory". This latter one envisages the spiritual content of the corporeal natures, physical beings. The spiritual function of creation is the very content of this type

⁴ For his works see: *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibuteh*, Woodbrooke Studies VII (Cambridge, 1934); Simone di Taibuteh, *Violenza e grazia: la coltura del cuore*, Collana di testi patristici 102 (Roma: Città Nuova, 1992).

of knowledge. The “spiritual theory” is the fourth type of knowledge and pertains to the spiritual contemplation of the un-bodily beings, that are angels and the spiritual beings. The fifth rank pertains to the knowledge of the next world. Lastly, the sixth stage is called “un-knowledge” and implies a kind of super-knowledge that describes the unification in grace with God. The excerpt below indicates the place where Simon deals at large with these six gnoseological ranks⁵:

The natural knowledge which is implanted in the nature of our creation is the one which grows and is illuminated by good things and it is also the one which, inclining towards evil things, becomes entangled, through the works which are outside nature, in the passions of the material world... This knowledge is called “the knowledge that is outside nature”. The same is also one which is conscious of the rational character that it possesses, and by its will makes use of the affairs of the world in the measure of its need; and when it flees from idolatry and does with understanding the good things that are inscribed in its heart... it is then called by the Fathers “the second natural knowledge”. It is also the one which becomes clear, illuminated and spiritual and contemplates in an intelligible way the spiritual powers who accompany the lower corporeal natures and work in them and in the hidden actor that acts in them. It is then called “the intelligible knowledge found in the lower corporeal natures”. When it becomes pure and shining, it contemplates, by means of theory, the spiritual and un-corporeal natures and the performance of their service. It is then called “the spiritual theory concerning the spiritual beings who are above”. When it has attained a high degree of penetration and been raised by grace, and mercy has been poured upon it, its theory becomes conscious of the hidden power of the adorable Essence of the Holy Trinity. It is then called “the knowledge of the truth of the next world”. The same kind of knowledge is sometimes swallowed up in grace in a way that is above nature and it becomes no-knowledge, because it is higher than knowledge⁶.

⁵ See also the division of knowledge at Isaac of Niniveh: knowledge against nature – subject to passions, according to nature – virtuous life, secondary natural contemplation – contemplation of God in creation, primary natural contemplation – contemplation of the spiritual powers, supernatural knowledge (true knowledge; Spiritual knowledge) – theoria (divine vision), un-knowledge (faith) – no movement, drunkenness, spiritual prayer, stupor, divine love.

⁶ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 47-48. One can also synthesize the stages into three: knowledge outside nature, natural knowledge and knowledge above nature. Isaac of Niniveh, when speaking about un-knowledge, refers to a stage beyond the nature of knowledge. This can be observed in the 52nd discourse of the First collection, where the unique process of knowledge is ranked into three ascetic states: knowledge of things when instruction is acquired through senses – natural knowledge (كلمة طبيعية); spiritual (كلمة روحانية) knowledge, beyond the visible things, generated by the intelligible things in non-bodily natures; both take their information from without; knowledge beyond knowledge, excellent knowledge (كلمة عذبة), supernatural (كلمة لاهوتية) or agnostic (كلمة لا علمية) because it is elevated beyond knowledge (I.52, 253/ B, 378).

One may also find a gnoseological itinerary expressed in three stages. The corporeal stage refers to a passionate state, while the physical and mental conduct reflect the psychical order, having its correspondence in what he calls “natural knowledge”. The last stage points to perfection, spirituality, and is characterised by spiritual contemplation of the corporals, of providence, of the incorporeals and the life to come, aiming at what he calls un-knowledge⁷.

Eventually, in the Neo-Platonist line, Simon divides the process of knowledge into two categories or stages – practice and theory. To the first one pertains the love of the neighbour, manifested in different ways in the ascetic life, while the second is actualised by experiencing the love of God. The highest point of the two stages is the knowledge and the communion with God.

