

# Holy Women of the Syrian Orient

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INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED  
BY SEBASTIAN P. BROCK AND  
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*Updated Edition*  
*With a New Preface*

University of California Press  
Berkeley Los Angeles London

University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

First Paperback Printing 1998

© 1987 by  
The Regents of the University of California  
Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

**Holy women of the Syrian Orient.**

(The Transformation of the classical heritage; 13)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Contents: Mary, the niece of Abraham of Qidun —  
Pelagia, of Antioch — Persian martyrs — [etc.]

1. Christian saints — Near East — Biography — Early  
works to 1800. 2. Women in Christianity — History —  
Early church, ca. 30-600 — Early works to 1800.

3. Syriac Christians — Near East — Biography — Early  
works to 1800. I. Brock, Sebastian P. II. Harvey,  
Susan Ashbrook. III. Series.

BR1713.H625 1987 275.6'01'088042 [B] 86-11313

ISBN 0-520-21366-1 (pbk : alk. paper)

This book is a print-on-demand volume. It is manufactured  
using toner in place of ink. Type and images may be less  
sharp than the same material seen in traditionally printed

*University of California Press* editions.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum  
requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992(R  
1997)(Permanence of Paper)

*For Helen and Jim*

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## NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have aimed at translations that read reasonably fluently in English but that also offer true representation of the original Syriac texts. The two Lives by John of Ephesus have previously been translated into English by E. W. Brooks in his bilingual edition of John's *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (*Patrologia Orientalis* 17–19; see Appendix). However, Brooks's edition is not easily available except to those with access to major research libraries, and his translation is so literal in rendering John's unwieldy Syriac that it can prove confusing for the reader not following the Syriac text. We have used a freer hand in the attempt to make John more readable, while still remaining loyal to his idiosyncratic style. Otherwise, these texts have not previously appeared in English, although Mary the niece of Abraham and Pelagia the Penitent may be known to readers from the collection by Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (London, 1936; repr. 1962) based on later Latin versions, whose differences from these earlier texts are at once apparent.

In order to facilitate reference to the original Syriac texts we have provided, in the left-hand margins, the page numbers of the editions from which the translations have been taken (details of these are given in the Appendix). Unless otherwise stated, the figures in the translations refer to the section numbers introduced by the editors of the Syriac texts.

In the matter of proper names, absolute consistency is hardly attainable. For Greek names we have preferred Greek forms, rather than Latinized ones, while for Iranian names we have tried to give an acceptable Iranian form (as opposed to the often corrupt Syriac forms of the text). On this matter we have greatly

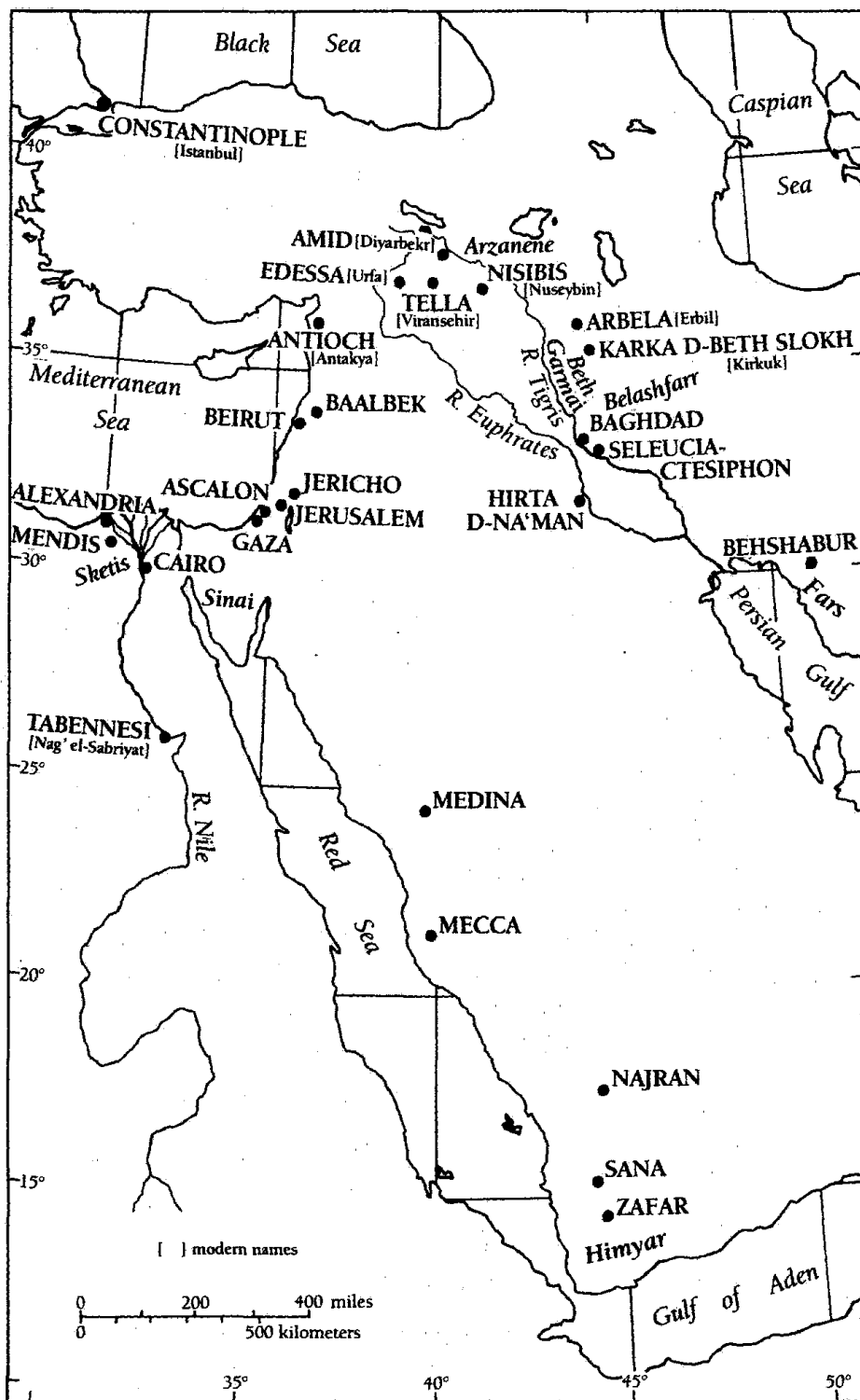
benefited from the advice of Dr. Nicholas Sims-Williams. In the translations we have not used macrons, but in the index these are employed where appropriate.

We are much indebted to both Dr. N. Sims-Williams (SOAS, London) and Dr. James Russell (Columbia) for information and help on various Iranian matters.

We thank, too, Margit Iwanowicz and Susan Joninas for their efficiency and care in the preparation of this manuscript, and likewise Doris Kretschmer, Mary Lamprech, and Jonas Weisel of the University of California Press for their skilled guidance of our book's production.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- AB *Analecta Bollandiana.*
- AMS P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (Paris and Leipzig, 1890-97; repr. Hildersheim, 1968), 7 vols.
- ASM S. E. Assemani, *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum* (Rome, 1748; repr. Farnborough, 1970), 2 vols.
- BHG F. Halkin (ed.), *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* (3d ed., Bruxelles, 1957).
- BHO P. Peeters (ed.), *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* (Bruxelles, 1910).
- BS *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (Istituto Giovanni XXIII nella pontificia Università Lateranense, Rome, 1961-69) 12 vols.
- CSCO *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium.*
- DHGE *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastiques* (Paris, 1912-).
- ET English translation.
- Fiey, AC J.-M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne* (Beirut, 1965-68), 3 vols.
- Fiey, *Communautés* J.-M. Fiey, *Communautés syriaques en Iran et Iraq des origines à 1552* (London, 1979).
- JRS *Journal of Roman Studies.*
- OCA *Orientalia Christiana Analecta.*
- PO *Patrologia Orientalis* (Paris, 1907-).
- SCH *Studies in Church History.*
- SLNPNF *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.*
- SSTS *Studies Supplementary to Sobornost.*
- TU *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur.*



The Syrian Orient

## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

Ten years have passed since *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* first appeared. In that time, many changes have taken place in the study of ancient Christianity and in the study of women in Christian history. The texts collected in this volume have contributed to those changes, even as they continue to challenge scholars and students to rethink familiar paradigms and generalities. Two concerns led us to undertake this book: the relative paucity of accessible materials on Syriac Christianity, and the dearth of sources on women in early Christian history. The texts in this volume remain useful not simply because they help to redress the imbalances that prompted our efforts, but further because they stand as powerful witnesses to their time and place. Every effort to interpret and understand ancient Christianity and women's contribution to it must be measured in relation to what these texts tell.

From the perspective of Syriac tradition, these texts have contributed to the effort to consider ancient Christianity in terms broader than the Greek and Latin literature of the Roman Empire allows us to do.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have given increasing emphasis to understanding the Roman Empire as a pluralistic society in which a variety of cultures flourished and interacted. The texts collected here make it possible to view Christianity as a phenomenon that from its inception was not coterminous with the Roman Empire. When one considers the patterns of continuity and difference found in Christian texts from beyond Roman borders, the Greek and Latin traditions are contextualized. A far richer picture emerges of how this religion developed: not only is the breadth of geographical scope striking, but further the sheer wealth of

constancy as well as variation in Christian literature, practices, and spirituality. In this broader understanding of Christian history, Syriac tradition is one of a number of ancient Christian strands that yield the fuller picture.

The "fuller picture" has also taught us more about Syriac Christianity. There has been a common tendency in scholarship to present Syriac tradition as quite separate from the Greco-Roman culture that dominated the early Christian era (a tendency reflected in the introduction). Yet scholars have come increasingly to see how truly cosmopolitan the Mediterranean world was, with far more cultural interaction than we had realized and of a more nuanced kind. Thus the texts in this collection can be seen not only to represent the distinctively Syrian ethos, but also to do so in literary forms and rhetorical patterns influenced by classical literary traditions and Greco-Roman philosophical schools. This realization does not detract from the importance of these texts as expressions of Syriac Christianity; rather, it underscores the fluidity of cultural boundaries in antiquity, and the profoundly interactive quality of the late antique world.

There is the more general issue of interest in the use of hagiography as a source for women's history. A number of collections of translations or studies of hagiography about women saints have appeared in recent years, with titles that indicate parallel interests for the texts collected here.<sup>2</sup> However, just as historians have come to appreciate the significance of hagiography as a source about women, we have also come to understand more clearly its ambiguities as historical material. Here, the most important accomplishment of the past ten years has been the shift in interest from historicity to rhetoric. For if our knowledge of women's lives for this period has grown tremendously,<sup>3</sup> so, too, has our awareness of women's place in the "totalizing discourse" of late antiquity—the degree to which rhetoric was used to construct a particular presentation of women and "women's experiences," and to subsume those constructions into a larger agenda of cultural expression formulated according to the normative social and political structures of the time.<sup>4</sup>

No known text by a woman survives in Syriac, from the inception of the language in the first century until long after the era of the texts in this collection. The *Life of Febronia* is thus particularly intriguing, as we note in the introduction, because it claims to have been written by a woman, the nun Thomaïs. However, the

text itself makes it difficult to accept such an authorship: the story, in the form of an epic romance, requires a female narrator because of its content (no man could have witnessed certain of the events). Even the positive portrait of life in the women's convent cannot indicate the gender of the writer since we have numerous instances of men who wrote positively about women's convent life in this period.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the presentation of Febronia's convent follows conventions from Greco-Roman (male) philosophical traditions for the ideal of friendship: a communal life, devoted to the pursuit of truth, in which the members share all things in common and are of one heart and mind. The narrative follows an outline that shares a number of key elements with hellenistic romance. Can we really say there is anything distinctive in this story that makes it a "women's" story? In the introduction we suggested an affirmative answer, but the question remains open and problematic.

In the absence of texts written by women, the evidence offered by an eyewitness account such as that of Martyrius (Sahdona) about the holy woman Shirin, is the more precious. A personal reminiscence recalling a figure from his childhood, the account is a haunting reminder of what we have lost. Shirin was a woman who lived alone in a village. She served as spiritual teacher and mentor for the village women and their children (including Sahdona's mother with himself as a child) and was also a major spiritual force for the monks and abbots of the region. The latter looked to her for both counsel and blessings. The lifestyle that Sahdona ascribes to her accords with the familiar pattern for women ascetics in Syriac tradition, including features strongly resembling the practices and obligations of the Daughters of the Covenant, although Shirin is not identified as one consecrated to that office. The significance of her presence in the daily life of her region is clearly attested. Yet here is our dilemma: we are left with the model of her example. It is a powerful model, to be sure, but her words, her wisdom, her teachings are lost to us.

We made the point in the introduction that the stories in this volume cover the spectrum from legendary to eyewitness account, with all the variation inherent in such a sweep. In the years since the book was published, scholarly awareness of women's presence and participation in Christian activity during late antiquity has been heightened. So, too, has our awareness that the issue of historical validity is dwarfed by the larger question of rhetoric. To



what extent do these texts written by men reflect the lives and teachings of these holy women, and to what extent do they use the figures of these women to address other agendas?<sup>6</sup> What discourse is being established? What cultural metaphors are being put forward by specific literary images, with what agendas of social control or cultural change? Hagiographical literature, like its predecessor the Greek novel, granted high visibility to the domestic sphere—and therefore an enhanced role for women characters—because of the dictates of form and function. The reasons involve ideological shifts in the depiction of proper religious life in domestic and civic space, as well as concern about social control during an era of political and religious upheaval. Neither an improved interest in or social status for women is evident, although high social tension is (an element we had underscored in the introduction). These texts occlude from our gaze the women they purport to praise.

What remains an open question, then, is how we are to assess the presence of women's lives and voices within these texts. Like the Apocryphal Acts, for which parallel questions have been asked, hagiography represented both a literary and an oral discourse.<sup>7</sup> The stories were generated by and within the Christian community as a whole, and women as well as men both told and heard these stories. We should not be surprised if we find evidence within our texts that women understood these stories differently than the men did.<sup>8</sup> A different voice, a resisting voice, may also be present: the voice of the women whose experiences these stories claim and conceal.<sup>9</sup> Lacking any surviving Syriac sources written by women, we must give heed to that textual difference.

Susan Ashbrook Harvey  
October 1997

#### NOTES

1. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200–1000* (Malden, Mass., and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) is a major case in point. In fact, the book begins its narrative in the (primarily Syriac) city of Edessa.

2. Perhaps most prominently *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, edited by Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Publications, 1996); *Handmaids of the Lord: Holy Women in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, selected and translated by Joan Petersen (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1996); *Holy Women of Russia: The Lives of Five Orthodox Women Offer Spiritual Guidance for Today*, by Brenda Meehan (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993; repr. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997); *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England*, by Sharon K. Elkins (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

3. The scholarly literature is vast. Of particular significance are Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford, 1992); and Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

4. Here the landmark achievement is Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). See also Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 155-84.

5. For example, Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* or Gerontius' *Life of Melania the Younger*. See the relevant discussion in Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Did Ancient Women Write Novels?" in *'Women Like This': New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 199-219.

6. See now Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* (forthcoming). The rhetorical issues were raised with keen insight by Averil Cameron, "Virginité as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity," in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, ed. idem, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) 181-205; and David M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman?" in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*, ed. idem (New York: Routledge, 1990) 113-151, 190-211.

7. The pivotal work was Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980). The parallel question for the hellenistic novel is argued with substantial insight by Ross S. Kraemer, "Women's Authorship of Jewish and Christian Literature in the Greco-Roman Period," in Levine, *'Women Like This,'* 221-242, in dialogue with Lefkowitz, "Did Ancient Women Write Novels?"

8. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 1-20; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 21-48.

9. An exploration of this perspective using a number of the texts in this collection is made in Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996) 27-56.

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- . "'There Were Also Many Women There': Women and the Foundation of the Church," in George S. Corey, Peter E. Gillquist, Anne Glynn Mackoul, Jean Sam, and Paul Schneirla, eds., *The First One Hundred Years: A Centennial Anthology Celebrating Antiochian Orthodoxy in North America* (Englewood, N.J.: Antakya Press, 1995): 141-167.
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## INTRODUCTION

### I

This collection of saints' Lives has been prompted by two concerns: first, that the heritage of the Syrian churches should be more easily accessible to the wider public, and second, that needed sources on women should become available.

Why the Syrian Orient? Historians have sometimes emphasized the Greek and Latin backgrounds of Western Christianity to the exclusion of other contributions. A "mainstream" church is often presented as though Christianity in its earliest centuries exhibited a homogeneity that has never characterized it since. Unity of faith, even unity of confession, has always been present for Christianity but always in the context of a diversity of religious experience, expression, and spirituality. In earliest Christianity no less than now, the spread of the church brought with it much interaction and intermingling of cultural influences from all parts of Christendom.

One of the major cultures contributing to the Christian mainstream was that of the Syrian Orient, which lay along the eastern Mediterranean Sea and inland into Persia. Syriac Christianity made a profound impact on the religious culture of early Christendom. We do not speak here of a long lost tradition: the Syriac-speaking churches are very much a part of our contemporary world, their heritage very much a living one. In the Middle East, in southern India, and now, too, in Europe, Great Britain, and North America, the Syriac churches continue—the Syrian Orthodox, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Maronites, the Syrian Catholics, the Chaldeans, the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches in India (sometimes popularly called "Mar

Thoma Christians"<sup>1</sup>), to name the primary representatives. Today we affirm our society as a pluralistic one. But history calls upon us to acknowledge that our heritage, as well as our present, is born out of and composed of many diverse strands.

Why women? Again the redress of an imbalance is needed. In the past history books have concentrated on a particular segment of society: men, and usually those men of the dominant class and culture. Such accounts have thus tended to omit mention of women, especially those of the lower or peasant class and minority groups, and to overlook their significant experiences and contributions to recorded history. Recent years have brought a welcome awareness of this oversight. Excellent work is being done on women's history, but much remains to explore. For the time of Late Antiquity, in which the texts of this collection are set, work has focused primarily on women in the Greco-Latin sphere. With this collection we are widening the parameters a bit. The women whose stories we have included are generally little known today even to scholars, though some were major figures in their own day or figures of great popularity in the medieval cult of saints. Some of their stories are legendary in character, some are historical; both instances reveal the variety and frequency of women's contribution to the religious life of their communities and the larger Christian sphere.

Our collection comprises fifteen texts drawn from the fourth to the seventh centuries A.D. They represent various degrees of historical value. The Lives of Mary, Euphemia, and Susan by John of Ephesus (5) and the story of Shirin by Martyrius (Sahdona) (8) are personal reminiscences by the authors, incorporating information they learned about these women from others who also knew them. The accounts of the Najran martyrs (4) are based directly on eyewitness reports, and so, too, are those of the Persian martyrs (3), though not so immediately. The latter are slightly more removed in time from the events portrayed, and their presentation reflects a more stylized form. At the far end of the historical spectrum would stand the stories of Mary the niece of Abraham of Qidun (1), Pelagia the Penitent (2), Anastasia (6), and Febronia (7)—in each case probably built round a histori-

1. "Mar" is the title formed from Syriac *Māryā*, "lord" or "sir," used in addressing superiors and especially saints. These Churches in India traditionally date their origin to the mission of the apostle Thomas.

cal kernel, but in these texts embellished into the form of romantic legend.

Such variation in historicity does not detract from the worth of these texts as social documents for their period of composition, offering us insight and information on the world from which they come. From personal accounts we have the always precious glimpse of individual lives: of the persons, habits, and contours of life in Late Antiquity. The remembrances, whether sooner or later, of the experience of martyrdom in Najran and Persia give us not only a view of events that happened but also reactions and reflections of those who lived with the memory of those events. The time lag between the martyrdoms and their recording by others does mean that we should read these texts cautiously in terms of their accuracy of detail. But that time lag also enables us to see the writers' view as a reflection of how the community dealt with these events in their aftermath. For instance, they sometimes show a more hardened attitude toward the "other side" than seems indicated by the background to the martyrdoms, so that the persecuting officials are portrayed properly as villains ought to be portrayed. Such developments in a community's attitudes are significant; they are an important kind of historical evidence about how a given group understands its own history.

Even the romantic fictions of Pelagia or Febronia cannot be dismissed as historically worthless. We may or may not be able to identify the actual persons and events behind the stories. But the stories themselves are pieces of history. To be meaningful to the society for which they were written, the stories had to share the values and assumptions of that society. They had to be true to the thought world of their time, as well as to the ordinary manner of people's lives, their way of doing things and seeing things. So these stories reveal to us not the individuals of their day but rather something of the world in which they lived and moved. From this view these stories offer us a rich harvest of historical depth.

Each text is supplied with an introduction to its particular circumstances and concerns. In the interests of a wider audience we have kept notes and commentary to a minimum, supplying instead the classified bibliographies in the Appendix. Those who wish to pursue matters further should find adequate information there. As for a general introduction, some remarks on the Syrian

Orient of Late Antiquity, the nature of literature about saints, and the problems of literature about women may help the reader with the larger setting of these stories.

## II

Syriac developed specifically as a language of Christian peoples.<sup>2</sup> It originated in the region of Edessa (modern Urfa, in southeast Turkey) as a dialect of Aramaic, the language of first-century Palestine. During the first and second centuries A.D., Syriac spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean realm as the language of the Christian community. By the Syrian Orient, then, we mean those places where Syriac was a primary written and spoken language. In late Roman times (the period of our texts) these areas were known as the provinces of Mesopotamia, Osrhoene, and Syria and their Persian neighbors, particularly eastern Mesopotamia and Adiabene (modern Iraq).

The Syrian Orient has always been a divided region politically. During Christianity's first two centuries the authority of the Roman Empire held sway in its western areas, and that of the Persian Empire in the east.<sup>3</sup> Yet it maintained a certain degree of cultural autonomy and unity, perhaps due to its organization into semi-independent city-states (or small kingdoms). From the mid-third century the Romans took over direct control as far as the Persian borders beyond the Euphrates River. But the area became a battleground, as both empires vied repeatedly in the following centuries for extension of their territories. In Persia the early third century saw the overthrow of the Parthians by the Sasanian dynasty; to the west, the Roman Empire was turning

2. On the Syriac language and literature, see, for example, S. P. Brock, "An Introduction to Syriac Studies," in *Horizons in Semitic Studies: Articles for the Student*, ed. J. H. Eaton (Birmingham, 1980), esp. at 11-13; R. Duval, *La Littérature Syriaque: des origines jusqu'à la fin de cette littérature après la conquête par les Arabes au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1907; repr. Amsterdam, 1970); A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn, 1922; repr. Berlin, 1968).

3. The best and most readable history of the Syrian Orient is still J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), although it focuses mainly on one area. For the eastern Syrian Orient, see J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'église en Iraq*, CSCO 310/Sub. 36 (Louvain, 1970). Less helpful is W. Stewart McCulough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, 1982).



toward its fourth century transformation to the Christian Roman Empire, later known as the Byzantine Empire. These changes perpetuated a hazardous state of affairs for the Syrian Orient.

Whether governed by Romans or Persians, the Syrian Christians were in a minority position (and their language was always overshadowed by the dominant language of their rulers). While the eastern Syrians were a religious minority in an empire largely Zoroastrian, the western Syrians were a minority of a different kind. They shared the faith but not the culture of their rulers, and in the heated christological debates of the fifth century they found even their faith to be at odds with that of their government. The struggle of the western Syrians was thus of a more bitter kind. Christians within the Christian Empire, they were nonetheless set apart.

The religious crisis centered around the Council of Chalcedon held in 451 and its credal definition of the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The debates on how precisely to define this relationship affected, and disrupted, the whole of Christendom both prior to the Council and in the years following its decisions. The problem lay in maintaining the full integrity of the incarnation, as well as the crucifixion and resurrection, in such a way that neither the divinity nor the humanity of Christ was diminished or undermined. The Chalcedonian definition proved unacceptable to most Syrian Christians. To this day the Syriac churches are not in agreement with those of the Chalcedonian Orthodox traditions, although dialogue between the two groupings (Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, Orthodox and Oriental-Orthodox) is now taking place with greater success than at any earlier time.<sup>5</sup> The religious disputes led in the fifth century to the exile into Persia of some Syrian Christians (those who would help shape the Church of the East);<sup>6</sup> and in the sixth century to persecutions against most of the remaining

4. Primary studies are: A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition from the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. J. S. Bowden (London, 1965); A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht, *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3 vols. (Würzburg, 1951–54); F. M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (Philadelphia, 1983).

5. P. Gregorios, W. H. Lazareth, and N. A. Nissiotis, eds., *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?—Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology* (Geneva, 1980).

6. A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, CSCO 266/Sub. 26 (Louvain, 1965); O. Hendriks, "L'activité apostolique du monachisme monophysite et nestorien," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 10 (1960): 3–25, 97–113.

Syriac-speaking Christians (those who would build the Syrian Orthodox, or Jacobite, Church) by the Byzantine government.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time renewed battles between Byzantium and Persia were being fought in the area. The enormous suffering that ensued heralded the hardships to follow. The Syrian Orient was seized afresh in the early seventh century, first by the Persians and then by the Arabs. The Byzantine Empire regained part of the western Syrian Orient during the tenth century, and Crusaders also held part of the western area during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Both times, the areas were reconquered by Muslim Turks. Each time the change in authority took place, it did so with great devastation to the people and their lands.<sup>8</sup>

The Syrian Orient has rarely known periods of peace, and the Syriac churches have held through most of their history the position of an endangered, marginal grouping. Precisely because of their religious differences, the Syriac churches have sometimes been better tolerated by Muslims than by Christians (whether Byzantine Orthodox or Catholic Crusader)—a sober lesson on the nature of religious conflict. Yet their security has not been long lasting at any time. As modern history testifies all too tragically, the Syrian Orient has continued to suffer repeated buffetings at the hands of opposing political powers.<sup>9</sup>

Because this collection is concerned specifically with holy lives (and holy deaths), the religious activities of early Syriac Christianity are of particular relevance for understanding these texts. Certain distinctive features of early Syrian spirituality bear significantly upon these stories; it is to these features we now turn.

Christianity first emerged in the Syrian Orient out of the Jewish communities, largely independent of the Greco-Latin churches to the west, and with a powerful spirituality born of semitic tradition rather than that of classical Greece and Rome.<sup>10</sup> Of course,

7. W. A. Wigram, *The Separation of the Monophysites* (London, 1923; repr. New York, 1978); W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, England, 1978); Hendriks, "L'activité apostolique," 3-25, 97-113.

8. Cf. Segal, *Edessa*, 192-257.

9. E.g., P. Dib, *History of the Maronite Church*, trans. S. Beggiani (Detroit, 1971); J. Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbours* (Princeton, 1961); J. Joseph, *Muslim-Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East* (Albany, 1983).

10. R. Murray, "The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity," *East of Byzantium*, ed. N. Garsoian, T. Mathews, and R. Thomson (Washington, D.C., 1982), 3-16 provides an excellent summary of the overall picture. Cf. also

in its basic sense Syriac Christianity shared the faith of the wider Christian sphere: this was not a difference of religious conviction but a divergence of orientations or thought-worlds, revealed in the texture and tone of spirituality developed in response to the Christian message.<sup>11</sup> From its semitic roots Syriac Christianity inherited biblical tradition directly from Judaism. That is to say, where the Greek and Latin churches dealt with Judaism in its Diaspora form, with the influences of Hellenic thought and culture and particularly the impact of philosophy, Syriac spirituality was based in a biblical grounding formed less in dialogue with external pagan religions than with Hebraic Judaism itself.

As was the case elsewhere in early Christendom, various forms of Christianity flourished in the Syrian Orient.<sup>12</sup> The region has become notorious with scholars for fostering groups of gnostic inclination; Marcionites most notably, Valentinians, Messalians, and the curiously syncretistic Manichaeans all made deep marks on the face of Syriac Christianity. What these groups shared, and what would emerge as a peculiarly poignant trait of Syriac spirituality, was an ascetic understanding of religious faith. For the extremist groups the understanding was based on a dualistic view of the cosmos—that the temporal, physical world is inferior to the spiritual one, if not an outright channel for evil, and that the spiritual world is the only true and good realm of the divine.

But an ascetic understanding of Christianity in the Syrian Orient was fundamental from its earliest times, even in that sphere of the Syriac church that would emerge as “orthodox” in the course of Christianity’s consolidation.<sup>13</sup> Syriac spirituality called for a life of renunciation and above all of celibacy not simply for its elect but for all its faithful. Thus into the third century (and pos-

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R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, England, 1975), 1–38.

11. R. Murray’s *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* is one of the finest studies to date in this regard.

12. See esp. W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. and trans. R. A. Kraft et al. (London, 1972); A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2 vols., CSCO 184/Sub. 14 and 197/Sub. 17 (Louvain, 1958); H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden, 1980).

13. S. P. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 1–19 (or, see S. P. Brock, chap. 1 in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London, 1984); and J. Gribomont, “Le monachisme au sein de l’église en Syrie et en Cappadoce,” *Studia Monastica* 7 (1965): 7–24, remain fundamental.

sibly into the fourth) baptism and the Eucharist were reserved for the celibate alone.<sup>14</sup> The life of virginity, or of continence in marriage (the practice of spiritual marriage), represented the basic Christian commitment. The models underlying this view were biblical: the models of the prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, and the New Testament examples of John the Baptist, Jesus himself, the disciples once chosen, and Paul. All of these "chosen ones of God" had lived the life of renunciation in order to pursue God's work with single-minded devotion. They had lived in the open countryside, conducted their public ministries by traveling without concern for shelter or food, and abandoned society's comforts of family, home, and relative security for a life of witness to God. If the Old Testament gave the sense that renunciation was called for only on the part of the elect, the New Testament openly demanded the imitation of Christ by all believers. "Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Luke 18:22); "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23); these and other such statements by Jesus left no middle ground for those who would be disciples.<sup>15</sup>

Syrian spirituality shared with that of early Christendom as a whole the tendency to literalize symbols.<sup>16</sup> There was no separation of spiritual symbol and physical activity in the realm of religious behavior. However, the Syrian Orient lived out this tendency to a greater extreme than the Greco-Latin churches to the west. Thus, if the life of renunciation was called for by scriptural model and injunction, then that was the life that must be lived by all believers. But the sense is perhaps better seen in the force of imagery. The New Testament presented the image of Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom,<sup>17</sup> to whom the believer is betrothed. The relationship evoked by the image is one of compelling and absolute devotion. The Heavenly Bridegroom was a favorite epithet for Christ in the Syrian Orient<sup>18</sup> but as far more than an image.

14. A. Vööbus, *Celibacy: A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951); Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*; R. Murray, "The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-75): 59-80.

15. Cf., e.g., Matt. 10:37-39; Mark 10:39; Luke 14:26-27, 33.

16. Cf. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism."

17. Esp., Matt. 22:1-14.

18. Murray, *Symbols*, 131-42; Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, I, 78-83.

If this was the relationship between Christ and the believer, then earthly marriage simply had no place. Celibacy was again the resulting action, and once again not because of a dualistic understanding that the flesh is evil or inferior but because the believer is utterly devoted to Christ, given to Christ, “betrothed” to Christ. The religious image and the physical action are inseparable and witness to the making literal of the symbol.

In its extreme form this literalizing of symbols led to striking behavior on the part of the Syrian believer. The redeeming work of Christ, the Second Adam, had made salvation possible for humanity and brought the promise of a return to Paradise, to the perfect life as it was lived by Adam and Eve before their Fall. In anticipation of that return, and indeed to hasten its coming, some believers adopted a life of stunning physical symbolism: going naked in the wilderness, surviving on wild fruits and water, living among the wild beasts, exposing themselves to the elements, and leading an uninterrupted life of prayer and devotion to the divine as indeed Adam and Eve had done.<sup>19</sup> They acted out with their bodies the spiritual truth of their faith.

Nowhere else in Christendom does one find so profound a sense that religious behavior is equivalent to religious belief. The believer’s very life, in the most mundane sense, manifested the essence of faith. Thus the early fourth-century bishop and ascetic Aphrahat the Persian wrote a treatise on faith in which he listed the following practices to be necessary for Christian life: pure fasting, pure prayer, love, alms, meekness, virginity, holiness, wisdom, hospitality, simplicity, patience, long suffering, mourning, and purity.<sup>20</sup> Aphrahat here speaks of the vocation of all believers as demanding a manner of life that in Western Christianity (and a little later in Syriac Christianity) was restricted to monastics. The believer sought to live according to the model of the life of Christ (well-summarized by Aphrahat’s list of practices) and to live in total devotion to God, giving one’s whole body as well as one’s whole mind and heart. Such a life was, necessarily, a life of renunciation from the luxuries of the secular world; it was necessarily ascetic.

19. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism”; Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, 1, 90–154.

20. Aphrahat, *Demonstration I: On Faith*. Text: ed. I. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca*, ed. R. Graffin (Paris, 1894) 1, cols. 5–46. ET: J. Gwynn, *SLNPNF XIII* (Oxford and New York, 1898), 345–52.

In the course of the fourth century, Christianity achieved its triumph: first, its legalization in the Roman Empire with the Edict of Milan in 313; then the defining of the creed at the first ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325; and finally in 392 the declaring of Christianity as the state religion of the empire, followed by the outlawing of paganism and heresy in 395. A tremendous movement accompanied these events to bring the various areas of Christendom into conformity with the mainstream orthodox church (largely Greco-Latin) as defined at Nicea. In the Syrian Orient, changes under this movement were slow to come but deep in impact. One of the most significant changes was conforming to a structure in which asceticism was a separate vocation within the church, apart from and exclusive of the life of the laity.<sup>21</sup>

While efforts were undertaken to tone down the ascetic sense of lay Christianity, the major developments of this change for Syrian asceticism continued within the traditional Syrian ethos.<sup>22</sup> It is this distinctive tradition that the saints' Lives of this collection reflect. So, for example, the tradition of the lay ascetic, the layperson who lives a life of continence, simplicity, and prayer without taking formal vows remained, as our texts of Mary (the Pilgrim) (5A) and Shirin (8) illustrate. Furthermore, the marking off of the ascetic life and the growth of the monastic institution retained certain distinctively Syrian features:

1. The conviction that the ascetic life was integral to the life of the worshipping community was maintained. The ascetic did not lead a life of isolated withdrawal but was intimately involved with the larger Christian community, advising, exhorting, healing, exorcising, and guiding the faithful. Our stories of Mary and Euphemia (5A), Susan (5B), and Febronia (7) describe such interaction.

2. There continued an appreciation for the individual virtuoso of ascetic practice, seen most clearly in this collection in the legends of Mary the niece of Abraham (1) and Pelagia the Penitent (2). Like the earlier virtuosi who took to the wilderness, these

21. Cf. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, 1.

22. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism"; Gribomont, "Le monachisme"; Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*. See, too, P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" (with author's revisions in the notes), *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), 103-52.

were persons whose pursuit of the perfect life took them on singularly symbolic paths of action, most notably found in those notorious practices of the Syrian ascetic movement—the wearing of iron chains, confinement in cages, or living in trees or on top of tall pillars as the famous stylites did.

The stylites are the best example of what the Syrian ascetic tradition meant. Simeon the Stylite (389–459) stood for forty years on top of his narrow pillar, sixty feet high. Everyone, whether peasant, king, or bishop, sought his teaching, judgments, and healings for affairs private, civil, and ecclesiastical. But in the long hours when people watched Simeon stand motionless in prayer, his arms outstretched in supplication, midway between earth and heaven, they saw, too, a living crucifix of the Savior. They saw a living image of Christ. In the most radical sense Simeon symbolically fulfilled the call to imitate Christ; in the most radical sense he had given himself utterly to God, body and soul.<sup>23</sup>

Modern scholars are sometimes uncomfortable with the ascetic nature of early Syriac Christianity and the startling extent of Syrian asceticism, which may seem alien to what our society understands a religious life to involve. However, what must be remembered is the drenching power of symbolism for Syriac spirituality and its breathtaking pursuit of biblical imagery. The complement to Syrian religious behavior was the literary expression of that same spirituality: Syriac literature, especially poetry, mirrors Syriac asceticism. Indeed the delicacy and vibrancy of Syriac poetry in Late Antiquity made a lasting impression on the hymnography of the orthodox churches. Most exquisitely rendered by Ephrem Syrus and Jacob of Serug, the poetry of the Syrian Orient blends a fine craftsmanship with an exploration and celebration of imagery that can only be described as sumptuous.<sup>24</sup> It is here in the play of biblical symbols and images that we face the heart of Syriac Christianity. It was not in the subtleties of philosophical discourse but in the subtleties of the lyrical spirit

23. H. Lietzman, *Das Leben des Heiligen Symeon Stylites*, TU 32,4 (Leipzig, 1908).

24. Tremendous strides have been made in our understanding of this facet of Syrian spirituality. See, above all, R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*; R. Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975/6): 1–20; S. P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: 18 Poems of St. Ephrem*, 2d ed., SSTS 4 (London, 1983); S. P. Brock, "The Poet as Theologian,"

that Syriac writers came into their own. Most importantly, Syrian poetry and Syrian asceticism sprang from the same source: the understanding of religious symbolism as all-encompassing.

