

SECUNDUS THE SILENT PHILOSOPHER: SOME NOTES ON THE SYRIAC TRADITION

In a short discourse on patience by Isaac of Nineveh the example is given of a philosopher who had so mastered his will in the matter of a vow to keep silence that, even when threatened with death if he did not speak, he steadfastly refused to utter a word¹).

Although no names are given, it is not difficult to recognize in this passage a reference to the Life of Secundus the Silent Philosopher, a text which has hitherto been known in Syriac only from a fragmentary ninth-century manuscript published by E. Sachau²), and reprinted by B. E. Perry in his monograph on Secundus, where he supplied it with an English translation³).

Isaac introduces the allusion to the Life of Secundus by telling his readers that, if they are unwilling to listen to what the church has to teach on the subject of patience, they should turn to the philosophers; then follows the outline of the story of Secundus⁴):

“One of them had mastered the will of the body to such an extent that, in order not to give up and deviate from the choice he had made, he did not even allow his mind to be disturbed when the sword was drawn; so fear of death could not break through the barrier he had made for himself. When he had kept silence for many years, the king of the Greeks⁵), wondering at

1) Syriac text in P. Bedjan, *Mar Isaacus Ninivita, de perfectione religiosa* (Paris, 1909), 403–4; English translation in A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam, 1923), 271.

2) E. Sachau, *Inedita Syriaca* (Halle, 1870), 84–8 (BM Add. 14620; Wright, *Catalogue...*, no. DCCC). In three places Sachau misrepresents the manuscript: p. 84 line 10, read *mškh*, for his *mškh'*; p. 85 line 16, the column comes to an end after *tsb*, and Sachau's ensuing *hywhy* is not in the manuscript, and so should be in square brackets; p. 85 line 18, delete note 4: the manuscript indeed reads *'ytyby*.

3) B. E. Perry, *Secundus the Silent Philosopher* (Cornell, 1964).

4) I use Wensinck's translation, slightly adapted.

5) Syr (= Syriac, ed. Sachau) has “Caesar” throughout.

his fame and desiring to put him to the test⁶), ordered him to appear before him. As the philosopher remained silent whenever the king spoke and questioned him, giving no answer, the king became incensed⁷) and ordered him to be put to death, because he was not even impressed by the splendour of his throne and crown⁸). The philosopher was not moved by this, but kept his rule quietly. Then the king ordered the executioners⁹) to slay him if he should break his rule¹⁰) out of fear of the sword; but to bring him back alive if he should be firm of will¹¹). When the moment had come and the executioner commanded him to bend his will or die, he deliberated thus¹²): it is better once to suffer death, while keeping the rule of my will which I have borne all this time, than to give way out of fear of death, putting to shame my wisdom, and to be a coward because of that which I shall have to meet in any case, whenever it may be. – By this firmness of will and this heroic mind he was delivered even from death, being found just and true to his rule. Do you see what power will possesses? This sage stretched out his neck¹³) before the sword without breaking his own rule”.

As mentioned above, the one surviving manuscript of the Syriac version of the Life is incomplete: not only is the beginning lost, but there are also three lacunae in the course of the text itself. Since Sachau's edition does not make clear the extent of the portions lost, the following observations, based on an examination of the manuscript in question, may be helpful. The Syriac text of the Life is to be found on ff. 1^{r.2} – 2^{r.1} of BM Add. 14620. The top of f. 1 has been cut off, with the result that about seven or eight lines have been lost at the top of each column. Since the previous work ends at the bottom of column

6) Cp Greek (Perry, p. 79 line 19) δοκιμάσαι θέλων; this section is lost in Syr.

7) *etgawzal*; Syr *hemta rabbta etmli*, “was filled with great wrath”.

8) Isaac reads this into the story.

9) *qaṭole*; Syr (as Greek) uses the Latin term *speculator* here (already found in the Old Syriac Gospels, see *Le Muséon* 80 (1967), 416).

10) Lacuna in Syr. The Greek (and evidently once the Syriac, to judge by the one word left) has *ἐὰν μὲν ἀποκριθῇναι αὐτὸν πείσῃς*.

11) Greek “if he does not answer”; Syr has “remains”, followed by a lacuna, which Sachau fills in by “in his silence”. In the light of Isaac, however, we should rather supply *b-ṣebyaneb*, “in his resolve”.

12) A moralising addition evidently provided by Issac.

13) So Greek (Perry, p. 74 line 6) and other versions, but not in Syr (which is otherwise fuller than the Greek here!). Evidently Isaac knew a form of text slightly different from the one that survives.

1 of f. 1^r, this means that only the title and a few lines of text can have been lost at the beginning of the Life, and that the lacunas between f. 1^{r.2} and 1^{v.1}, and between f. 1^{v.1} and 1^{v.2}, will also cover only seven or eight lines each. Between ff. 1 and 2, however, the lacuna is much larger, and the structure of the codex indicates that two folios must be missing here¹⁴).