The cognitive powers in the Syriac monastic literature

The process of knowledge is possible, as we have already highlighted above, due also to an anthropological structure able to communicate with divinity. This factor is located in what the philosophical terminology calls “noetic part” of the soul. Specifically, in the Syriac tradition, one speaks about “powers” (ܩܘܘܘܬܐ), “parts” (ܩܘܘܘܬܐ), or energies (ἐνέργεια), described as cognitive (γνωστικαί), the last two terms borrowed from Greek terminology. If we are to give a definition of what “power” means, we will refer to Pseudo-Michael the Interpreter, who identifies an ontological connection between power and nature. He argues that this term becomes a technical concept to express the generative condition of the acts⁸ and properties⁹, intrinsic and connatural: “La puissance est ce qui est dit de la nature et avec la nature, et par rapport à l’individu de la nature, et c’est comme la chaleur pour le feu et la rationalité pour l’ange”¹⁰. On the evolution of the term in the Syriac theological thinking, Vittorio Berti published an important study dedicated at large to the East Syriac anthropology regarding the problem of death¹¹.

⁷ *Medico-Mystical Work*, by Simon of Taibutheh , 2-3; *Violenza e grazia*, 86-87; for details see Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme, La lumière sans forme. Introduction à l’étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale* (Chevtogne, 1987), 118.

⁸ ܩܘܘܘܬܐ.

⁹ ܩܘܘܘܬܐ/ܩܘܘܘܬܐ.

¹⁰ Ps.-Michaël l’Interprète, Cf. G. Furlani, “Il libro delle definizioni e divisioni’ di Michele l’Interprete”, *Memorie delle Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche* 6 (1926), 1-194, here 64, 118.

¹¹ *L’au-delà de l’âme et l’en-deçà du corps. Morceaux d’anthropologie chrétienne de la mort dans l’église syro-orientale*, Paradosis 57 (Paris, 2014).

To contextualize the discussion around the cognitive powers, we will synthetically dwell on the evolution of the anthropological terminology and, in particular, on the taxonomies developed by some important writers, and their philosophical sources. While using an intellectual terminology, Ephraim the Syrian speaks about four powers, described as the noetic part of the soul: ܠܘܘܝܐ – thinking¹², ܠܘܘܐ – mind¹³, ܠܘܘܘܘܐ – thought, and ܠܘܘܐ – intellect¹⁴. Pseudo-Macarius, whose traces go back to the Syriac tradition, interprets Ezekiel’s vision in an anthropological key. The four appearances in the first chapter of his book, symbolize the noblest λογισμοί¹⁵ of the soul: will (Θέλημα), conscience (συνείδησις), intellect (νοῦς) and charity (ἰγαπητικὴ δύναμις)¹⁶. Instead of energy, he uses the term “dynamis”. John the Solitary, the first synthesizer of the Syriac ascetic theology, mostly involves the term “passion” (ܠܘܘܐ) that, as Berti argues¹⁷, presumes a connection between the soul’s impulses and the corporal actions. In his work, “Dialogue on the Soul”¹⁸, he lists three passions: discernment¹⁹, lust²⁰, irascibility²¹, reflecting Plato’s three parts of the soul and, consequently, analysing their negative development, he identifies the sources in human’s nature, in the evil that is mixed with the nature, in the works of the devils and even in the soul²². Jacob of Saroug, a representative theologian of the School of Edessa in northern Syria, speaks about five senses (knowledge²³, intellection²⁴, discernment²⁵, intellect²⁶, mind²⁷)²⁸, in the line of Ephraim the Syrian, and eight beauties (ܠܘܘܘܘܐ)

¹² V. Berti – “entendement” (*L’au-delà de l’âme*, 76).

¹³ V. Berti – “connaissance”.

¹⁴ See the index of Syriac words E. Beck (ed.), *Ephrām des Syrers Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre*, CSCO 419/ 58, 1980, 183-184.

¹⁵ Translated with: characteristics, affections or passions.

¹⁶ Ps.-Macaire, *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien des Makarios* (Berlin, 1964), 2-3; *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* (Manwah N.J.: Paulist Press, 1992) 36.

¹⁷ *L’au-delà de l’âme*, 78.

¹⁸ *Dialogue sur l’âme e les passions des hommes* 13-4, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* (Roma, 1939), 26-27 (48-49).

¹⁹ ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²⁰ ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²¹ ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ; He adds also the “intellective power” (ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ ܠܘܘܘܐ).