For the Christian world of Late Antiquity these were the greatest and most far-reaching of the contributions offered by the Syrian Orient—the beauty of her hymns and the jarring translucence of her ascetic practices. The Byzantine *kontakion* owes much to Ephrem's hymnography; and long after Simeon Stylites died, the Byzantine Empire nurtured his practice (indeed, the last known stylite was seen as late as the mid-nineteenth century).<sup>25</sup> Poetry and asceticism were the inner and outer modes of expression for Syrian spirituality, a spirituality of symbolism as literally lived as it was figuratively understood.

Still the political and cultural dominance of the Greco-Latin sphere inevitably made its mark. In the wake of the post-Nicene move toward theological conformity and ecclesiastical consolidation, the christological controversies of the fifth century were born. The disputes that led up to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and followed on from it were fought with a bitterness that eventually split Christendom apart and seriously altered the shape of the Byzantine Empire. It was in the fighting of these disputes that Hellenic influence began to press on the Syrian Orient with real impact.<sup>26</sup> Syriac writers of the late fifth and sixth centuries sometimes show cultural syncretism at its best,<sup>27</sup> but it was a brief moment. Although Syriac literature continued to produce great writers into the Middle Ages, the combination of religious and political warfare impaired its autonomy and energy. With the seventh century, the so-called golden age of the Syrian Orient came to a close.

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*Sobornost* 7:4 (1978): 243–50; S. P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, OCA 205 (Rome 1978): 325–48; S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem* (Rome, 1985).

25. H. Delehaye, *Les Saints Stylites*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 14 (Bruxelles, 1923).

26. S. P. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," *East of Byzantium*, ed. N. Garsoian et al. (Washington, D.C., 1982), 17–34 (or, see Brock, *Syriac Perspectives*, chap. 5).

27. For example, in the fusion of Hellenic and Semitic thought by Philoxenus of Mabbug, as in R. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford, 1976); or in the elegant *Life of John of Tella* by Elias the Monk, ed. E. W. Brooks, CSCO 7/7 and 8/8 (Paris, 1907).



## III

For the Christendom of Late Antiquity it was holy lives that most often transcended differences of language, culture, and time. As in the cases of Mary the niece of Abraham (1) and Pelagia the Penitent (2), stories of Syriac saints or legends of Syrian origin are found in every language of the medieval Christian world, and many hold places in both the Orthodox and Roman liturgical calendars.<sup>28</sup> What do the stories of this collection share in common with the larger frame of Christian hagiography—the literature about saints? Our collection includes martyrs' passions and saints' Lives, pious romances and personal reminiscences. What are the primary concerns that bind these diverse forms of hagiography together?<sup>29</sup>

In its most basic sense Christian hagiography is about the intersection (however brief) of the human and the divine. The hagiographer seeks to reveal holy presence in human life and uses the saint's story to accomplish that purpose. For the writer, the holy person was neither angel nor demon, despite the cosmetics of literary license, but a human being through whose actions the divine works in human life. Through the holy one God acts in, participates in, and is present in the world in which we live. Although saints' Lives sometimes give the impression that the holy one was born in this state of perfection or born destined to it (as in our story of Febronia [7]), there are many saints' Lives that tell of persons who achieved this state after the most unlikely beginnings. Here, for example, in the story of Pelagia, a prostitute turned penitent (2), or Mary the niece of Abraham (1), who fell from the ascetic life into the most degrading of circumstances, we are told that the furthest reaches of human weakness can yet be turned and cleansed to achieve holiness. For the sanctity of the saint lies in this very paradox—that the human itself can be rendered holy. Hagiography echoes the promise of the incarnation: humanity *can* be worthy of the divine, and the divine can and does deign to meet us within ourselves.

28. P. Peeters, *Orient et Byzance: Le Tréfonds Oriental de l'Hagiographie Byzantine*, Subsidia Hagiographica 26 (Bruxelles, 1950).

29. See Appendix: General Bibliography (a) for the major references on hagiography. The following discussion is meant as an overview, stressing those features of primary importance for our texts.

Hagiography is only rarely biography.<sup>30</sup> The task of the hagiographer is to articulate the processes of the divine and the human in the actions of the holy person, or to make visible to the ordinary eye the inner truth of such a person's work. That is, the hagiographer is concerned with interpreting what happened. Physical events themselves are not always revealing of their true significance and are indeed secondary to the import of their larger meaning. Hagiographers knew well their purpose. Accordingly, they wrote the meaning they wished to be understood rather than straight historical narratives, and they wrote to edify and exhort the faithful and unfaithful alike.

Yet hagiography does contain much of historical worth, simply because its subject is that of human lives even as its intent is to see beyond them. To be sure, the perceptions and presuppositions of hagiography are hard for the historian to use, let alone to measure. What is tangible in the recognition of sanctity, then, is that the person perceived as holy is one who can accomplish deeds of power and meaning where people perceive themselves to be helpless. The holy one can heal the sick, teach wisdom such that the vicissitudes of life make sense, sway the heart of the most ruthless debt-collector, or cause an emperor to change his mind. These are actions that count, for people who have no other succor.

The hagiographer's model was that of the Gospels. Since the primary call for Christians was the imitation of Christ, the life and death of the believer were understood as meaningful always in relation to the Gospel model: in all circumstances, hagiography is based on the life and death of Christ. The given historical situation determines the emphasis of the story. In times of peace it is the saint's Life that is shown to mirror the work of Christ, usually with asceticism providing the means of imitation. In times of persecution it is the saint's death, or rather the manner of the saint's death, that proves significant; martyrs' passions pivot on that event and what led up to it—we may be told nothing else about the saint's prior life. But in both cases, what is critical (or, for the hagiographer, what is holy) are the actions of the saint, those things that are actually done. The substance of sanctity is thus made tangible, even if seen to be transcendent.<sup>31</sup>

30. And even then, biography of a particular kind. See P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983).

31. See Appendix; but esp. E. Patlagean, "A Byzance: ancienne hagiographie et histoire sociale," *Annales: e.s.c.* 23 (1968): 106–26, repr. in E. Patlagean, *Struc-*

The story of Euphemia (5A) by John of Ephesus illustrates how the writer could put the substance of a person's life together with the life of Christ. Euphemia was a woman John of Ephesus knew well; we know about her from no other source. She is presented by John as a "saint" in an informal (noncanonized) way, but his conviction as to her sanctity is unshakeable. Without the embellishments of legend or cult, then, he tells us about her: her private vows of chastity, poverty, and asceticism; her tireless efforts among Amida's poor, hungry, sick, and homeless; her dangerous work for the refugees of religious persecution; and her shameless determination to do what she saw God's purpose to be, even in the face of public disapproval or censure. After thirty years of such efforts Euphemia died of exhaustion, a death John tells us was equal to the martyr's crown. Because of the manner of John's portrait, we cannot fail to see Euphemia's life as the perfect imitation of Christ's ministry and suffering. But John has not imposed this interpretation on the story he tells, so much as he has used the model of Christ to understand the meaning of Euphemia and her work. Further, by using the model of Christ to this end, John grants particular force and significance to her actions—the work of this woman was God's work.

However, because the saving work of Christ lay in his crucifixion, it is the hagiographer's assimilation of Christ's life to that of the martyr that provides the clearest view of how the model of Christ functioned for the understanding of sanctity. More than half the texts in our collection are concerned with martyrs, running the spectrum from the painfully authentic to the elaborately wrought as literary accounts. We have here the memory of Christians torturously put to death at the hands of Roman pagans (Febronia [7]), Zoroastrians (the Persian martyrs [3]), and Jews (the Najran martyrs [4]). What was martyrdom about, and why were Christians martyred?

Historians are agreed on two primary points. First, Christian literature has painted the experience of martyrdom and persecution as far more extreme than generally happened—perhaps not so surprising in terms of the romantic appeal of religious propaganda, but an important feature even so. Second, contrary to the literary portrayal, Christians were put to death not because they

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*ture sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance: IV<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (London, 1981); ET now in S. Wilson, ed., *Saints and their Cults* (Cambridge, England, 1983), 101–21.

represented an overt threat or danger to their persecutors but because certain actions of Christian life proved deeply offensive to the basic moral structures of their persecuting societies. The standard charges against Christians were those of impiety and atheism (refusal to recognize any God but their own).<sup>32</sup>

These two points indicate the major motifs that characterize the literary forms of martyrs' passions.<sup>33</sup> There is a standardized script behind our texts, which may be followed more or less, depending on the writer's prerogative.

1. The charge against the Christian involves an action: refusal to sacrifice to the patron deity of the empire (Persian or Roman), as when the Persian martyr Martha (3A) fervently declares that she will pray on behalf of the empire but not to the imperial deity;<sup>34</sup> or refusal to marry, for the common Christian practice of virginity was unsettling in its social impact, eroding as it did the most fundamental aspect of the social and economic order, the family. The martyr responds with words that disallow any outcome to the incident except death. Often the persecutors themselves seek some alternative course—marriage (for the Persian martyrs) or flight (for Febronia)—but to no avail.

The resonance between the historical episodes and the legendary ones on these events raises deeper issues. It is clear from both the Najran accounts and from the background to Febronia's conflict that Christians could and did live in a pragmatic harmony with their non-Christian neighbors most of the time. Yet the passion narratives set up a situation of absolute conflict between Christian and non-Christian in which no mutual coexistence seems possible. From the speeches of the Persian martyrs we glimpse the symbolism of the Christian life-style that proved

32. A helpful survey is found in G. Bonner, "Martyrdom: Its Place in the Church," *Sobornost/E.C.R.* 5:2 (1983): 6–21. The Persian situation was more complicated still, as will be seen in the following. There, in addition to questions of moral offense, the concern about religious and political loyalties played a part once Christianity was affirmed in the Roman Empire; that is, the question was raised as to whether Christians in Persia would remain loyal subjects or align themselves with the Christian Roman state. See S. P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Religion and National Identity*, ed. S. Mews, SCH 18 (London, 1982), 1–19 (or, see Brock, *Syriac Perspectives*, chap. 6).

33. See Appendix: General Bibliography (a).

34. This was in fact the standard Christian apologetic when faced with this charge.

most distressing. The stories of the martyrs reinforce the values of an ascetic Christian life-style. The Christian lives as if spiritually dead to the world—indifferent to secular luxuries and unwilling to participate in society's perpetuating institutions of family (marriage) and state (sacrificing to the patron deities). The martyrs underscored the consequences of this life-style by physically dying for it—not forcing their own deaths but holding to a mode of life whose consequences could be fatal, both for the individual and for society.

2. In our stories tortures follow the interrogation and are described with a violence that still stuns the reader's sensibilities. It is this violence that is the *sine qua non* of the martyr's story. While historians have generally viewed the extent of this violence to be a literary exaggeration, our experience of torture in the twentieth century has taught us the extremes that can in fact be administered and suffered. Our modern experience indicates that the exaggeration in these stories may not always be as great as has been supposed. Still, in the martyrs' stories a religious motive is present in the literary depiction of this violence. The hagiographer's stylized portrayal of the martyr's interrogation, torture, and death represents these events as containing a greater significance than their physical occurrence would indicate: the battle between good and evil is here at work. For literarily the violence is such that it moves all participants beyond the realm of humanity. In the stories' view, no human could endure such torture, but neither could a human inflict such torture. The martyr transcends human weakness, filled with the power of the divine whose presence is manifested by virtue of the martyr's capacity for endurance. The persecutors, however, have descended beyond the ranks of human sin.

3. Lest the reader doubt the import of this battle and how it occurs, miracles of a particular kind accompany the martyr's death. A common feature in martyrs' passions is that the martyr can be killed only by an actual beheading; fire and wild beasts fail to bring death.<sup>35</sup> Since we know for a fact that Christian martyrs died by such means, the writer's purpose in altering the cause of

35. Compare, for example, the martyrdoms of Polycarp, or Perpetua and Felicitas; or, what happens to the legendary Thecla when she is sentenced to death in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Even Eusebius of Caesarea reports this phenomenon, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII. 7, and the *Martyrs of Palestine*, XI.

death demands our attention. As the writer presents the event, the deed must be done by human hands, whereon the full responsibility then lies. Nature, God's created order, refuses to participate in the death, but once the act is done, Nature reacts with a breaking of her own laws. From the blood of the martyred women of Karka d-Beth Slokh (3C) springs a fig tree with miraculous healing powers; a terrifying cloud of wasps protects the sacrilegiously exposed body of Anahid (3F). So, too, had the sun darkened at the death of Christ, and an earthquake rent the temple veil.<sup>36</sup> The death of the martyr is a crime that transgresses the created order of the universe.<sup>37</sup> Harsher still is the hagiographer's clear implication that this battle between good and evil is humanity's own affair.

To see the martyr as the imitator of Christ is to see the starting assumption of the audience for these stories. Salvation had come through the suffering death and resurrection of the incarnate Lord. By their suffering deaths, the martyrs accomplished a perfect imitation of that event. The hagiographer shows the reader that the martyrs became a channel through which God's grace could work, by offering themselves thus in perfect purity of heart. The disproportionate components of our texts—the extremity of violence given and received—remind the reader that the simple historical event is not what it appeared to be. The death of one person by another could yet contain salvific import far beyond what was intended or known by those involved.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, the glorification of martyrdom presents a problem. This measure of human greatness, even if possible only by means of God-given endurance, depends upon the supreme measure of human wrong in another person. The historical basis to these stories belies so simplistic an understanding. As the case of the Najran martyrs reminds us most vividly, in its stories of Jews massacring Christians, the roles of oppressor and oppressed have been interchangeable in our history all too often.

The salvation brought by the action of Christ was, after all, about the redemption of humanity from its fallen state. For our hagiographers, the battle between good and evil is finally that

36. Matt. 27:45, 51; Mark 15:33, 38; Luke 23:44-45.

37. In Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, IV and IX, sea and earth alike are unable to bear these crimes.

38. Compare P. Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 1-25.

which must take place within humanity itself. The saints' Lives that are set alongside these martyrs' stories indicate that this is the real issue at hand. In the hagiographical texts that deal with holy lives, the forces for good and evil, or the capacity for heroic steadfastness and treacherous wickedness, are contained within each individual. In the end the real battle is that to be fought within each human soul.

The hagiographers in these texts also call their readers to task. The audience cannot escape their own complicity in the demonic or their call to the holy. When Euphemia refuses to take charity from others to support her work among the sick and destitute, she vehemently declares that she will not carry the sins of others for them, for her own sins are black enough. Perhaps the reader might quake at such a rebuff in the face of Euphemia's tremendous power of spirit. But her challenge is against complacency: all are called to account for their own lives. Our hagiographers soften Euphemia's bluntness by teaching that all can bear this responsibility even as the martyrs did, if only they open themselves to the grace of God.

What binds the stories of this collection is the fact that holy lives and holy deaths are about the same thing. What is at stake is not the idea that asceticism might be an alternative form of martyrdom or vice versa, but that martyrdom and asceticism are two forms of the same event: humanity's encounter with the divine.

#### IV

One final issue remains. These texts are about women, but with the possible exception of Febronia's story they are written by men. The reader must be alert to the presence of the author's eye in the depiction of the subject and her experiences.<sup>39</sup> In the

39. As was the case throughout the Greco-Roman world of Late Antiquity, women in the Syrian Orient were very much a subservient group. Wealthy women had some mobility and social stature, as was true for the wealthy matrons of the Roman nobility, but real influence in the political and economic sphere was rarely possible unless exerted through a man. See J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 38–39, 152–54. It does appear that the radical forms of early Syrian Christianity did enhance women's status for awhile, but by the fourth century the Syrian Orient was earning its reputation for extreme misogyny. See S. Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Syrian Christianity," *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (London, 1983), 288–98. For the larger parallel,

more legendary accounts the reader is clearly being offered more than a "good story"; strong undercurrents of what the society or the church would like to say about women, or what they would like women to be, are at work.<sup>40</sup> In the more historical accounts we can sometimes see severe discordance between what the author says about women and what he tells us women are actually doing. Thus John of Ephesus describes the holy woman Susan (5B) as a "weak, feeble, frail woman," but at the same time he tells us about her astonishing career, which includes deeds of tremendous physical and mental exertion and fortitude that would defy the strength of either gender.

To be sure, women's voices have been largely missing in the history of literature until relatively recent times. That is what makes the case of Febronia's Life (7) the more intriguing. Here the author claims to be the nun Thomais, Febronia's spiritual sister who became abbess of the convent after the saint's death. It is a standard feature of hagiography that the writer claims to be a close companion of the subject, whether or not they ever met, lived in the same time period, or even both existed as historical persons. The writer's claim with regard to Febronia could thus be for literary protocol, especially since the nature of Febronia's story is such that no man could have plausibly functioned as a witness to the events portrayed. But there are other features of the story that make a woman author a likely possibility. The description of convent life as one of strenuous physical labor and high education; the nature of women's friendships as earnest, loving, philosophical, and intellectually inquisitive; the bonding between women lay and religious, married and unmarried, in common recognition of the hardships of their lives—all of these are unusual features in hagiography about women. The text is a compelling one, and not least for the dignity and love shared among the women that pervade the entire account.

For a portrait of women more aligned with early Christian writings,<sup>41</sup> we can turn to the (largely legendary) stories of Mary

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E. Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983) is indispensable.

40. For a finely textured presentation of the standard patristic view, see E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, vol. 13 of *Messages of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, Del., 1983).

41. *Ibid.*



the niece of Abraham, or Pelagia the Penitent. Here women are portrayed as weak-natured, wantonly sensual, darkly sexual beings. Saved from the error of their ways by the grace of God (and by men wiser and stronger than themselves), they live out their holy careers with a penance of violent proportions. Mary, in keeping with one whose life of sin had reached such degrading depths, fulfilled to the limit that life of penance most often deemed fitting for women in patristic literature: living in silent withdrawal shut off from the world around her, weeping ceaselessly in compunction until her death.<sup>42</sup> In Pelagia's case the story carries an almost sinister edge; when this proud prostitute abandons her life of sin, she leaves behind not only her former career and former self but even her former sex. Disguised as a eunuch monk, Pelagia lived out her life in self-mortification as a hermit on the Mount of Olives, to be discovered at her death. The story ends with wonder and bemusement at the thought that women as well as men could live as God's holy ones.

Some measure of reality can be gained from the more historical accounts, particularly those related by personal acquaintances—in our collection, the accounts of the Najran martyrs (4), those by John of Ephesus (5), and Martyrius' (Sahdona's) remembrance of his childhood mentor Shirin (8). In these cases, however heavy-handed the presentation may be in terms of patronizing attitudes toward women (and they can be very heavy-handed), something of the women themselves bursts through. We see women who are strong of character and strong of faith; who are assertive and even aggressive when they need to be; who are leaders of men and women both, and of religious and lay communities; who are courageous, firm, compassionate, honest, unassuming, creative, and wise. We see women whose actions speak far louder than the words said about them.

Hence we see Euphemia taking the wealthy nobles of her city to task over their luxurious life-styles, upbraiding them "until they became a bit peeved with her." Nonetheless, they responded by giving generously to those in need. We see, too, Mahya, a woman of Najran, whose "impudent and abusive manner" had exasperated the town for years. Willful and "disagreeable," Mahya responded to the massacre of the town's Christians like a

42. Compare the famous story of another reformed prostitute, Thais. *BHO* 1137; *BHG* 1695–97.

storm unleashed. Striding through the streets calling the Christians to take their stands and challenging the Jews on their lawless actions, she met her death with a rare dignity and a respect by others that had eluded her all her life. From the other extreme the Najran noblewoman Ruhm had always conducted herself with impeccable decorum, "a woman whose face no one had ever seen outside the gate of her house, who had never walked in the town in broad daylight." Hearing the news of the massacre, she walked to the public square "with her head uncovered," encouraging the Christians and condemning their persecutors; the very scandal of her actions lent power to her death.

These are women who show us how awkward the restraints of society on women could be, and how little women really fit the mold that was supposed to be theirs. The stereotype of pious women as passive, subservient, and unobtrusive is simply unfounded in the face of these women whose actions are acclaimed as inspired even while they disconcert the popular sensibilities. If there is a common factor across these stories, both legendary and historical, it is the courage that women could display on behalf of the faith. This is an important point: these women do not act in forceful ways out of their own assertiveness (as we might call such behavior today) or their own sense of self-respect but because they are compelled by that which is beyond themselves. It is because they can lose their own sense of self, as women or as individuals, that they can act in ways that break the social norms. What enables that letting go is their devotion to the higher purpose at hand: God's purpose. One must not mistake this behavior for what it is not; women were not "breaking out" through their own self-awareness. They were empowered by the conviction that it was God who called them to action, and God who would sustain them in that action.

Religion justified the restriction of women to a subservient position,<sup>43</sup> but religion also empowered women to break through their subservience.<sup>44</sup> Because Christian teaching underlay both the restriction and the empowerment, the breaking of social mores by women was not seen to endanger the basic societal

43. For the doctrinal basis, see Clark, *Women in the Early Church*; and G. Tavarard, *Women in Christian Tradition* (London, 1973).

44. A thematic paradox in Christian history. See E. McLaughlin and R. R. Ruether, eds., *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1979).

structure. That is, even if a woman like Euphemia acted in ways that scandalized the people around her, she was not seen to undermine society's stability since her behavior was called forth by divine authority. Again, the enormous capacity for leadership that women like Euphemia or Susan displayed was not taken to indicate that women deserved such positions in either the religious or social sphere.<sup>45</sup> The duty of the Christian to act according to God's will thus allowed a continual but anomalous position of authority for holy women. Holy women were seen to be the exceptions that proved the rule on women's inferiority, no matter how many such exceptions there were. John of Ephesus, like many hagiographers, feels compelled to apologize every time he tells a woman's story.

The hagiographies do, however, indicate clearly how tight the confines on women's lives could be. What kinds of choices for women did in fact exist? With Mary the Pilgrim (5A), Euphemia's sister, we find a woman of deeply private spirituality, whose vocation was that of a solitary. The acceptable routes available to her as a woman of religious vocation were either the convent or the life of service. She refused either, choosing instead a life of anonymous pilgrimage; her sanctity was clear from the fact that miracles were wrought merely "by her presence, and not by her will or her word." Her life involved no abrasive breaking of rules, no overt confrontation with standard expectations of women. Indeed the self-effacing manner in which she pursued her career almost veils the striking independence of her actions. Here was a woman who left her family, refused the relative security of marriage or a home, and rejected even the security of a religious community. Since the society made no place for women alone, the simplicity of her course is the more startling for its radical import.

In similar manner the holy woman Anastasia (6) found herself seemingly without recourse in a situation of grave tribulation. Called to a spiritual vocation, pursued with suspect intent by the emperor Justinian upon the death of his wife Theodora, Anastasia fled in fear. But who had the means to resist the will of an emperor? And where could she, a woman of religious vocation, safely flee? In this desperate state she journeyed to the innermost

45. For example, familiar arguments against the ordination of women are heard: Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 173-81.

part of the Egyptian desert, taking on the disguise of a eunuch monk; there she lived many years until her death, a solitary whose identity was known only to those two monks who tended her. Was her religious career a matter of choice or one born out of necessity?

Anastasia's story brings us to what is perhaps the most disturbing element of hagiography about women—the theme of sexual violence against women. This theme, which appears a number of times in our collection, is overtly present here in two forms: the sexual abuse and/or mutilation of women as a means of torture in the martyr accounts, and the annihilation of sexual identity in the stories of the “transvestite motif”—Pelagia in particular and Anastasia—where the women do not simply deny their gender or render themselves genderless but destroy their identity as women and take on that of men. In either instance, the texts describe the actions with disturbingly graphic detail. This is not a matter of insinuation.

The use of women's sexuality as a religious symbol for the poles of perdition and purity is a commonplace in early Christian and patristic literature, so much so that it colors how women are written about in all circumstances. So, for example, in the case of Pelagia, her prostitution measures the extremity of her sinfulness. Her conversion to Christianity is spectacular and awesome, but it does not provide equal measure to the degree of sinfulness her previous life had shown. The successful taking on of her male identity—or, as the writer implies, the achievement of a life so holy that only a man could have lived it (hence the shock of the crowd at the realization that Pelagios was not a man)—this deed alone suffices to measure the degree of her achieved grace in proportion to her former sin. Her sexual identity functions metaphorically for the moral of the tale.

For a more historically based treatment of this usage we have only to look at the Persian martyrs, where the Christian women, who here are consecrated virgins (*bnāth qyāmā*),<sup>46</sup> are bribed with the offer of marriage as an alternative to a tortured death. Metaphorically, these stories present Christian purity (the women's virginity) in opposition to their persecutors' lust (the concern for marriage). But these accounts, historically based as they are, ring too strongly of what is really happening in such a situation—the

46. See the discussion that follows, accompanying the texts.

violation of these women through their identity as sexual persons. The matter is confirmed by turning to the graphic accounts of sexual mutilation—for example, in the cases of Anahid and Febronia. It is rare for sexual mutilation to make its appearance in martyr accounts involving men,<sup>47</sup> though not in those of women. Indeed this mutilation of women is common to iconography of martyrs as well.<sup>48</sup> The specifically sexual character of some of the tortures imposed on women martyrs reflects on the fact that men were the torturers. But the gratuitously detailed manner in which these incidents are described (in fictional accounts as well as historically accurate ones) reminds us further that men are also doing the writing.<sup>49</sup>

The sexual mutilation of women by torture and the sexual annihilation of women by the taking on of a male identity are both about the same issue—namely, power and dominance in the relationship between men and women. And these events are found in hagiography about women, both legendary and historical. The events described in each given instance may or may not be true. But men are telling these stories to women as their audience and to men about women, and they tell them as if they were true. What are we to hear?

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke grants women a prominent place and a portrayal notably sympathetic to women's lot. Yet Luke's Gospel also shows such literary treatment for the poor, the sick, and the outcast. It is Luke who measures the extent of Jesus' purpose by emphasizing the place in his ministry of these "marginal" groups. The place Luke grants to women may not be due to his respect for women so much as it highlights Jesus' compassion for the unfortunate. So, too, in hagiography women often represent the extremes of sinfulness or sanctity. Above all, because they are women, not men, they reveal what our writers see as the astonishing greatness of the Lord's grace and mercy. Deserving these gifts less than men by virtue of their

47. For a notable exception, see Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, VII.

48. E.g., the martyr Agatha is often depicted carrying her severed breasts on a platter; Catherine of Alexandria is sometimes portrayed carrying a severed breast in her tunic.

49. Eusebius' reference to some men suffering emasculation (*Martyrs of Palestine*, VII) is brief—one sentence—and in this instance could even be interpreted as a figurative rather than literal description. Such brevity, and indeed such ambiguity, are a far cry from what we find in the women's stories.

gender, they thus display them all the more. As the bishops who bury Pelagia cry, "Praise to you, Lord; how many hidden saints you have on earth—and not just men, but women as well!"

Even so, in our hagiographies, as in Luke's Gospel, the women carry a dignity properly shown. Despite the author's hand, this is true for the scandalous Pelagia no less than the majestic noblewoman Ruhm. Even the most biased of writers could not escape altogether the fundamental injunctions of scripture. Thus John of Ephesus defends his decision to include stories of women in his collection of holy lives on the basis of the apostolic exhortation "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female, slave nor free" (Gal. 3:28). More pointedly, the "disagreeable" Maḥya castigates her torturers with a mighty freedom in the Spirit all would do well to seek. Publicly stripped naked at the orders of the king, Maḥya yet holds to her dignity, boldly stating, "It is to your shame . . . that you have done this; I am not ashamed myself. . . . I have been naked in the presence of men and women without feeling ashamed, for I am a woman—such as was created by God." Had she finished her scriptural allusion, Maḥya would have added, "created by God in His own image" (Gen. 1:26).

The paradox is that in the society from which our hagiographies came, not different from others of its time, women were not valued as women. Yet some people of value were women. Christianity rested on a vision of humanity that called all to the grace of redemption. But in its early centuries it did not understand its teachings to have tangible impact on the societal perceptions of gender in its world. Socially, politically, and religiously women remained persons of little worth, viewed with little respect. But no Christians disputed that women had value in the eyes of God and that women performed actions of worth for the Christian church as a whole. Our hagiographers thus glorify their women's actions as true followers of Christ while diminishing the integrity of their identities as women.

We return to the discrepancy between what our writers say about women and what they tell us women actually did. Stripped of their writers' editorial additions, these hagiographies tell us that women could do and did do the work of God on their own terms. That is powerful witness indeed.

## Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun

### INTRODUCTION

The first piece, on the fall from ascetic life and the subsequent repentance of Mary, niece of the recluse Abraham of Qidun (a village near Edessa), is an extract from the Life of this mid-fourth-century hermit. Abraham is also known from a brief mention in the sixth-century Chronicle of Edessa,<sup>1</sup> and from a group of thirteen hymns in praise of him, attributed to the great Syriac poet-theologian St. Ephrem (d. 373);<sup>2</sup> it is now generally accepted, however, that these are unlikely to be by Ephrem, and in any case they make no mention of Abraham's niece Mary.

The Life of Abraham is left anonymous in the earliest Syriac manuscript to contain it (fifth or sixth century), but subsequently it also came to be attributed to St. Ephrem; this is certainly incorrect, for the Life belongs to the fifth century, and indeed a date well on in the fifth century would be demanded if, as has been claimed,<sup>3</sup> the author is drawing on Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa* 17 (on Abraham the solitary, later bishop of Harran; in fact a different person), Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*, and the Life of St. Antony. Attention has also been drawn to striking parallels with a Coptic legend (probably translated from Greek) on Salome.<sup>4</sup> Clearly there would seem to be some doubt about the his-

1. He is said to have flourished about 355-56.

2. Edited by E. Beck in CSCO 322-23, *Scriptores Syri* 140-41 (1972).

3. By de Stoop (see Appendix).

4. By Lüdtké (see Appendix).

toricity of the episode described in the excerpt translated here, but hagiographers—like today's writers of historical novels—were not writing for the benefit of modern historians; rather, their concern was for the spiritual enjoyment and uplift of their audiences. The author of the *Life of Abraham* went about his task with considerable literary skill, and in particular the passages describing the meeting between Mary and her disguised uncle in the tavern achieve a marked poignancy. Although Syriac is certainly the original language, the author (in common with other anonymous Syriac writers of the same period<sup>5</sup>) makes use of a number of well-known rhetorical techniques familiar from contemporary Greek and Latin literature.

Two points of some interest in the episode here translated might be singled out. The author lays stress on the close links, brought out by Abraham's bizarre action, between sanctity and folly; in the next few centuries Syria was to produce a number of "fools for Christ,"<sup>6</sup> such as Theophilus and Mary, described by John of Ephesus, whose daytime life gave the appearance of being that of a pimp and a prostitute, but whose nights were given over to luminous prayer; or Symeon of Homs, whose exploits were narrated by Leontios of Neapolis (in Cyprus). Second, the *Life of Abraham* provides an early example of the idea of a saint taking upon himself the sins of someone else and acting, as it were, as a pledge to God for the other person's good behavior; thus (24) Abraham says to Mary in her despair, "I have taken upon myself your wrongdoing: God will require this sin at my hands." This theme of the saint standing surety for someone else is not uncommon in later hagiography.<sup>7</sup>

The *Life of Abraham* was translated at an early date into Greek and Latin,<sup>8</sup> and in both languages it enjoyed great popularity; in

5. For example, the author of a fine homily on Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22), ed. with English translation in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 12 (1981): 225–60.

6. For later developments, see J. Saward, *Perfect Fools* (Oxford, 1980), and A. Syrkin, "On the Behavior of the 'Fool for Christ's Sake,'" *History of Religions* 22 (1982): 150–71.

7. An excellent example can be found in the *Life of Eulogios the Stonecutter*, part of the cycle surrounding Daniel of Sketis (sixth century). See also R. J. Barringer, "Penance and Byzantine hagiography: le répondant du péché," *Studia Patristica* 18 (1982): 552–57.

8. Another very influential Syriac work of about this time that made its way into Greek and Latin was the *Life of Alexis*, the "Man of God."



the tenth century the remarkable nun Hrosthwitha of Gandersheim, author of Terentian-style plays, turned the work into dramatic form.

Several medieval manuscripts containing the Syrian Orthodox Festal Hymnary, known as the *Fenqitho*, contain a lament put in the mouth of Mary. It was sung sometime during Lent, and stylistically it would appear to be a composition of the fifth or sixth century (it is dependent on the *Life*). A translation of this text is given at the end of the extracts from the *Life of Abraham* that concern Mary.

*Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun*<sup>9</sup>

17. I want to tell you now of something amazing that Abraham did in his old age, a matter that my cultivated readers will find truly astonishing. The situation was as follows. The blessed Abraham had a brother with an only daughter. When the brother died leaving his daughter an orphan, his relatives took her to live with her uncle. She was seven years old at the time, and Abraham told her to live in the outer part of his home, while he lived as a recluse in the inner part. There was a small window that communicated between them, and it was through it that he gave the girl instruction in the Psalms and the Holy Scriptures. She used to keep vigil with him and minister to his needs. Just as he trained her soul in an excellent manner, so too she strove with a good will to attain to the perfection of his virtues. The blessed man would frequently supplicate God on her behalf, asking that she might apply her mind to a life of penitence and not get entangled by any of the world's attractions.

Now her father had left her ample money, but the blessed Abraham without any hesitation ordered that this should be given to the poor and orphans. She herself would daily beg her uncle and say, "Father, I beg of you, pray for me so that I may be delivered from bad thoughts and from all the effects of Satan's cunning snares." Willingly she trained herself in all the excellent ways of her blessed uncle, and he in turn delighted to see her fine intention, her tears and her humility, her quiet and gentle nature,

9. The section numbers are those of Lamy's edition (see Appendix).

and her love toward God. For twenty years did she emulate the blessed man's way of life: she was like a chaste lamb, like a spotless dove.

18. When these twenty years had elapsed, Satan took notice of her and tried to ensnare her; his intention was to cause the blessed Abraham grief and pain by these means, thus diverting his mind from God. Now there was a man who was nominally a monk,<sup>10</sup> who used regularly to come and visit the blessed Abraham on the pretext of friendship. One day he happened to see the blessed girl through the window. He fell in love with her at the mere sight and wanted to get hold of her and sleep with her. He allowed his mad desire for her to burn like a flame of fire in his heart. For a whole year he treacherously lay in wait for her, until he succeeded in softening her firm resolve, and the girl eventually opened the door of the house where she lived as a recluse and came out to see him. He assaulted her with his blandishments, bespattering her with the mud of his lust.

Once this sinful episode had taken place, stupefaction seized hold of her mind: she tore off the garment she was wearing, beat her face and breasts in grief, and said to herself, "I am now as good as dead: I have lost all the days of my life; my ascetic labors, my abstinence, my tears are all wasted, for I have rebelled against God and slain my soul; and upon my holy uncle I have imposed bitter grief. I have wrapped myself in shame by becoming a laughingstock to the Enemy, Satan. Why should I continue to live, now that I have become so wretched? Alas, what will happen to me? Alas, what have I done! Alas, what will happen to me? Alas, how did I fall? How did my mind and senses become so darkened without my realizing it? How my downfall occurred, I was unaware; how I became corrupted, I do not know. A dark cloud overlaid my heart, preventing me from seeing what I was doing. How shall I hide myself? Where shall I go? Into what pit shall I cast myself? What has become of this saintly man's instruction, what has happened to the wise Ephrem's<sup>11</sup> warnings? They told me to be careful of myself and preserve my virginity spotless for the immortal Bridegroom.<sup>12</sup> 'Your Bride-

10. *dayrāyā*; the use of the term in the context of Abraham's lifetime is anachronistic.

11. The poet, who resided at Edessa for the last ten years of his life.

12. Christ as the heavenly Bridegroom is a regular theme in early Syriac literature.

groom is holy and jealous,' they said. No longer do I dare look up to heaven, for I have died to God and to men. I can no longer go near that window, for how can I, a sinner, full of horrid stains, speak with this saintly man? If I made bold to approach the window between us, then fire will issue forth and consume me. It would be better for me to depart to some other place where no one knows me, seeing that I have died once and for all, and no longer have any hope of salvation."

19. So straightaway she got up and left for another town. She changed the precious monastic garb<sup>13</sup> she had been wearing and established herself in a low tavern.<sup>14</sup>

After this had taken place, the blessed Abraham had a fearful vivid dream: he beheld a huge serpent, disgusting to look at and hissing in a fearsome way. On leaving its lair it came toward him; it found there a dove, swallowed it up, and went back to its lair. When the blessed man awoke, he was much troubled and started weeping. "Perhaps Satan is going to stir up persecution against Christ's church and alienate many from the faith," he said to himself.<sup>15</sup> "Or maybe there will be schisms and divisions in the church of God." He then prayed to God with these words: "You know what is hidden, O lover of mankind; you alone know what this dream means."