Isaac's summary of the narrative implies a knowledge both of the beginning of the story, lost in BM Add. 14620, and of the portion missing in the lacuna between the recto and verso of f. 1. In one place he seems to have slightly adapted the story to his own purposes, for Secundus' deliberation in the face of the threat of death ("It is better once to suffer death...") has no parallel in any of the surviving forms of the story (it is of course conceivable that he knew a version already expanded in this way). Throughout Isaac retells the story in his own words, and thus, since there are almost no verbal quotations, the main interest of the passage will lie in the indication it gives that the Syriac Life of Secundus was known in Nestorian monastic circles in the second half of the seventh century.

Unfortunately little or nothing is known of Isaac's personality and education, and we have only the barest of details available about his career: he was born in Beth Qatraye (Qatar), and was ordained bishop of Nineveh (Mosul) in the famous monastery of Beth Abe (N. Iraq)¹⁵ by the Catholicos George (659–81)¹⁶, but soon retired to a solitary life in the mountains of Beth Huzaye (Khuzistan), where he lived to a great age¹⁷. Isaac's works on the spiritual life were very widely read, and in the ninth century they were translated into Greek at the monastery of St Saba in Palestine¹⁸). Their subsequent influence on Greek and Russian monastic spirituality has been considerable¹⁹),

14) Folio 1^v is marked as the end of quire 10, and f. 9^v as the end of quire 11. In the surviving parts of the codex the quires consist of 10 folios.

15) See J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne* (Beirut, 1965), 236–48.

16) This synchronism provides the only evidence available for Isaac's date.

17) On Isaac see E. Khalifé-Hachem, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 7.ii (1971), 2041–54.

18) The discovery of some ninth-century fragments of Isaac in Greek was announced at the Seventh International Patristic Conference (Oxford, September 1975) in a paper by K. Treu (forthcoming in *Studia Patristica*).

19) Especially through extracts in the Philocalia. The full Greek text of Isaac was first printed in 1770 (there are several recent reprints). The passage on Secundus appears as chapter 25 in the Greek edition (correspond-

and even to-day among the Athonite monks Isaac the Syrian is still widely read and regarded as one of the most profound of all writers on the spiritual life. By this roundabout way Secundus is thus assured of continued, albeit anonymous, fame in at least one unexpected corner of the modern world.

*

Since Perry's translation of the Syriac fragment of the Life of Secundus is in places misleading or incorrect, I offer, by way of appendix, a revised English translation:

".. | on my right hand and on my left. And you do not wish to make known your wisdom, but instead stand in silence. You are like an insolent man who wants to withhold what has been entrusted to his keeping²⁰), and you are depriving many people of an advantage, whereby you yourself will suffer no loss. You are (simply) withholding the wisdom given to you, like a wicked and insolent man."

When the Caesar had spoken thus, the philosopher was (still) unwilling to speak with him.

Now Secundus was silent and said nothing at all. Marvelling at him, the Caesar again said to him:

"O Secundus, before you came²¹) here you were silent because you had available no one like me to listen to you or who could comprehend the (meaning of) your words, but now that I (or you) have come, give me an answer to all that I shall ask, lest I give orders that your life be taken with the sword."

On hearing these things the philosopher was unafraid of him and was unabashed, not answering him a word, but instead he stood in complete silence before him.

ing to chapter 57 of the Syriac; see the tables in K. Deppe, "Die *Λόγοι ἀσκητικοί* des Isaak von Niniveh", in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte* (Göttingen, 1968), 35–57).

20) There is nothing exactly corresponding in any of the other of the Life. Seeing that so little of the opening has been lost in the manuscript (see above), it would appear that Syr began the story in quite a different way from the Greek.

21) So explicitly the Arabic (Perry, p. 127: "you came to us"), but the Greek has *πρὶν με εἰλθεῖν*. Later in the sentence Syr is ambiguous (either "I", or "you have come" is possible): the point in the manuscript should suggest that "I" is intended (but note *hwyt* in line 10, pointed in the same way, but it must be taken as 2nd sing.), in which case we should perhaps read here *'dl' 't'*, "until I came" (1st sing. ipf.), in place of *'dl' t' t'*, "until you came" (Greek *ἄρχειμι*, Arabic omits).

The king was seized with great amazement and looked towards his tribune²²), saying to him: "Sir, do you persuade this man to give me an answer." Now they say of that man (*sc.* the tribune) that he was very patient and wise, and was the instructor of all stubborn men, to such an extent that he could even persuade²³) lions to speak like human beings. Accordingly he approached the philosopher and spoke to him many words of wisdom, partly persuasive, and partly threatening; and he strongly urged him to comply, and give an answer to the Caesar, thus avoiding death.

Although he spoke a great deal with him, he was unable to alter his resolve; instead (Secundus) stood silent in mien. Thereupon the Caesar was filled with great wrath²⁴), and gave orders that he should die. He²⁵) sent and called for an executioner (*speculator*)²⁶), and said to him: "In the case of a man who is unwilling to give Caesar an answer, I am unwilling that he should live; rather, I have given orders that you take his life by the sword. | ...