²² *Dialogue sur l’âme*, 39-40 (60); Vittorio Berti argues that John the Solitary lists here the opinions spread in his time on the source of passions, synthetized in four general lines: anthropological vision, dualistic vision, demonological vision and psychological vision (*L’au-delà de l’âme*, 80).

²³ ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²⁴ ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²⁵ ܠܘܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²⁶ ܠܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²⁷ ܠܘܘܘܐܝܐ.

²⁸ Jacob of Sarug, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. I-II, IV (Paris, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1905, 1906, 1908), II. 35, 77.

of the soul (intellect²⁹, wisdom³⁰, illumination³¹, sublime mind³², impulses full of discernment³³, speeches³⁴, voice³⁵ and spiritual thoughts³⁶)³⁷. The variability of the terminology in his thinking demonstrates that there was no stable anthropological-psychological pattern during the fifth-sixth century.

Using a Platonist pattern and following Evagrius³⁸, some other authors speak about the three parts of the soul: rationality, will and irascibility. Contemporary with the last author mentioned above, Philoxenus of Mabboug evokes the three divisions of the soul and the way they manifest: rationality³⁹ of the intellect has its very aim to achieve knowledge in creation and of God Himself, desire⁴⁰ longs for the unification with spiritual things and irascibility⁴¹ struggles against passions⁴². Dadisho Qatraya changes the Evagrian terminology of “parts” with the Aristotelian term cognitive⁴³ “powers” and lists the same three energies: desire⁴⁴, irascibility⁴⁵ and mind⁴⁶ and their active aim, in the same manner as Philoxenus. Berti shows in his study that Jacob of Edessa⁴⁷ is the first Syriac author who seems to make a clear synthesis between the Aristotelian tradition and the Platonist legacy, when he mentions the existence of “powers” of animation (nutritive and augmentative⁴⁸, sensitive and impulsive⁴⁹,

²⁹ ܠܘܡܢ.

³⁰ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³¹ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³² ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³³ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³⁴ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³⁵ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³⁶ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

³⁷ *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, I.30, 687-688.

³⁸ *Praktikos*, SC 171, 683-684.

³⁹ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴⁰ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴¹ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴² *La lettre à Patricius de Philoxène de Mabboug*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 30.5 (Paris, 1963), 782-783 (62-63); see the same division at Ahudemme, bishop of Nisibis cf. G. Furlani, “La psicologia di Ahudhemme”, *Atti della Reale Accademia delle Scienze di Torino: Classe delle Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche* 61 (1926), 844.

⁴³ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴⁴ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴⁵ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴⁶ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴⁷ *Jacobi Edesseni Hexameron seu in Opus creationis libri septem Hexaméron*, CSCO 92/44; 97/48, 1928/1932, 323-324 (275-276).

⁴⁸ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

⁴⁹ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ ܠܘܡܢܘܘܬܐ.

rational and of decision⁵⁰) and “powers” of the soul⁵¹ (irascibility⁵², desire⁵³ and rational thought⁵⁴), as the first category represents the former philosophical thinking, while the second, the latter philosophical tradition⁵⁵.

It is not difficult to identify the presence of this synthesis at some well-known Syriac authors. The great translator Sergius of Resh’aina mentions the three vital powers, but instead of desire he speaks of will⁵⁶. Barhadbshaba, professor of Nisibis, also mentions the cognitive powers (intellect⁵⁷, intelligence⁵⁸ and thinking⁵⁹)⁶⁰ besides the appetitive powers. What is new and interesting refers to the fact that, in addition to the three appetitive powers, he lists the mind⁶¹ as the one that dominates the others.

Another interesting author is Theodore Bar Koni (8th century). He develops an entire system kin to that of Simon’s in matter of connecting it with anatomy. Firstly, he attributes four primary powers to the body, formed out of the mixture of four natural elements: warmth, cold, humidity and dryness. Next to these powers, he adds four characteristics that support the function of the organism – attraction, repulsion, conjunction and disjunction, mentioning also the desire and the vitality. These generate five operations: irascibility⁶², desire⁶³, discernment⁶⁴, sensitiveness⁶⁵ and concupiscence⁶⁶. He also identifies the anatomic places where these five operations take place: surprisingly,

⁵⁰ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ ܩܠܠܐ.

⁵¹ Appetitive.