Then once again, two days later, he saw the same serpent leave its lair and come toward his house, whereupon it placed its head beneath the blessed man's feet; the serpent's belly was then ripped open, and there, safe and sound in its belly was the dove that it had swallowed. The blessed man stretched out his hand and took the dove, which was still alive and unharmed.

On waking up he called to the blessed girl once and then a second time, saying, "My daughter, why are you so negligent: for two days you have not opened your mouth to praise God."

Seeing that she did not answer, and that for two days she had not ministered to his needs as was her wont, the blessed man realized that the dream he had seen referred to her. He groaned and wept plentifully, saying, "Alas for my lamb, the wolf has snatched her away; my daughter has been taken captive." He raised his voice in his tears, and said, "O Christ Savior of the

13. The Greek word *schema* is used in its technical sense.

14. *putâqâ*, derived from Greek *pandocheion*.

15. Persecution by Arians (such as is recorded in the Chronicle of Edessa as having taken place in that town in 373), rather than by pagans, will be meant.

world, return the lamb Mary to the fold of your flock; may I not go down to Sheol full of grief in my old age; do not turn aside my request, Lord; rather, send your aid at once and deliver her from the serpent's mouth."

Now the two days between the blessed man's two dreams represented the years during which his niece lived in the world. Continuously, night and day, did he supplicate God on her behalf.

**20.** After two years the blessed man discovered where she was living. He asked someone who knew her and sent him there to find out the truth about her and to ascertain where she was residing. The man duly found out about her and saw her, whereupon he returned and told Abraham of her situation and where she was living.

Convinced that this was she, the blessed man asked to have brought to him an outfit of soldier's clothing and a horse. When these arrived, he opened the door of his home and came out. He put on the military dress with a helmet on his head so that his face was covered, mounted the horse, and set off—like a spy wanting to scout out some region or town, wearing the local dress to prevent detection: thus did the blessed man wear those clothes whereby he could overcome the Adversary.

My beloved, come and let us wonder at this second Abraham: the first Abraham went out to battle with kings; he vanquished them and brought back his nephew Lot;<sup>16</sup> this second Abraham set out for battle with the Enemy, he conquered him and brought back his niece.

**21.** When he arrived at the spot where the tavern was situated, he spent a little while looking around in case he should see her. Failing to find her, he spoke to the tavern keeper with a smile on his lips, "My friend, I've heard you have a pretty lass here; I'd like to see her." Seeing Abraham's venerable white hair, the tavern keeper thought ill of him inwardly, but nevertheless said in reply, "Yes, there is; she is indeed pretty." The blessed girl, you should understand, was quite exceptionally beautiful.

Her uncle then said to the tavern keeper, "What is her name?" "Mary" was the reply. Then with radiant face, he said, "Summon her, so that we can enjoy ourselves together with her today. From what I've heard of her I am much attracted by her."

16. Gen. 14:16.

The tavern keeper called to her and she came. When Abraham caught sight of her dolled up and dressed like a prostitute, his whole body nearly began to run with tears, but he valiantly gripped hold of his emotions lest she notice and run away. As they sat drinking, this amazing old man began to chat with her, and she drew close to him and started embracing him and kissing his neck. But as she caressed him, the smell of asceticism that issued from the blessed man's body hit her. Immediately she recalled the days of her own ascetic life, and choking with grief, she gasped, "Woe is me, me alone!" In astonishment the tavern keeper addressed her: "My lady Mary, you've been with us for two years to the day, and I've never heard you groan and say anything like that. What's the matter with you?" "Had I died three years ago, I would have received a great blessing," she replied. To prevent her realizing who he was, the blessed man said to her angrily, "Why do you have to recall your sins now that I've come?"

22. My beloved listeners, don't you suppose that she said in her heart, "How much the man resembles my uncle," or "Isn't his build like that of my father?" But God who alone is wise and loves mankind saw to it that she did not recognize him and so run away in panic. At that moment the blessed man brought out a daric and, handing it to the tavern keeper, said, "Take this, my friend, and prepare us a first-class meal so that we can enjoy ourselves today with this lass. I've come a long way to see her."

What wisdom of spirit, what true discernment in the company he kept! This man, who for fifty years had not even eaten any bread due to his ascetic way of life, now, for the sake of one soul, ate meat and drank wine, all in order to rescue a lost soul. The angel hosts stood in astonishment at the blessed man's discerning action, how with a good will and without any hesitation, he ate and drank, all in order to draw up a soul that had sunk into foul-smelling mire. How great is the wisdom of the truly wise, what perception do those who truly understand possess! Come and stand in awe at the "folly" of a man perfected in wisdom! Here is a man of sharp understanding who became a boorish fool in order to remove from the serpent's mouth the soul that had been swallowed up, who rescued and delivered from bonds and from the prison of darkness the soul that had been held captive, having strayed after vanity.

23. After they had chatted together, the girl said, "Please come

into my bedroom so that we can sleep together." "Let's go in," he replied. On entering he espied a large bed made up, and of his own accord he sat down beside her. O perfect athlete of Christ, I know not what name I should give you, or what I should call you. Should I speak of you as a Nazirite, or someone who has compromised himself? Full of wisdom, or of folly? A man of discernment, or someone who has lost all sense of proportion? After fifty years of monastic life, sleeping on matting, how is it that you can sit down on such a bed? You did all this for the honor and glory of God: you made a long journey, you ate meat and drank wine, condescended to enter a tavern, all in order to save a lost soul. We hesitate to utter a single uplifting word to those present.

24. As he sat on the bed, the girl spoke to him: "Come, let me take off your shoes." "Shut the door first and then you can come and take them off." She objected and wanted to take off his shoes first, but he said no. So she shut the door and came back to him. "My lady Mary, draw close to me," he said. When she had done so, he grasped her firmly to prevent her escaping and, as though wanting to kiss her, he removed his helmet from his head and spoke to her with tears in his eyes: "My daughter Mary, don't you recognize me? Am I not your father Abraham? My beloved daughter, child of my dearest relations, don't you know who I am? Didn't I bring you up? What has happened to you, my daughter? Who has killed you this way—or so it seems? Where is that precious monastic habit you used to wear? Where is your ascetic way of life, where are the tears in your eyes? Where are your vigils, your bed on the ground? From what a height have you now sunk to such a pit as this! I brought you up as my daughter: why didn't you tell me when you committed the sin? I would have done penance for you along with my beloved Ephrem. Why have you acted like this? What was the reason for your leaving me, throwing upon me an unutterable sadness? Who is without sin, apart from God alone?"

As she listened to these words she became like a motionless stone in his hands, petrified with terror and fear.

"Won't you speak to me, my daughter?" the blessed man went on, in tears. "Wasn't it for your sake that I have come here? The sin shall be upon me, and I will answer on your behalf to God on the day of judgment. I will be the one who does penance for this sin."

He continued right up to midnight, begging her and admonishing her in tears. When she had plucked up enough courage, she said to him as she wept: "I cannot bring myself to look upon you, sir, seeing what a shameful thing I have done. How can I pray to God, now that I have befouled myself in this stench and mud?" The blessed man replied, "My daughter, I have taken upon myself your wrongdoing: God will require this sin at my hands. Just listen to me, and come back to our home. My beloved Ephrem is also full of grief because of you, and he makes supplication to God on your behalf: your soul is in his hands. Have pity on my old age, spare my white hairs, listen to your father's counsel, I beg of you."

He said this, having fallen on his knees trying to persuade her; whereupon she replied, "If you are certain that I *can* repent, and that God will receive me, then I come and fall at your feet, supplicating your venerable person; I kiss your holy feet because your compassion stirred you to come after me in order to raise me up from this foul abyss of mine."

Thus she spent the whole night in tears, saying, "How can I repay you, my father, for all that you have done for me?"

When morning came, he said, "My daughter, let's get up and get away from here." "There's a little gold and a lot of clothes that I've picked up in the course of my life of shame, what should I do with them?" she asked. "Leave them all here; they belong to the Evil One," he said.

25. So they got up and left without further ado. He sat her down on the horse, while he walked ahead, leading it. He traveled happy at heart, like a shepherd once he had found his sheep that had gone astray, carrying it home in joy on his shoulders. Such was the blessed man's joy of mind as he traveled home.

When they arrived, he enclosed her in the inner part of the house where he had previously lived, while he took up residence in the outer part, which had formerly been her place. Dressed in sackcloth and humility, she spent her time in tears and vigil, fasting and showing great diligence in her penitence as, without any hesitation, she called upon God who has pity on sinners. Her repentance was completely sincere.

This supplication and the reconciliation it effected astounded everyone. Who was so unfeeling that he did not open the eyes of his mind at her weeping? Who was so hard-hearted that he failed to praise God when he heard the sound of her lamenting her

sins? Compared with hers, our repentance is a mere shadow; compared with hers, our supplications are just dreamlike. Without any hesitation at all did she make supplication to God, asking him to forgive her what she had done. In order to provide a visible sign that God, the compassionate and the lover of mankind who receives the prayers of the penitent, accepted her back, a healing was effected through her prayer.

26. The blessed man lived for a further ten years. When he saw her excellent intention firm and unchanged, he praised and glorified God. He passed away at the age of seventy, having spent fifty years of his life in voluntary toil and great humility; he was unhesitating in his love, and he showed no respect for persons—contrary to what tends to happen with most people—who show preference to one person while they discriminate against another. For all these years he did not alter his rule of life, never faltering or losing heart. Instead he lived each day as though he was going to die during its course. 27. Such was the manner of the blessed Abraham's life. . . .<sup>17</sup>

28. On the day when he died the entire town gathered; everyone was eager to follow the saint's body in the funeral cortege. People grabbed bits of his clothes to afford themselves salvation. Everyone who had some sickness applied to their bodies whatever part of his clothing had been removed, with the result that they received healing. The people of the town escorted his body amid psalms and spiritual songs, employing the hymns that the blessed Mar Ephrem had composed in his honor. They took him outside the town and laid him in a coffin in the cemetery, beneath the great church where the blessed Mar Ephrem was later to be laid, in the same coffin, after his death.

29. The lamb Mary lived on for five years after the death of the blessed Abraham. She lived a life of exceptional virtue as, night and day, she begged God in her tears to have pity on her and forgive her the sins she had committed. Very often those who passed that spot at night would stop and listen to the sound of her weeping, and would themselves weep with her and give praise to God.

At the time of her death everyone who saw her face gave praise to God for its radiance. In this way she completed her life. She left the world having made a good end, being reconciled with God.

17. The rest of section 27 is omitted, since it does not concern Mary.



*Lament of Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun*

ALAPH<sup>18</sup> I will sit down and lament over my life;  
alas for me, for what has happened to me,  
how have I fallen!

Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

*Refrain* Alas for me, my brethren, what has happened to me?  
Again alas for what the Evil One has wrought in me.

BETH With his blandishments he lured me,  
with his enticements he led me astray—alas is me!  
How was it he captivated me, and caused me to sin?  
Fie on you, Evil One, what is it you have wrought in me?

GOMAL He removed from my countenance  
the honorable veil—alas is me!  
He made me live, shamefaced, in a tavern.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

DALATH He thrust me from my position of honor,  
he destroyed the opportunity for holy converse,  
casting me into the mire of lusts and base deeds.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

HE I too became a cause for wickedness,  
allowing it to be wrought in me—alas is me!  
For in me was the Evil One's wish fulfilled.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

WAW Alas, how bitter is the trap  
which the Evil One has laid for me—and caught me:  
with his bait he chokes pure damsels.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

ZAYIN He made me a prostitute, skilled in shame's work;  
alas, for I have fallen  
from those who lead the life of the Spirit.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what have you wrought in me?

18. The Lament is in the form of an alphabetic acrostic (compare the Lamentations of Jeremiah and Psalm 119); like the Hebrew, the Syriac alphabet has twenty-two letters.

HETH The ruler of the air<sup>19</sup> saw me engaged in virtuous deeds  
and became jealous of me;  
using his guiles he stopped me from my excellent labor.  
Fie on you, Evil one; what is it you have wrought in me?

TETH Great blessing would have been mine  
had I died while still a virgin,  
when the seal of virginity was preserved still sealed.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

YODH My weighty honor was turned into flightiness,  
my modesty was changed into an object of contempt—alas is  
me!  
For in me was the will of the Evil One fulfilled.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

KAPH That fair crown that was upon my head  
has been snatched away by the Evil One—alas is me,  
because I, of my own will, opened the door to him.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

LAMADH I have destroyed all my labors  
through sin with the Devil—alas is me  
who am stripped of the rank of virgins.  
Fie on you, Evil One; what is it you have wrought in me?

MEM Merciful are you, Lord, kind and pitying all;  
have pity on me, the lost lamb who has returned.<sup>20</sup>  
Heal all its ulcerous wounds,  
and may it find joy in you.

NUN May your mercies reach to me, Lord,  
and that salvation which you spoke of aid me,  
so that I may conquer and destroy the Enemy,  
and give thanks to your name, for you have had mercy on  
me.

SEMKATH Support my weak self with your arm  
raised up and mighty, O Lord,  
and may the Evil One be put to shame when he sees my  
firmness,  
may he collapse in confusion, destroyed forever in the pit.

19. I.e., Satan: the sublunary region (Greek *aer*, as opposed to *aither*) was widely considered to be the region where the demonic powers resided.

20. Cf. Matt. 18:12–13, Luke 15:7.

- Ⲉ The Evil One made me an object  
that was abominable and filled with stains.  
Answer me, my Savior, as you did that Sinful Woman;  
receive my tears as you did hers, O Lord.
- ⲡⲈ Your door is open for penitents  
to enter before you, O Lord;  
you do not call their sins to mind,  
you are good, Lord, and have pity on all.
- Ⲥⲁⲃⲏ I have taken up your cross and followed after you,  
as you told us, Lord;<sup>21</sup>  
make me worthy of the Kingdom and of salvation,  
along with the thief who gained salvation by your cross.<sup>22</sup>  
Thus shall I confess your grace, Lord.
- ⲚⲠⲡⲏ Receive the weeping and tears of my wretched state,  
Lord;  
wipe out the bill<sup>23</sup> which I wrote through the Murderer's  
guile.  
May he be ashamed because your compassion has wiped it  
out  
so that it can never again be exacted.
- ⲠⲤⲤⲏ Great is your compassion,  
and your grace is poured out over sinners  
who take refuge in you,  
who come to your great and holy gate in penitence.
- Ⲥⲏⲏⲏ Receive the mite of my words, in your great mercy,  
just as you received the widow's mite,<sup>24</sup>  
which she gave, Lord,  
to your great and holy name.
- ⲧⲁⲩⲩ Thanksgiving be to you from the just  
who have had faith in you, Lord,  
and from sinners as well, whom you have saved by your  
cross,  
and from all who have lived and are living be praise to you,  
Lord.

21. Matt. 10:38, 16:24.

22. Luke 23:40-43.

23. Col. 2:14.

24. Mark 12:42.

## Pelagia

### INTRODUCTION

This delightfully narrated piece concerns the conversion of a famous prostitute in Antioch, perhaps the unnamed woman whom St. John Chrysostom mentions in his Homily 67 on Matthew;<sup>1</sup> if this is so, then Pelagia will have lived in the late fourth century. The Life purports to be the work of Jacob, the deacon of the bishop Nonnos who effected Pelagia's conversion. Nonnos is said to have been a monk in Egypt, but his see is never named. Some, following Theophanes,<sup>2</sup> have identified him as Nonnos the bishop of Edessa from 449-51 and 457-70/1, but this is most unlikely. Nor is the archbishop of Antioch given a name, although one Greek text not unreasonably identifies him as Flavian (381-404).<sup>3</sup> No doubt this suppression of details by "Jacob" was deliberate, for the Life should primarily be seen as a literary embellishment of the story of the converted prostitute to whom St. John Chrysostom refers. This explanation, which allows a kernel of historicity to the Life, certainly seems more plausible than the theory adduced by Usener that Pelagia is none other than Aphrodite given the respectability of a Christian cult.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Patrologia Graeca* 58, cols. 636-37.

2. *Chronographia* (Bonn edition), I: 141-42.

3. BHG 1479g.

4. See Appendix. The title of Pavlovskis's article, "The Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot: Hagiographical Adaptation of Pagan Romance," is a little misleading: while Pavlovskis shows that "Jacob" was indeed writing in the general tradition of the Greek novella, he offers no evidence that the Life of Pelagia as a whole is a reworking of some pagan romance.

The Syriac Life is a translation from Greek, and it happens to be the earliest extant witness to the text. The Life of Pelagia was a great literary success—and deservedly so. It also served as the starting point for a number of later hagiographical texts of purely fictitious character. Translations into many different languages exist, and the work proved especially popular in the West during the Middle Ages.

Although the theme of a woman who disguises herself as a monk was to become something of a hagiographical *topos*<sup>5</sup> (it recurs in no. 6, Anastasia), in the present case it could conceivably have a historical basis.

### *Pelagia*<sup>6</sup>

1. Greetings from the sinful deacon Jacob to the spiritual believers in our Lord.

I wanted to write to you, my holy fathers and brethren, about the conversion of the prostitute Pelagia, in the hopes that you might find great benefit in hearing and learning of it, and accordingly give praise to our merciful Lord God who does not wish anyone to perish, but rather that all sinners should be saved and return to the knowledge of truth.

2. The beginning of this account is as follows: the bishop of Antioch, the capital of Syria, was obliged to summon his fellow bishops because of some pressing church business that concerned them. In accordance with his summons eight bishops assembled in the city. It is not necessary for me to record their names, with the exception of one: this was the holy bishop Nonnos, whose deacon I, the sinner Jacob, am in his own town. This glorious man excelled and was most perfect in his whole way of life; his religious upbringing was in Egypt, for he was from a famous well-populated monastery called "of Tabennesi," situated in the Thebaid.<sup>7</sup>

Because of his chaste and perfect way of life this glorious man

5. See Appendix under Patlagean and Delcourt (in the General Bibliography).

6. The section numbers are those used by Guillaumont in his recent French translation of the Syriac (see Appendix); these are not the same as the numbers in Usener's edition of the Greek.

7. Tabennesi, in Middle Egypt, was where Pachomius founded his cenobitic community.

was held worthy of the rank of bishop through the will of God who chose him. 3. This holy bishop Nonnos, then, came to Antioch along with seven fellow bishops, and I, the miserable Jacob, his deacon, accompanied him.

When we had paid our respects to the archbishop of Antioch, he told us to lodge at the hostel of the shrine where the bones of the glorious martyr Julian are preserved. Accordingly we and the other bishops lodged there. Now it so happened there was a delay for some reason, and on one particular day all the bishops left their cells and met together, sitting by the outer gate of the shrine of the glorious martyr Julian,<sup>8</sup> and they were conversing among themselves on various topics; 4. then they begged the holy Nonnos, my bishop, to speak the word of God with them as they sat, so as to benefit them with his wise teaching, for they knew that he used to speak in the Holy Spirit, and that he uplifted everyone who heard him with his divine teaching.

This God-loving and holy bishop Nonnos therefore spoke before his companions in an excellent way, and they, full of wonder at his teaching, rejoiced at his words. At that moment, as they were sitting—and I, his deacon Jacob, was near them, standing out of respect for him—all of a sudden a rich prostitute, the leader of the troupe of actors,<sup>9</sup> happened to pass by us. It is her story that I, the wretched Jacob, have endeavored to write down and tell for the benefit of all those who are desirous of the truth and who love God.

This prostitute then appeared before our eyes, sitting prominently on a riding donkey adorned with little bells and caparisoned; in front of her was a great throng of her servants and she herself was decked out with gold ornaments, pearls, and all sorts of precious stones, resplendent in luxurious and expensive clothes. On her hands and feet she wore armbands, silks, and anklets decorated with all sorts of pearls, while around her neck were necklaces and strings of pendants and pearls. Her beauty stunned those who beheld her, captivating them in their desire for her. 5. Young boys and girls accompanied her in haughty fashion, holding her lascivious feet; they too were adorned with

8. The shrine is mentioned by Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa*, 10, 8; it was some three miles outside Antioch. See G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria* (Princeton, 1961), 544–45.

9. The Greek word *mimas* is used.

golden girdles and had jewelry strung round their necks. Some ran in front of her, while others escorted her with great pomp. Thus it was that her beauty and finery lured everyone who saw her to stare at her and at her appearance.

As this prostitute passed in front of us, the scent of perfumes and the reek of her cosmetics hit everyone in the vicinity. 6. The bishops as they sat there were amazed at her and her clothes, as well as the splendor of her cortege, and the fact that she went by with her head uncovered, with a scarf thrown round her shoulders in a shameless fashion, as though she were a man; indeed in her haughty impudence her garb was not very different from a man's, apart from her makeup, and the fact that her skin was as dazzling as snow. To put it briefly, her appearance incited everyone who set eyes on her to fall in love with her.

When the holy bishops saw her, they averted their eyes from her, as though she was some sinful object. 7. The holy bishop Nonnos, however, observed her carefully in his mind, filled with wonder. Once she had passed in front of them, he turned away his face, placed his head between his knees, and wept with great feeling, so much so that his lap was filled with tears.

Lamenting greatly for her, the holy bishop Nonnos sighed and said to his fellow bishops, "To be honest, fathers, did not the beauty of this prostitute who passed in front of us astonish you?" They kept silent and did not answer a word. 8. But the holy Nonnos went on sighing bitterly, striking his chest, deeply moved and weeping so much that even his clothes—a hair shirt—got soaked with his tears. (He always wore a hair shirt next to his skin, hiding it with a soft woollen garment on top, so that it could not be seen; he spent his entire life in a harsh regime of strict asceticism.)

Having wept a great deal, he said to his fellow bishops, "I beg you, my brothers, tell me, did you lust in your minds after the beauty of that prostitute who passed in front of us? And did you suffer for her? I myself was greatly astonished at her beauty and I suffered because of her ornaments, which were a baited snare for all who beheld her, a stumbling block leading to perdition. In my weakness I beseech and supplicate God to turn her to a life of truth and to let her stand chastely before the awful throne of his majesty.

"Up to the present she has been a snare and a stumbling block

for mankind; she has lived her life in the world in the vain pursuit of adorning herself, causing harm to many. 9. I imagine she must have spent many hours in her boudoir putting on her eye-black, making herself up and dressing in her finery; she will have looked at her face in the mirror with the greatest attention, making sure there is not the slightest speck of dirt on it, or anything that might not please those who behold her. And all this in order to lead astray and lure her lovers after her—lovers today, but gone tomorrow.

10. "In this prostitute we should reprove ourselves: we believe that we have a bridal chamber in heaven that will not pass away, in a place that will last for ever and ever; and we have a fiancé who will neither die nor become corrupted; we have in heaven an inheritance to which the entire world cannot be compared; a happiness whose joy and felicity cannot be described is ours; ours too is the fragrance that never fades away: 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has the mind of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.'<sup>10</sup> What more need I say: we have vast promises in the supernal heights stored up with our hidden Lord who cannot be seen. It is he we should please, but we fail to do so; it is for him that we should adorn our bodies and souls, but we totally fail to do so. We should take pains over ourselves in order to scrub away the dirt of sins, to become clean from evil stains; but we have paid no attention to our souls in the attempt to adorn them with good habits so that Christ may desire to dwell in us. What a reproach to us, seeing that we have not taken pains to make ourselves pleasing to God nearly as much as this prostitute we saw passing in front of us has taken pains to please men—in order to captivate them, leading them into perdition by her wanton beauty.

"Truly, my brothers, I am in a state of great amazement and wonder at my own soul and at her: we should have been trying to please our Lord in all things with even greater effort than she has expended on her embellishment and adornment. And maybe we should even go and become the pupils of this lascivious woman."

11. When the God-loving bishop Nonnos had uttered these words, his fellow bishops sighed with emotion at his wise words, so filled with feeling. Full of grief and compunction, they got up and went off to the places where they were staying.

The holy bishop Nonnos took me, his deacon Jacob, and we

10. 1 Cor. 2:9.



went off to where we were lodging. Once we had climbed up, he threw himself onto the ground (on which a sackcloth lay spread out) and, beating his hand against his face, said as he wept, "Lord God, have mercy on me a sinner: I am not worthy to stand before you seeing that I have never tried to embellish my soul for your presence. What that prostitute accomplished in a single day in beautifying herself surpasses everything I have ever achieved during all the years of my life. How can I have the face to look upon you, my God? I do not know what words to use in the attempt to justify myself in your presence, Lord. What excuse have I before you, seeing that all my hidden secrets are laid open before you? No, alas for me the sinner who, as I enter the threshold of your sacred temple and appear before your glorious altar, have failed to offer the beauty in my soul that you want.

12. "Instead, having failed to adorn myself as you would like, I stand before you who are so full of awe and are so mighty, despicably unworthy. You have allowed me to be a servant who shares in your mystery: I beseech you, Lord, do not remove me from your heavenly altar; let not the beautification of this prostitute bring about my condemnation in front of the fearful tribunal of your mighty and exalted throne. For she, a creature of dust and ashes, has employed the utmost zeal in trying to please Satan, 13. whereas I have neglected pleasing you the living and immortal one, seeing that I have given myself over to laxity. Indeed, through my neglect I have stripped off the fine robe of your holy commandments. That prostitute has given her promise to please lascivious men, and she has kept it by adorning herself like this; whereas I made a promise to you the compassionate God, undertaking a solemn pact to please you, but I have proved false to you, and here I am stripped of all the spiritual adornments on earth and in heaven. Consequently I have no hope of salvation resulting from my deeds; instead my wretched soul looks to your mercy, Lord, and to your hope, for it is only through the multitude of your mercies that I can hope to live. I, a sinner, Lord, beseech you, be pleased to choose me for your divine glory; for it is you who have adorned me in your heavenly beauty that does not pass away. I beg you, too, to call this lost woman, so that she too may be found when you seek her: she has not neglected anything devised by sinful men in her ceaseless hunting after the lost. Change her in accordance with your will,

Lord, as you consented to change the water into delicious wine that brings joy.”<sup>11</sup>

This is what the God-loving Nonnos said, groaning as he wept and confessed to God. He spent the whole of that day in prayer, fasting and praying. It was a Saturday, 14. and the next day was Sunday, the holy day. After we had said the night office, the holy Nonnos called to me, his deacon Jacob, and said, “My son, I saw a vision this night, and I am much perturbed when I ponder on it. In any case let God do whatever is beneficial, as he likes. What I saw in my dream just now was this: it was as though I was standing beside the horns of the altar, and all of a sudden a black dove, befouled with mud, flew above me. I was unable to endure the disgusting stench of the mud on this dove that I saw, but it fluttered above me until the prayer of the catechumens was ended. Then, as the deacon proclaimed, ‘Depart, catechumens,’ in my dream I saw the dove fly off at once, and it disappeared from my sight. 15. After the prayer of the faithful, when the oblation had been offered, and once the service had finished and I had left the sanctuary, I again saw the dove flying toward me, still befouled with a lot of mud, just as before. I stretched out my hands and grasped it, whereupon I immediately threw it into a basin of water that happened to be in the courtyard of the church. Once I had thrown the bird in, I saw in my dream that it left behind all its mud, washed off in the water, and the foul stench disappeared. I further saw the dove emerge from the water and fly off at once into the heights above until it had vanished from sight and was no longer visible. This is the dream I saw, my son, and I have been pondering much about it. I think that its explanation will come about in truth, if God wills.”

16. This is what the holy bishop Nonnos told me, his deacon Jacob. He got up and took me with him to the great church, along with the seven other bishops who were with us. We approached together to greet the archbishop of the city of Antioch on the holy day of Sunday.

When it was time for the priests to enter the *thronos*<sup>12</sup> of the church as was customary, the archbishop asked the eight bishops to come into the *naos* of the church for the holy office. Accordingly they went in and sat down on the *bema*,<sup>13</sup> each sitting in his

11. Cf. John 2:1-11.

12. The Greek has *presbyterion*.

13. A raised platform in the center of the church where the clergy sat during

appropriate place in accordance with the honor of his see. After the completion of the office, and once the Scriptures and holy Gospel had been read, it was time for the homily, which follows the lections from the holy Scriptures. Everyone was waiting expectantly to see and hear who would give the homily. The archbishop decided to send the holy Gospel in the hands of his archdeacon to be given to the holy bishop Nonnos, with the permission that he should preach.

17. Thereupon the holy bishop Nonnos stood up and, opening his mouth, began to speak the word of God in glorious fashion. Fervent in the Holy Spirit, he gave his homily, not using ornate and pompous words employing human skill (for he had no secular education), but rather, being filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, he uttered weighty and perfect words. He brought out clearly the meaning of the Gospel text, using wise words as he taught, with the result that the entire people were moved to contrition in their emotion as they listened. Now the subject of his sermon was the judgment in store for the wicked and the good hope stored up for the righteous. The whole congregation was reduced to weeping at his words, and the floor of the church became soaked with tears.

18. Through the merciful providence of God an excellent plan entered the head of the prostitute we have been talking about: her thoughts unsettled her so much that, against her custom, she came to church that day. She had joined the other women and gone into the church, where she had diverted her attention to the holy Scriptures, and she had even stayed on to listen to the homily.

As she heard the homily and the teaching of the God-loving bishop Nonnos, she was greatly moved and her conscience was pricked: tears poured down as she sobbed, and amid heavy sighs she recalled all her sins. She was groaning so much over her life as a prostitute that the congregation became aware of her emotion. Everyone recognized her as the city's famous playgirl, for as she groaned out aloud, people were telling each other, "It really is the sinful woman, and she's been converted by the teaching of the God-loving and holy bishop Nonnos. She, who had never paid the slightest attention to her sins, has all of a sudden come

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the preanaphoral part of the Liturgy; see R. Taft, "Some Notes on the Bema in the East and West Syrian Traditions," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 34 (1968): 326-59.

to penitence; she who never used to come to church, all of a sudden has had her mind turned to religion and to prayer as a result of the divine words she has heard from the mouth of the holy bishop Nonnos."

When she had wept a great deal, moved to compunction and ensnared for life by the holy Nonnos' sermon, it was then time for the oblation to be offered. She left at the start of the holy Mysteries with the catechumens<sup>14</sup> and 19. called two of her household servants, telling them, "Wait here till church is finished, and when the disciple of Christ, the holy bishop Nonnos, whose sermon we have heard, comes out, make careful enquiries and find out where he is staying so that you can tell me."

Once the oblation had been offered and church was ended, we left to go to our lodgings, but the servants of the prostitute followed us as they had been instructed until they had found out where we were staying; then they returned at once to inform their mistress. She was extremely pleased to learn this, and she was praying that she might be allowed to see the holy and God-loving Nonnos and listen to his teaching. Her former haughtiness had been completely removed from her mind, and she was now full of compunction, shaking as she pondered the punishment that she had heard was due to sinners in the next world at the hand of God's justice. She was greatly afraid in her mind and sobbed with tears before God.

20. Stirred by contrition, Pelagia wrote down on a wax tablet a passionate and moving message with a plea concerning her salvation. This she sent to the holy bishop Nonnos by the hands of her servants. It read as follows: "To the holy bishop Nonnos, from the sinful woman Pelagia who is a disciple of Satan, many greetings. I supplicate your saintly feet, my lord, for I have now heard something about the God whom you love with all your heart: how he bent down his majesty toward us and descended from heaven to earth—and this was not for the sake of the righteous, but in order to save sinners in his mercy. This is what I gather the Christians say, that he, upon whom the cherubim and seraphim dare not look in heaven, has sat down and eaten and drunk with tax collectors and sinners,<sup>15</sup> out of his love, during

14. Those not yet baptized were not allowed to attend the Anaphora proper but had to leave after the homily.

15. Mark 2:16.

the time he appeared on earth and went around amongst us in human body, **21.** as you yourself know, holy sir, even though you did not see him with the physical eye. He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the water well, with the Canaanite woman who cried out after him, with the woman who was smitten with illness,<sup>16</sup> whom he healed, with Mary and Martha whose brother he raised. He did all this, as I have heard from Christians, and now, my lord, if you are the disciple of this God who has done all this, do not reject me or turn me away when I ask to appear before you and to see you in person, in case there is a possibility that I might be saved at your hands. You might thus take some pride in me the sinner if I were to become a disciple of your health-giving instruction.”

**22.** The holy bishop Nonnos wrote the following reply to the prostitute: “God is well aware of what you are; he knows and sifts out your will, your intention, and your thoughts. This, however, is what I have to say to you: do not try to tempt me who am both insignificant and weak; for I am a sinful person and one who has never been righteous. If you want to see me, do so with the seven holy bishops: I cannot see you alone, lest the simple, who lack understanding, stumble and be offended.”

**23.** Receiving this message, the prostitute got up at once and hurried to the shrine of the glorious martyr Julian. When she reached the shrine, she sent a note to us to inform us of her arrival. Now, previous to her arrival, the holy and God-loving bishop Nonnos had called his fellow bishops and made them sit with him. He then bade her approach for an audience with them. **24.** As she drew near and saw them, she prostrated herself before them all together and ended by throwing herself down on the ground, clasping the feet of the holy Nonnos in a state of great emotion. She started to weep and groan, and the holy man's feet got soaked with the prostitute's tears. Without noticing what was happening, she wiped onto herself the dirt from his feet. As she groveled before him, she was throwing dust from the ground onto her head, beseeching him amid loud groans, and saying, “I beg you, have pity on me a sinner. I am a prostitute, a disgusting stone upon which many people have tripped up and gone to perdition. I am Satan's evil snare: he set me and through me he has caught many people for destruction. I am a ravenous vulture,

16. John 4:1-26; Matt. 15:22-28; Mark 5:25-34.

and many chicks of the heavenly Eagle have been caught by me. I am a sly she-wolf, and by my crafty wiles I have destroyed innocent lambs and sheep. I am a deep ditch of mire in which many have befouled themselves and got filthy: they had been clean, but I corrupted them. Have mercy on me, O pure and holy sir, I beg you; be like your leader Christ, who never averted his face from sinners, but instead out of his graciousness had compassion on them. Pour over me your kindness, imitating him, otherwise I shall perish and die in my sins. I am a destructive moth, and I have gnawed into many bodies that had previously been unscathed. Make me into a Christian this very day—for I am a sea of sins. Take me, sir, and make me holy by means of your pure instruction—for I am an abyss of evils. Take from me my sins and wickednesses today, and through your prayers cast them away from me in the cleansing bath of your God's baptism. Stand up, I beg you, my lord, and invoke over me the name of the holy Trinity; baptize me for the remission of my sins. Stand up, my lord, and strip off from me the dirty clothing of prostitution; clothe me with pure garments, the beautiful dress for the novel banquet to which I have come."

24. When they saw the prostitute's emotion and faith, the bishops and all the priests as well as everyone else who happened to be present, wept plentiful tears. Only with difficulty did the holy bishop Nonnos persuade her to get up from his feet; when she had done so, he addressed her: "My daughter, the canons of the church require that one should not baptize a prostitute without her having some sponsors,<sup>17</sup> otherwise she may continue in her old ways."

26. On hearing these words, the prostitute at once threw herself down onto the ground again and clasped hold of the holy and God-loving Nonnos' feet. As she wept and groaned, she spoke as follows: "You will have to answer for me to God if you do not baptize me now: God will require my soul at your hands and he will inscribe all the bad things I have done against your name if you refuse to baptize me now; you will share in the wickedness of my ways. No, you must baptize me at once, and so make me a stranger to my evil deeds. You will become a stranger to your holy altar and deny your God if you don't make me a bride of

17. *ʿarrābē*; for baptismal sponsors (i.e., godparents) a number of different terms were in use; cf. note 22.

Christ this very day, giving me rebirth by saving baptism and offering me up to your God—who will himself be a sponsor for me to you today. For I will not return to the ditch of mire from which you shall raise me to eternal life. My lord, have no fear of me; get up and receive me a sinner, just as your Lord received sinners.”

27. The bishops and everyone with them gave praise to God when they saw how the mind of this sinful prostitute was set on fire and was burning with the love of God.

Now the holy bishop Nonnos summoned me, his deacon Jacob, and, giving me instructions, sent me off into the city to inform the archbishop of all that had taken place, in order that he might give permission to act in whatever way he wished with the prostitute. He also gave me strict orders, saying, “Let the archbishop send back with you one of the deaconesses if he gives you permission for us to baptize the prostitute.”

28. So I, the wretched Jacob, went off to the archbishop and told him everything that the God-loving Nonnos, my bishop, had bidden me to say. I informed him about the prostitute’s conversion and I described to him her emotion and her promise. I repeated everything, not omitting a word.

