

THE SHEKHINA & The Cross

St. Isaac the Syrian

The limitless power of God dwells in the cross, just as it resided in an incomprehensible way in the ark which was venerated amidst great honor and awe by the Jewish people, performing by it miracles and awesome signs in the midst of those who were not ashamed to call it 'God', that is, they would gaze upon it in awe as though upon God, because of the glory of God's honored name which was upon it. This ark was honored with this name not only by the Jewish people, but by foreign peoples, their enemies: 'Woe to us, for the God of the People has come to the camp today'. That power which existed in the ark. believed by us to exist in this revered form of the cross, which we hold in honor in great awareness of God.

What was in the ark that made it so awesome and filled with powers and signs? The ark was venerated because the invisible *Shekhina* (Presence) of God dwelt in it. Did not Moses and the People prostrate before the ark in great awe and trembling? Did not Joshua son of Nun lie stretched on his face before it from morning until evening? Were not God's fearsome revelations manifested there, as if to afford honor to this object, seeing that the Shekhina of God was residing in it?' The very same *Shekhina* now resides in the holy Cross: it has departed from the Old Testament ark and entered the New Testament cross.

Through the power of the cross many have restrained wild animals acted boldly in the face of fire, walked on lakes, raised the dead, held back plagues, caused springs to flow in parched and wild terrain, set a boundary to the seas, commanded the surge of mighty rivers to flow after them, and reversed the course of water. "Why do I speak of these things? Satan himself and all his tyranny is in terror of the form of the cross, when it is depicted by us against him.

Why it was that before the construction of the wooden ark, built by the hands of carpenters, adoration filled with awe was offered up continuously, in spite of the prohibition of the Law against worshiping the work of human hands or any image or likeness? Because in the ark unlike in the pagan idols, the power of God was manifested openly and the name of God was set upon it.

The moment this form is depicted on a wall or on a board, or is fashioned out of

some kind of gold or silver and the Like, or carved out of wood, immediately it takes on and is filled with the divine power ... and so it becomes a place of God's *Shekhina*, even more so than the ark.

Whenever we gaze upon this image in the time of prayer, or when we show reverence to it, because that Man was crucified upon it, we receive divine power through it and we are held worthy of assistance, salvation, and ineffable good in this world and in the world to come.

For true believers the sign of the cross is no small thing, for all symbols are understood to be contained within it. But whenever they raise their eyes and gaze on it, it is as though they were contemplating the face of Christ, and accordingly they are filled with reverence for it: the sight of it is precious and fearsome to them, and at the same time, beloved And whenever we approach the cross, it is as though we are brought close to the body of Christ: this is what it seems to us to be in our faith in him. And by drawing near to him, and gazing towards him, straightway we travel in our intellects to heaven, mystically.

For the cross is Christ's garment just as the humanity of Christ is the garment of the Divinity. Thus the cross today serves as a type, awaiting the time when the true prototype will be revealed: then those things will not be required any longer. For the Divinity dwells inseparably in the Humanity, without any end, and for ever; in other words, boundlessly. For this reason we look on the cross as the place belonging to the *Shekhina* of the Most High, the Lord's sanctuary, the ocean of the symbols of God's economy. This form of the cross manifests to us, by means of the eye of faith, the symbol belonging to the two Testaments Moreover, it is the final seal of the economy of our Savior. Whenever we gaze on the cross, ... the recollection of our Lord's entire economy gathers together and .stands before our interior eyes

Blessed is God who uses corporeal objects continually to draw us close in a symbolic way to a knowledge of his invisible nature Let our hearts rejoice in the mysteries of the faith which we hold; let us exult in God who is so concerned with us.... How much to be worshiped is the God who, for our salvation, has done everything in the world to bring us close to him, before the time when what has been prepared will be revealed How much to be worshiped is the symbol of the cross, seeing that it has given to us all these things, and through it we have been deemed worthy of the knowledge of angels-that is, through the power by which all created things, both visible and invisible, were created.

References: The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian, by Hilarion Alfeyev, Cistercian Publications, 2000.