⁵² ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ/ θυμός.

⁵³ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ / ἐπιθυμία.

⁵⁴ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ/ βούλησις.

⁵⁵ Vittorio Berti evokes a pattern that tries to synthesize the two mentioned philosophers identified at some different Greek authors as Ammonius (*In Aristotelis Librum de Interpretatione*, 4), David (*Prolegomena*, 79.6), Olympiodorus (*In Platonis Gorgiam*, 12.3), Meletius (*De Natura Hominis*, 23.18; 149.27): five cognitive powers (intellect/ νοῦς; thinking/ δianoia; opinion/ δόξα; imagination/ φαντασία; perception/ αἴσθησις) and three vital powers (irascibility/ θυμός; desire/ ἐπιθυμία; will/ βούλησις), sometimes also added the free choice (προαίρεσις). (For details see V. Berti, *L’au-delà de l’âme*, 88-90)

⁵⁶ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ / Cf. G. Fiori, “L’építome syriaque du traité *Sur les causes du tout d’Alexandre d’Aphrodise* attribué à Serge d’Reš’ayna”, *Le Muséon*, 123 (2010): 1-2, 127-158, here 130.

⁵⁷ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁵⁸ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁵⁹ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁶⁰ Cf. Mar Barhadbšabba ‘Arbaya, évêque de Halwan (Vie siècle). *Cause de la fondation des écoles*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 4.4 (Paris, 1908), 341 (27).

⁶¹ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁶² ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁶³ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁶⁴ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁶⁵ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

⁶⁶ ܩܘܕܩܘܨܘܢܐ.

sensitiveness in the brain, discernment in the heart, desire in the stomach, irascibility in the liver and concupiscence in the kidneys. Finally, he divides the souls' powers in two, and he associates vitality with irascibility and desire, while rationality is associated with will and free choice. The latter works under four operations: intellect (ܠܘܡܢܐ), mind (ܠܘܡܢܐ), thinking (ܠܘܡܢܐ) and intelligence (ܠܘܡܢܐ). By juxtaposing the medical science of his time (connected to the body) with philosophical preoccupation, Theodore speaks about powers and operations of both body and soul⁶⁷.

Isaac of Niniveh lists five cognitive powers and the way they work in the cognitive process: natural desire (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ), irascible power (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ), vitality (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ), simple rationality (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ), composed rationality (ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ)⁶⁸. The vitality is destined to a continuous work. Isaac divides the rational power in two parts – simple and composed rationality with different duration. The first one continues its existence even after the death of the body, while the second ceases its existence in the moment the soul migrates from the body. This occurs as the latter one pertains to the knowledge of the created beings and becomes superfluous after death. The desire, considered as natural for the soul, goes beyond death, but irascibility, as after death there is no contradiction, is no longer necessary. In the same framework, Isaac speaks about five gifts that the human was given in order to be able to attend to the divine knowledge. In the Second collection, 18th discourse, he lists them: life⁶⁹, sense perception⁷⁰, reason⁷¹, free will⁷² and authority⁷³, so that the human is able to enjoy “the delight of intelligence”⁷⁴ and “the pleasure of the gifts of insight”⁷⁵⁷⁶.

Before going to Simon Taibuteh's vision, we will point to a last author, Patriarch Timothy I. In his psychological-cognitive analysis, he argues the existence of four, occasionally, five, powers of the soul: rationality⁷⁷, irascibility⁷⁸,

⁶⁷ *Liber Scholiorum*, CSCO 55/ 19, 1910; transl. *Livre de Scolies (Recension de Séert). I mimrè I-V*, CSCO 432/ 188, 1982, 22 (67).

⁶⁸ II.3.3, 76-77.

⁶⁹ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷⁰ ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷¹ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷² ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷³ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷⁴ ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷⁵ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷⁶ II, 18,18.

⁷⁷ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

⁷⁸ ܠܘܡܢܐ.

concupiscence⁷⁹, will⁸⁰. One pair pertains to the nature of the soul (rationality and will), while the second pair (irascibility and concupiscence) is assigned to the soul by its union with the body. Those which belong to the very soul are permanent, but the second pair ceases to exist the moment the body dies. All faculties have a double dimension – power and act. Therefore, the first couple (pair) persists as power after the death of the body, while the second disappears entirely (power and act). At this point, the fifth power is called vitality⁸¹ or movement, which maintains its existence in both forms even after the migration of the soul⁸².