The archbishop was absolutely delighted, and he said to me, “Return to our brother, the holy bishop Nonnos, the blessed father and wise teacher, and tell him that I am most pleased with the message he has sent me, and that I had actually had it in my mind that this great and wonderful event might be in store for you, waiting to be fulfilled at your hands. For I know that you are like God’s own mouth; for it was he who said, ‘If you bring out something valuable from what is base, you shall be like my own mouth.’<sup>18</sup> For the rest, be assured that I am very happy that you should carry out to the end what you have already commenced upon: it will please Christ, and it will edify the entire church, as well as bring salvation to the life of this prostitute. Baptize her, then, on the confession of her own mouth. So, we have now heard of the matter, and we are in agreement with your wise handling of it that will prove full of joy. It is right that you should baptize, just as you have converted her: simply let the lascivious woman become chaste, let the sinner be justified, and let our God be praised.”

18. Jer. 15:19.

He then sent for the deaconess Romana from her house (she was the head deaconess). He told her to go with me and obey the holy bishop Nonnos, and do whatever he told her.

29. So I and the deaconess Romana returned to our holy father Nonnos to find the prostitute still sprawling on the ground, weeping at his feet. Then the deaconess Romana approached and begged her to get up, saying, "Rise up, my sister, collect yourself together. Recover your strength in preparation to receive what Grace has summoned you for. Get up, sister, and let us pray over you to remove all the power of the Adversary from you."

Only with difficulty was she persuaded to get up, but she still went on crying. Then the holy bishop Nonnos gave us instructions to get everything requisite ready for holy baptism. He addressed the prostitute and said, "Open your mouth and acknowledge God; renounce your sins before him."

Weeping, the prostitute said, "If I examine myself thoroughly, I cannot find a single good deed that I have done. I know that my sins are heavier and more numerous than all the grains of sand on the seashore; and all the sea's water is not sufficient to wash away my wicked and evil deeds. But I believe that God is merciful and will not look upon the multitude of my sins—just as he did not look upon the sin of that sinful woman in the Gospels, or that of the Canaanite woman or the one from Samaria:<sup>19</sup> he did not shut his door in their faces but had pity and compassion upon them; he held them to be worthy of healing in their bodies and of forgiveness of their sins. I too have acknowledged and do acknowledge that I am wicked and bad, whereas my God is compassionate and merciful. And I beg you, my lord, a true priest and forgiving father who gives spiritual rebirth, be merciful to me; take me and wash me with fire and the Spirit."

30. Thereupon the holy Nonnos said to her, "Give me your name so that I can offer it up to God." The prostitute replied, "My actual parents called me Pelagia, but the entire city of Antioch, where I was born, called me Marganito,<sup>20</sup> because of the quantities of jewelry I wore and prided myself on. You see, up to now I have been Satan's well-decked shop-front and home."

The holy Nonnos went on, "From birth your name was Pelagia?" "Yes, my lord," she replied. Having learnt her name, the

19. See n. 16.

20. Syriac for "pearl"; the Greek has Margarito.



bishop said the exorcism over her, marked her, and sealed her with the oil of anointing as she made the renunciation,<sup>21</sup> saying, "I renounce you, Satan, and all your might." She went on to cry out, "I acknowledge you, Christ, and your Father and your living and holy Spirit. I acknowledge your church and your baptism; I acknowledge your kingdom on high, and the heavenly powers; I acknowledge your holy altar on earth, and your fearful mysteries in heaven, and your illustrious and pure priests who minister before you. I renounce the falsehood I have wrought, and the prostitute's profession I have been following up to now."

Then after this confession, the holy Nonnos baptized Pelagia, and her spiritual mother, Romana the deaconess, received her from the baptismal waters.<sup>22</sup> She received the body and blood of Christ from the hands of the illustrious and holy Mar Nonnos.

The occasion brought great joy to God and his angels in heaven, and on earth to the entire church and its priests. Once Pelagia had been perfected as the bride of Christ, the deaconess Romana took her up to our lodgings after the bishops themselves had gone up there.

**31.** The holy Nonnos said to me, his deacon Jacob, "We should rejoice today, my son, and exult with the holy angels of God who today rejoice at the finding of Pelagia, Christ's lamb. Today, my son, let us eat our food with oil, and let us drink some wine, because of the new birth and mighty salvation of this glorious bride of Christ, Pelagia."

I got everything ready as he had instructed, and while we were eating, full of joy, all of a sudden Satan appeared to us, furious, in the form of a scowling man with tangled long sleeves and his hands on his head;<sup>23</sup> he wailed out loudly, saying **32.** "Fie on you, foolish old man who eats his own white hairs:<sup>24</sup> the thirty thousand Arabs, whom you snatched from me, baptized, and donated to your God, should suffice for you. Weren't you satisfied

21. The normal order in the Syrian baptismal rite was exorcism, renunciation of Satan, acknowledgment of Christ, and *then* anointing (the first of two or three anointings). See H. M. Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington, D.C., 1974), chap. 11 and S. P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Syrian Churches Series 9, 1979), chap. 3.

22. For the role of the deaconess at baptism, see *Apostolic Constitutions* III. 16. Romana evidently also acted as godparent (*anadochos*) or "sponsor."

23. An angry suitor is clearly meant.

24. The phrase is quoted in the tenth-century lexicon compiled by bar Bahlul (ed. Duval, col. 67).

with my city Heliopolis—Baalbek—where you converted a large number of women who worshipped and honored me?<sup>25</sup> And now you've gone and captured from me this seductive lady and baptized her, removing her from my service and offering her to your God. Weren't you satisfied with the pagans you enticed away from me, converting them and donating them to your God? But now you have gone and cut off all my hopes today. Fie on you, ill-fated and luckless old man: I cannot endure your crafty tricks; cursed be the day that had the misfortune to see you born. The river full of tears you poured out has swept away the oaths and promises that large numbers of people had made with me. You have shattered my hopes today. What have I to do with you, you grave robber who has despoiled me as though I were a tomb, wickedly removing this woman alive from me, where she had been like a corpse confined by me in her error."

Such were Satan's words when he appeared to us and to all the bishops with us. Everyone present, including Pelagia and the deaconess Romana, who both had their eyes fixed on that Satan, heard him shouting and reviling the holy Nonnos. 33. Then Satan left the holy man and turned to address Pelagia; groaning, as though he was someone in tears, he cried out to her, "Is this my due, Pelagia? Didn't you belong to me, and I to you up to just now? How can you do this to me: you've made me a laughing-stock to this old white-head and to everyone who hears that you have jilted me. Wasn't it I who taught you how to make yourself up and become an object of lust for many? Didn't I bring you crowds of lovers to satisfy your prostitute's profession? Didn't I subject both the rich and the noble to you, so that they brought you expensive presents as a result of their lust-ridden passion? Why have you turned against me and tricked me like this? Why have you done this to me and jilted me, just because of a few misleading words from this ill-starred old man? All his life he has been annoying me with his tricks all over the place: he's like a nasty thorn to me wherever he goes. I'll bring about some calamity if you don't renounce him and acknowledge me—just as in the past you used to do what I wanted."

Then the holy Nonnos said to Pelagia, Christ's bride, "Rebuke

25. Baalbek was a notorious stronghold of paganism, see W. Kaegi, "The Fifth-Century Twilight of Byzantine Paganism," *Classica et Medievalia* 27 (1966): 258–59.

this Satan, my daughter, rebuke him and don't be afraid of him, for he is weak and helpless before the Holy Spirit whom you have put on today."

Pelagia immediately crossed herself, plucked up courage, and rebuked the Satan who had turned up. In this way she quickly put him to flight and he vanished from our sight.

34. Two days later he came along quietly and manifested himself to Pelagia as she was asleep beside her spiritual mother, the deaconess Romana. Satan quietly awoke Pelagia and said to her gently, "Margarito, what wrong have I done you that you've turned against me? Didn't I deck you out with gold and pearls, piling up riches upon you? I beg you, tell me why have you deluded me and played me false? Please let me explain, and don't jilt me, otherwise everyone will laugh at me because of you."

35. Pelagia, however, bravely crossed herself and blew at Satan, whereupon he disappeared. She had shouted at him as follows: "May our Lord Jesus Christ Son of the living God rebuke you. It was he who seized me from you and made me a bride for his heavenly marriage chamber."

Then she woke up Romana the deaconess and said, "Mother, pray for me, because that wicked man came and troubled me." "Don't be disturbed by him, my beloved daughter," she replied, "for from now on he is afraid of you and will run away from your very shadow."

Thereupon the two of them, mother and daughter, signed themselves with the cross, rebuked Satan in the name of Christ, and he vanished and was not seen by them again.

36. The following day the holy Pelagia, like an eagle whose youthfulness had been renewed,<sup>26</sup> having been weaned away from evil deeds, aroused her mind and summoned the head of her household who was in charge of all her belongings. She told him to go to her house, make an inventory of all she possessed—her gold, silver, and quantities of jewelry, together with her expensive wardrobe. He was to bring the list to her, because ever since this glorious lady had heard the words of the holy bishop Nonnos and had been converted, making a start on a life of penitence, she had not returned to her house at all or crossed its threshold; instead she had remained with us in penitence in the shrine of Christ until the completion of her baptism.

26. Cf. Ps. 103:5.

Her steward went off to her house as she had instructed and brought back an inventory listing all her wealth, not hiding anything. 37. Thereupon the glorious Pelagia sent by the deaconess Romana a request that the holy bishop Nonnos should come and pay her a visit. On his arrival at the place where she was staying, Pelagia asked him earnestly to accept her entire fortune. She handed over to him all that she desired with the words, "My lord, here is the wealth that Satan has bestowed upon me as a result of the sin of prostitution. From now on, my lord, it is entrusted to your care: do with it whatever you want. As far as I am concerned, from today on Christ's riches that were granted to me at your hands are sufficient for me; I have grown rich many times over through them."

38. Then she summoned all her servants and maids, freed them in accordance with the law, and gave each one of them an appropriate present. Whereupon she dismissed them, saying, "Up to now you have been my servants, living a life of sin and licentiousness, enslaved to sinful servitude to prostitution. Now I have freed you from this slavery of wickedness; it is up to you for your own part to free your souls from the slavery of sin. Henceforth you shall no longer work for me, and you will no longer have the reputation of belonging to a prostitute."

She then dismissed them, and they bade her farewell and left, astonished by the change that they beheld in their mistress Pelagia.

39. On receiving Pelagia's entire fortune, the holy Nonnos sent for the steward of the great church at Antioch, and in Pelagia's presence he handed over to him all that had belonged to her, telling him, "I adjure you by the exalted Trinity, let nothing out of all these belongings enter the church of God, or be given to any of the bishops; let none of it enter the house of any of the clergy, or even your own house: do not let anything be defiled by it, whether through your agency or through the agency of anyone else; for even though it might seem desirable and good, considering that there is so much of it, nevertheless this wealth has been amassed as the result of the sin of prostitution. So do not take any delight in these belongings. If this bride of Christ has renounced and rejected it as being nothing, for the sake of the spiritual possessions she has discovered, how much more should we consider it filthy; we must not exchange it for the heavenly riches stored up for us, which are pure, undefiled, and glorious. Take care, then, my son, in view of what I have bidden you under

oath; if you transgress this oath, God's curse shall enter your house and you will be accounted as one of those who cried, 'Crucify him, crucify him.'<sup>27</sup> No, you must use it only to provide for the orphans and widows, for the poor, the needy and the destitute, so that they can live off it. In this way, just as it was amassed in a wicked and wrong manner, so it shall now be administered in an upright and just fashion. What was sin's wealth shall henceforth be righteousness' treasury."<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly he received this trust from the holy man as though it was from God's own apostle. The steward took it all and administered it, exactly following the instructions given by the saintly bishop Nonnos in the presence of the holy Pelagia: he did not go against or alter his orders in anything.

Everyone was astonished at all that Christ's bride, Pelagia, had done, how she had benefited many through this action of hers. All her licentious acquaintances, however, were extremely put out, and they were reduced to tears on seeing her abrupt new way of life. She kept herself away from her old friends, and they all felt puzzled and asked, "How is it that a famous prostitute can become a woman of renowned chastity overnight?" But many were uplifted by her example.

When Pelagia's fellow prostitutes and neighbors saw what she had done, they were themselves moved to compunction and started weeping over themselves. Many of them turned to chastity and abandoned their life of prostitution, going off to receive instruction about Christ; these came to the chaste Pelagia, and she exhorted and urged them to do what she had done. Numerous prostitutes listened to her advice and were converted by the chaste bride of Christ.

Many people thought highly of Pelagia for what she had done, and because of her, our Lord was glorified by everyone.

40. The handmaid of God kept herself apart from eating or drinking anything from her own house for the seven days following her baptism. During this time she did not use anything of her own; instead Romana the deaconess provided food and everything she required from her own pocket: in her faith and her love, like a fond mother, she considered Pelagia to be her own beloved daughter, and so looked after her. Now Pelagia had sworn not to

27. Mark 15:10.

28. Compare Didascalia, chap. 18, on the use of ill-gotten gains in charity.

touch anything ever again that had been bought out of the wealth she had amassed through sin. She kept to her oath and did not eat or drink anything derived from what had formerly been hers. She even refused to receive anything from her house, and she never again entered it. Nor did she ever again take anything that had belonged to her to give away, telling everyone, "Far be it from me that I should live off the wages of prostitution any longer, or think anything of them." Instead she held her fortune to be worse than blood and fouler than the smelly mud of the streets.

**41.** When the bridal days following Pelagia's baptism were at an end and the blessed eighth day, Sunday, had arrived, it was time for her to take off her holy baptismal robes<sup>29</sup> in accordance with the canon of the church, and to put on ordinary everyday clothes. So, when Sunday was over, she got up during the night on which Monday dawned and went in to the holy bishop Nonnos; she prostrated herself before him and received his blessing, whereupon he gave her permission to take off her holy baptismal garments. But the holy Pelagia earnestly besought the priest of Christ that she might receive her clothing from some of his, rather than put on something else. The holy bishop Nonnos acceded to Pelagia's request and gave her some of his own clothing—a hair shirt and a woollen mantle. Straightaway she took off her baptismal robes and put on his clothes. Then she knelt down at his feet and received his blessing, having revealed to him all her plans.

That night she left dressed as a man and secretly went off without our being aware of it. She was no longer to be seen in the city. Now the holy bishop Nonnos, who knew her secret, did not tell anyone what had happened—not even me, Jacob, who served as his deacon.

When morning came, there was great consternation, for Pelagia was nowhere to be found: she was not with us, nor anywhere else in the entire city. **42.** Stricken with grief, the deaconess Romana was in tears and kept inquiring after her all over the place. The holy bishop Nonnos, however, rejoiced greatly for only he knew of Pelagia's departure. He told the deaconess Romana, "Do not be despondent or weep for your daughter Pel-

29. The newly baptized wore white robes for eight days after baptism; see H. M. Riley, *Christian Initiation*, 413–51.

agia. Rather, rejoice greatly over this, for she has chosen the good portion, just as did Mary, Lazarus' sister."<sup>30</sup>

All this took place in the great city of Antioch. **43.** A few days later the archbishop of Antioch dismissed all the foreign bishops who were there, and we and everyone else went back to our respective towns.

Three years later I, the deacon Jacob, felt the urge to go and pray in Jerusalem, the city of our Lord; I wanted to venerate his cross and receive a blessing from the site of his resurrection. I approached the holy Nonnos, my bishop, and sought his permission. He allowed me to go, giving me the following instructions: "When you reach the holy place of Jerusalem, remember me there in your prayer—in all those sacred sites that our Lord visited. And afterward be sure to make inquiries there about a certain monk Pelagios, a eunuch; when you have ascertained he is there, go and see him, for there is much that you can benefit from him. For truly he is a true and faithful servant of God, a monk who is perfect in his service."

Now he was speaking to me about Pelagia, the handmaid of God, but I did not grasp the meaning of his allusion, and he did not want to reveal the matter to me openly. So he sent me off with his blessing, and I set out in peace.

**44.** Eventually I arrived at the holy place, Jerusalem: I prayed and received a blessing from the tomb of our Lord and from all the places where he traveled, performing his glorious actions. The next day I, Jacob, went out to ask where the monk Pelagios lived. After a great deal of inquiry, I learnt that he dwelt on the Mount of Olives, where our Lord used to pray with his disciples. Accordingly I went up to the Mount of Olives and kept on asking until I discovered his cell. He was very well known in the area and held in high honor.

As I approached his cell, I saw it had no door to it; on close examination I espied a small window in the wall in front of me. I knocked, and Pelagia, the handmaid of God, opened it. She was dressed in the habit of a venerable man. **45.** She came up and greeted me with great humility, clasping my hands and kissing them from within. She was overjoyed at my arrival, for the moment she saw me she recognized me. She was inside, and I out-

30. Luke 10:42.

side, and I failed to recognize her because she had lost those good looks I used to know; her astounding beauty had all faded away, her laughing and bright face that I had known had become ugly, her pretty eyes had become hollow and cavernous as the result of much fasting and the keeping of vigils. The joints of her holy bones, all fleshless, were visible beneath her skin through emaciation brought on by ascetic practices. Indeed the whole complexion of her body was coarse and dark like sackcloth, as the result of her strenuous penance.

The whole of Jerusalem used to call her "the eunuch," and no one suspected anything else about her; nor did I notice anything about her that resembled the manner of a woman. I received a blessing from her as if from a male eunuch who was a renowned monk, a perfect and righteous disciple of Christ.

**46.** The holy Pelagia opened her mouth and spoke to me like a man. She said, "I think I have seen you somewhere, my brother, unless it was someone who looked just like you. By your life, do not conceal the truth from me, are you not the deacon of the holy bishop Nonnos who belongs to the archdiocese of Antioch? He was trained in Egypt."

I replied, "Yes, my lord, I am indeed the disciple of that servant of God, your admirer."

"Does he still live in the body?" she asked.

"Yes, he is still alive," I replied, "and he told me to make careful inquiry about your excellent life, and to come to see you and greet you who are so full of virtues." She then went on and said, "Blessed is our Lord who has preserved his life up to today. May he pray for me henceforth, for I know him to be an apostle of our Lord. And do you too, my brother, pray for me and greet the holy bishop Nonnos and all his companions."

This is all that the blessed Pelagia said to me. Since she was dressed as a man, I did not recognize her. She then closed her window at once and went in to her cell, without uttering a further word to me.

When she had gone in and I was still standing there full of wonder, she began to sing the office of the Third Hour. **47.** I joined at once in prayer just by her lavra. I gave thanks and departed, moved by the virtuous way of life of this man of God—not realizing she was a woman, and unaware that she was Pelagia, our daughter in Christ.

I, Jacob, spent every day wandering around to see the holy



monasteries; I received blessing from them and heard how they would relate stories of the virtuous deeds of the monk Pelagios who lived the life of a recluse on the Mount of Olives, performing miracles. 48. I was filled with amazement at him. Then along came some other people who announced that the monk Pelagios, the recluse on the Mount of Olives, had fallen asleep. As I heard this I rejoiced greatly, giving thanks to our Lord who had held me worthy to receive a blessing from him.

49. Then the monasteries around Jerusalem, and those of Jericho and Transjordan, and of the town of Nikopolis,<sup>31</sup> all gathered on the Mount of Olives, a huge crowd of monks, to see the burial of Pelagios the recluse. Quantities of other people, men and women from the whole of Jerusalem, went up to join the funeral procession for the holy Pelagia who was known as a righteous man. The bishop and entire clergy of Jerusalem, together with the honorable abbots, approached and opened up the holy Pelagia's cell; they took out her body, laid it on a bier, whereupon the bishop and all the local holy men came close to anoint it decently with fragrant unguent. As they did so, they saw she was a woman. They gasped with astonishment in their hearts, then, raising their voices, they cried out to God, saying, "Praise to you, Lord; how many hidden saints you have on earth—and not just men, but women as well!"

50. They wanted to hide this astonishing fact from the people but were unable to do so. This was to fulfill what is written in the holy Gospel: "There is nothing hidden which shall not be revealed, and nothing concealed which shall not be made known."<sup>32</sup> This wonder immediately became known to the entire people.

The whole crowd of men and women, carrying innumerable tapers and torches, then began to process for the blessed Pelagia, as for a righteous woman. They carried and escorted her holy body in true faith, and in this way they buried her amidst great honor and much splendor, giving praise to God. The Gospel words "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and praise your Father who is in heaven"<sup>33</sup> were fulfilled with reference to her.

51. I, Jacob, sinner and deacon, have written down for you who love God these glorious deeds that concern a woman who previ-

31. I.e., Emmaus.

32. Matt. 10:26.

33. Matt. 5:16.

ously had been a prostitute, but who later became a "perfect vessel." This is the panegyric we have received concerning her who was formerly an outcast, but who subsequently was chosen. Let us pray that our Lord will grant us mercy, along with her, at the judgment when the righteous receive reward, and sinners censure.

From all men and women who have repented or who shall repent, and from sinful me who saw and wrote this life, praise, thanksgiving, and honor be raised up to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always and to eternal ages, amen.

## Persian Martyrs

### INTRODUCTION

Although early Christianity was for the most part confined within the limits of the Roman Empire, there was one area outside the empire in which it flourished from an early date: this was in what is now Iraq and western Iran, the area that, since the early third century, had been the focal center of the Sasanian Empire. Whereas in the Roman Empire persecution of Christianity ceased with Constantine's conversion, across the border to the east persecution only seriously began shortly afterward in the mid-fourth century, at a time (significantly) of hostility between the two empires.

The origins of Christianity in the Persian Empire are shrouded in obscurity, but by the mid-third century there were sizable Syriac-speaking Christian communities in many towns, to be swelled before long by large-scale deportations of Greek-speaking Christians taken captive by Shapur I in a series of campaigns in 256 and subsequent years, during the course of which Shapur even succeeded in taking prisoner the Roman Emperor Valerian himself, a feat proudly recorded in rock relief, and still visible, at Naqsh-e Rostam in Iran. Many of these prisoners were resettled in a town refounded by Shapur under the name Gundishapur, "Shapur's better-than-Antioch" (to commemorate his capture of Syrian Antioch in 256), eventually to become the home of an important medical school; Syriac sources, however, retain for the town its older Aramaean name of Beth Lapat.

It was here, in 276, that Mani, the founder of the unique syn-

cretistic religion that for a period was to spread right across Asia, was put to death. Persecution of the Manichaeans, instigated by the zealous Zoroastrian authorities (one of whom, Karter, has left an account of his successful repression of minority religions in Iran),<sup>1</sup> eventually spread to Christians, and of the victims of this earliest of persecutions within the Persian Empire we have details only of a certain lady, Candida.<sup>2</sup> She was one of the resettled prisoners of war, but thanks to her exceptional beauty, she had been singled out by King Bahram II (276–93) and made a member of his royal harem. The special favors that the king showered upon her earned her the jealousy of the other royal ladies; her religion provided them with the opportunity they sought. “The woman whom you love more than all the rest of us does not conform to your way of thinking, but she serves her own god and invokes him,” they told the king. Pressure was put on Candida to convert to Zoroastrianism, but to no avail; threats and torture then took the place of the king’s initial cajolements, and she died a martyr’s death.

Candida’s martyrdom was an isolated affair, and it was not until the early 340s, under Shapur II (339–79), that widespread persecution broke out. During the fourth and fifth centuries Christians in the Persian Empire tended to come under suspicion of favoring the enemy, their correlative, and it is significant that all the major outbreaks of persecution under the Sasanids belong to periods when the two empires were in open conflict with each other.

On 17 April 341 (the year is not quite certain) Simeon, bishop of Seleucia-Ktesiphon, the winter capital (to the south of Baghdad), was executed on the grounds that he had refused to levy from his flock an extra tax to help the war effort. His was but the first of a whole series of martyrdoms. Among the early victims was the king’s own master craftsman, Posi (or Pusai), a member of the Christian community deported from Roman territory and settled at Karka d-Ledan, a new town built by Shapur. In his new home Posi had married a Persian wife and converted her to Christianity; their daughter Martha evidently undertook a vow of virginity (something particularly abhorrent to Zoroastrian

1. French translation in M. L. Chaumont, “L’inscription de Kartir à la Ka’abah de Zoroastre,” *Journal Asiatique* 248 (1960): 339–80.

2. Edited with an English translation by S. P. Brock, “A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida,” *AB* 96 (1978): 167–81.

mores), and shortly after her father's martyrdom she too was arrested and eventually put to death (see 3A below).

The appendix to the narrative of Martha's martyrdom provides some insight into how the cult of these early Persian martyrs developed. Knowledge of them was eventually brought to Roman territory in the early fifth century, very probably by Marutha, bishop of Maipharqat (Martyropolis, modern Silvan in south-eastern Turkey), who had acted as imperial legate to the Persian court, where he had won the favor of the Persian emperor by effecting a cure; with the shah's backing he then arranged a synod of the Persian bishops (410), at which the canons of the Council of Nicaea (325) were ratified and promulgated in Persian territory. It is attractive to suppose that on his return home Marutha stopped off in Edessa; in any case, a list of fourth-century Persian martyrs has been appended to a calendar of saints to be found in the earliest of all dated Syriac manuscripts, copied in Edessa in 411.<sup>3</sup>

The martyr bishop Simeon had two sisters; one was married, while the other, Tarbo (3B), had undertaken a vow of virginity and become a *bath qyāmā*, conventionally translated "daughter [i.e., member] of the covenant,"<sup>4</sup> along with her maid. The three women are arrested on suspicion of having cast a spell upon the queen (who had fallen sick) in revenge for their brother's death. Their weird and gruesome fate perhaps reflects the punishment decreed for witches in the Zoroastrian law code.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that the accusation of sorcery is a recurrent one in the hagiographical texts emanating from Sasanid Iran.

The first of the two short pieces (3C–D), taken from a list of the martyrs of Karka d-Beth Slokh (modern Kerkuk), probably represents an early state in the hagiographical process, for here we have little more than a mere commemoration of names, with only sparse information on the circumstances.

Thekla and her companions (3E) belong to Adiabene, a part of

3. B. Mariani, *Breviarium syriacum seu martyrologium syriacum saec. IV* (Rome, 1956); also in *PO* 10 (1912): 7–26.

4. On the *bnay qyāmā*, "sons (i.e., members) of the *qyāmā*," see especially G. Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac Speaking Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973): 191–215, 419–44. The precise sense of *qyāmā* in this context is disputed: it could mean covenant, vow (especially of virginity, probably made at (adult) baptism), stance, position, or even (unlikely) resurrection.

5. Denkart VIII. 42.1–2.

the country further to the north (modern Irbil area). They too are "daughters of the covenant," and this is clearly the main reason why they catch the attention of Narsai Tahmshabur and are arrested alongside their local priest, Pawle. When the priest's unexpected apostasy foils Narsai's hope of getting hold of Pawle's not inconsiderable property, the poor women are turned into pawns in Narsai's subsequent maneuvers to lay his hands on this wealth.

Two further short periods of fairly widespread persecution are also associated with times of hostilities between the two empires. That under Yazdgard I (right at the end of his reign) and Bahram V, lasting from about 420 to about 422, has produced a small group of martyrdoms of considerable historical interest; none, however, concerns women. The main literary monument of the second period, the persecutions (ca. 446–48) under Yazdgard II (438–57), is a cycle of three martyrdoms that have taken on somewhat legendary proportions; they concern Pethion, a hermit, and his two aristocratic converts, the Mobed Adurhormizd and his daughter Anahid. Their story in fact begins a generation earlier: a Magian called Mihryar, of considerable local repute in the Balashfarr region,<sup>6</sup> had two sons, Yazdin and Dadgushnasp. Yazdin is sent to a Zoroastrian school, but he persistently runs away. His father, therefore, entrusts him to a tutor, and sends his brother to the school instead. The tutor, Jacob, happens to be a Christian, and Yazdin goes with him regularly to church; eventually he asks to be taken to the local priest to be baptized, but Jacob, out of fear for the consequences from Yazdin's father, tells him he must wait till his father's death. Yazdin, in disappointment, runs away yet again and manages to get baptized at Karka d-Beth Slokh. After thirty-two years living as an ascetic, he returns home to find his father dead; he manages to convert his brother Dadgushnasp (who alters his name to Dadisho<sup>6</sup>, "Jesus has given"), and he takes into his cell as a pupil one of his brother's children, Pethion. Pethion and his uncle Yazdin live an ascetic life together for fourteen years, until the latter's death. During these years they gain a great reputation for their healing miracles, and it is in connection with these gifts that the Mobed Adurhormizd first goes to Pethion for help in healing his daughter Anahid (3F). In the first extract from the Pethion cycle translated here,

6. The region to the east of Beth Garmai, spanning the Iraqi-Irani border, and centered on the town of Hulwan; cf. Fiey, *Communautés* 4: 360–68.

we learn of Anahid's conversion, followed eventually by that of her father. In the Syriac text there follows the account of Adurhormizd's own trial and martyrdom (not translated here), and only after that is the narrative concerning Anahid resumed.

The Pethion-Adurhormizd-Anahid cycle reflects a later phase in the history of the relationship of Christians to the Zoroastrian state. By now, the mid-fifth century, Christianity had become a recognized minority religion, and only converts from high-born Magian families were in serious danger from the Zoroastrian authorities. It is interesting that very often the shah himself tried to restrain the zeal of the Zoroastrian clergy.

For the last two centuries of Sasanid rule (mid-fifth to mid-seventh century) virtually all the extant martyrdoms concern converts from aristocratic Zoroastrian families (or, occasionally, the priests who had baptized them). Among these martyrs were several women: from the sixth century we know of Shirin, from Karka d-Beth Slokh, who was converted at the age of eighteen and then imprisoned, eventually to die in jail in 559. Another was Golindukht, a relation of the shah Khosroes II (531-79) and married to a general; she was converted by some Christian captives in her household. When she refused to revert to her ancestral faith, she too was imprisoned for many years before she managed to get across the border to Byzantine territory, where she died in 591. The Syriac originals of both these lives are lost, and we only have translations into other languages.<sup>7</sup> The life of a third woman martyr, Christina, was written by no less a person than the great East Syrian theologian Babai (d. 628), but all that survive of this are the opening pages in a single, mutilated manuscript; these, unfortunately, tell us nothing about the circumstances of her death.

### A. *The Martyrdom of Martha, Daughter of Posi who was a Daughter of the Covenant*<sup>8</sup>

Now the glorious Posi also had a daughter called Martha who 233  
was a "daughter of the covenant." She too was accused, and at

7. Shirin: the Greek text was edited by P. Devos in *AB* 64 (1946): 87-131; Golindukht: the Georgian text was translated by G. Garitte in *AB* 74 (1956): 405-40.

8. Marginal numbers refer to pages in Bedjan, *AMS* 2.

the third hour on the Sunday of the great feast of the Resurrection she was arrested.<sup>9</sup> They brought the blessed Martha, daughter of the glorious Posi, into the presence of the chief Mobed,<sup>10</sup> who then went in to inform the king about her. The king bade him to go out and interrogate her, saying, "If she abandons her religion and renounces Christianity, well and good; if not, she should be married off. If, however, she fails to follow either of these courses, she should be handed over to be put to death."

So the chief Mobed went out and started to interrogate the glorious Martha as follows: "What are you?" To which the blessed Martha replied derisively, "I am a woman, as you can see." Those who happened to be there in the presence of the chief Mobed blushed and bent down their heads when they heard the  
 234 wise Martha's reply to his question. The Mobed's face became green with anger and shame, but he controlled his feelings and said, "Reply to my question." To which the wise Martha said, "I did reply to the question I was asked."

The Mobed then said, "What did I ask you, and what reply did you give?" Martha said, "Your honor asked 'what are you?' and I replied, 'I am a woman as you can see.'"

"I asked you what is your religion," said the Mobed. The glorious Martha replied, "I am a Christian, as my clothing shows."<sup>11</sup> The Mobed went on, "Tell me the truth, are you the daughter of that crazy Posi who went out of his mind and opposed the king, with the result that he was put to an evil death?" To this the blessed girl replied, "Humanly speaking, I am his daughter, but also by faith I am the daughter of the Posi who is wise in his God and sane in the firm stand he took on behalf of the King of kings, the King of truth, the Posi who yesterday acquired everlasting life by means of his dying for his God. If only God would hold me worthy to be a true daughter of this blessed Posi, who is now with the saints in light and eternal rest, while I am still among sinners in this world of sorrows."

The Mobed then said, "Listen to me, and I will advise you what is your best course: the king of kings is merciful and he

9. The town where this takes place is Karka d-Ledan, in Khuzistan (*Fiey, Communautés* 3b: 123-30), and the year is probably 341.

10. Zoroastrian priest; for the Zoroastrian clergy, see G. Widengren, *Die Religion Irans* (Stuttgart, 1965), 259-65.

11. Members of the *qyāmā* evidently wore distinctive clothing.



does not desire anyone's death, but in his goodness he wishes all his friends to become fellow-religionists of his and so be honored by him. So it was in the case of your father: because the king liked him, he honored him and gave him advancement; but your father acted foolishly and said things that were quite out of place, whereupon the king of kings urged him not to be stubborn, but to no effect. This was the reason why he was put to death. And now in your case, do not act stubbornly as your father did, but do the will of Shapur, king of kings and lord of all regions. As a result you will be greatly honored, and whatever you ask for your own comfort will be granted by the king." 235

The glorious Martha replied, "May king Shapur live, may his graciousness never leave him, may his compassion continue; may his graciousness be preserved by his children and his compassion redound to himself and on the people who deserve it. May the life that he loves be accorded to all his brethren and friends, but let all who imitate my father meet the evil death you said my father died. As for me, a wretched handmaid, the dregs of the handmaids of God and of the king, why should any transient honor come to me? I have decided to become the object of abuse like my father for the sake of my father's God, and I will die like him because of my faith in God."

The Mobed said, "I am aware of the hardness of heart you Christians have—a people guilty of death. Furthermore, no obedient offspring is likely to come from a rebellious man like Posi. Nevertheless, simply so that I shall not be held guilty before God of not having done my best to warn you, I am taking all this trouble over you in order to bring you over to the religion of the excellent gods who care for the world."

The holy Martha replied, "You have said your part, and I have said mine—unless you are quite blind and are paying no attention to the true state of affairs that I have described. Otherwise you have both heard and seen which exhortation is profitable and which harmful; which leads to the kingdom of heaven, which leads to the fire of Gehenna, which provides life, and which engenders death." 236

The Mobed went on: "Listen to me and don't be stubborn and obstinate, following your own perverted wishes in everything. Instead, seeing that you are set on not giving up your religion, act as you like, but do this one thing only, and you shall live and

not die: you are a young girl, and a very pretty one—find a husband and get married, have sons and daughters, and don't hold on to the disgusting pretext of the 'covenant.'"<sup>12</sup>

The wise virgin Martha replied, "If a virgin is betrothed to a man, does the natural law order that someone else should come along, attack her fiancé, and snatch away this girl who has already been betrothed? Or does it say that such a virgin should give herself up to marry a man who is not her fiancé?"

"No," answered the Mobed.

The betrothed of Christ, Martha, then said, "So how can your authority order me to marry a man to whom I am not betrothed when I am already betrothed to someone else?"

To which the Mobed said, "Are you really betrothed, then?"  
 237 And the blessed Martha replied, "I am in truth betrothed." "To whom?" asked the Mobed. "Is not your honor aware of him?" said the glorious Martha. "Where is he?" asked the Mobed. Wise in our Lord, she replied, "He has set out on a long journey on business; but he is close by and is on the point of coming back." "What is his name?" inquired the Mobed. "Jesus," replied the blessed Martha.

Still not understanding, the Mobed went on, "What country has he gone to? In which city is he now?" The splendid Martha replied, "He has gone off to heaven, and he is now in Jerusalem on high."

At this point the Mobed realized that she was speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereupon he said, "Didn't I say at the very beginning that this was a stubborn people, not open to persuasion? I will spatter you from head to toe with blood, and then your fiancé can come along to find you turned into dust and rubbish: let him marry you then."

The courageous Martha replied, "He will indeed come in glory, riding on the chariot of the clouds, accompanied by the angels and powers of heaven, and all that is appropriate for his wedding feast; he will shake from the dust the bodies of all those who are betrothed to him, wash them in the dew of heaven, anoint them with the oil of gladness, and clothe them in the garment of righteousness, which consists of glorious light; he will place on their fingers rings as the surety of his grace, while on their heads he will put a crown of splendor, that is to say, unfad-

12. Probably a vow of virginity is meant.

ing glory. He will allow them to sit on his chariot—the glorious cloud—and will raise them up into the air, bringing them into the heavenly bridal chamber that has been set up in a place not made by hands, but built in Jerusalem the free city on high.” 238

When the chief Mobed heard this, he left her in his palace and went in to inform the king of everything. The king then gave orders for the impudent girl and daughter of an impudent father to be taken outside the city and immolated on the very spot where her father had been killed.