[lacuna of seven or eight lines]

.. | if he utters a word, remove his head; but if he remains [in silence]²⁷) and goes along with you, do not kill him, but bring him (back) to me alive."

As the executioner went off with him, he spoke many words to him, but (Secundus) was not prevailed upon (to depart) from his self-imposed law, but instead preserved the silence that he loved from the first day up to death.²⁸)

The executioner looked at him in amazement and said: "Even if you have remained silent up to the present, and have

22) On the basis of this Perry restores *τριβούνῳ τινί* in the Greek text for *τυρποντι* of the manuscript (*tyrponti* in the Latin of Willelmus medicus). Attention, however, might be drawn here to a remarkable rendering that appears in the Syriac translation of Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 2. 3, where *Μάρκιον τοῦ τριβόνα* becomes *Μργγῆς τρυβωνέ* "Marcius the tribune". This Marcius Turbo *may* be the person referred to in the Life of Secundus; cp Perry, p. 28, note 40; also E. Frézouls, in *Syria* 30 (1953), 247-78.

23) Syr supports *ἐπειθεν* of R, which Perry emended to *ἔστι πειθεῖν*.

24) See note 7.

25) I.e. Caesar; in the Greek presumably the tribune is meant; cp Perry, p. 105 note. Isaac supports Syr over this.

26) See note 9.

27) So Sachau's restoration, but see note 11.

28) This paragraph, and the beginning and end of the next, are fuller than the corresponding section in the Greek.

been unwilling to save yourself by means of a word, nevertheless open your mouth (now) and speak to me, and you shall live. Grant yourself life by means of a word, for you are wise and are called a philosopher, and I think that it does not escape you that when the swan is on the point of death it not only speaks, but actually sings. You, then, have been consigned to death on account of silence; you are not willing to speak and live, but rather you are going to die because of a word which you refuse to utter. I advise you to repent of this resolve of yours, give an answer and save yourself. The time that you have been silent is quite sufficient, when you were a free man without any fear. Now, however, the sharp sword stands over you, and no one can save you, apart from your own will."

He spoke other words, too, to him, but was unable to alter his resolve, because (Secundus) despised death²⁹⁾ and was intending to receive it in silence.

He went off with him silent, and they reached the place where criminals were put to death. The executioner drew his sword and showed it to him | ..

[lacuna of seven or eight lines]

... [but when he refused] | to speak (the executioner) was greatly amazed at his perseverance. He put his sword back into its sheath and, following the Caesar's orders, did not kill him, for his instructions were as follows: if he gives you any answer and speaks to you, kill him, but if he remains as he is in silence, bring him back to me alive³⁰⁾. So he led him off and came to Caesar, did obeisance to him and said: "My lord Caesar, live for ever! The man you committed to me I have brought back to you just as he was: just as he left your presence, so has he remained right up to the point of death. He has kept his law of silence, and has not answered me a single word. Here he is, standing before you."³⁰⁾

When (the Caesar) heard this he was greatly amazed at the man's perseverance. Much astounded at him, he said: "O philosopher, if you, who have imposed this law of silence on yourself, have kept it right to the point of death, then I, who am king, with the power to kill and keep alive, to lay down law and to abrogate it, shall not achieve my will. Nevertheless I shall

29) Greek "life".

30) Fuller than the Greek.

break³¹) this law of yours, for even if you are not willing to speak to me with your mouth, I shall make you speak to me with your hands. You may keep the law that is pleasing to your will to keep, (but) take this writing tablet, and write down on it what you like; speak to me with your hands rather than with your voice, and make me a defence concerning all that I shall ask you”.

Then Secundus took the writing tablet from the Caesar, and wrote as follows: “O Hadrian, over my life and my death, in very truth, you have power, for these things belong to the sphere of your will, whether I should live or die | ..

[lacuna of 2 folios]

.. | Death is this: sleep for eternity, what dissolves the body, terror of the sick, the object prayed for by the aged, the hope of the unfortunate, the separating off of the soul, the enemy of youth, the limit of old age, the end of life, the destroyer of wise things, what is willed by the poor, the resting of limbs, what brings the world to an end, the fulfiller of fate, what completes (all) measures, the hinderer of life, what terrifies men, the fountain-source of tears, the king of those who are no more, the grief of many, rest for a few, the terrifier of souls, the departure of what is light, what sends away to darkness, what scatters bones, what dissolves thoughts, what nullifies cunning, the friend of silence, the enemy of pleasure, the object of hate for the rich in that it accepts no bribes, the corrupter of every corpse, dissolution for everything.

‘Secundus the silent philosopher’ is ended”.

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31) I take *ῥῥῡῃ* as imperfect, rather than (aphel) imperative, as Perry does. The Greek has nothing corresponding, but compare the Arabic (though the sense is different).

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