The powers of the soul and the process of knowledge at Simon Taibuteh

Now, according to Simon Taibuteh, knowledge is acquired by the combination of the senses of the body with the powers of the soul. One can identify here an association of anatomy and theological anthropology. He starts from the powers of the natural soul and their location: feeling in the brain, discernment in the heart, passion in the stomach, desire in the kidneys and wrath in the liver. Successively he lists the natural powers divided into two categories – four which serve and three which are served: the attractive power, which is cold; the astringent power, which is dry; the laxative power, which is hot; the repulsive power, which is damp (powers to serve); and generating power, the growing power and the feeding power (to be served). The vital workings of the natural soul are: the power of imagery (located in the forepart of the brain), the memory (in the middle part of the brain) and the understanding (in back part of the brain). In consequence, when the forepart of the brain is affected by injuries, human may see false representations and images of all kinds. In the same manner, when the middle part is injured, one cannot distinguish the things that are useful and necessary and when the back part of the brain is affected one does not remember anything said or done. Surprisingly, he associates the lack of memory and understanding and the thickness of the intelligence not only to physical injuries but also to the bad quality of the food as well as indigestion⁸³.

⁷⁹ رذيلة.

⁸⁰ قوة.

⁸¹ رذيلة.

⁸² *Timothei Patriarchae. Epistulae I* (Paris, Leipzig: 1914-1915), CSCO 74/30; 75/31, 50-52 (31-32).

⁸³ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibuteh*, 63-64.

In the same context, the senses (in the stage of “animal spirit”⁸⁴) are attributed two powers: the motor power and the sensory power, both of them generated by the good function of the nerves – in case of obstructions, the feeling is atrophied, while the movement functions and, in case of rigidity, the power of movement is atrophied, while feeling remains; when there is excessive dampness, both powers are atrophied.

It is also necessary to mention the role of the heart and its manifestations. Firstly he describes it from an anatomical perspective – it is the source of the natural heat. It has two ventricles – the right ventricle receives the blood from the liver, purifies it and sends it out to the brain and the body, while the left one is the seat of the animal spirit and it subtilizes that spirit and sends it to the lobes of the brain where rationality is created with memory and understanding. Simon calls it “the sense of senses”. Then, he insists on the physical place where it is located and the position, which shows it is not independently located – it inclines to the left so that its heat may mix with the cold of the lungs, the loins and the black bile. It is the seat of mind and discernment, while the brain of the rationality and understanding. The good functioning of those is also conditioned by the alimentation and the process of digestion as well as of an ascetic life. In this way it radiates light, peace and life⁸⁵.

Regarding the powers of the soul, Simon speaks about the existence of two active powers – rationality⁸⁶ and vitality⁸⁷. The first one is specific to the rational beings and becomes manifested by the means of mind⁸⁸, intellect⁸⁹, thinking (judgment)⁹⁰, thoughts⁹¹ and discernment⁹², while the second power corresponds to both the rational and the non-rational beings and is actualized in desire and irascibility/ anger (animal faculty)⁹³. Desire is stirred up by the

⁸⁴ In Galens’s medical perspective “the animal spirit” was a higher form of the “natural spirit” or “vital spirit”. “The natural spirit” consisted of subtle vapors, coming with the blood from the liver to the heart, and there, mixing with the air of the respiratory organs, was changed into vital spirits. From there they were carried to the brain and changed into “animal spirits” and distributed to the body by the means of nerves (cf. *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, Footnote 1, 64).

⁸⁵ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 65-66.

⁸⁶ רחללה.

⁸⁷ רחללה.

⁸⁸ רחללה.

⁸⁹ רחללה.

⁹⁰ רחללה.

⁹¹ רחללה.

⁹² רחללה.

⁹³ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 49 (308); He changes “will” with “desire”, then introduces “mind” among the rational actions. He also changes “intelligence” (רחללה) with “understanding” (רחללה).

senses and the senses by the union of an outer stimulus with the inner faculties. Irascibility is stirred by desire⁹⁴.