So they led the chaste virgin Martha off on the Sunday of the great feast of Christ's resurrection, at midday. As they were getting ready the place where she was to be put to death, she fell down on her face and, as she knelt before God facing east, she said, “I thank you, Jesus Christ, my Lord, my King and my Betrothed, for preserving my virginity sealed up with the imprint of the seal-ring of your promise, and for preserving my faith in the glorious Trinity—the faith in which I was born, in which my parents brought me up, and in which I was baptized. For this confession, for which my father Posi was also crowned, I give you thanks, O Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, for whose sake the bishops, our shepherds, have been sacrificed, as have the head pastors, the priests, and along with them the members of the holy covenant; and slaughtered too have been the sheep—Guhstazad<sup>13</sup> and Posi my father. And now it is the turn of me, the young lamb who has been fattened up on the pastures of your promises and by the springs of your declarations: here I am being sacrificed before you. At your hands, Jesus, the true High Priest, may I be offered up as a pure, holy, and acceptable offering before the glorious Trinity of the hidden Being, in whose name you taught us to be instructed and baptized. Visit, Lord, your persecuted people; preserve them in true faith in the midst of their enemies, and may they be found to be like pure gold in the furnace of persecution that has been erected against your people; may they be strengthened in the worship of your majesty, fearlessly worshipping and confessing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always and for eternal ages, amen.” 239

The moment she had finished her prayer, while no one was

13. The apostasy and subsequent repentance and martyrdom of this courtier of Shapur II are related in both recensions of the martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabbā'ē, bishop of Seleucia-Ktesiphon (*Patrologia Syriaca* 2, cols. 750–58, 831–39, and 866–90).

near at hand, she rushed off and stretched herself on the ground above the pit they had dug for her. When the officer approached to tie her up, she said, "Do not tie me up, for I am gladly accepting immolation for the sake of my Lord." When she saw the knife being brandished by the officer, she laughed and said, "Now I can say, not like Isaac, 'Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'"<sup>14</sup> but rather I can say, 'Here is the lamb and the knife, but where is the wood and the fire?' But I *do* have wood and fire, for the wood is the cross of Jesus my Lord, and I *do* have fire too—the fire that Christ left on earth, just as he said, 'I came to cast fire on earth: I only wish it had already caught alight!'"<sup>15</sup>

240 The thousands of spectators who stood by were astounded at the chaste girl's courage, and everyone gave praise to the God who encourages those who fear him in this way.

The officer then approached and slaughtered her like a lamb, while she entrusted her soul to Christ. Guards stayed by her corpse, and it remained there for two days, but on the night of Tuesday, thanks to a bribe handed over to the guards, it was taken away. By this time many had been slain for the sake of Christ. The blessed girl's brother, who had earlier buried his father, provided the money and took off the corpse; he then embalmed the body and laid it beside her father's.

The blessed Martha was crowned on the Sunday of the great feast of the Resurrection.

The blessed woman who had helped prepare them for burial used to keep their memorial each year in her home, close by where the priests and clergy lived. This she did all her life, and after her death her house passed to her brother's son. He too diligently kept their memorial, following that blessed woman's custom. When this nephew died, he left behind him two sons, and sometime after his death they had a quarrel over the saint's bones: one of them wanted to divide them up between himself and his brother, because the house of the blessed woman had fallen to his share. The matter came to the knowledge of Sawmay, bishop of Karka,<sup>16</sup> of blessed memory, and he persuaded the two of them to let him take away the bones; whereupon he presented them to

14. Gen. 22:7.

15. Luke 12:49.

16. He was a signatory of the Synod of Yahballaha I in 420; on him, see Fiey, *Communautés* 3b: 127–28.

the people of the church of Karka, to serve as a fair memento, and to be a valued treasure in the church of Christ. This was done by the holy bishop Sawmay in the eighth year of king Barharan,<sup>17</sup> son of Yazdgard, eighty-nine years after their crowning. This was what happened to Posi and his daughter. 241

### B. *The Martyrdom of Tarbo, her Sister, and her Servant*

At this time it so happened that the queen fell ill. Since she was favorably inclined to the enemies of the cross, the Jews, they told her, making their customary false accusation: "The sisters of Simeon have put spells on you because their brother has been put to death." Once this reached the queen's ears, Tarbo, a "daughter of the covenant," was arrested together with her married sister, who was living in continence,<sup>18</sup> and her servant, who was also a "daughter of the covenant" and who had been instructed by Tarbo in the excellent teaching of Christ. 254

They brought the women to the queen's residence for interrogation. The head Mobed and two officers were sent for so that they could adjudicate their case. When the women were introduced into their presence, these men saw the valiant and holy Tarbo's beautiful looks and her fine appearance, excelling that of all other women. Straightaway all three of them conceived the same filthy thought and disgusting intentions concerning her,<sup>19</sup> though none of them revealed anything to the others. They proceeded to speak harshly to the women, saying, "You deserve to die, seeing that you have brought these evil effects upon the person of the queen, the mistress of the entire orient." 255

The holy Tarbo replied, "What false charges are you bringing against us, charges that are quite out of keeping with our way of life? What wrong have we done you that you falsely accuse us of something quite alien to the truth for which we stand? Are you thirsting after our blood? If so, what prevents you from drinking it? Are you aiming at our death? Your hands are already befouled

17. I.e., Bahram V (420–38).

18. *mḡaddashtā*; this and the terms *qaddishā* or *qaddishūthā* (lit. 'holy, holiness') are often used in the technical sense of abstention from marital intercourse in early Syriac literature; the usage was suggested by Exod. 19:10 taken in conjunction with verse 15.

19. For this motif, see Susanna, 1:8–9.

by killing us Christians every day: we may be put to death, but we will not renounce our religion. It is written down for us that we should serve one God alone, and not consider alongside him any likeness in heaven or on earth.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the following is written down for us: 'If a sorcerer should be found, he is to die at the hands of this people.'<sup>21</sup> How, then, could we perform sorcery? Sorcery is in the same category as the denial of God; in both cases the sentence is death."

256 Those evil judges sat there listening to her in silence, enjoying the occasion—that is, in their own bitter way, stunned as they were by her astonishing beauty and exceptional wisdom. Each one of them said to himself in the vain hope conjured up by his evil thoughts concerning her, "I'll rescue her from death so that she can be my wife."

The Mobed then spoke to the women: "In your anger over your brother being put to death you have gone so far as to transgress your own law, performing sorcery on the queen, despite the fact that you are not allowed to do this, as you yourself have said."

The glorious Tarbo spoke: "What bad or hateful thing has been done to my brother Simeon so that as a result we should risk losing our salvation at God's hands? For even though you may have killed him out of hatred and jealousy, he is nevertheless alive in the Kingdom on high—the Kingdom that will make your kingdom down here on earth pass away, and that will dissolve your position of authority and render useless this honor of yours that does not last."

257 After this they sent the three women off to prison, to be detained there. The next day the Mobed sent a message to Tarbo, saying, "I will intercede with the king and I will save the three of you from death—on the condition you become my wife." On hearing this the glorious woman was greatly shaken, replying, "Shut your mouth, you wicked man and enemy of God; don't ever again utter anything so disgusting. Your filthy words make no impression on ears that are pure, and your foul proposition does not have any effect on my mind, which is chaste and holy: for I am the betrothed of Christ. In his name I am preserving my virginity, and upon my hope in him I am hanging my sure con-

20. Exod. 20:3-4.

21. Lev. 20:27.

viction. I entrust my life to him since he is able to deliver me from your impure hands and from your evil intentions concerning me. I am not afraid of death or alarmed at the thought of being killed, seeing that you are marking out a path for me whereby I shall travel to behold my beloved and dearest brother Simeon, the bishop. In this way I shall receive consolation for all my pains and sufferings, as I follow on his footsteps."

The two officials likewise sent messages to her on the same lines, each concealing the matter from the other. With indignation and great anger she gave them an adamant refusal.

The three of them then decided together on a stratagem that would bear bitter fruit. Bringing totally false testimony, they gave a wicked verdict, saying that they were indeed witches. The king then sent word to the effect that, if they worshipped the sun, they need not be put to death, on the grounds that they might really not know how to cast spells. When the women heard this, they cried out, "We will not exchange our God for something created by him; we will not worship the created sun in place of our Creator, nor will we abandon our Savior Jesus just because of your threats."

The Magians immediately started making an uproar: "These 258 women should perish from beneath the face of the heavens; they have cast spells on the queen and she has fallen ill." Permission was then given to the Magians to employ on the women whatever means of execution they liked. Now they said that their bodies should be cut in two and that the queen should pass between the two halves, after which she would be healed.<sup>22</sup>

Once again, as the women were being taken out for execution, the Mobed sent a message to the glorious Tarbo to the effect that, if she listened to his proposal, neither she nor her companions would be put to death. The chaste woman, however, cried out with a loud voice, reviling him: "Foul and perverted man, why do you crazily rave after something that is neither proper nor permissible? I shall die a heroic death, for thus shall I obtain true life; I will not live in an ignominious way and then eventually die."

They took the three holy women outside the city and drove into the ground two stakes for each woman, and they stretched them out, attaching them by their hands and feet, like lambs

22. See n. 5.

about to be shorn. Thereupon they sawed their bodies in halves, cut them up into six portions, placing them in six baskets, which they suspended on six forked pieces of wood; these they thrust into the ground, three on each side of the road. These were shaped like half crosses, carrying half a body each. Hung upon them were fruits that blind those who pluck them, and they bore  
 259 produce that is bitter to those who pick it.

This was a bitter spectacle that spoke for itself, girt with suffering; a grievous sight, carrying with it groans and lamentation. If anyone cannot weep, let him come here and bathe himself in tears; if anyone's eyes are dry, let him come here and wash himself in weeping, as he recalls the groans uttered by the pure and chaste bodies of those holy women. In their lifetime they were modestly dressed while in their own rooms, but in their death they were naked by the roadside. These are women who did not betray their freedom for a life of shame, whose chaste nature was handed over to be abused. How silent and quiet is Justice, who is normally not lenient or forgiving when she exacts the penalty. How daring and bold is Pride, which, once shattered, does not normally recover! These were merciless men, deprived of any pity or compassion; they resembled ravening wolves that tear out living flesh. The men who cut in half and strung up these women are cannibals who eat people alive; as it is written, "They swallowed us up alive."<sup>23</sup> Who got any joy out of this lugubrious spectacle? Who took any pleasure in this awesome sight? Who could look on with dry eyes? Who could steel himself to turn round and look upon them? If any such person exists, his nature is not the same as our nature, and he cannot belong to the race of Adam.

260 They conveyed the queen along that road and made her get out in between the bodies. The entire entourage came out after her, for it was the time when the king was moving up to his summer residence.<sup>24</sup>

The glorious women were crowned on the fifth of the lunar month Iyyar.<sup>25</sup>

23. Ps. 124:3.

24. I.e., Karka d-Ledan, in the mountains.

25. Approximately May.



### C. *From the Martyrs of Karka d-Beth Slokh*

Ba'utha, a noble laywoman from Karka d-Beth Slokh,<sup>26</sup> 288  
was put to death outside her castle at the orders of the Mobed  
Adurgushnasp.

Thekla and Danaq, both "daughters of the covenant," were  
put to death at the orders of the Mobed Adurgushnasp.

Taton, Mama, Mezakhya, and Anna, all "daughters of the  
covenant" from Karka d-Beth Slokh, were put to death outside 289  
Karka in a place called Hawra (White Poplar) at the orders of the  
Mobed of Karka. A fig tree grew up on the spot where their  
blood was shed, and it was a source of miraculous healing for  
many years until the despicable Manichaeans uprooted it out of  
envy. As a result a spirit of elephantiasis was sent upon them, to  
their discomfort, whereupon they acknowledged the reason why  
this had happened to them, and a mighty miracle was witnessed  
in them.<sup>27</sup>

Abyat, Hathay, and Mezakhya, all "daughters of the covenant"  
from the region of Beth Garmay, were put to death at the orders  
of King Shapur when he was in the region.

### D. *From the History of Karka d-Beth Slokh*

In the time of Ma'ne, bishop and glorious martyr, there was 513  
a persecution against the Christians, and the church was up-  
rooted. . . . The persecution consisted not just of killing, but  
also looting of property, imprisonment, and cruel tortures, so  
that even some "daughters of the covenant," who had made  
promises of virginity, who had come from the Royal City (i.e.,  
Seleucia-Ktesiphon) because of the persecution and were living  
in our town, were accused before the commandant by some  
Manichaeans who were in the town. The accused man gave  
orders that they be put to death outside the town in a place called  
"White Poplar." After the holy women had been crowned, there 514  
sprung up on the site of their martyrdom a fig tree, which pro-  
vided healing for all who took refuge in it. When, however, the

26. Capital of Beth Garmai, modern Kerkuk; see Fiey, *AC* 3: 11-53.

27. See the parallel tradition in text D.

Manichaeans saw the miracle that had taken place, they cut down the tree and set fire to the spot. But God, who does not allow his friends to be despised by foes, allowed the disease of elephantiasis to torment them, until they entirely disappeared from the town. This spot where the holy women were victorious is called to this day the "place of the fig tree," and now it has become a sanctuary for all believers: each year, when they keep the memorial of the great day of the Crucifixion, the entire community of the church—the pastor and his flock in all its ranks—go up to the great Martyrion, with the cross in front of them and behind them, and they turn aside to the "place of the fig tree" in solemn procession, accompanied by praises and sacred songs of thanksgiving befitting to God, the Lord of all, to the shaming of renegades and the pride of believers.

*E. The Martyrdom of Thekla, a Daughter of the Covenant, and of Four Other Daughters of the Covenant with Her*

308 At this time an impious man named Pawle, nominally a priest in the village of Bekhashaz,<sup>28</sup> was accused before Narsai Tahmshabur. Narsai Tahmshabur was told, "He is very rich and has a lot of property"; so straightaway he sent some men to surround his house and arrest him. They ransacked the house and took away a great deal of money that they found there. Because of him, they also arrested along with him the "daughters of the covenant" of his village, whose names are Thekla, Mary, Martha, and Emmi. These were all brought bound, together with Pawle, to the village of Hazza<sup>29</sup> and taken into the presence of the accursed Tahmshabur. He told Pawle, "If you do the king's will, by worshipping the sun and eating blood,<sup>30</sup> I will return to you everything that has been confiscated from you." Whereupon this impious son of Gehenna, hungering after his riches, and yearning for his money (which would result in his burning in Gehenna), did everything he was told to do.

28. Unidentified.

29. Some 12 kilometers southwest of Arbela (modern Irbil): Fiey, *AC* 1: 166.

30. Evidently local Christians kept the Jewish law in this matter, ensuring that the blood was drained from slaughtered animals.

When Tahmshabur realized that he no longer had any pretext 309  
for putting him to death, he thought up the following plan: he  
would tell him to kill the “daughters of the covenant,” in which  
case he might feel ashamed, and this would provide an excuse for  
putting him to death. Thus he would be able to confiscate the  
belongings that had been seized from Pawle’s house.

Tahmshabur at once ordered the women to be brought into his  
presence and told them menacingly, “Do the king’s will, worship  
the sun, and get married. If you do this, you will avoid beating,  
and you will save yourself from the sentence of death by the  
sword, which has been decreed for you. If you fail to obey, I will  
carry out my orders and no one will be able to deliver you from  
my hands.”

The holy women cried out in a loud voice, “You proud and  
insolent man, don’t try to frighten or beguile us with these de-  
ceiving words; no, put into effect what you have been ordered to  
do without any further delay: far be it from us to turn away from  
our God and our Creator to take advantage of anything that you  
have urged us to do.”

Tahmshabur gave orders that they be taken out of the place  
where he was sitting, and he had each one of them thrashed with  
a hundred strokes of the rod, while they confessed with a loud  
voice, saying, “We will not exchange God for the sun; we will  
not become foolish and senseless like you who have abandoned  
the Creator and worshipped instead what he has created.”

Their sentence of death was immediately given, and the im-  
pious Pawle was told, “If you kill these ‘daughters of the cove- 310  
nant,’ you can have back all that has been taken from you.” Satan,  
who had entered and breathed upon Judas Iscariot, likewise en-  
tered him and won him over by enticing and seducing him with  
the thought of gold and silver. In this way he destroyed his own  
soul as a result of his greed, just like the traitor. In the end he too  
met his lot and, like his mate, inherited the throttling noose.  
Maybe he too, like Judas, burst asunder and his entrails popped  
out:<sup>31</sup> perhaps the thief left him this inheritance too? The one  
killed Jesus, the other killed Christ who was in the virgins. For  
those who have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ.<sup>32</sup>

31. Acts 1:18.

32. Gal. 3:27.

What will be the judgment and punishment for these two men? What will be the heavier, which the more bitter? Is the one more fearsome, or the other more severe? Justice will mete out punishment to them in boundless measure since they committed a crime that is beyond measure or restraint.

- Lured by his possessions (which he did not manage to keep) and trusting in the wicked Tahmshabur's enticements, the grasping Pawle hardened his heart and put on a brazen face, took the sword and had the audacity to lift it against the holy women. In
- 311 unison they cried out, "O base shepherd, are you beginning with your own sheep, slaughtering the lambs of your own flock? In your greed have you turned into a wolf, destroying the lambs in your own sheepfold? Is this the holy and saving Bread that we used to receive at your hands? Is this the life-giving Blood that you offered our mouths? But now the sword in your hands is indeed our salvation and deliverance: we go now to Jesus, our true possession and eternal inheritance. As for the possessions and inheritance you love so much, you will not even get the benefit of them. We shall reach the place of judgment before you, and with us will come accusation of you; it will not stay behind, but God's judgment will overtake you at once. As for the money for whose sake you are killing us, you will not stay alive to enjoy it. You are committing a sin, but for the sake of what are you doing so? We are about to die, but for whose sake are we doing so? Woe, however, to the man at whose hand we die. Approach at once, grasping man; let the consummation of your sins find their limit in us, let the beginning of the harsh punishment due to you be called forth in us. Get on with it quickly, shameless man, save us from having to behold you when you burst asunder throttled by the
- 312 rope, when your hands and legs flay each other as you are strung up and are dying a cruel death."

The audacious man, doomed to destruction, raised up the sword (which sent him to Gehenna) and struck the five of them in turn, thus dispatching them, taking off their heads as though he was skillful and well practiced as an executioner. Did not the impious man's arm get tired, seeing that he was not experienced at beheading people? Did not his sword get blunt, seeing that it was not in the hands of a professional warrior? Had he just been waiting with his fangs sharpened in expectation for just such an opportunity? Did not the traitor's hand tremble as he raised the sword and brought it down? Maybe it was the love of his money

that gave him strength; perhaps he was fortified by his lust for gold. Was not the shameless man afraid, seeing that he was not accustomed to grasping a sword? Was not the vicious man terrified, seeing that he had never tasted human blood? In his brazenness, was he not ashamed of the people who stared at him at the time as if he was someone utterly accursed? Nevertheless, Satan, who not so long ago had manifested murder upon earth by means of Cain, quickly trained him and made him used to such things. "You are children," Scripture says, "of him who was from the beginning a murderer."<sup>33</sup>

The holy women met a brave death; valiantly did these chaste ladies depart this life to become a sweet savor before their Lord who has doubly rewarded them for their excellent course with glory that surpasses the suffering they underwent. 313

The glorious women were crowned on the sixth of the lunar month *Haziran*.<sup>34</sup>

Had this mindless man never read or heard the Gospel words about the rich man whose lands produced large crops, and how, when he said, "My soul, eat, drink and enjoy yourself," he was told, "Senseless man, this night your soul will be required of you; what will happen to all your preparations?"<sup>35</sup> The same thing happened to Pawle: imagining that they would restore to him his ill-gotten gains (for whose sake he eventually died), his life was in fact taken that very night, the reason being that the judge was afraid lest, in his impudence, Pawle would complain to the king and get back what had been taken from him; he accordingly sent some men who were in collusion with him to the prison, where they threw a rope round his neck and hanged him. His death was kept secret.

How similar were the deaths of these two grasping men. Maybe Judas was not as bad as Pawle, for Judas actually repented and then hanged himself, whereas Pawle never felt any shame and was hanged by others. Because his eyes satisfied themselves with the innocent blood he shed, no sentence or punishment that might come upon him was too small or short as his due reward.

33. John 8:44.

34. Approximately June.

35. Luke 12:19-20.

## F. Anahid

565 At that time there was a Mobed in the region of Balashfarr<sup>36</sup> whose name was Adurhormizd; he originated from Behshabur<sup>37</sup> in Fars. He was renowned for his great learning in Magian affairs, and at the same time he was a just and upright man. He had an only daughter called Anahid, of whom he was extremely fond, seeing that he had no other children beside her.

One day Anahid was sore tried by an evil spirit that did not leave her alone or cease troubling her day and night. Numerous Jews, Manichaeans, and Magian sorcerers came from all over the place, but none was able to help her; indeed she was tormented all the more.

566 Then those who attended on the Magian Adurhormizd told him about the blessed Pethion, the holy man: if he came and prayed, as he laid hands on her she would recover at once. They also recounted to Adurhormizd the names of a large number of people who had been healed thanks to Pethion through his prayer.

The Mobed gave orders and had her sent to the blessed man. When the party began to approach the blessed man's cell, the accursed demon began to cry out, "I am not going to that evil and murderous sorcerer." Only by using considerable force did they manage to bring her to him. When they had brought her in to his presence, the evil demon started shouting, "What have I got to do with you, the hateful opponent of our number? You have chased us out like your Master, you have caused us a great deal of trouble just as did your Lord. I have not done you any wrong, sir, so do not drive me out of my house where I live."

When the evil demon had spoken like this, the holy man addressed it, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have no authority to stay any longer in her; shut your mouth and get out of her, quickly."

Thereupon the girl fell down on the ground as though dead, and the blessed man ordered everyone out. Only the son of her tutor was allowed to stay. Then the holy man fell down and prayed. Finishing his prayer, he laid his hand on her, and immediately the demon departed from her, complaining loudly. She

36. See n. 6.

37. See Fiey, *Communautés* 2: 199-200.

herself recovered and stood up, whereupon she ran and prostrated herself before the holy Pethion, kissing his feet as she said, "You have restored to me my lost life."

She inquired what was the cause, both of her illness and of her healing, and on learning she said, "If this is so, I shall not leave 567  
for anywhere else."

When her father had been informed of his daughter's recovery, he set off that very night and came to the blessed man. "If you are able to make the girl immune to this kind of illness," he said, "I will give you whatever you like: quantities of gold and silver, and valuable presents." To this the holy man replied, "I will have nothing to do with gold or silver, for they only lead to perdition; nor with any transient possessions that would alienate me from our Lord and his kingdom. Nevertheless, if you want your daughter to be healed, give upright judgment, do not show any favoritism, and do not take bribes because (as our Scriptures say) 'they blind the eyes of the wise in judgment.'<sup>38</sup> Liberate the exploited from those who oppress them; ease the lot of the needy as far as your means allow." Instead of being angered by these and many other such words of admonishment and rebuke, the man promised, "I will do as you say."

He took away his daughter fully recovered and she remained with him for two years after her healing. Her father had it in mind to marry her off, but subsequently she was smitten by a further scourge—a serious case of leprosy. On seeing the girl thus, he was stricken with grief. He sent her once again to the blessed man to be healed of this, just as she had been of her former affliction.

After she had been with him some three months, she recovered, and the blessed Pethion told her, "If you want to be 568  
healed of all your sicknesses, then confess Christ: he will protect you from every evil. For what profit is there in these transient possessions: they do not endure and they only store up torment at the end of the lives of those who possess them. Instead endeavor to acquire heavenly wealth that does not fade away, for this acts as a good companion in both this world and the next to all those who desire it."

As he gave her this admonition and instruction, our Lord opened up her heart so that she gladly received his teaching.

38. Deut. 16:19.

One day as she was asleep she dreamt that she was standing before a mighty and awe-inspiring king, someone of quite exceptional splendor and majesty; he summoned her, saying, "Hanna."<sup>39</sup> "Here I am, my Lord," she replied. "Why are you not listening to the words of my servant Pethion who is urging you not to give your life over to perdition? Twice have I invited you to bliss, which is promised for those who are worthy; do not be stubborn, otherwise you will find yourself in bad company in Gehenna." Then she saw him take a crown from in front of him and place it upon her head.

When she awoke from her sleep, she was on fire with love for Christ who had allowed her to know the secret of his will. When it was morning, she went in to the blessed Pethion and told him the vision she had seen. She showed extreme eagerness to receive as soon as possible the baptismal "mark"<sup>40</sup> of Christ who had chosen her to be an associate of his. And so, in accordance with the will of God, she was baptized, full of joy and praising God.

569 Her father sent for her to have her brought home on numerous occasions, but she would not come. In the end her father came himself and took her off against her will. She refused to eat in the presence of her parents in case they would thereby discover that she was now a Christian. When her father eventually became aware that this was indeed the case, he rebuked her and tried to frighten her with threats, "Where have you ever seen Mobeds' children become Christians?"

When all failed to make her change her mind, he went off to the blessed Pethion and said, "What is this that you have done to me, separating me from my only daughter? I had originally intended to honor you in some way, but now that you have done me this great wrong I will be your out-and-out enemy and bring your life to an end; I will have you put in prison and beaten cruelly."

He gave orders that Pethion be bound tight at once, oblivious of all the benefits he had previously conferred upon his daughter. A man who was well known in the area took Pethion in, and told

39. Perhaps this was to be her baptismal name.

40. This was the baptismal anointing (*rushmā*) in the form of a cross on the forehead; see G. Winkler, "The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications," *Worship* 52 (1978): 24-25, and Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, chap. 5, 2.



Adurhormizd, "Whenever you require him I will bring him along to you." So Adurhormizd gave orders that his written deposition<sup>41</sup> be made.

That very night while Adurhormizd was asleep in his own home there appeared to him a resplendent man dressed in fine linen and wrapped in purple; in his hand he held a scepter, and in front of him was a large crowd. The man ordered one of his attendants to strike Adurhormizd on the shoulders with the baton he was holding, whereupon Adurhormizd woke up from his sleep trembling with fright. He found he was unable to turn over on his back because of the blow he had received, and he was crying out in anguish from the pain.

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The same night he sent for the blessed Pethion, and on his arrival Adurhormizd said to him, "I beg you, servant of God who performs his will, have pity on me; I have sinned against you, and I realize that it is because of you that this severe punishment has come upon me." Whereupon the blessed man opened his mouth and began to tell him about the true faith and the good things that have been prepared for believers after their death. Then he laid his hand on the wound and it was healed.

It was at that point that Adurhormizd realized quite clearly that his chastisement had taken place because of the holy man, and he asked him to instruct him in his beliefs and to tell him about his faith. Receiving these orders, the blessed man spoke as follows, "God, who made the world and all that it contains, is one, and all created things that have been established as a result of his lordship have been made by him for our honor: there is nothing in creation that was not made for our benefit; there is nothing ugly in it. In return he requires us men to love him with all our heart, and to love all mankind as we love ourselves. There are not many gods, in the way that paganism proclaims; rather, there is only one, and the sun, moon, fire, and water are not gods, but made by him and part of his creation. You, however, have abandoned the God who made and established you, and you have had the audacity to designate as gods created objects that he made for your honor. Are you not aware that Christ has a big settlement to make with you on the day when he judges all creatures? Repent of your sins and believe in Christ, for he is the remitter of your

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41. Both Greek and Persian terms are employed (*kathairesis*, *nbštg*).

sins; have no desire for transient riches or for honors that disappear, otherwise in the next world you will find yourself a stranger, stripped of the honor that belongs to it."

He gave him a great deal of instruction to which Adurhormizd listened attentively. Pethion spent ten days with him in discussion and instruction. Like a skillful hunter he caught him in the net of the faith, thanks to the power of Christ. When he saw that Adurhormizd had put his neck under the living yoke of the Gospel of Christ, Pethion stayed with him for another fifteen days, during which time he was assiduous in instructing him, at the same time encouraging him, so that Satan would not wrench him out of his hands. Adurhormizd then valiantly and with a sincere mind received baptism and partook in the holy Mysteries. His mind was fortified by the power of the Spirit so as to be able to spurn the visible world.

News of his conversion spread throughout the entire area.

(Editor's note: The martyrdom of Adurhormizd follows; the narrative concerning Anahid resumes on p. 583 of the Syriac text)

583 Previously, at the time of the examination of the holy Adurhormizd, the glorious man of God, inquiries were also made for his daughter Anahid, so that she might be brought before the authorities along with her father. They failed to bring her because the news had been spread that she had fled and was not in the region. In fact some of the faithful had hidden her, and she was not discovered until after the time that her father, the holy Adurhormizd, had received the crown of martyrdom.

In the vicinity of the shrine erected in honor of the glorious Adurhormizd, near the cell of the holy Pethion, she too made herself a small cell where she lived a chaste and resplendent life. A short time, however, after the saint's martyrdom, while Adurfrazgard the Magian and the rest of the notables of the region were still in a state of dismay at what had happened to  
584 the Mobed Adurhormizd, they soon started inquiring after his daughter. Some people had spoken in their presence of the girl's beautiful looks and high intelligence. They had said, furthermore, that her parents had left her a considerable fortune.

When those gathered around Adurfrazgard heard things of this sort, many of them, on discussing the matter, were desirous of seeing whether they might succeed in converting her back from the religion of the Christians and returning her to themselves.

Straightaway Adurfrazgard gave orders to Tahmin the Ayen-

bed<sup>42</sup> to go out quickly with eighty horsemen in search of the girl. "Take with you," he said, "some local landholders,"<sup>43</sup> three hundred men, and take control of all the roads into and out of the region; see to it that she does not escape and get away from the area. Once you are in control of all the roads into the area, then go out with the horsemen in search for her; do not cease until you have her standing before me. By the life and mighty destiny of Yazdgard the king of kings, if you fail to do this I will crucify you and the eighty horsemen along with you; I will hand over your corpse to corruption and your property shall go to the king; your name will I make into an object of cursing throughout the world: the very mention of it will instil horror into future generations, with the result that everyone who curses an enemy of the king, his crown, and his person, will use your name and no one else's in his curse."

585

Tahmin and his horsemen left immediately. He assembled a considerable number of local people and took them with him. He then took control of all the roads and tracks that led into and out of the region and entrusted them to his men to guard while he and the horsemen began their search, entering villages and houses, combing mountains, valleys, and woods in search of her.

When they reached the vicinity of the holy Pethion's cell, they intended to enter and search the place in case she had taken refuge with him and hidden there, seeing that he had instructed both her and her father. When they came to the entrance of the holy man's cell, they saw, close by it and a little above where they were, another cell that had not previously been there. Straightaway some of the horsemen raced to it, and on entering it, they came upon the virtuous Anahid on her knees in prayer and supplication, sobbing and groaning as she called upon God.

These were the words of her prayer: "Mighty God who existed before the world did, establisher, provisioner, and guide of all that is in it; you gave to human beings intelligence and a discerning mind more than to any other corporeal creature, you gave them authority to enjoy all the delightful things that you have made; but when they went astray from knowledge of you and strayed from your dominion, erring after all sorts of evil idols,

42. For this official, see A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les sassanides* (2d ed., Copenhagen, 1944), 300.

43. The Persian term *dehkān* is employed.

586 you did not act toward them as their wickedness deserved, but instead you sent your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Power who issues from you, the image of your divinity, and through your life-giving illumination he gathered them together, leading them away from all sorts of idols and false beliefs into a knowledge of you; through the grace of the Spirit given in baptism you made them worthy of illumination and heavenly glory, and you held me worthy, too, Lord, although I was a worshipper of demons who poured libations to the created elements in the sky and on earth, who was brought up in utter wickedness, who luxuriated in every evil; for you brought me into the blessed sheepfold of your flock, into the sacred fold of your sheep, by means of the watchful and true shepherd, Mar Pethion, the teacher whom you provided in your grace. Now, Lord, that I have become aware of the way of your dominion and the path to salvation, and know how to travel along them toward those treasures of yours in heaven, may I not desist from the course as I accompany my father, the aged Adurhormizd; rather, just as in the past I worshipped and poured libations at evil pagan altars, so may I now, Lord, find a place along with him in your great bridal chamber, among the flock of your sheep. May I not hold back from joining in his wedding feast, but instead let me provoke the minds of these voracious and destructive wolves; yes, let them quickly snatch me up as prey in their fangs, thus fulfilling their rebellious intentions upon me as they did upon my father who brought me up."

587 Such were the words of her doleful supplication as the band of horsemen rushed in uttering threats. When they caught sight of her, they stopped in amazement, and for a while they were unable to speak to one another. Then the girl modestly turned to them and said, "What do you want, sirs? If it is me you are looking for, here I am, a sinful lamb ready to be sacrificed. Have no fear, I will go with you gladly."

She spoke gently as she urged them on, but at the sight of her, their hearts were pricked, and as they stood looking at each other, they said, "How can someone with such noble looks and such distinguished appearance be allowed to meet a violent end so soon at the hands of the Magians and their associates?" They even tried to devise amongst themselves some way of saving her, but though they racked their brains, they could not hit upon any means of effecting her safety. In the end they started to reproach

one another, "Would that we had never come here in the first place; as it is, whether we take her off or leave her, both actions are fraught for us."

As they argued amongst themselves in this sort of way, the modest girl, wrapping herself in her cloak, stood up and came out of her cell toward them. "Do not hesitate any longer to come in, my lords, otherwise you may come to some harm and be punished for delaying over me out of respect for my person. Come, sirs, let us go on our way confident in the power of Jesus, the life-giving physician."

So they started off at once and came to the place where the Magians were all assembled. But their hearts were dazed and their eyes were full of tears at the thought of having to hand over the virgin into the grasp of such destructive wolves. 588

On reaching the nobles gathered in Adurfrazgard's presence, Tahmin entered and announced the arrival of the chaste girl. Adurfrazgard and the notables who were with him were overjoyed when they heard this, and most of the people present pushed their way outside to take a look at Anahid. "This is indeed Anahid the mistress,"<sup>44</sup> they shouted; "more beautiful and desirable than any other woman!"

The chaste girl did not raise her eyes in the slightest to look at them, but in her mind she addressed God on high: "O God, mighty and powerful, you perform the wishes of those who fear you and of all those who call upon you in upright fashion; please look upon your wretched servant, Lord, and may I not abandon my course on the path governed by you. Let not this cup of salvation pass by me, for it is the cup that your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, drank for our sakes, and after him so did countless tens of thousands of those who believe in you, the first of whom was your friend Stephen. Confirm the minds of my persecutors, Lord, so that they do not disregard me and I perish, having been left behind from the flock and herd."

Such were her thoughts when the Magian ordered that she be brought before him. Both he and his attendants gazed at the girl

44. The Persian word *bānūg*, "lady" or "mistress," is used; this is a regular title of the goddess Anahid, and it is evident that the ordinary people take her to be an apparition of the goddess. See N. Sims-Williams, *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript* (Berlin, 1985), p. 56, and (for the cult of Anahid "the lady"), M. Boyce, "Bibi Sharbānū and the Lady of Pars," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30 (1967): 30-44, esp. 36-37.

589 in their amazement at her beauty and fair appearance. Everyone's anger disappeared and they ceased from their menacing threats. The chief Magian then addressed her pleasantly and gently, supposing that she would be the more easily ensnared by his coaxing her. But when she paid no attention to his cajolements, he looked hard at her and said, "Wretched Anahid, daughter of Mahdukht, daughter of Mahadurfarreh Zardusht, head Deşqeshan,<sup>45</sup> from whom issues the entire light of the Avesta, and by whom the Magian religion<sup>46</sup> was henceforth illumined, from whom have issued—and still do so—all who become Deşqeshan on the dais,<sup>47</sup> and those again who belong to the aristocratic stock of Mahadurfarreh, the father of Mahdukht your mother; your family is held in great honor by the king of kings and by everyone in the realm. What then has happened to you that such utter folly and ridiculous stupidity has overtaken you? Even though your father Adurhormizd, having spent night and day unceasingly in the performance of Avesta, Yasht, and Drōn,<sup>48</sup> has gone out of his mind, his brain having dried up and been filled with nonsense with the result that he has gone off after the magic practices of the Christians so that he needed to be healed of his sickness and to recover—what, my pretty girl, has happened to you? I hear

590 that you too are wanting to go off after the magic practices of the utterly despicable Christians. Is not whomsoever you should want to marry from among all the Magians and nobles held in great favor and honor? No, my daughter, do not pay any attention to the misguided opinions of your distracted father; do not lose the position of great honor and reputation that your noble birth holds. If you are willing to accept me, I will raise you above all the noble women in the realm; if, however, you refuse me, here is my son, Adursroshay, who is the king's own *dronya*;<sup>49</sup> he has 170 special soldiers. Marry him and do not destroy your life, led astray by Ahriman.<sup>50</sup> I too will honor you above all my sons

45. Evidently a religious title; possibly the second element represents *kēsh*, "dogma."

46. The Persian term *dēn* is used.

47. The translation takes the word *šdrwn* to represent Persian *šādurvān*, or "dais."

48. I.e., recitation of passages of the Avesta in worship (*yasht*); *drōn* is the "consecrated bread," or the "ceremony of consecrating the bread."

49. Evidently a title connected with *drōn*.

50. Ahriman is the evil or destructive spirit in Zoroastrianism.

and daughters, making you mistress in charge of everything in my household."

When the Magian had addressed these words to her, she did not even look at him or give him any reply: her gaze was modestly fixed upon the ground and she bravely stood there in silence, unmoved.

Then the holy woman opened her mouth and addressed him: "I am telling you, greatest and most famed of the Magians, that I have once and for all been betrothed to Christ, and so I cannot belong to anyone else; I have already received from him the pledge of the Spirit, and I cannot leave him. Nor indeed will my Lord and my King who has betrothed me allow me to be taken off by anyone else to marry, for he is extremely powerful and strong, and no one can take anything from him. So, if you have something else to say, or if there is some other action to take, carry it out; it is no use wasting time with empty words." 591

"Who is this betrothed of yours, you impertinent woman, whose mighty strength no one can subdue?" asked the Magian. "The king of kings is a great warrior who has subdued both land and sea: are you saying that he cannot get the better of your feeble fiancé, who is totally unknown? Is there a single mighty man of valor in the world who is not subdued under the yoke of the king's dominion?"

The holy woman replied, "If my fiancé had been on earth, he might have listened to the king in some things, as you have said; as it is, he is resident in heaven, and so his power and authority extend over both heights and depths. What can your master—or indeed all the kings on earth—do that affects him or his in any way? Indeed, he has only to direct his gaze a little against them and their armies for them swiftly to meet their end, melting away like ice before fierce heat!"

At this the Magian became very angry and said, "You wicked and impertinent woman, I can see that in your folly you are traveling along the same road to perdition as your father. I am telling you not to destroy your own life by this madness of yours. Hold on to the religion of your parents, do not be led astray. Find refuge in the worship of the luminaries and fire, following after Hormizd: if you do so, you will be saved from all the terrible things you will otherwise have to endure. For I can see that your folly may bring you great harm." 592

"Alas for old age," said Anahid, "when it grows foolish and is

given to senseless speech, thus becoming the object of laughter—and here you are in your venerable old age yourself talking nonsense by introducing the subject of fire and the luminaries. O chief among Magians, do you say that these children of Hormizd were conceived and given birth to by Hormizd or by someone else?<sup>51</sup> On the basis of observation we can see that those who father children or give birth to them do so as a result of cohabitation of two persons, a male and a female; a person cannot achieve this on his or her own accord. If Hormizd on his own conceived in his own belly and gave birth to children, like his father Zurvan, then he is androgynous<sup>52</sup>—as the Manichaeans say. But if he fathered them from his mother, daughter, and sister, as your crazy and senseless teaching maintains, how is it he does not resemble us in everything? For God has no mother, daughter, or sister, since he is one and he alone is God, having control over all his treasure stores. But Zurvan and Khwashizag his mother<sup>53</sup> testify that Hormizd is like us, subject to a beginning, an end, and corruption: for just as they ceased from life, so too will their children and grandchildren. There is something written in our Scriptures concerning such as these: ‘Do not put your confidence in man, for he is no source of confidence; rather, put your confidence in the living God.’”<sup>54</sup>

593 At this point Adurfrazgard lost his temper and he ordered those standing in his presence to hit her hard on the mouth until all her teeth fell out onto the ground. Those ordered came up at once and hit her on the cheeks, mouth, and head, until her face was so swollen that her eyes were covered up and she had lost all her teeth. Her body was drenched with blood, which ran from her mouth and cheeks—it was as though she was swimming in it.

He gave orders that she be trussed up like a dog and thrown into prison under close guard. No one was to give her any food or anything to drink until the God of the dispersed Christians, in

51. N. Sims-Williams, (*The Christian Sogdian ms C 2*, p. 58) translates “(and) by no one else,” emending *w* to *lw*.

52. See the notes in J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés* (Paris, 1938), 2: 110–11.

53. Though this name is found in magic texts, her relationship to Hormizd is apparently given only here. The passage is commented on by Nöldeke and Zacher, pp. 64–65 (see Appendix).

54. A combination of Ps. 146:3 fused with 1 Tim. 6:17.



whom she trusted, should come and rescue her. They carried out his orders on the spot.

While she was in prison, held under close guard, during the middle of the night she was giving praise and thanks to God, making use of the psalms of David, and saying, "I will confess you, O Lord, with all my heart, and before kings will I sing of your name. I will worship you in your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your grace and truth, for you have answered me on the day I called upon you, and you have given my soul great strength."<sup>55</sup> With these and other such words she spent the night praising God until the morning.

When morning came, the nobles assembled in the presence of Adurfrazgard and sent for the holy woman. Since she could not walk because of the fetters, they had to carry her into their presence. Once she had been set down in front of them, they urged her to abandon the doctrines she clung to. Some of them used threats, others cajoled her, while one of them, a close relative of hers, went up to her and said, "My daughter Anahid, what is the matter with you, what has happened to you that you act differently from everyone else? If they have eliminated your father Adurhormizd the Christian and he has met a bad end, what demon has got hold of you? Why should Ahriman be battling with you like this? Even if you do not revert to Magianism,<sup>56</sup> at least say, 'I am not a Christian,' and then I can save you and carry you off to somewhere where there are Christians, and you can live there in Christianity all the rest of your life."

The wise woman replied, "You silly and senseless man, how can I deny him in whom we live and move and have our being<sup>57</sup>—we and all created things? Where can I go to where he is not there, what place is there that is not filled with him and he is there? Furthermore, our Lord Christ said that 'whoever denies me before men, him will I too deny before my Father in heaven.'<sup>58</sup> As it is, I have already renounced your gods—which are not gods—and I continue to do so; and I have confessed him and will continue to confess him right up to death."

55. Ps. 138:1-3.

56. The Syriac text adds *'hrmhwg*, an Iranian word of uncertain meaning, perhaps "disturber of ritual purity."

57. Acts 17:28.

58. Matt. 10:33.

When the Magian heard this, he ordered that her clothes be ripped off and that she should be stripped naked. "Bring a caning frame,"<sup>59</sup> he said, "and four pairs of men, and I will show you what to do." They brought this as instructed, and he gave orders for her to be stripped naked. She was still trussed up like a dog, with her head between her knees. He gave orders that she be scourged on the caning frame by two men, one on either side, until the flesh on her back and thighs was cut into from every direction, reaching the bones.

The men came up to scourge her, and when they had struck the virgin only twice with the rods, her flesh was at once deeply cut into, and streams of blood began to flow, so that the place where she was lying trussed up was running like streams of water with blood. The men did not stop beating her but rather lashed out at her even more assiduously than farmers hack at uncultivated ground to soften it.

When the first pair of men grew tired, a second pair took their place to scourge her. In this manner they continued the scourging until she became silent and her tongue ceased from praising God. When her voice could no longer be heard, they imagined that she must have expired, and the Magians gave orders that she be taken off and thrown to one side. Guards were appointed  
596 to watch over her, lest some Christians might snatch away her corpse.

When midnight came, she rose up on her feet and started to give praise with these words: "I will give thanks to you, Lord, for you were angry with me, but you turned away your anger and comforted me. I trusted in God my savior, and I will not be moved, for the Lord is my strength and my glory, and he will prove my salvation."<sup>60</sup> With these and other such words she was singing and praising God.

When they came to take a look at her in the morning, they saw her chains lying on the ground to one side, while she herself met them, radiant with joy. On seeing that she was still alive, they threw a small piece of cloth to her, which she took and wrapped round her loins to hide her nakedness. They observed that all her wounds from the previous day had healed, and that her body was without a scar. The men expressed astonishment at what they

59. A Persian word, *dwtšwbg*, is used.

60. Cf. Ps. 62:2-3, 118:14.

beheld, whereupon the holy woman said, "Do not be amazed at this, sirs, for the Lord has sent his angel and he has healed my wounds by laying his hands on my body. If God can raise up the dead and restore them to life, how much more can he heal my wounds?"

The guards went in and told Adurfrazgard the Magian, and he gave orders that they bring her into his presence. When she had entered and was standing before him, he looked hard at her and said, "O daughter of darkness, how long will you go astray and lead others astray with the magic practices of the Christians? Did you like the banquet yesterday? Prepare yourself for another that I have got ready for you today."

597

The holy woman replied, "You did indeed please me with the banquet yesterday, and today I thank you for all your trouble."

He then ordered two thin threads of cobblers' string to be brought in. This was done. He then told them to tie them into a hangman's noose round her breasts, one thread on each. Two men were to hold on to and pull at each thread until her breasts were severed and fell to the ground. As they attached the threads and the men took hold of them, the holy woman directed her gaze to heaven and said imploringly, "Lord Jesus Christ, receive my spirit—not because I am suffering at the hands of those who cause me pain, but lest they stop at letting me come to you."

While the holy woman was in such dire pain, many of the crowd present were sobbing with tears. At the same time they were astounded at her fortitude: "Truly God is giving her strength," they said; "it can be nothing else."

Her two breasts were quickly cut through and hung each by a mere sinew. The holy woman stretched out her hands, grabbed her breasts, and placed them in front of the Magian, with the words, "Seeing that you very much wanted them, O Magian, here they are, do with them whatever takes your fancy. If I have any other limbs you would like, give the order and I will cut them off and put them in front of you. I will not hold back anything I have from your banquet."

598

The Magian was furious and said, "Am I a dog, that I should want to eat human flesh?"

The wise woman replied, "A dog is better than you—and you know it: a dog guards the palace door, but you guard the door to Gehenna; just as the dog belongs to the palace, so you belong to Gehenna."

At this he grew even more angry and gave orders that she be carried off to prison in fetters. He had a piece of wood placed under her two armpits, and her hands were tied, doglike. They were to place her upside down on the wood all night in the prison. They then took her off as instructed.

The next morning he had her brought, and seeing that many people followed her and believed in her superstition, he realized that if she was left alive any longer, numberless people would go over to her faith.

When she was brought in, they saw that all the bones in her arms had been broken so that she could not move any of her limbs. He gave orders that she be conveyed at once to the hillside where she had been living. They were to smear her body with honey and stretch her out on the mountainside attached to four stakes. This was to frighten her and deter all who saw her from her superstition.

599 He ordered Nehormizd son of Adurmahan, the Rad<sup>61</sup> of that region and of the entire province of Nisibis, to convey her in person, together with Tahmin the Ayenbed and the horsemen. He was to ensure that the instructions were properly carried out.

As they traveled, conveying the holy woman to the place of her crowning, she was radiant with joy and gave praise to God because she had been considered worthy to follow in the smooth and narrow path of her father.

A considerable crowd accompanied the holy woman to see what would be done to her. When they reached the hillside, Nehormizd ordered that the girdle be taken from her; then they stretched her out on a flat spot on the hillside, beneath the crag there, attaching her to four huge iron stakes. They smeared her with honey and left her, stationing over her some guards from among the horsemen and the local landlords, four hundred men in all, while Nehormizd went to see if there were any further instructions concerning her.

Before they had reached the lower slopes of the hill in their descent, an enormous swarm of wasps collected, such that the entire mountain in every direction was covered up by their presence. They were heaped up on one another in clusters more than an arm's span wide. So threatening were they with their stings at

61. A high-ranking official in the provinces with judicial powers.

the ready that they prevented anyone approaching anywhere near the mountain—not just human beings and cattle, but even birds. They did not touch the pure woman's body but were heaped up on each other in swarms, some five arms' lengths thick, around the martyr's body, as though it were some festival, and their mass acted as it were as a canopy above her body. This lasted seven days, preventing anyone from approaching the mountain.

600

On the seventh day the clergy of the deported community who lived a little further up from there took the Gospel along with candles and incense and processed with a large crowd of the faithful, carrying scented water and clean burial garments. When the group of clergy arrived in procession, the wasps separated themselves from their swarm and settled, piling onto one another to the right and to the left, like huge heaps of rocks; they did not hurt anyone and did not make a move to fly off either to the right or to the left.

Before they reached her, the holy girl was addressing God in her prayers as follows: "O great God of every power and of all creation, who guides and controls all things, provisioner of all creation, you have chosen people out of all nations and generations to receive your life-giving utterance, and in your grace, Lord, you sent your Holy Spirit when your servants were chosen to join your flock; yes, Lord, you even brought us sinners, Adurhormizd, myself, and Pethion our teacher of truth into your sheepfold. Grant, Lord, this present supplication and request in your mercy, and to all those who call upon you in the name of us your wretched servants—in whatsoever country or place they may call upon you—do you grant what their heart requests in accordance with your will. Do not reject any petition of theirs, Lord, which is good and upright, but come to their help and act as their deliverer from their afflictions. Even if there should be at any moment ten thousand thousand suppliants, more than there be lowly insects here, in your mercy, Lord, fulfil their petition, meet their needs, be their deliverer in all sicknesses and afflictions; be a succor and support in all their grief and suffering. And grant, Lord, to this place, where we are now, prosperity as long as the world lasts. Receive my spirit in your grace, and may I rest in peace with my forefathers; for to you, Lord, the Father of truth, and to your only-begotten Son, and to the Holy Spirit, be glory and thanksgiving and praise, now and always, unto eternal ages."

601

To this all the clergy at once answered "amen" with a loud voice. As the "amen" was pronounced, she yielded up her spirit and fell asleep.

602 When the clergy reached her, she was already resting in the sleep of death, as though she had already been dead for several days. They brought scented water, washed her body, and wrapped it in clean white linen garments. They then laid her on a bier, and as the priests began the funeral rites, the entire swarm of wasps flew upward and took up a position above the priests and bier, as though they were a tall, many-storied house. So closely piled on top of one another were they that even the sun's light could scarcely be seen from underneath. The remainder of the wasps, either side of that "house," were like a fortified wall running up from the ground, straight up to a high level; there were others still on the road, for a mile and more, preventing any human beings, animals, or cattle from approaching the spot. If anyone did happen to pass along in that direction, he was immediately struck dead by them.

They conveyed the holy woman in great honor and laid her in the tomb of her father and of the holy Yazdin.<sup>62</sup> Having said the final prayer, they returned. As they were finishing the prayers, once again those insects formed a swarm in the place where the martyr lay stretched out. They consumed all the dust there until they reached bedrock. The swarm stayed on the mountain for a further seven days and then flew off.

603 When Nehormizd the Rad, and those with him, saw what took place, they were full of astonishment, and in their amazement they said, "What is this prodigy? In truth neither demons nor men can effect such things as these; maybe it is from God." They then told the Magian Adurfrazgard of all that had taken place. On hearing of it he said, "From what I have heard, this is the work of the sorcerer Pethion, their teacher who led the two of them astray with his spells. It was he who collected together the wasps there, to prevent the vultures and birds getting at her body. It is not right that Pethion should escape from my hands, seeing that he is to blame for all these evils, being the person who misled these two misfortunate persons. He has caused a disturbance throughout this whole region to the entire Magian reli-

62. Pethion's uncle (see introduction).

gion. It is as though the entire teaching of us Magians had disappeared, all because of him."

The crowning of the holy Anahid took place on 18 June,<sup>63</sup> on a Friday, in the ninth year of Yazdgard,<sup>64</sup> king of kings.

63. Both the Syriac (Haziran) and the Persian (Spandarmad, the twelfth month) names of the month are given.

64. Yazdgard II (438-57).

## Women Martyrs of Najran

### INTRODUCTION

Seizure of power in the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar in the early sixth century by a Jewish upstart, Yusuf As'ar, led first to the massacre of the (Christian) Ethiopian garrison stationed at the capital Zafar, and then to open persecution of Christians in various parts of the kingdom. The martyrdoms—many of them of women—in one town, Najran, came to the notice of a Syrian Orthodox bishop, Simeon of Beth Arsham,<sup>1</sup> who quickly publicized the events. On a political level these martyrdoms reflect the power struggle between the two great empires, Persian and Byzantine, and their relationships with the smaller kingdoms in Ethiopia, Ḥimyar, and of the Arab Ghassanids (on the Byzantine side) and Lakhmids (on the Persian).<sup>2</sup>

The Ḥimyarite (Homerite) martyrdoms quickly caught the public imagination and they soon found a place in all church calendars; as a result there survives a large hagiographical “dossier” in Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Georgian. The historical value of this material is very uneven; of prime importance, however, are three Syriac documents.<sup>3</sup>

1. A letter from bishop Simeon of Beth Arsham, evidently written from Ramla during Lent 524, whither he had traveled

1. A biography of Simeon is given by John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, no. 10 (PO 17: 137–58).

2. For the political background, see the articles cited in the Appendix for this section.

3. For bibliographical details, see Appendix.



from the Lakhmid capital Hirta d-Naʿman (on 20 January 524) in company with a priest Abraham son of Euphrasios, who had been sent by Justinian to make peace with the Lakhmid king Mundhir III. While they were at Mundhir's camp at Ramla there arrived a messenger from the king of the Himyarites (i.e., Yusuf) announcing to Mundhir all that he had perpetrated on the Christians in his kingdom and in Najran in particular. It is the contents of the king's letter, given in the king's own words, together with some additional eyewitness reports brought by other people from Najran that Simeon of Beth Arsham provides in this first letter. Simeon's purpose in writing is twofold. First, he wants his correspondent, Simeon abbot of Gabula,<sup>4</sup> to pass on the news to the Syrian Orthodox bishops who had fled to Egypt (after the accession of the Chalcedonian Justin in 518), so that they can get the patriarch of Alexandria to write to the king of Ethiopia to urge him to send help quickly (a scribal postscript alludes to the subsequent arrival of this help). And, second, Simeon wishes the martyrdoms to be made known "to the towns of the believers [i.e., Syrian Orthodox], that is, Antioch, Tarsos of Cilicia, Caesarea of Cappadocia, Edessa, and others," so that these new martyrs may be duly commemorated.

2. "An account of the martyrdom of the blessed Himyarites who were crowned in the city of Najran." This recently discovered document is a slightly later and fuller account of the events in Zafar and Najran; its editor, Shahid, very plausibly attributes it to the same Simeon of Beth Arsham. It too is in the form of a letter (and so is usually referred to as Letter II), and at the end it is stated that it was written from the camp of Jabala, king of the Ghassanids, at Gabitha (Jabiya) in July 519, a date that conflicts both with the date given for the martyrdoms within the letter itself (November 523) and with the date of Letter I (which is clearly the earlier letter). This is a crux to which we shall briefly return later.

3. "The Book of the Himyarites." This is a somewhat later work written after the Ethiopian king (here called Kaleb) had intervened by coming in person to Himyar to restore Ethiopian control there. Had the book survived complete it would have constituted the fullest of all our sources; unfortunately, however, the original manuscript was cut up in the fifteenth century and

4. Near Aleppo.

recycled as stuffing to go inside the covers of a liturgical manuscript. We should, however, be grateful to the perpetrator of this apparent act of vandalism, for without his work we should not even have the tantalizing fragments that do survive. Fortunately the table of contents is preserved almost complete, and so we can at least gain a good idea of its original contents: in its original form the book evidently provided a comprehensive history of Christianity in Ḥimyar, down to the return home of the Ethiopian king Kaleb. The editor of the fragments, Moberg, suggested that the author may have been Sergios bishop of Reṣafa (Sergiopolis), who was also at Ramla, but more recently Shahid has argued that he was none other than Simeon himself.<sup>5</sup> In any case there is a very close connection between these three Syriac works, with frequent agreement between them.

Of sources other than Syriac the most important is the Martyrdom of Arethas.<sup>6</sup> This man, the leader of the Najranites, also features in the Syriac accounts, where he is called Ḥarīth (=Arethas) son of Kaʿb. This work, which circulated in Chalcedonian circles, survives in Greek, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Georgian, and it is based partly on Syriac sources identical with, or at least closely related to, those extant, and partly on other material. Like the Book of the Ḥimyarites, it takes the account down to the Ethiopian intervention by the king Ella Aṣbeḥa (who appears in the Book of the Ḥimyarites and on his coins as Kaleb, perhaps his baptismal name).

It so happens that a number of the persons named in these martyrdoms also appear in South Arabian inscriptions, in the Sabaeen language:<sup>7</sup> thus we have an inscription of Maʿadkarib Yaffur, king of Saba, dated to the year 631 of the Sabaeen era, and two inscriptions giving the name of his successor Yusuf Asʿar,

5. I. Shahid, "The Book of the Himyarites: Authorship and Authenticity," *Le Muséon* 76 (1963): 349–62.

6. The standard edition of the Greek is that by E. Carpentier in *Acta Sanctorum*, *Octobris* 10 (1861): 721–59. There are important Arabic and Ethiopic translations.

7. G. Ryckmans, "Inscriptions sud-arabes, X," *Le Muséon* 66 (1953): 267–517 (nos. 507–8 mention Yusuf, and 510 mentions Maʿadkarib), with historical comments in J. Ryckmans, "Inscriptions historiques sabéennes d'Arabie centrale," *Le Muséon* 66 (1953): 319–42. There is also a fragmentary Geʿez (Ethiopic) inscription that refers to the victory of Ella Aṣbeḥa/Kaleb over Yusuf: see M. Kamil, "An Ethiopic Inscription Found at Mareb," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964): 56–57, and R. Degen, W. W. Müller, and W. Röllig in *Neue Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik* 1 (1972), 59–74.

who is none other than the instigator of the martyrdoms, and who features in the Syriac tradition as Masruq and in the Greek and Muslim as Dounaas = Dhū Nuwās, evidently nicknames.<sup>8</sup> One of Yusuf's inscriptions, dated 633 of the Sabaeen era, mentions his destruction of the church (*qlsn* = *ekklesian*) in Zafar while he was attacking the Ethiopian garrison there.

It was after Yusuf had taken Zafar by trickery that he moved on northward to Najran. There, after a long siege, he again persuaded the town's leaders to open the gates on a promise of safe conduct. Once again the promise was broken and the Christians were given the choice of conversion to Judaism or death.

Most of the ensuing martyrdoms took place over the course of a week, which started with the burning of the church with many of the clergy and laity inside it. A large number of the martyrs were women, and the accounts of their deaths figure prominently in all three Syriac narratives, as can be seen from Table 1 (which also includes Harith/Arethas) on page 104.<sup>9</sup>

In the following translations the accounts of Elizabeth, Tahna and companions, the freeborn women and their maids, of Ruhm and Maḥya are taken from the new second letter, while that of Habsa and Hayya comes from the Book of the Himyarites (the second letter has only a brief paragraph on them). The bitterness of intercommunal feeling, which makes itself clearly felt in the martyrdom of Habsa and Hayya, will partly be due to the fact that the Book of the Himyarites was written some years after the two letters, by which time attitudes will have hardened.<sup>10</sup>

To which year do the martyrdoms belong? Unfortunately no sure answer can be given, for, although the details given by the principal sources for the most part appear to be historically reliable, the conflicting dates they give raise apparently insoluble problems. This is all the more tantalizing in that on the correct date for the martyrdoms (518, 522, and 523 are the claimants) hangs the absolute chronology of the Sabaeen era. The conflict in

8. Dhū Nuwās signifies "the man with dangling (locks)"; this sense may also underlie the Syriac Masruq, which possibly represents Arabic *masruḡ*, "with braided (locks)"; compare the spelling HNT in these Syriac documents for the Arabic name Hind. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran*, 263–64, has a different suggestion. For the problem of the language spoken at Najran, see Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran*, 242–50.

9. An "x" denotes the presence of the item.

10. A comparison of the three Syriac documents will show that the distasteful epithets used of the Jewish persecutor in the Book of the Himyarites are to be attributed to the compiler of that work, and not to the martyrs themselves.

TABLE 1. Accounts of the deaths of women martyrs

	<i>Letter I</i>	<i>Letter II</i>	<i>Book of the Himyarites</i>
Burning of church TRWBY <sup>a</sup>	x	x	Chapter 13 (fragmentary) Chapter 14 (fragmentary)
Elizabeth, deaconess		x	Chapter 17 (fragmentary)
Tahna and companions		x	Chapters 15–16 (fragmentary)
Harith/Arethas	x	x	Chapter 19 (fragmentary)
Freeborn women	x	x	Chapter 20 (mostly surviving) cf. Chapter 23 (fragmentary)
Ruhm	x	x	Chapter 22 (mostly surviving)
Maḥya		x	Chapter 26 (lost)
Habsa and Ḥayya		x	Chapter 21 (complete)
Ad'a and Thummaliki			Chapter 33 (lost)
Diba and Ḥayya			Chapter 34 (lost)
Hint and 'Amma			Chapter 35 (lost)

TABLE 2. Conflicting dates for individual martyrdoms

	<i>Letter II</i>	<i>Book of the Himyarites</i>
Harith/Arethas		Sunday 25 November
Freeborn women	Wednesday, Nov.	Monday 26 November
Habsa and Ḥayya		Tuesday November
Ruhm	Sunday 20 Nov.	Wednesday November

the Syriac sources has already been seen from the clash between the two years given in Letter II (November 835 of the Seleucid era for the martyrdoms, A.D. 523, whereas the letter itself is dated July 830 of the same era, A.D. 519). Further conflict can be found if one compares the dates given for individual martyrdoms in the *Book of the Himyarites* (where no year is available), shown in Table 2 above. (The date 25 November fell on a Sunday in 518, and 20 November fell on a Sunday in 522). Since the chronological problems (which have much wider repercussions for the course of political events and the shifting of diplomatic policies) are not of direct concern here, it must suffice merely to draw attention to their existence.

*A. From Simeon of Beth Arsham's Second Letter*<sup>11</sup>

The Burning of the Church

The Jews amassed all the martyrs' bones and brought them into the church, where they heaped them up. They then brought in the priests, deacons, subdeacons, readers, and "sons and daughters of the covenant,"<sup>12</sup> and laymen and women as well—whose names we shall give at the end of our letter. They filled the church up from wall to wall, some 2000 persons according to the men who came from Najran; then they piled up wood all round the outside of the church and set alight to it, thus burning the church along with everyone inside it. vii

Some other women who had not been seized at the time, on seeing the church in flames with the priests and "members of the covenant" inside, rushed to the church calling out to one another, "Come, friends, that we may take pleasure in the fragrant offering of the priests." Thus they rushed into the fire themselves and were burnt alive.

Elizabeth

The sister of the holy bishop and martyr Paul<sup>13</sup> was a deaconess named Elizabeth. She was in hiding in a house where the Christians had forcibly concealed her. On learning that the church was in flames, with the "members of the covenant" and the bones of her brother inside it, she dashed out of the house where the Christians had hidden her and went straight to the church, crying out, "I shall go to Christ with you, my brother, with you my brother and with all the rest of you." This was what she was crying out as she reached the courtyard of the church, and when the Jews saw her there, they seized her, saying, "Adonay, Adonay, Adonay! She has escaped from the fire, she has vanquished the fire by sorcery and got out!" But she assured them, "I haven't left the church—far be it; rather, I have come from out- viii

11. Marginal numbers refer to pages in the editions by Shahid (Section A) and Moberg (Section B).

12. See n. 4 in Chapter 3.

13. Earlier in the letter we are told that this bishop had been consecrated by the famous Syrian Orthodox writer Philoxenos of Mabbugh, and that he had been martyred at Zafar. His bones had been subsequently brought to Najran.

side in order to enter it and to be burnt along with the bones of my brother and with the priests his companions. I want to be burnt in the church where I have ministered, together with my brother's bones." She was about forty-seven years old.

The Jews grabbed her and produced thin cords; they bent down her head and bent her knees like a camel's and her arms as well, and threw the cords around them. They put in wooden pegs below the cords and turned them so as to tighten the cords until they sank into her flesh. They did the same with her chest and the temples of her head. Then they produced some clay and fashioned something resembling a crown; this they placed on her head, saying to her in mockery, "Receive your crown, servant of the carpenter's son!" Next they modeled the clay into the shape of a basin on top and heated up some oil in a pan; this they poured  
ix onto the top of her head when it was on the boil. When her entire head was scalded, the Jews said to her, "Perhaps it is too cool for you? Would you like us to heat it up again?" The blessed woman was unable to speak for pain, but she did manage to make a sign to them, softly indicating to them, "Yes, I would."

While there was still some life in her, they took her outside the town and stripped her naked. There they tied ropes to her feet and brought along a wild camel, which they took out into the desert, tying the ropes to the camel and attaching wooden knockers that would clash against each other and agitate the camel. They then let the camel go into the desert, and it jerked her along violently behind it. This is how the blessed Elizabeth was crowned.

The people who came from Najran told us that three young men from the blessed woman's relations risked their lives and let themselves down the town wall by night on ropes. They picked up the tracks left by the blessed woman when she was dragged along and followed them all night; then, toward the ninth hour of the next day they found her: the ropes attached to the blessed woman's feet had got entangled in an old tree trunk, and the camel, checked violently in its course, had been strangled, the ropes having caught around its neck.

x Two of the men hid themselves there while the third returned to the town, managing to enter it through a sewer that conducted water out of the town during winter. He told the secret to the members of his family who were in hiding in the town. Then he and another man took clean linen and spices and everything re-

quired for embalming; they also took bread, wine, water, and an axe, whereupon they let themselves down the town wall on ropes. On reaching their companions, they wrapped the blessed woman up in the linen shroud with the spices, and they buried her in a particular spot, placing above her a mark that would be recognized by them. Thus they laid the blessed woman to rest in such a way that the place would not be known to any but those who had laid her there. They then returned to the town in great joy. Only a few people were aware of this secret action.

### Tahna, Ummah, and Hudayyah

Another woman named Tahna, hearing that the church was burning, seized her daughter's hand (her name was Ummah, and she was a "daughter of the covenant") and they went off to the church to be burnt. When her maidservant (whose name was Hudayyah) saw her, she said, "My lady, my lady, where are you off to? The church is on fire and the 'members of the covenant' are being burnt in the fire." Her mistress replied, "I too am going along to be burnt up with the priests, both I and my daughter here, who is a 'member of the covenant.'" The maid said, "I adjure you by Christ, my lady, take me with you so that I too may enjoy the fragrance of the priests." So her mistress took her by the hand, and thus the three of them entered the church and were burnt to death along with the priests.

This blessed lady's younger daughter, who was also called xi Hudayyah, did not go into the church along with her mother and sister but stayed in the house. The Jews, however, caught her, set fire to the house, and threw her into the fire. Then, when she had been scorched a little, they extracted her, rekindled the fire, and threw her in a second time; then they repeated this a third time, and so the blessed girl was crowned.

The church, together with the bones of the holy martyrs and of the bishop Paul, as well as the priests and all the people, as described earlier, was burnt on 15 November. On the same day the deaconess Elizabeth and her companions were crowned, as related earlier.

(Editor's note: The letter next relates the martyrdom of Harith [Arethas] and of a child of three; then follows that of the freeborn women)

## The Freeborn Women

xvii The king turned to the women, saying, "You have seen with your very own eyes your husbands put to death because they refused to renounce Christ and the cross, and because they blasphemously claimed that Christ is God and son of Adonay. But do you have pity on yourselves now, and on your sons and your daughters: deny Christ and the cross, and become Jewish like us; then you shall live. Otherwise you will certainly be put to death."

They replied, "Christ is God and Son of the Merciful One;<sup>14</sup> we believe in him and we worship him; for his sake we will die. Far be it from us to deny him or to go on living after the deaths of our husbands. No, like them and alongside them we shall die for Christ's sake."

xviii Those women who were "daughters of the covenant" and the nuns who had not been burnt in the church with their companions then said to the laywomen, "It is right that we should be killed first." But the laywomen replied, "No, it is right that we should be killed first, immediately after our husbands."

The king gave orders for them to be brought to the wadi, or ravine, and killed there. They rushed along, jostling each other to see who should be first. The wicked king and his nobles were laughing at them as they jostled one another. In this way they were all crowned by the sword on Wednesday, as stated earlier, in the month of November of the year 835 of Alexander.<sup>15</sup>

The king had given instructions that one of the women should not be put to death; this was Ruhm, daughter of Azma<sup>c</sup>,<sup>16</sup> from the family called Jaw, a relation of the glorious Harith son of Ka<sup>c</sup>b. The reason for this was her high standing, her lineage and her beauty, for the king imagined he could coax her into denying

14. The term "Merciful One" (*mrahmānā* or *rahmānā*) reflects the phraseology of Sabaeen inscriptions (*rhmn*). An inscription of the later Christian king Abraha uses the phrase "by the power of the Merciful One and his Messiah" (. . . *rhmn* *wmsḥhw*), Ryckmans, no. 506 in *Le Muséon* 66 (1953), 277–84 (cf. 339–42).

15. The Book of the Himyarites, however, gives Monday, 26 November; see introduction. (It should be noted that the Book of the Himyarites has another chapter, 23, on some further martyrdoms of freeborn women, for which the date does not survive.) The names of many of these women are recorded at the end of Chapter 20 of the Book of the Himyarites.

16. RHW or RWHM in Syriac. Shahid, however, for reasons that do not appear very cogent, vocalizes the name as a diminutive form, Ruhayma.



Christ and the cross. Thus she reentered the town, all sorrowful that she had not met her death.

### The Maid Servants

The king ordered the maid servants to be brought along, and he addressed them as well: "You have seen your masters and mistresses, as well as your relatives, die an evil death because they refused to renounce Christ and the cross. But do you spare yourselves; listen to me, and deny Christ and the cross. Then you shall become free women, and I will give you away to freeborn husbands." But they replied, "Far be it from us to deny Christ and the cross; far be it from us to remain alive after our masters and companions have died; no, we, along with them and like them, will die for the sake of Christ. Far be it from us to consent to you and accept your proposition." xix

When the king saw that they could not be persuaded to deny Christ, he ordered that they be brought to the wadi, or ravine, and put to death there. This was carried out, and they were all crowned by the sword.

### Mahya

On the same day, after the maid servants had been put to death, Mahya, a maid of the glorious Harith son of Ka'b, was in hiding in a particular house. She was a disagreeable woman, impudent and abusive, disliked by everyone because of her disagreeable ways; she was always very masculine in her manner of acting, and even her owners were afraid of her because of her disagreeable character. Now when she heard that her owners and her family and companions had been put to death, she dashed out into the street, put a belt around her waist like a man, and ran through the streets of the town shouting, "Men and women, Christians, now is the moment to pay back to Christ what you owe him. Come out and die for Christ, just as he died for you. Whoever fails to come out to Christ today does not belong to him; whoever does not answer Christ's call today will not be required again tomorrow. This is the time of battle! Come and assist your Lord Christ, for tomorrow the gate will be closed and you won't be able to go in to him. I know you hate me. By xx

Christ, from today on I will not be your enemy; no, by Christ, I will not be abusive to you. Look at me: there is no one as wicked as me; follow me, so that I don't have to go alone—otherwise the Jews will run away from me as usual, and will not put me to death."

This is what she was shouting out all the way until she reached the king's presence. When some Jews who knew her saw her, they told the king, "This woman is the very Satan of the Christians: there is not a single devil that does not live in her."

She then addressed the king: "I am speaking to you, Jewish butcher of the Christians! Get up and butcher me too, for I am a Christian, a maid of Ḥarīth son of Ka'b whom you killed yesterday. Don't imagine that you have won a victory over my master. No, my master has been victorious over you; for it is you who have been vanquished, in that you have played false to your God, and my master has won over you, seeing that he did not play false and deny Christ. I am telling you that had you come out against my master with a robber band, I would have met you with spear and sword, and I'd have kicked you with my feet. But had my master so wanted, he'd have squashed you like a fly."

xxi The king ordered her to be stripped naked. When they had done this, she said to the king, "It is to your shame, and to the shame of all your fellow Jews, that you have done this; I am not ashamed myself, for I have done this many times of my own will: I have been naked in the presence of men and women without feeling ashamed, for I am a woman—such as was created by God. But as for you, all the Ḥimyarites know the shame that the robber<sup>17</sup> merchant from Ḥirta d-Na'man did to you when he saved you from death at the Ethiopians' hands in time of war."

Now this robber had happened to be in the land of the Ḥimyarites at a time when the Ethiopians had made a sortie and routed the Ḥimyarites: they had caught this Jew and were wanting to kill him, but this robber made an oath on the holy Gospel on his behalf to the effect that he was a Christian. This was the

17. The translation is merely a guess, and follows Shahīd's, even though his linking of this word *ghsn'* with *gys'* "robber," cannot be correct. Clearly some term of abuse is intended, and Shahīd is no doubt right in seeing a reference to the Lakhmid king Mundhir III (on whom see J. S. Trimingham, *Christianity amongst the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London and New York, 1979), 192–98, 270–73). Just conceivably the word *ghsn'* might be connected with Arabic *ḡahš*, "donkey."

reason why this Jew had escaped from death; but now that he had become king and had routed the Christians, he sent some of the plunder taken from the Christians to this robber at Hirta d-Na'man, along with a letter of gratitude. This was the reason why all the Christians hated this robber, and it was with reference to him that the blessed woman now reviled the king, as has just been described.