In another place he lists the faculties of the inner man: mind, intelligence, imagination, thoughts, rationality, knowledge, discernment, judgment, understanding and memory. All of them function together as an organism, each one with its specific role.

As a physician, in the line of Galen's medical system, he describes the process of knowledge using an anatomic terminology. The knowledge in his vision is generated by the means of the combination of the body's senses with the powers of the soul, in particular imagery, memory and intelligence/ understanding. We remember that the seat of the power of imagery is localised in the fore-part of the brain, intelligence in the middle part and memory in the back part. The senses have their seat in the nerves which come out from the brain. They also contain the „animal spirit“, which embraces the motor power and the sensory power. It is a refinement, by the brain, of the „vital spirit“ formed in the heart. The last one is also a refinement of the „natural spirit“, which has its seat in the liver. This spirit is curiously described as a fluid or a vapour, carried through the venous blood to the ventricles of the heart, where it receives a process of subtlety or refinement and is then sent in this state to the brain. The brain has the same function of further subtilizing this vapour and of sending it through the nerves to all parts of the body.

Simon describes here the natural function of the soul and, in consequence, the process of the natural human knowledge. He lists three important moments in this process: the first image of the object is formed in the brain, then the brain submits the formed image to its natural function of understanding and grasping its characteristics and, finally, the faculty of memory causes the image impressed on the brain and understood by it. The thickness and dullness of the natural and vital spirit might generate injuries to the performance of the brain in its triple function – imagining, understanding and memorising, as a result of indigestion, concussion and tumour.

There are other important anatomical seats of the soul's powers evoked by Simon: the organs of the will are the nerves and muscles; the centre of the nerves is the brain, the center of the arteries being the heart and that of the veins is the liver, again in the line of Galen. The seat of feeling is the brain, that of discernment is the heart, passion is located in the stomach, the place of desire is in the kidneys and that of the wrath in the liver. A great importance is given to the heart, considered to be the seat of the mind and of discernment, credited with receiving the good and evil information from outside. It passes them further to mind and thoughts, as the natural mind is the spring of the

⁹⁴ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh, 45.*

heart. In this frame, the heart stamps the thoughts and passions that come to it with its comprehension. One may identify in this idea a very important ascetical work – „the guard of the heart/ spirit”, according to Matthew 15:19⁹⁵.

In addition to this apparently physical description of the process of knowledge mixed with a language that pertains to the inner cognitive process that takes place in the soul, Simon gives a very clear ascetical orientation. Symbolically making appeal to Moses' itinerary into the desert with the people to the Promised Land, he speaks about three ascetic stages that the human steps on: the first one is determined by the “impetuosity of human nature, followed by the fight against passions, full of suffering and affliction, and, finally, the stillness of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual consolation⁹⁶. To put it differently, the first stage is that of the beginner, who fled away from Egypt, unconscious of the snares and pitfalls that he has to go through. The second moment is of those in the middle of the stream and griefs. And thirdly, one reaches the state of stillness and security. One may describe this as an ascent of the exercise, sustained by our will as well as by divine grace. The will is the first generator of penitence described as “day-to-day growth” from the depth of passions to the height of virtues. Then, the divine grace, which “comes after the freedom of the will”, brings help to our weakness in the time of our zeal, while it withdraws from us in the time of negligence.

An important place in this process is occupied by prayer that comes as a gift after human's purification, when the heart is engulfed with love and good mental labours. It is, in fact, described as inner vision, generated by the Spirit, a state in which the human can contemplate inwardly the good implanted in the heart as well as in the world. The next step is the theory of the mysteries of the new world, when one's mind is enraptured, being united with Christ “in hope and confidence”, able to contemplate the nature of the Godhead. Finally, one reaches the un-knowledge, the state of the grace, the true perfection.

Simon also argues a tripartite division of spiritual life as “three intelligible altars”⁹⁷ of mystical knowledge pertaining to the mysteries of Friday, Saturday

⁹⁵ For details see *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, Prefatory note, 2-5.

⁹⁶ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 54.