The king gave orders that an ox and a donkey be brought along. They tied ropes to the woman's legs and attached one leg to the ox and the other to the donkey. The Jewish children then took sticks and beat the ox and the donkey, and the animals dragged her round the town in this way three times. Thus did this martyr for Christ deliver up her spirit.

Subsequently they brought her to the north gate of the town, opposite the courtyard belonging to her master Harith. There was a large tree there called *athalah*, that is, a tamarisk.<sup>18</sup> They suspended her head downward from it until evening, and the Jews came along and threw stones and shot arrows at her. In the evening they took her down from the tree, dragged her off, and threw her into the wadi. xxii

### Ruhm

Three days after the freeborn women and their maid servants had been put to death, on the Sunday, the king sent a message to Ruhm the daughter of Azma<sup>c</sup>, that if she denied Christ she could live on, but if she did not deny him she would be put to death. On hearing the message, she ran out into the street, into the middle of the town—she, a woman whose face no one had ever seen outside the gate of her house, who had never walked in the town in broad daylight previous to that day when she stood there in the presence of the entire town, her head uncovered, as she shouted out, saying, "Fellow women of Najran, Christians, Jews and Pagans, listen! You know that I am a Christian, and you know my lineage and family, who I am, and that I possess gold and silver, male and female servants, and my own income: I lack

18. The Letter gives several local Arabic terms (above we had *wadi*, glossed as "ravine" or "valley"); *athalah* will be related to classical Arabic *athl*, and the rare Syriac word with which it is glossed, *binā*, "tamarisk," probably occurs in the place name Kaparbiana (PO 8: 164), and may be found in classical Hebrew in Isaiah 44:4. (For the problem of the language, see n. 8).

xxiii

nothing. And now that my husband has been killed for the sake of Christ, if I wanted to I could remarry: I do not lack a suitable husband. And I tell you, this very day I am the possessor of 40,000 denarii, sealed up and stored in my treasury, separate from my husband's. I have jewelry, pearls and jacinths, which some of you women and your daughters have seen in my house. Furthermore you, my fellow women, know very well that a woman has no days of joy like those of her wedding feast: after the wedding feast there are only griefs and pains. When children are born, it is accompanied by pains and groans; or when a woman loses her children, there is anguish and sorrow, while when she buries her children, there is weeping and mourning.

xxiv

"But from this day on I am free from all this, and I shall continue with the joy of my first marriage: my three virgin daughters who have not been married off to husbands have I now decked out for Christ.<sup>19</sup> Gaze on me, for you have seen my face only two times—at my first wedding feast, and at this, my second one. I entered the house of my first betrothed husband with my face uncovered, and now I am going in to Christ, the Lord and God of both myself and my daughters, just as he first came to us. Look at me and at my daughters: I am no less beautiful than you, as I go to Christ my Lord with my beauty not disfigured by the Jews' denial of Christ. My very beauty shall act as a witness for me in the presence of my Lord, that it was not able to lead me astray into the sin of denying Christ my Lord. My gold, my silver, and all my jewelry, my servants and maids, and all I have, shall provide testimony that I have not preferred them and denied Christ.

"And now the king has sent a message to me that I should deny Christ and so save my life. But I have sent reply to him, saying that, if I were to deny Christ I would die, but if I do not deny him, then I shall live. Far be it from me, my fellow women, far be it from me that I should deny Christ my God, for it is in him that I have faith; in his name was I baptized myself and I had my daughters baptized as well; his cross do I venerate, and for his sake I and my daughters will die, just as he died for our sakes.

19. The Book of the Himyarites has Ruḥm call Christ "the heavenly Bridegroom to whom the souls of all his worshippers are betrothed in sanctity" (chap. 22)—a theme familiar from early Syriac Christian tradition (cf. n. 12 in Chapter 1).

"My gold that belongs to the earth I leave for the earth: let anyone who wants to take my gold do so, let anyone who wants to take my silver and jewelry take them. Of my own free will I leave everything behind, in order to go and receive a substitute for it from my Lord.

"Blessed are you, my fellow women, if you listen to my words; blessed are you, fellow women, if you recognized this truth, for whose sake I am going to die—both I and my daughters. Blessed are you, my fellow women, if you love Christ. Blessed am I and blessed are my daughters, for what a blessed state it is to which we are going!

"Henceforth there shall be peace and quiet for the people of Christ: the blood of my brothers and sisters who have been killed for Christ's sake shall act as a wall for this town if it holds fast to Christ my Lord. With my face uncovered I leave your town where I have lived as though in a temporary tabernacle, to go with my daughters to another city where I have betrothed them.

"Pray for me, my fellow women, that Christ my Lord may receive me, and forgive me for remaining in this life for three days after the death of the father of my daughters."

After the blessed Ruhm had finished, a wail went up from all the women of the town, and the wicked king, together with those with him outside the town to whom it reached, were shaken by it. xxv

When the men sent by the king to fetch the blessed woman arrived back, they told him all that the glorious Ruhm had uttered, and how the women were raising lamentations for her. The king wanted to put them to death for having allowed her to speak at such length and thus lead the town astray through her sorcery.

She then went out of the town, her head uncovered, along with her daughters. She came and stood before the king, her face uncovered without feeling any shame, and holding her daughters by the hand, all dressed up as for a wedding feast. She let down her braided hair and, holding it aside with her hand, she bared her neck and, bending her head, presented the king with the nape of her neck, as she cried out, "I and my daughters are Christians: we will die for Christ's sake. Cut off our heads, so that we may go and join our brothers and my daughters' father."

Following this, the king spoke coaxingly to her, "Just say that

Christ whom they crucified on the cross was a man, and then go home, both you and your daughters."

One of the blessed Ruhm's daughters who was about nine years old filled her mouth with spittle and spat in the direction of the king when she heard him tell her mother to deny Christ and spit on the cross.

xxvi At this point in the narrative the freeborn men who have just now arrived from Najran pointed out that the girl who insulted the king was not in fact the daughter of the blessed Ruhm, but her granddaughter, who had been named after her, Ruhm. The girl's mother had been killed with the women who had met their death on the previous day.

The girl told the king, "I spat on you because you weren't ashamed to tell my grandmother to deny Christ and to spit on the cross. I reject you and all your fellow Jews; I reject everyone who has rejected Christ and his cross, as you have done. For Christ knows that my grandmother is better than your mother, and my family is better than yours; yet you dared to tell my grandmother to spit on the cross and deny Christ! May your mouth be stopped up, O Jew who slew his Lord."

When the girl had thus addressed the king, he ordered his men to throw the old lady down to the ground. Then, in order to frighten all the Christians, he gave orders that this child be slain and her blood actually poured into her grandmother's mouth. Then the other daughter, whose name was Ummah, was also killed, and her blood too was poured into her mother's mouth. Then they got her to stand up again, and the king asked her, "How did your daughter's blood taste to you?" She replied, "Like a pure spotless offering; that is what it tasted like in my mouth and in my soul." The king gave orders at once that she be executed.

xxvii The people who have arrived from Najran added the following at this point: After the blessed Ruhm had been put to death, the nobles approached the king and told him, "This woman performed many acts of kindness toward all sorts of people—to the king, to the nobles, and to the poor. She once acted in this way to Ma'adkarib,<sup>20</sup> your predecessor as king in this region, when he was in difficulties: he had borrowed from her 12,000 denarii, and when she saw that he was still in difficulties at the end of the pe-

20. The Syriac M'DWKRM is certainly the same person as king Ma'adkarib Yāfur of the Sabaeen inscription Ryckmans, no. 510 (see n. 7).

riod of the loan, she remitted him both the sum and the interest. She made many people rich, in every way. But we beseech you to grant us this one favor: because of all her acts of kindness to everyone, allow the woman to be buried; she performed acts of kindness in all sorts of ways, having nothing to do with the matter of her Christianity.”

So the king gave instructions that she be buried. She was wrapped, they told us, in worn-out linen strips and was buried on the edge of the wadi, the ravine where her companions had been killed. These people who have come from Najran also mentioned that the glorious Harith son of Ka'b was buried by the town wall, opposite the entrance to his courtyard, thanks to the petition of the nobles.

The blessed Ruhm, daughter of Azma', together with her granddaughters Ummah and Ruhm, were crowned on Sunday, 20 November.<sup>21</sup>

### *B. From the Book of the Himyarites (Chapter 21)*

Habsa, Hayya, and Hayya

A narrative that tells first about the confession of the freeborn women Habsa, Hayya, and another Hayya, and then about their martyrdom in our Lord. 31

Among the other believing freeborn women in Najran who had not yet been arrested by the Jews in order to make them deny Christ was a freeborn woman named Habsa, belonging to the family of Hayyan, son of Hayyan the teacher mentioned at the beginning of this book,<sup>22</sup> through whose efforts Christianity had been sown in the town of Najran and in the territory of the Himyarites. When this excellent woman heard about all that had been done to the other freeborn women by the Jews, the crucifiers, all because of their faith in Christ our hope, she was immeasurably saddened that she had been deprived of being associated with them. She kept on weeping and saying, “Our Lord Jesus Christ,

21. For the conflict with the date given in the Book of the Himyarites (a Wednesday in November) see the introduction.

22. The chapter is unfortunately lost. The missionary Hayyan is not otherwise known.

do not look upon my sins, or exclude me from the rank of martyrdom for your sake; rather, Lord, make me too to be worthy to be associated with those who have loved you and who were slain for the sake of your venerated name."

The day after the freeborn women of Najran had been crowned, a Monday, this believer Habsa took a small bronze cross that she possessed and sewed it onto her headdress, just above her forehead. She then went out into the street and started crying out in an importunate way, "I am a Christian and I worship Christ." Two other freeborn women joined her; one was an old woman named Hayya, while the other, also called Hayya, was a young girl.

They attracted a large crowd of men and women of Najran, amongst whom Habsa caught sight of a neighbor of hers who was a Jew. She called out to him and addressed him, "O Jewish crucifier, I reject you and all your fellow believers, for you deny that Christ is God; I reject your king who crucified his Lord. Go and tell him that Habsa, the daughter of Hayyan, is shouting out in the street that she is a Christian and that she rejects you and all who are party to you."

The Jew said to her, "They will not allow me to come near him." Habsa replied, "Go and tell him what I have said to you; and if you don't go, be assured that I will tell him to his face that I told you to tell him, but that you failed to do so." The Jew said, 32 "I am afraid to approach him." "Then go and tell one of his officers, and he can tell him," replied Habsa. Whereupon the Jew went off and told one of the wicked Masruq's officers.<sup>23</sup> The officer passed on to Masruq the crucifier the message about what Habsa and her companions were saying, and how they were publicly confessing that they worshipped Christ, and were loudly renouncing all the Jews in everyone's hearing.

When that spiller of innocent blood, Masruq, heard of this from the officer, he was disturbed, and he was greatly provoked by these freeborn women. He gave orders that they be promptly arrested and brought before him. His instructions were carried out at once, and when they were there standing in front of him, he began to address them in his usual arrogant manner, saying, "Which of you is Habsa?" Habsa replied, "I am

23. For the nickname Masruq and the king's real name Yusuf (known from Sabaeen inscriptions), see the introduction.



Habsa." The wicked Masruq went on, "What are these women's names?" Habsa told him, "They are both called Hayya." The wicked Masruq then asked her, "Whose daughter are you?" Habsa told him, "I am the daughter of Hayyan, of the family of Hayyan the teacher at whose hand our Lord sowed Christianity in this land. My father is Hayyan, who once burned your synagogues."<sup>24</sup>

Masruq the crucifier said to her, "So you have the same ideas as your father? I suppose that you too would be ready to burn our synagogue just as your father did, to judge by your words." Habsa told him, "Now I am not going to burn it down, because I am all prepared to follow quickly this path of martyrdom in the footsteps of my brothers in Christ. But we have confidence in the justice of Jesus Christ our Lord and our God, that he will swiftly bring an end to your rule and make it disappear from amongst mankind: he will bring low your pride and your life, and he will uproot your synagogues from our land, and build there holy churches. Christianity will increase and rule here, through the grace of our Lord and through the prayers of our parents and brothers and sisters who have died for the sake of Christ our Lord. Whereas you and all who belong to your people will become a byword that will cause future generations to wonder, because of all that you, a godless and merciless man, have wrought upon the holy churches and upon those who worship Christ God." 33

The accursed serpent Masruq hissed out the venom of his heart like a snake that wants to suck the blood of a dove. Because he was put out and annoyed by everything he had heard from the lips of Habsa, he was also devising how he might find an appropriate death by which the life of this believing woman who had spoken thus might be painfully ended.

He gave instructions that a cross be thrown down in front of him and that a bowl of blood be brought, just as he had done in the case of those who had been martyred before her. He then addressed her: "In your audacity you have spoken at length all that you wanted, and you have made me hear all sorts of novel things that not even the men who preceded you said to me. I am greatly astonished at how much contempt you have shown me—or so

24. A hint perhaps that conflict between the Jewish and Christian communities in Najran went back even before Yusuf usurped the throne.

you imagine—by boldly speaking in this way. But because you are a woman, it is fitting that I should first require you to turn away from your error, and only then, if you fail to listen to me, will I destroy you cruelly as you deserve. So deny Christ at once; spit on this cross and dip your finger in this blood and say, just as we say, that Christ is a man, mortal like everyone else; and become Jewish, just like us. Then you shall stay alive, and I will provide you with a freeborn husband, and I will forgive you everything that you have uttered.”

Habsa said to him, “That mouth of yours, which has blasphemed against its Maker, shall be quickly stopped up, deprived of life in this world, and no offspring shall be left to follow you and revile their Creator, O crucifier who crucifies his Lord. You have made efforts, as you imagine, to finish off the entire race of Christians in our land. Be assured, not only that I refuse to say that Christ is an ordinary man, but that I worship him and give thanks to him for all the benefits he has performed for me. I believe that he is God, Maker of all things created; and I take refuge in his crucifixion. Devise all the sufferings you want to impose upon me, in the knowledge that I will not shy off from a single one of your tortures.”

The crucifier Masruq told her, “Now I know that my desire that you be spared a bitter death has not succeeded. Henceforth your blood be upon your own head, for I will swiftly do something to you so that you will repent in your mind that you did not listen to my words.”

Masruq then asked the freeborn women with her, “What thought will you take for yourselves? Will you listen to my words and deny Christ? Or will you stick to this woman’s madness and do you want to join her in meeting a bitter end?”

The two women named Hayya replied, “In all that our sister Habsa has said to you, she has spoken on behalf of all three of us: though our mouths did not utter these words, nevertheless our hearts concur with them. Far be it from us that we should now be separated from one another; rather, we are ready to endure any sufferings for the sake of the truth that we possess. So quickly impose on us all the tortures you want, for we confess that Christ is God, and we reject you and all who are of your opinion.”

On hearing this from the two Hayyas, the wicked Masruq was all the more put out. In his malice he gave orders straightaway

that their shins be tied to their thighs and that they be hobbled like camels; they were then to be beaten with rods and struck.

The blessed women started to pray and said, "Lord, we thank you for holding us worthy of martyrdom for your name's sake. Give peace, Lord, to your church, and preserve her children from apostasy. Receive us in your peace, and forgive us for all that we have sinned against you."

When his orders were put into effect, the sound of their bones being torn apart and of their joints being wrenched asunder could be heard. They also removed the cross on Habsa's head and threw it away. The iniquitous man told her, "Seeing that you hoped that this cross would help you, I will now give orders that you and your companions be tortured in the very spot where you had sewn in the cross, and you will realize that, not only did it fail to benefit you anything, but that it was also the cause of your destruction and that of these two women who have joined you in your madness."

He then gave orders that they be battered mercilessly on their foreheads. When this was carried out, the handmaids of God were in great affliction and no longer able to speak. The murderous Masruq then ordered that they be flogged without pity on their backs, like men. This too was carried out, and the crucifiers who were in charge of the matter mockingly said to them, 35  
"Will you now obey the king and do what he says, or are you content with this sort of death?" The faithful women, no longer able to speak, indicated with their hands, "Yes, we want to die."

The blessed old woman Hayya, being in immeasurable anguish, delivered up her spirit to her Lord and was crowned in fair martyrdom for his sake. When the crucifiers saw that she had died, they raised their voices and burst out laughing in their madness, saying, "The Christ whom she worshipped did her a lot of good—failing to rescue her from this affliction; for just look, she has met her death like an animal."

They removed the corpse of the blessed Hayya and threw it outside the encampment. That night some of the Christians who were there living in fear, not letting it be known that they were Christians, went and dug a grave for the blessed Hayya, that excellent woman.

The handmaids of God Habsa and the other Hayya were in great anguish, unable to speak as a result of the merciless blows and flogging that they had received. The crucifier Masruq ordered

that wild camels be brought and each woman be tied to one of them; they were then to be released into the desert.

The orders were promptly carried out, and so the handmaids of God delivered up their spirits to their Lord and were crowned with this glorious martyrdom by which they had testified for him, dragged off by the wild camels.

Af'u, one of the freeborn men whom we wrote about earlier,<sup>25</sup> who wrote down this martyrdom for us, was the brother-in-law of the blessed Habsa, having married her sister, whom we saw and spoke to. He related to us how he, Af'u, and two other men with him, had gone out following the tracks of the camels that had dragged the blessed women, and after some twelve miles they had found the corpse of the blessed Hayya: the ropes with which she had been tied to the camel had snapped, and the camel had gone its own way, leaving her behind. Af'u, out of faith, cut  
36 off and took away the hair of the blessed Hayya as a blessing,<sup>26</sup> having dug a hole and hidden her corpse on the spot.

They went on and caught the tracks of the other camel; these they followed for some fifteen miles and then they found the corpse of the glorious handmaid of God Habsa, with the camel lying down.<sup>27</sup> When Af'u caught sight of it, he ran up silently and cut the ropes with a sword. The camel got up and went off, while the chaste body of the handmaid of God was left behind. Af'u and his companions took the blessed Habsa and buried her beside the blessed Hayya. In an act of faith Af'u cut off and took away the hair of the glorious women together, placing a mark over their graves. They then returned, in fear of the Jews who were still in control of that region.

Af'u gave us some of the hair of the two women as a relic and blessing. But when we asked him to give us some of their bones as well, he told us, "Out of fear of the Jews we have not yet even brought them into our town; we have not even taken away any of their bones ourselves, because if any believer is found carry-

25. In Chapter 19. Af'u and his son 'Abdallah were some of the principal informants of the author. For the problem of the language in which the documents were written, Sabaeen or Arabic, see Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran*, 242-50.

26. To serve as a relic.

27. The only details on Habsa and her companions that Letter II gives concern their being dragged by camels "from 'LYN to another place called 'SLH, nine miles further on" (p. xxix).

ing bones of the glorious martyrs, the Jews will immediately kill him."

These glorious women fell asleep in this valiant martyrdom for the sake of their Lord on a Tuesday, in the month of November, providing a fine example for those who came after them.

From the *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, by  
John of Ephesus: Mary, Euphemia and  
Susan

INTRODUCTION

The following stories are taken from the sixth-century collection, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Chapters 12 and 27) by John of Ephesus. John was a monk, bishop, missionary, and writer, born in the early 500s, from the Byzantine province of Mesopotamia; his many-sided career was devoted to one major cause, the faith of the anti-Chalcedonian party.<sup>1</sup>

The opposition to the Council of Chalcedon (451)—particularly strong in the Syrian Orient—arose as a result of the final form of the credal definition made at that council, stating that the incarnate Christ was “one *in* two natures.”<sup>2</sup> The “hesitaters” (*diakrinomenoi*), as they were at first called, felt that this definition “divided” the unity of Christ by too sharply distinguishing his human and divine natures, and they considered that the concomitant allocation of Christ’s different activities to one or the other of his two natures (e.g., miracles to the divine, suffering to the human) made nonsense of the full reality of the incarnation. The Chalcedonians, for their part, suspected that all who rejected the

1. The so-called Monophysites; the term, however, is misleading: “Henophysite” would be more appropriate (with the Chalcedonians as “Dyophysites”).

2. Most opponents of Chalcedon would have accepted the formula “one *out* of two natures,” which lay in the draft text of the definition.

Chalcedonian definition were sympathizers with Eutyches' position (genuinely monophysite), which held that Christ's flesh (i.e., humanity) was not consubstantial with that of ordinary humanity—a view that both dangerously undermined the effectiveness of the incarnation, and at the same time blasphemously involved the divinity in suffering. With hindsight it is possible to see that each side, in its genuine anxiety not to fall into a particular theological pitfall, ended up by misrepresenting and misunderstanding the true position of their opponents, who with equal sincerity were striving to avoid a quite different pitfall. In the course of the late fifth century the dispute became a matter of political concern, and by the early sixth it had turned into a major political issue for the Byzantine Empire. When Justin I ascended the Byzantine throne in 518, imperial policy dramatically shifted to perpetrating an officially sanctioned Chalcedonian faith. Persecution of the religious opposition commenced almost immediately and continued intermittently into the seventh century. To this day the Syrian Orthodox Church is not in communion with those churches that uphold the Chalcedonian definition—in other words, the Greek and all the Western churches.

When John of Ephesus wrote the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* in the 560s, his intention was not to write a history of the persecutions of the opponents of Chalcedon; he did that elsewhere. Instead the *Lives* were a collection of fifty-eight stories of men and women from the Syrian Orient whom he himself knew or had met, and whose ascetic careers were particularly inspiring. But in fact, his stories focus primarily on his native Mesopotamia, the region suffering the most brutal persecution under the Chalcedonians; and the response of its anti-Chalcedonian community would prove a fervor equal to the oppressors' zeal. John's *Lives* elucidate just this response; while he does not specifically offer the work as anti-Chalcedonian propaganda, its content glorifies the courage and inspiration of individuals devoted to the "true faith" in a society of violent dissent. His message would not have been lost on his audience.

These stories hold further importance for their intimate details of sixth-century life—whether describing something of the tourist industry at this time, the daily life of a major city such as Jerusalem or Amida, the various forms that life in exile took, or, above all, the ordinary problems facing even the extraordinary individual.

A. *John of Ephesus, Lives, 12: Mary and Euphemia*

Here begins the twelfth story, of the two holy sisters called the Daughters of the Gazelle.<sup>3</sup> One had her religious service in Amida, and the other in Tella d-Mauzlath.<sup>4</sup>

Since we learn from the divine Paul who said, "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female,"<sup>5</sup> it seemed to us that we should introduce the story of those who are by nature females, since mention of them in no way lessens this series of stories about holy men. Furthermore, their course of life was not lower than the exalted path upon which every one of these holy men has journeyed, and even their way of life was great and surpasses telling. These blessed and excellent women, then, were sisters in the flesh; the elder was called Mary and the other Euphemia.

This Mary was a pure virgin, and from her childhood she chose for her part quiet, abstinence, great feats of fasting, many vigils, constant prayers, exertion in charity, and wandering. At last she set her mind on going to Jerusalem and to that holy land of the divine incarnation that took place for the salvation of all, so that in it she might worship and then return to her ascetic way of life. Now when she had gone and prayed, she stood in front of the site of Golgotha and was lifted up in ecstasy. There she remained standing for three days and three nights. Meanwhile, men came and saw her, and the guards wished to drive her off; but when they saw that she was an old and feeble woman, and moreover, standing in prayer, they left her alone. Afterward she sat there in the shrine.

For three years Mary went about praying, without entering anyone's house or speaking with anyone; nor did she pass a night outside the church, or ask anything of the people. Instead, she sat amongst the poor and spent the night with them, in the church or wherever else it might be. If it happened that someone came and gave charity where she was, she would stretch out her hand and take it. But when she had received twenty *minae*, she would not accept anything further, so that if, on a particular occasion, she was given more than twenty, she would give the extra to someone else. Now with this twenty *minae* she would buy bread

3. Acts 9:36.

4. Amida is modern Diyarbakir, Tella is Viranshehir, both in southeastern Turkey.

5. Gal. 3:28.



with fifteen, some green vegetables with two, and dried seeds with three. She only ate when she was thus provided, and if it happened that no one came to where she chanced to be, she would simply sit. Then for three or four days—perhaps even a week—she would sit in silence, with her thoughts engrossed in heaven.

Most of the time she sat in front of Golgotha with her eyes raised up, gazing in wonder and tears, as though gazing upon God transfixed on the cross. So, while she sat there every day in wonderment, those who saw either thought she was mad or senile. In this way she passed three years there in prayer.

After a while, men arrived who knew Mary and were well acquainted with her wondrous course of life. They found her sitting in front of Golgotha, her eyes raised, watching, marveling, and weeping; at once they fell down and prostrated themselves in greeting before her. But Mary was greatly upset, because she did not want people to recognize her there. These men went on to tell many people about the perfection of this blessed woman's way of life, from her childhood right up to her old age, and many marveled at her. Then those in whose eyes she had been reckoned a foolish old woman—one who sat there because of charity, so that she might sustain her body's needs—now began to honor her as a great and holy woman, begging her to pray for them.

Now the blessed woman dreaded being honored by people, lest she lose the fruits of her ascetic labor; and when she saw this happening, she fled immediately, deeply saddened at having to leave the holy place since she had intended to spend all her life there in that fashion. She left, again going down to the east, but decided inwardly that once each year she would offer worship in the place of God's suffering, for the rest of her life.

And so she did, traveling on that road in the season of extreme heat. Nor did she taste anything except once every two days, carrying nothing at all but a small basket, which hung on her arm, and a bowl—such was her way of travel. She set herself this task every year for as long as she lived, returning and persisting in prayers and tears throughout her life of quiet. When the time came she would return, going up to Jerusalem and fulfilling her vow, and then going back to her ordinary way of life; until, in due course, many powerful miracles were worked by her presence, not by her will or her word. For she shrank from such things as these, and it did not please her if anyone asked anything

like this of her; if anyone wanted to pressure her, he never saw her again. Indeed, that devout woman was very much on guard against pride, and she fought against vainglory, lest she lose the fruits of her ascetic labor.

Now her younger sister Euphemia had been wed as a girl, and she had a daughter to whom she had given religious instruction since she was quite small. When her husband died, this Euphemia and her young daughter had arranged their life so that Euphemia came<sup>6</sup> to move away altogether from a secular existence, turning to the inner world and the example of her sister. She took up a regulated life of devotion and wore the garb of a religious, while learning the psalms and teaching them to her daughter, who had been thoroughly instructed since her early youth in psalmody, the Scriptures, and writing. From that time on, Euphemia set herself fixed times for reciting the service and for prayers, both night and day. But while observing her sister's abstinence and other practices, at the same time she was fulfilling another sublime and exalted role, since she served two orders together—asceticism and relief for the afflicted.

This admirable woman determined that any bread not bought by the work of her own hands would not enter her house; and if it chanced to enter her house, she and her daughter totally refused to eat it. Instead, by working faultlessly and excellently, they wove only two pounds of goats' wool yarn for a *denarius*. Euphemia would receive the money as she worked for the noblewomen of the city, buying a little sustenance with half of it, and with the other half providing for the relief of the poor and the sick and those in prison.

Thus every day she took cooked food and bread and wine wherever anyone was confined or in prison or somewhere else. Indeed she went round all the squares of the city; and wherever she found someone ill or crippled or blind, or an old person unable to walk, she would sit down beside each in turn, asking, "What would you like today, dear? Would you just like me to buy you ordinary bread and some green vegetables? Or perhaps you would like something else; would you like me to go and buy you some fine white bread?" But whatever the reply and whoever it was who gave it, she would not leave him until she had satisfied him (when she went out, she always had her head covered). If she

6. Cf. Luke 15:17.

had no small change available, she would hurry home, take one of their utensils, and go out and pawn it, and so bring relief to that needy person.

In fact it was impossible for a single poor sick person among those lying in the squares to escape without her visiting once or twice daily, since she was capable of dashing about all day. Then, going around the courtyards, she would ask if perhaps a poor orphan was there, or a needy old widow who was ill. And with whatever she had she would buy wheat bread and fruit and wine—where she realized it was appropriate—for whomever she found ill, and going about she portioned the food out among them. But if it happened that by her own means she could not satisfy someone in a fitting way, whomever it might be, nothing stopped her from taking that person apples or pomegranates or fish or bread. Then sitting beside him, she would take his hand and ask, “What is wrong, dear?” advising, “Don’t be depressed, thinking that people afflicted like you have no comfort. Blessed are you for all the good things without end that are prepared for you in that world, for the sake of these afflictions that have come upon you. Look at Lazarus,<sup>7</sup> who by persevering with patience and not complaining inherited the kingdom of Heaven.” Thus the poor used to call her “our consolation and our visitor.” Truly blessed is that woman for the number of souls laden with gratitude for her, and laden with her blessings, like those of Tabitha of old;<sup>8</sup> blessed is she for the many who display these things to God who sees all! Eventually, she was called Tabitha throughout the city.

Now when all the noblemen and women of the city saw her strength and her zeal, and that she was distressed at being unable to visit the afflicted in a generous way, all who were eager for the welfare of their souls would urge her to enter and take for her rounds anything that she knew she needed to relieve the oppressed. So she was freed from her anxiety, since she had been greatly distressed on two accounts: one, that she was unable to relieve the sick and needy sufficiently by the small business she and her daughter ran; and the other, that she could only find opportunity at night for doing the handiwork she had taken on herself.

7. Luke 16:19–31.

8. Acts 9:36.

Her daughter, then, was working day and night singlemindedly and without complaint. If one of her companions or someone else said to her, "Your mother leaves you at work by yourself all day," she would say, "My mother's labor is greater than all labors, and God strengthens me through her prayers." So the blessed woman was freed a little from worry, since her daughter worked for their needs, and as far as they could, she supplied the needy. For she herself with free mind would perform her ministry to the afflicted and needy and suffering all day, and then would also gather them to her house every day and relieve them with the fruits of their business. Because of this, many people besought her to accept what was necessary for herself and her daughter, but she refused, saying, "God forbid that I should consume the strength of human beings, and satisfy my body from the toil of others while it has strength to work, or receive the stains of their sins upon my soul!" But if anyone compelled her otherwise, she would be greatly annoyed, saying, "Stop this kindness of yours; do you want to soil me with the mud of your sins? I am blemished enough as I am. God gives me strength, and that poor girl who is with me, so that we may work for our own needs and minister to our brothers according to our strength." Thus they utterly refused any food at all except by their own labor in their own house, and it was only if one of them was constrained to perform an act of charity at some point somewhere that they would agree otherwise.

So they persevered in this labor, and also in fasting and prayer and reciting the service. For whenever that blessed woman was attending to the ministry of the needy, she recited the prayers as she was going about, and so, too, did her daughter at home. But for vespers and the night office and at the dawn office, they recited the service together. In these great actions, then, and this perfect way of life, this blessed woman was living with all her energy; nor did she lack the great reward of another labor, through which the word of the Lord concerning the man who had five talents might be fulfilled—namely, "He who has, to him shall be given."<sup>9</sup>

When the persecution took place, all the monks in the area surrounding the city were driven out from their places, and the

9. Matt. 25:29.

monasteries seized by those of the opposing side. Then like a harbor that receives ships from everywhere for mooring and peaceful rest, that blessed woman in this way took in and gave relief to the exiled and oppressed from all places. For they were compelled to take refuge with the devout woman, renowned for her way of life, since they had no opportunity to reenter the monasteries because of the heretics.

Euphemia then devised a plan and hired for herself large houses; and one that was naturally of a suitable size she converted into a martyrion, with icons, pictures, chests, and all sorts of things—even the eucharistic vessels, liturgical books, and everything one would find in a monastery was to be found there. Besides these things, she also supplied great mats and curtains and rugs. For herself and her daughter, however, she prepared an inner chamber since, wise in all things, she gave herself alone to the service of the blessed men. But her daughter, because she was young, she kept carefully inside day and night, lest she harm one of the men by her sight, or herself be harmed seeing one of them.

From then on, that martyr's chapel did not lodge less than ten or fifteen or even as many as twenty men at a time. Through the handiwork that she and her daughter distributed outside, Euphemia would buy wheat, lentils, and green vegetables, and each evening she would bake bread and boil lentils and vegetables. With this she gave relief to as many as came, while being engrossed in her ministry all day. Those blessed men, moreover, were continually sending her matters of business. Now, as they were coming to her from everywhere because of her love of God, and the work she and her daughter did became insufficient for the men's needs, she was forced for the sake of the men to accept what they needed so that she could relieve their sufferings; but she herself refused to eat with them from this source. And if it happened that there were some virtuous men present who compelled her to partake of the gift with them, then she would bring her bread threefold for them and as much as she herself needed, and sitting in front of the spread, then she would eat.

If by chance strangers came, whom she knew were in need and unknown in the city, she would go out to the noblemen and vehemently demand of them, "What mighty thing are you going to do for Christ, he to whom all your wealth belongs? You cast off onto him all your surplus and you think that yours is a great

charity. Woe to you, wealthy ones; wail and weep for the afflictions that are coming upon you!"<sup>10</sup> For as it is written that the righteous shall be as confident as a lion,<sup>11</sup> so this woman confidently upbraided everyone regardless of their rank until the noblemen and women of the city were full of trepidation because of her. When she entered their thresholds and they heard that Euphemia was coming, they would say, "Alas for us, Tabitha has come to give us a good thrashing!" Then she would boldly take whatever she wanted to give to whomever was in need, the blessed travelers or sick widows or orphans or the needy or the sick, and she would go off and visit them.

But if someone resisted and would not give cheerfully, she made him regret the day with such words as these, "It's all very well for you to sit, with your servants standing around attending you, bringing you successive courses of delicacies and wines and the best white bread, and very fine rugs, while God is overcome in the market, swarming with lice and fainting with hunger. Do you not fear Him? How will you call upon Him and He answer you, when you treat Him contemptuously in this way? How will you ask forgiveness of Him, or expect Him to save you from hell?" So she passed judgment on them until those of the secular life were somewhat peeved with her, even as it is said, "The fool does not love the one who rebukes him."<sup>12</sup> But she was diligent in relieving and fulfilling the needs of the afflicted and distressed, and those who lacked human comfort, by whatever means she could.

Indeed the whole city was not sufficient for her business and she would even go about carefully searching outside in the inns and roads and monasteries, lest any needy person or stranger might be lying ill in one of them. In this way she found many people and brought relief to them, taking some to her house and carrying some to the hospitals where she would give instructions concerning them. And it was for the most part because of her that they were received and tended.

Now she was known to great and small alike in the city, and even at a distance everyone recognized the sight of her by her vigorous and swift gait. Summer and winter, in mud, snow, and ice she would walk in that manner without any shoes, stubbing her toes, her nails broken off, blood flowing from her blisters.

10. Cf. James 5:1.

11. Prov. 23:1.

12. Prov. 15:12.

Nor would she be persuaded to bandage them, though many a person grieved for her, seeing her in such a state. We, too, said to her many times in a joking manner, "Don't kill yourself so violently, Tabitha." But she would say, "If something has its end in rot and worms, why should we spare it?"

Truly, so vigorous was Euphemia in her religious service that the tongue is too small to tell of her great labor. In this way also, her sister Mary in the city of Tella was triumphing in practices of perfection consisting of abstinence, quietude, and poverty, just as Euphemia in the city of Amida. So the report of these two sisters was told throughout the East, and wonder seized everyone that each of them in a way of life without equal bravely exerted herself, acquiring righteousness.

After that blessed woman had completed roughly thirty years in such practices as these, and her house was resounding day and night with the praises of holy men from everywhere, then Satan—who is always jealous of good things—did not fail to stir up a trial for them, so as to deprive them and cause them to lose the profit of their great and spiritual business. Thus he roused against them the heretical envy of those who had seized the power of the church, violently and savagely and mercilessly. And they said, "These women are upsetting this city—why, the citizens revere and honor them more than the bishops!—for their house has been made a den of thieves,<sup>13</sup> and they take in and shelter deceivers." Then they ordered them to be seized, and took them to the church to make them partake of their impious communion. But though they assailed the women both with many threats and with blandishments, they did not succumb; rather, with vehemence the blessed Euphemia boldly spoke, fighting against death, saying, "Lord Jesus Christ forbid that I should take communion with those who divide him, or with those who proclaim a quaternity instead of the holy Trinity!" When those deserving of it heard this statement, they were moved with vicious and bitter fury, and they ordered the blessed woman to be bound in a dungeon beneath the prison. So, because of "this insolence," she was imprisoned there for thirty days.

Meanwhile all the city was begging for her release, but the officials had sworn an oath that until she would receive communion she would stay there. Hearing this, however, she mocked

13. Matt. 21:13.

them, saying, "If only I may suffer hardship for him whose suffering on the cross was for my sake; for rather would I die here, than in denial of my Lord and God." When they saw that there was no means of persuading her, and that the entire city was in a state of uproar concerning her, they took her out and banished her from the whole city—exactly what Satan had schemed to bring about. Then all the poor of the city were mourning and deeply grieved, and all the nobility, too, were sad.