⁹⁷ See also Evagrius, *Kepalaia Gnostica* (KG II.57-58; V.84). There, the three stages of contemplation: the third altar is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity, the other two are the first natural and second natural contemplation. The wisdom which concerns the second altar makes known the wisdom of the third, and that which concerns the first altar is anterior to that which is in the second (II.57-58). The wisdom of the contemplation of the angels (second altar) leads to the contemplation of the Holy Trinity (third altar), whereas the contemplation of the reasons (*logoi*) of created things (first altar) leads to the contemplation of the angelic powers (second altar). Of the three altars of gnosis, two have circle and the third appears without a circle (IV.88). The altar without a circle is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity and the other two altars represent the first and second natural contemplation.

and Sunday (corresponding to Christ's passion, descent to Sheol and Resurrection). The first altar refers to the knowledge out of works, in correspondence with Friday, that is observing the commandments; the second altar, that of Saturday, names the knowledge out of contemplation, illuminative, pictured as the key to the divine mysteries hidden in creation; the third one, the living altar of Christ, corresponding to the mystery of Sunday, is the mystical knowledge of hope, when the mind of the hermit is united with Christ just as Christ is united with the Father⁹⁸. The highest level of mystical knowledge is the experience of "shapeless eternal light" that transcends all intelligence. Using a language that comes very close to that of Timothy I and the other East Syriac contemporary mystics (as well as to that of Gregory Palamas, later on), Simon shows that this mystical knowledge occurs: "when the grace will dwell in that impassibility and the mind will be conscious of the sublime and endless mysteries which are poured out by the Father and Source of all lights, which shine mercifully on us in the secret likeness of His hidden Goodness; and the mind be impressed by them with the likeness of the glory of goodness, as much as it can bear, according to its expectations, its eager longing and the measure of his growth in spiritual exercise"⁹⁹.

Consequently, at a practical level, he proposes a way of the ascetic consisting of seven phases: the noviciate (complete obedience); change of habits and way of conduct; struggle against passions by observing the commandments; labours of discernment; contemplation of the incorporeal beings; contemplation and wonder at the secrets of the Godhead; mysterious works of grace, submersion in divine love¹⁰⁰.

Conclusion

Finally, one can draw one important conclusion. There is a transformative and progressive evolution in the process of knowing. This means it is a mystical experience, due to the external and inner purification and, especially, to God's intervention, which creates spiritual eyes, spiritual faculties, capable, in consequence, to spiritually see God's rationality in creation and finally to spiritually see God Himself. Simon proclaims a gnoseology in perfect symmetry with the moral life. As one evolves in the ascetic spiritual life, he proportionally makes progress in the divine knowledge as well. Virtues are not just creative powers of knowledge, but also principles of knowledge, through which one reaches "knowledge out of knowledge".

⁹⁸ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 41-42 (303).

⁹⁹ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 15 (286).

¹⁰⁰ *Medico-Mystical Work, by Simon of Taibutheh*, 17 (287); *Violenza e grazia*, 34-35.

The method implied in his discourses is theanthropic, comprising both human's ascetical participation – bodily and noetic (ontological structure as well as ascetical work) – and the direct divine intervention.

In addition to the idea expressed above, one finds necessary to highlight that Simon's ascetical vision gets a plus of importance because of its combination with his worldly profession, medicine, thus creating a bridge between theology and anatomy. Asceticism is described from both perspectives, theological-anthropological as well as medical, in the line of Galen's system, well-known in that time, even among ascetics. We did not really want to analyse the correctness of his discourse from a medical point of view (this would be a very difficult work, taking into consideration the very context of Simon's time as well as the changes that occurred since then in medicine), but more to show that there was preoccupation among monastics with explaining the ascetic labours also from an anatomical point of view and, in consequence, with describing the work of penitence, seen as process of healing, by using also the medical knowledge of the time.

Finally, the specificity of this mystical author also comes out from the way he describes the process of divine knowledge itself using also an anatomical terminology. The cognitive powers of the soul are also conditioned by the function of the body. More than that, Simon identifies physical seats for the cognitive psychological faculties, thus creating a strong connection between the human's body and soul. Out of his vision reverberates the biblical connection between the healing of both the soul and the body, integrated in the soteriological process ruled within the ecclesiastical community. In this way, probably voluntarily, he avoids an excessive spiritualisation of the Christian life in a time when this very direction was continuously suspicioned and interrogated by the defenders of the "orthodoxy" of the East Syriac Faith.

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