Euphemia and her daughter departed, and went to that blessed woman, her sister Mary. Wishing to go to Jerusalem, they went and prayed and returned. So in these trials of persecution these women were buffeted for five years. Now when they had received each other's blessing, after a time they thought that perhaps the anger against them had abated, and they returned to Amida, entering it secretly; and they stayed at the house of a certain nobleman.

When it began to be noticed, and their opponents began to speak of them, the people with whom they were staying became anxious, begging them to depart lest their house be pillaged. But the blessed Euphemia was weary, and she wept aloud to God, saying, "My Lord, your mercy knows that I have grown weak, and I have no more strength. It is enough for me." The request of her prayer was granted that very night, and she fell ill. Then, as her hosts were afraid, and worrying about her, she summoned them and said, "Don't be troubled, my children, because I will leave your house this week for good." But they did not understand what she said, or of which departure she spoke.

Summoning her daughter (who was called Maria), Euphemia told her, "My daughter, take comfort in Christ and guard yourself in purity for the Lord, your lord to whom you are betrothed. Do not grieve, for I am not deserting you—God forbid me that, my beloved. But I am entrusting you to the child of our blessed lady Mary, and to the Holy One herself, that by her prayers you may be guarded, and become a temple of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit of God." And when she had given her many strict instructions, she said, "I am going to Christ" and committed her to divine grace as she spoke. Then she stretched out her hand, making the sign of the cross in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally she stretched herself out, looking to heaven, and as her gaze was raised heavenward her soul went out, while everyone was seized with wonder over her departure.



Her daughter remained alone in solitude and bereavement. But two days after her mother's death, while she was mourning and sitting in sorrow—almost approaching death herself—a man came bringing a letter about the blessed Mary, who had departed from the world ten days before and gone to God. Learning what had happened, her friends kept Maria from hearing, and her soul from departing with grief, for her whole mind had been set on going to her blessed aunt and sharing her way of life until her death. So they prevented her from hearing and being overwhelmed with grief.

These two holy women, then, both within eight days completed their course of life together, each of them having borne the great burden of her labor. The blessed Mary had lived sixty years in the way of holiness from her birth until her death, traveling on the road of perfection and laboring toward God. The blessed Euphemia, too, had passed thirty-five years on that way of perfection: thirty in serving the holy men and five in the sufferings and trial of persecution—that is, martyrdom for the sake of Christ. But her blessed daughter still remained, fortified by the power of her blessing and her prayer; following in the footsteps of these holy women, she began the vigorous course of their practices after them.

The story of the sisters Euphemia and Mary is ended.

### *B. John of Ephesus, Lives, 27: Susan*

And now the twenty-seventh story, about the blessed virgin of Christ whose name was Susan.

The mighty strength of Christ God is wont to be celebrated and manifested in human weakness so that no flesh may glorify itself before him,<sup>14</sup> the strengthener of the weak. However, it is apt to show its activity not only in men who are powerful in appearance and mighty and forceful, but also in weak, feeble, frail women. Thus it fortifies and gives them courage until they too bear the struggle with undaunted strength—not simply with flesh and blood, enticing passions, the yearnings of fleshly lusts, and so on; but even against principalities, powers, and those ruling the world of this darkness, and against evil spirits under

14. I Cor. 1:29.

heaven.<sup>15</sup> Against these are they mightily given courage, and they mock them as a powerful man mocks a band of children or infants preparing to come and fight against him. This was also revealed to us through Paul, wise in all things, when he said, "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female, nor slave nor free."<sup>16</sup> This woman, then, holy and manly in Christ, so astonished me by her appearance, words, and strength in God that she seemed to me not at all out of place in this series of stories of holy men, with whom she strains to enter the same narrow gate<sup>17</sup> as indeed she already has done.

Now this blessed woman (as we discovered when we managed to learn the details from her) belonged to a family from Persian Arzanene.<sup>18</sup> It was a noble family; but from the beginning, since the age of eight, the light of her life shone out in her mind until people marveled at her sensibility, modesty, and devotion. For as if through prophecy her parents had named her "Blessing," she who truly received a heavenly blessing.

This virtuous girl decided that she should go and worship in the holy places, where the salvation of our lives took place, and she implored her parents. But they laughed at her, a mere child, and said, "You haven't even learned to understand the Scriptures, and yet you want to go to Jerusalem!" So she was silent, keeping watch in her heart; and during that time she prayed and said, "Lord if you wish for the salvation of my miserable soul, 'Make straight your way for me,'<sup>19</sup> and present me with an escort. Save my soul from the defilement of this world's filthy mire!" Then the child (as she related to us when I pressed her greatly) placed her soul in the hands of God and ran away.

After crossing three or four miles, she chanced upon a large caravan of women and men traveling toward Jerusalem. And when she had mixed with them, inquiring and learning their purpose, she jumped and danced for joy, praising God, saying, "Blessed am I that the Lord wishes for my salvation, and as I asked He answered me! God forbid that I should return to the world and family and parents, and so die; I go to Him who leads me and is my father, brother, and kinsman in both worlds." Thus she reached Jerusalem joyously. But when she had wor-

15. Eph. 6:12.

16. Gal. 3:28.

17. Matt. 13:24.

18. Across the Tigris to the northeast of Amida.

19. Ps. 5:9.

shipped there, her companions wished to return and begged her to go back with them to her own country, saying, "We can't leave you here." So she parted from them, and they did not see her again.

Now she searched around to find a convent where she could live, and learning that there was a large community of women between Ascalon and Gaza, she set her course there. She revealed her desire to the woman at the gate, but because of that convent's strictness, the old woman said to her, "My daughter, you can't live here because you are a child. You couldn't bear the hardship and labor. Besides, your genteel upbringing doesn't make you suited for a convent."

The devout girl, because she was a stranger and in a foreign country, was very upset, and sat at the gate weeping for seven days. The women tried to drive her away, but she would not leave. Then, learning that she was a foreigner, they took her in; and she entered, though they looked down on her because she was so young. But when they learned where she had come from and where she had gone, they said to her as if concerned, "What good is it, child, for you to go out and ruin your soul this way in the mire of sin? For seeing you so young, and what's more alone, who—even if he were unwilling—would Satan not bring against you in order to destroy you prematurely?" Then (as the blessed women with her used to relate to me, and as they themselves had learned at the outset from her), she said, "For our Lord's sake pray for me, since I trust in Him to whom I have committed my soul, that He did not desert me to be destroyed, and He does not desert me now." And so they praised God.

From that time forward she took up great ascetic practices and virtuous feats of labor, abstinence, and devotion, while they hindered her and would slap her because she was a child, so that she would not apply herself to these things more than the other sisters. But she would strive even more and would keep vigil all night, standing in a corner. Not a single word would leave her mouth for anyone all day unless begged for; nor, from her arrival at the convent, did any of her companions ever see her face uncovered or all of her eye exposed; and no laughter came from her mouth.

Now when they saw the blessed girl's way of life—that however much they might strive to hinder her because she was a child, she would simply spend an extra year or two in this bur-

densome practice—those who had treated her disdainfully because of her youth saw her as one who was excellent. Then she changed the name that was hers before entering the convent, lest someone from her family come making inquiries, and find her; and she called herself Susan.

After she had been laboring ten years in these practices, persecution fell upon their convent, forcing them either to submit to Chalcedonian faith or to leave. Since theirs was a great and well-known community of women, the majority of them were seized and these then submitted to their persecutors; but some scattered here and there. Thus two choices were facing the blessed woman: either to leave the convent, or to risk falling into evil faith; so she decided to go out, and entering the desert beyond Alexandria, live there. Immediately she left. But there was great division even among those sisters who had surrendered themselves, and some women were saying, "Since Susan has gone we won't stay." Then five of the more prominent women from those who had not surrendered joined themselves to her, although she had intended to go alone, saying, "There is no way that we will be parted from you."

So Susan revealed her intentions to them, since they compelled her, and said, "Do not come with me. For to be brief, if the Lord profits me as is His wont, I am going to the desert." They also declared their decision: "We, too, will come with you to the desert." Then, as they would not be dissuaded, they boarded a ship together and crossed over to Alexandria.

There the blessed woman heard rumor of a place in the desert outside the monastery of Mar Menas, and she directed her course there—about two miles from a village called Mendis. This place eventually belonged to the blessed Syrians, but its beginning lay with Susan's arrival. Now there was a tower there that had been built as a watchtower against barbarians; and entering it enthusiastically, she and the five others dwelt there. Then one of them went and brought them work from the village. Thus they labored with their hands for their needs, and they sustained themselves. And God took care of them, seeing their zeal and trust in him.

Away from the tower was a cave underground, where once a holy man had lived. Susan used to leave human habitation to go out wandering and praying in the desert; on one occasion as she was going along she came across that cave and immediately

jumped in. None of her companions or anyone else was aware of it, nor had she taken food or anything with her. Then, just as it is written about Ishmael the son of Abraham, "he sat in the desert of Paran and was instructed in the bow,"<sup>20</sup> so also is it fitting to say about her that she was sitting in a desert cave, being instructed in struggle and manliness against hideous demons that especially show the fervor of their wickedness in the desert.

But when a day or two had passed without her coming, her companions sat day and night in bitter distress and tears, saying, "She in whose trust we came here has left us and gone." After about ten days, some people from the village learned of it and went to the blessed women to find out what had happened. When they saw their grief and weeping, they wondered whether she might have gone to that cave in the desert. Since they knew the place, they went out, and reaching the cave, they peered down and saw the blessed woman thrown on her face, groaning. They spoke to her, but she mistook them for the demons who were showing her fearful and hideous shapes there, and so did not stop the crying out of her prayer. Seeing that she would not answer them, they left and went to report to her companions.

Then all of them hastened to the cave and found the blessed woman in the same state, weeping and praying. With difficulty, and only after they had spoken many things to her, at last she believed who they were; for on the previous day demons had come to her in their guise, so as to drive her out from there. Tearfully the women begged her, "Don't you know that we came out to the desert trusting in you after our Lord? And now why do you seek to destroy all our souls, and that you alone should be delivered? Don't you know that without you we can't exist?" But that mighty woman, weeping with her head bent down, said to them, "My sisters, leave me alone. I am with you for all time; but because the Lord prepared this place for me, so that I might easily live in quietude here, go and stay in peace. And on Sundays let one of you come and see if I am alive or dead." Then the women stood over her to lift her up, trying to get her to go with them; but they could not do it.

Finally they exacted a promise from her, lest she also depart from there without letting them know; and she promised them. They begged her to let them make a small dish of lentils and

20. Gen. 21:20-21.

bring it to her, since she had tasted nothing in ten days; but she did not even want to hear it, saying, "You want to take care of my food when I am lying flat on my face, and make me eat the sweat of your faces; God forbid! For the sustenance of my body it is enough if you bring me a pitcher of water on Sundays, and a small hunk of dried bread for each day."

This they did for three years. But after the report of the blessed women and where they lived was heard abroad, many people came to them from Alexandria and the villages of Libya. Now there was a certain great old man who had about ten disciples with him, and they had been neighbors of the women's convent in Palestine. He and his disciples had also been persecuted greatly and driven from place to place, but then had learned of the blessed women and where they were, and about the quietude and sweetness of that desert. So he made straight for that place, arriving there with his disciples—one of whom was the brother of the woman who had been made superior of the blessed women. He, too, was admirable in his way of life, and was named Samuel. The old man was named Maro and by birth was from Amida, while his disciple Samuel, with his sister, was from the environs of Edessa.

When these men came, the blessed women were comforted by them; and the men, too, were glad and gave thanks to the Lord that they had been refreshed with the quiet of the desert. Then they began to found a cell in that desert, and others, as well, were brought together there—some of whom we wrote about in an earlier chapter. So that place was settled, with the blessed women among them. But they determined to prepare a separate place for the women, so as not to give room for abuse by outsiders, and also because it was hard for them to speak without offending Susan. Indeed she was concerned over that very thought, "For God has provided his servants with this place, but it is not possible for our female sex to live among men—since the attack of the evil one against holy men is mostly made through women, even when they are far away, how much more so when they are near?—even if we should happen to continue warily pursuing spiritual things. Now then, let us depart for the desert beyond this."

Because those blessed men were ashamed by the sobriety of the holy woman, she herself said these things to them. But when they heard, they praised God and took upon themselves to build

and make ready for the women a place at the boundary of that village, while she prepared again to penetrate further into the desert. Then they rose up, resisting her, and said, "For you, mother, a city would be a desert if you dwelt in it. But look at these souls that depend on you." Thus she was convinced by them. And they built for the women an enclosed convent with a tower inside it, and they dwelt in it.

Now the blessed woman gained valiance against demons through the strength that comes from grace, as night and day they arrayed themselves in successive ranks for battle against her in the form of men, and attacked her with every kind of weapon. But she mocked them, as a mighty man would despise sickly men who were threatening him. Report of her strength was heard everywhere; and after she had been in that desert for fifteen years, the news of her perfection incited us, as well, to desire the sight of her and of the holy men who were also there. Still, when we were deemed worthy of seeing her whom I can hardly call a woman, I was astonished at the words of suffering and wisdom of God that issued from her mouth—and I was with those holy men twenty days or more, going and coming in order to hear her gentle conversation.

Nor could I see her head held erect or any sign of her face except the tip of her nose, so sorrowful and weepy was she. She undertook to speak to us about this world, held fast by erring: how men see their companions rotting and corrupted and putrefying in their graves, while creepy things crawl and mingle in their putrefaction—yet those who see these things go astray through the empty vanities of this deceptive world. She spoke, too, of how it does not occur to the hearts of men that the dreadful hour of this world's destruction hastily approaches, when they will stand before the dreadful judgment seat of God. For, she said, "It is ridiculous that we hear about the chasm of fire, the flaming depths, the darkness, the rest of the tortures, but we do not take it to heart and beg for mercy while we have the opportunity, so that we might be delivered from these things." Again, the divine woman related to us many things more frightening than these; and we were left in great wonder at her words.

She also received the gift of healing, so that she could cure every sickness or disease she stretched her hand against. Now while we were there, a certain blessed man, great and God-loving, dwelt in a place in the desert not far away. Against him the de-

mons would openly prepare for combat, and he would see their battle with the blessed woman, and she his. But because she was stronger than he, she both conquered the demons and had no fear at all of them. She became firm like adamant and unmoveable—so much so that the demons would cry out at her, “This is a woman, but she is stone, and instead of flesh she is iron!” Such were the things the demons said to her.

To such an extent was she thus steadfast that when visions prevailed against the blessed man, he would go to her as if to a mighty woman. While I was there, he came, pale, smitten in his mind, and disturbed. When she saw him, she understood, and asked, “Why are you worn out, father?” He told her, “The demons have waxed strong and taken away my senses. All week we have been engaged in an ever increasing battle, then last night and today they showed me fearful, terrible forms. My heart was shaken, my wits were seized, and I was confounded. I fled from fright. I am terrified to enter my cell because of the apparitions I saw. I’m not going back to that place anymore.”

But when she heard, she shook her head, saying,<sup>21</sup> “Come and have a look at some people who are called men—and not only men but servants of Christ. Do you deserve to be called servants of Christ? Do you thus think Christ your Lord to be feeble? Are you showing your own weakness that the mighty and invincible power of Him who has cast down and overthrown and annihilated all the power of Satan is actually weaker than that of demons? Does Christ thus now appear as one who flees and is conquered by devils? Do they turn out to be powerful and victorious over the power of God? How can you be a disciple of Him who said, ‘You will trample all the power of the enemy’?<sup>22</sup> Forgive me, father, you have grieved me because you have gladdened the hearts of demons.<sup>23</sup> Last night I only heard the shapes and voices resembling the battles of demons, and I wondered. But I am aware that the strength of the Lord surrounds my weakness like a wall of bronze, and there is no other power that can rise against it.”

21. The text of this speech is particularly confusing and ambiguous; the following rendition seems to make the most sense.

22. Luke 10:19

23. We omit part of a line that seems untranslatable in the context. Brooks has included it in his text (not following ms. B, which omits it: PO 18: 557), but his sense is very obscure.



While the weak woman courageously said these things in front of us, we looked at each other, although she did not look at either of us. Then she spoke confidently to the blessed man, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, stand up; go back to your cell. As He is accustomed, He will make humble all the power of the evil one." The blessed man was abashed at what the woman said, and quaking in his shame he agreed to go.

Then we rose from beside her and spoke amongst ourselves, marveling at her spiritual strength and courage, and I said to him, "Why can one not see the face of this woman?" He told me, "One day while we were speaking, I said to her, 'Why do you conceal your face from us?' And she swore an oath to me, saying, 'He who placed His yoke upon me by His grace knows, our brother, that ever since I accepted His yoke twenty-five years ago I have not seen a man's face. And do you want me to look at yours now?' So I said to her, 'For our Lord's sake, tell me the truth. Are you afraid that you will suffer harm at the sight of a man, or that he would at the sight of you?' She answered, 'Because of both these things.'"

So marveling at the practice of the holy woman and the constancy of Susan, Christ's virgin, we departed from there praising God.

The story of the blessed virgin of Christ whose name was Susan is ended.

## Anastasia

### INTRODUCTION

This text, whose original was in Greek, forms part of a cycle of narratives concerning the late sixth-century Abba Daniel of Sketis<sup>1</sup> (the desert home of many monks and monasteries situated between Cairo and Alexandria). For the most part these narratives take the form of uplifting tales, and their historical value is probably minimal, although it is likely that at least some of the persons who feature in them existed in the flesh.

The present narrative in fact combines two quite separate episodes: first, Daniel's visit to a convent in Middle Egypt, where he receives a delightful and delicate rebuff from the abbess, and then subsequently discloses the saintly character of a nun who was acting mad—another holy fool for Christ; and, second, the story of a eunuch monk whose true identity as a patrician lady, Anastasia, who had run away from Constantinople to Egypt to escape the advances of the emperor Justinian and become a "monk," was disclosed only at her death.

The author of the narratives, who purports to be Daniel's disciple, has taken over, and adapted to a new context, older material, for the mad nun is clearly modeled on Onesima, who features in Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* (chap. 39), while the theme of the transvestite (already encountered in the Life of Pelagia) was always a popular one among hagiographers.

1. Modern Wadi 'n Natrun. On this cycle Garitte (see Appendix) provides a succinct orientation.

The Syriac translation (but not the Greek original) identifies this Anastasia as the deaconess Anastasia with whom the Patriarch Severos of Antioch (d. 538) corresponded.<sup>2</sup> This is probably no more than a piece of guesswork.

Although this Life is set in Egypt, rather than Syria, it belongs to a cycle that proved both popular and influential in the Syriac milieu and so has been included in this collection. The close link between Syria and Egypt in the sixth century, especially in monastic circles, is well illustrated by the Life of Susan (5B).

### *The Story of Anastasia*<sup>3</sup>

1. The blessed Abba Daniel once left Skete with his disciple to go to a monastery of sisters that was in the inner desert, called Tabennesi.<sup>4</sup> When the solitaries who were in the desert became aware of this, they all came out to meet him, as one man, like sheep waiting for their shepherd. On seeing him from a distance, they threw themselves down on the ground before him seven times. He spoke with them profitable words and sealed them with the sign of the cross, saying, "Run after the stripping away of possessions and the stripping away of thoughts, for by these means shall a man see the face of God." He then prayed over them and moved on.

2. Toward evening they arrived at the monastery we spoke of earlier, and the blessed man said to his disciple, "My son, go and tell the abbess 'There is an old man from Skete with me; we would like protection with you tonight.'" Now it was the custom that no man should enter that monastery.

The disciple went off and knocked at the monastery gate. An old nun answered, "Pray, what is it you want?" "Call the abbess for me," he replied. When the abbess came out to him, he told her, "There is an old man from Skete with me, and we would like protection with you tonight, so that we do not get devoured by wild animals." She said to him with a smile, "It would be better for you to be devoured by the wild animals outside, rather

2. Letters 69 and 71 in E. W. Brooks, *A Collection of Letters of Severos of Antioch*, in *PO* 14 (1920), are addressed to her.

3. The section numbers are those of Nau's edition of the Syriac text.

4. See n. 7 to Chapter 2: the Greek, however, here has "the monastery of the holy Abba Jeremias."

than by those inside, my son." He then told her, "The blessed Daniel of Skete is with me."

3. On hearing this, the abbess did not wait any longer but opened the two gates of the monastery and brought all the sisters out to meet him. From the monastery gate to the place where he was standing, they spread out their veils on the ground, and thus walking over the ground he entered the monastery.

When they had prayed and sat down, the abbess put some water into a basin and washed his feet and those of his disciple. All the sisters then passed in front of him and received a blessing from him. Now the abbess took some of the water that had washed the blessed man's feet and poured some on the head of each of the sisters as a blessing, while the rest she poured over her own head and into her bosom. She made a great occasion for the whole monastery and set up a table before the blessed man, placing just soaked crusts in front of Daniel, and boiled lentils in front of his disciple, together with a little bread, while for all the sisters she had cooked food with oil and a little wine and some other things. When they had enjoyed themselves, the blessed man said, "What was this that you did, bringing us the inferior and yourselves the better food?" The abbess replied, "My Lord, you are a solitary, and I gave you the food of solitaries, and I gave your disciple food suitable for a solitary's disciple, because that is what he is; whereas we ate something better because we are weak women." The blessed man said to her, "So be it."<sup>5</sup>

It was a matter of wonder and amazement with these sisters that they lived in deep silence, and in everything they carried out their ministrations and the seeing to all their needs either by means of signs or using the *semantron*. Now there were more than three hundred of them. The blessed man said to the abbess, "Are the sisters always like this, or is this something put on for our sakes?" The abbess replied, "Your handmaids are always like this."

4. He prayed over them and gave praise to God. Then he got up from the colonnade and went into the courtyard, where he caught sight of a sister sprawling on the ground in the middle of the courtyard. He asked the abbess, "Who is this, mother?" The abbess told him, "My Lord, this is a poor simpleton, who has gone out of her mind; she throws herself about wherever she happens

5. Translation uncertain.

to be." He told his disciple to take some water that was in a pail and throw it over her, at which she got up as though from a drunken sleep, stood up, and went off to some other place. Then the old man said to his disciple, "Do me a favor, my son, and go and see where the poor mad girl is sleeping." The disciple went off and found her sleeping by the monastery latrines. He came back and told his master, at which the blessed man said to the disciple, "Do me a favor, my son, and keep vigil with me tonight."

When everyone else had gone off to sleep, the blessed man went off with his disciple and stood somewhere where they could see the mad girl, without her being aware of them. She, on seeing that all the sisters had gone off to sleep, stood up in prayer, stretching out her hands to heaven. From her hands there issued as it were sparks and flames of fire as she knelt down and stood up throughout the entire night, with tears streaming down onto the ground like rivulets of water. She used to do this every day.

The blessed man told his disciple, "Go quietly, my son, and call the abbess and her assistant to me." When they arrived, the blessed man showed her to them saying, "You see this mad girl? Truly God loves people who are mad like this." At that point the semantron sounded for midnight service, and the news spread among the sisters: there was a great commotion amongst them, as they wailed and wept over all the evils they had inflicted on the mad girl, supposing that she really was a simpleton and crazy.

Then, because they had stayed awake, the blessed man and his disciple threw themselves down for a little and rested. The blessed girl, once she had learnt that her secret had been disclosed, got up that same night and went to the place where the blessed man was sleeping, took his cowl and staff, wrote down a message on a tablet, hung it on the monastery gate, and left: where she went, and where she died no one ever knew. On the tablet the following was written, "Farewell, my sisters in Christ, and pray for me for our Lord's sake. Forgive me for causing you such disturbance."

The blessed man at once assembled all the sisters and spoke with them the word of salvation, comforting them and telling them, "You have seen this mad girl; in truth God loves mad people such as these, who are drunkenly mad with ardent love for him." He then sealed them with the sign of the cross and departed from there with his disciple.

5. Once they had arrived at Skete, the old man said to his dis-

ciple, "My son, go and visit the old man who lives further into the desert than we do." For there was an old man, a eunuch, who lived eighteen miles into the desert from Skete. The way that brother used to visit this old man was as follows: he used to bring one jar full of water and place it in front of the entrance to the cell; he would knock and then return without uttering any word. With him he would bring back an empty jar. This took place once a week.

One day the old man said to his disciple, "My son, look and see if there is anything beside that old man's cave; when you find an ostrakon with something written on it, bring it with you." On arriving at the old man's cave, he indeed found an inscribed ostrakon, and brought it back with him. On it was written, "Bring your work tools, and come with your disciple." When the blessed man had read what was on the ostrakon, he wept greatly and said to his disciple, "Alas for the inner desert, what a pillar it is losing today!" He then told his disciple, "My son, carry these metal implements (there was a mattock and a shovel), and let us go quickly and catch the old man before he dies, otherwise we shall be deprived of his prayers; for the old man is departing to go to our Lord."

6. The two men wept, and came and found the old man lying in a heavy fever. The blessed Daniel threw himself onto the other's chest and wept bitterly saying, "Blessed are you, father, for in making mention of this hour, you neglected what belongs to this earth, taking care only for things heavenly." The eunuch replied to him, "Blessed are you, the new Abraham, for from your hands God will receive so many excellent fruits." The old man said, "Make prayer for us, father." To which the eunuch replied, "It is I who at this moment am in need of many prayers." The old man said, "If I had arrived at my last hour before you, then I would have had to accede to your request." At that the eunuch sat up on the pallet upon which he was lying and embraced the old man, kissing him on the head and saying, "May God, who brought me to this place, make perfect his grace and mercy in your old age, as he did with the patriarch Abraham."

The blessed man then took his disciple and placed him at the eunuch's knees, saying, "Pray over your son too, father." He kissed him and said, "May God, who held me worthy of this hour in which to separate me from this body and its frailty, who knows how many times this disciple has traveled in humility to

this cell for His name's sake, may God cause the spirit of this master to reside on this disciple, and may he be called by his name, and the name of his fathers, just as He caused the spirit of Elijah to reside on Elisha."<sup>6</sup>

After this the eunuch said to the blessed man, "Father, for the sake of our Lord, do me a favor of not taking from me what I am wearing, but send me to our Lord just as I am, so that others may not learn of my secret, only you and your disciple." Then the old man said to the blessed Daniel, "Give me the Sacrament, father." And having received the Sacrament, he said to them, "Give me the peace with the holy kiss of Christ." They prayed over him, and he looked in the direction of the east and the south, stretched out his hands and said, "You did well to come; let us be off." His face shone like lightning from heaven, and he said, "O God, into your hands do I commend my soul." He made the sign of the cross over his mouth, and gave up his spirit.

7. When the blessed man and his disciple had wept, they dug a hole in front of the door to the cave. The blessed Daniel took off the garment he was wearing and said to his disciple, "My son, clothe him with this garment on top of what he is wearing." Now the eunuch had been wearing a strip of fiber, that is, palm hair, and a short-sleeved garment outside. As the brother was dressing him, he saw that on his chest he had women's breasts, looking like two shriveled up leaves. He kept silent and said nothing.

When they had buried him and performed the service and prayers, the blessed Daniel said to his disciple, "My son, let us today break our fast, and break bread over the old man." Having partaken of the Sacrament, they found a few bits of flat bread and some soaked crusts; then, once they had eaten and had something to drink, they took the old man's girdle and returned to their cell, praising and giving thanks to God.

8. As they were journeying, the disciple asked the old man, "Father, did you know that the eunuch we buried was a woman? As I was putting on the burial garment, I felt and noticed that she had breasts hanging down like two withered leaves." The old man said, "Yes, my son, I know he was really a woman. If you would like I will tell you her story; listen. She was a patrician lady of the highest rank in the kingdom of the emperor Justinian. Now the

emperor Justinian wanted to introduce her into the palace because of her beauty and great virtue, but when the empress Theodora learnt of this she was put out and wanted to have her sent into exile. On discovering this, Anastasia got up one night, hired a boat, took various of her possessions, and came to Alexandria where she resided at the Ennaton,<sup>7</sup> building there a monastery that is called the Monastery of the Patrician to this day. When she learnt that Theodora was dead<sup>8</sup> and that the emperor Justinian wanted to send for her and introduce her into his royal court, she fled from Alexandria by night and came here. She asked me to give her a cell outside Skete, revealing to me her whole story. I gave her this cave, and she changed her clothes for a man's. She has been here twenty-eight years today, without anyone knowing apart from you and me and one other old man—even though the *magistrianoï* were sent by the emperor in search of her, and not just by the emperor, but also by the patriarch and all of Alexandria. Yet no one has found her to this day. See, my son, now how many people have been brought up at court, yet have performed battle against the adversary, battering their bodies, and living like angels on earth. As for us, when we were in the world, how many times did we not even have any bread to eat our fill, yet when we turned to the monastic garb we have had abundance of food and drink but were unable to acquire any such way of virtue.<sup>9</sup> Let us pray then, my son, that the Lord may hold us worthy of the same course and way of life, and may we find, along with this holy father, mercy on that day; and together with this father and brother Anastasios the eunuch, may we be worthy of the kingdom that does not pass away.” Now Anastasia was her name.

9. The blessed disciple then went to his cell, sat down and wrote all this that he had heard and seen. This patrician Anastasia was a deaconess in the time of the holy Severos;<sup>10</sup> he wrote her many letters, full of explanations of the things she used to ask him

7. The ninth milestone from Alexandria, at which were situated several monasteries; cf. A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, ed. P. M. Fraser (Oxford, 1978), 51, n. 2, 500–504.

8. She died on 28 June 548.

9. For the thought, compare the story in H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (London, 1936), 145–49.

10. See introduction.



about, when she lived in a monastery with sisters, before she arrived in the desert of Skete.

The end of the history of a sister who lived in a convent and was considered to be mad and out of her mind; also about Anastasia the patrician, a deaconess.

## Febronia

### INTRODUCTION

Although St. Febronia is reputed to have been a martyr at Nisibis under Diocletian (284–305), we placed this Life here, for it manifestly belongs to the hagiographical genre of the “epic passion,” and it has been correctly described by Halkin<sup>1</sup> as “un roman edifiant” without historical value; this, of course, is not to deny that there probably existed a historical martyr Febronia, around whose name the present Life (which may date from the late sixth or early seventh century) has been woven.

Despite its largely legendary character, the piece is of considerable interest, not least for the fact that the Life purports to be the work of a woman, Febronia’s fellow nun Thomais. While it is quite out of the question that this particular claim is to be believed, it does seem quite possible that the author was indeed a woman, and perhaps one might not unreasonably speculate that she was actually a nun of the convent of St. Febronia in Nisibis.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the psychological insight into the friendship between the widowed Hieria and the young nun Febronia would seem to point to a woman as author.

There can be little doubt that the work was composed in Nisi-

1. In *AB* 76 (1958): 299.

2. Simon (see Appendix) supposed that the Life was put out by an East Syriac author in order to combat the spread of the “monophysites” (i.e., Syrian Orthodox) in this area in the late sixth and especially early seventh centuries. This is unlikely in view of the fact that the earliest manuscripts of the Life (including one dated 688) are in fact of Syrian Orthodox provenance.

bis, and, although there are other glaring anachronisms (in particular the existence of a flourishing convent of nuns in the time of Diocletian long before cenobitic monasticism had reached North Mesopotamia<sup>3</sup>), the author has carefully avoided leaving any hint that the ceding of Nisibis to the Persians in 363<sup>4</sup> had taken place by the time of writing; likewise the names of the Roman officials are all plausible enough—though, needless to say, one will search in vain for any confirmation that these persons ever existed.

The cult of St. Febronia appears to have become popular only in the late sixth century and later. In the verse *Life of the East Syrian monk Rabban bar 'Idta*, we are told that in 563 his sister “built a nunnery in the name of the martyred woman Febronia who had been martyred in the days of Diocletian”; this convent was not in Nisibis itself but across the Tigris in Marga.<sup>5</sup> In the seventh century the cult reached Constantinople, where it became associated with that of St. Artemios,<sup>6</sup> and it is probably of significance that the emperor Heraclius (610–41) had a daughter (by his second wife Martina) named Febronia. St. Febronia also had an oratory in the sanctuary of the famous church of St. John the Baptist in the Oxeia Quarter of Constantinople.<sup>7</sup> It would seem plausible to suggest that the cult and the Greek translation of her *Life* reached Constantinople at much the same time. Once in Greek, her *Life* served as a source for several later passions. From the capital her cult spread to Italy<sup>8</sup> (by way of Naples) and France.

At Nisibis itself the existence of both the convent and the Church of St. Febronia (both mentioned in the *Life*) is attested by the *Life of St. Simeon of the Olives*, Syrian Orthodox bishop

3. If the historical Febronia had lived in some sort of religious community, it would have consisted of a group of consecrated virgins, or “members of the *qyāmā*” (on which see n. 4 in Chapter 3).

4. This was part of the peace treaty between the two empires subsequent to the death of the emperor Julian. It was on that occasion that St. Ephrem migrated from Nisibis to Edessa.

5. E. A. W. Budge, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar 'Idta* (London, 1902) 2, 1: 203. For the site, see Fiey, *AC* 1: 278–80.

6. *BHG* 173.

7. R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin*, vol. 1, pt. 3, *Les églises et les monastères* (Paris, 1953), 492.

8. She features both in the Constantinopolitan Synaxary (pp. 769–72) and the *Martyrium Romanum* (pp. 254–55).

of Harran (d. 734);<sup>9</sup> the mention in this Life of "the old ruins of St. Febronia who had been martyred in Nisibis" implies that the church had been built a considerable time previously. St. Simeon is also said to have revived the convent of St. Febronia and provided it with new rules.

In the Syriac churches St. Febronia is commemorated in both the Syrian Orthodox and the Church of the East.<sup>10</sup>

The lengthy descriptions of the tortures undergone by martyrs such as Febronia (or Anahid) will appear to the modern reader as distasteful and will usually be dismissed as the product of a morbid imagination. It is important to remember, however, that what motivates the authors of these "epic" passions is not so much a perverse delight in these macabre details, but a need to express that deep-seated awareness, present throughout the entire religious history of humanity, that suffering in some form or other is a necessary preliminary concomitant to any rite of initiation, and that the higher the level into which the individual is being initiated—and the reward for these martyrs is seen as nothing less than the very bridal chamber of Christ—the greater the sufferings required for the initiatory process.<sup>11</sup>

### *Febronia*<sup>12</sup>

- 573 I. In the days of the emperor Diocletian there was an eparch Anthimos who, as he fell ill and was about to die, summoned his brother Selenos<sup>13</sup> and said, "My brother, I am on the point of leaving human affairs; I entrust into your hands my son Lysima-

9. There is an English summary of the Life by S. P. Brock in "The Fenqitho of the Monastery of Mar Gabriel in Tur 'Abdin," *Ostkirchliche Studien* 28 (1979): 174–79, esp. 176.

10. For West Syrian Calendars, see F. Nau, *Une Martyrologie et douze Ménologies syriaques*, in *PO* 10 (1912), index; and for East Syrian, J.-M. Fiey, "Le sanctoral syrien oriental," *L'Orient Syrien* 8 (1963): 37.

11. See, for example, the illuminating remarks (in a very different context) of M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (London, 1962), 149–52. Cf. also G. Bonner, "Martyrdom: Its Place in the Church," *Sobornost/ECR* 5, no. 2 (1982): 1–21.

12. The section numbers are those of the edition of the Greek text in *Acta Sanctorum* (see Appendix); marginal figures are the page numbers in Bedjan's edition of the Syriac.

13. Slynws; Greek Selenos, Armenian Silvianos.

chos. We have arranged his betrothal to the daughter of the senator Prosporphos:<sup>14</sup> let it be your concern, once I am dead, to arrange the marriage feast; act as their father.”

Three days after he had given these instructions the eparch died. Now the emperor summoned together the young Lysimachos, Anthimos' son, and Selenos his uncle. He addressed the young man as follows, “My young man, mindful of the friendship of your father Anthimos, I had decided following his death to appoint you to his office; nevertheless, because I have heard that you take pleasure in the superstition of the Christians, I have for the moment given up the idea of raising you to the seat of office of eparch. Instead I first want to send you to the Orient to silence the superstition of the Christians; then, on your return here, I will raise you to this exalted seat of office and you shall be eparch.”

2. When Lysimachos heard this, he did not dare say a word in reply to the emperor. He was, after all, only a young man of some twenty years old. But his uncle Selenos fell down at the emperor's feet and implored him, “I beg your majesty, grant us just a few days respite so that we can arrange the wedding feast for the young man; in this way I too will set out with him and we will carry out whatever the wisdom of your majesty bids.”

574

“First of all go the Orient,” replied the emperor, “and get rid of the superstition of the Christians. Once you have returned here I will eagerly join you in celebrating Lysimachos' marriage feast.”

When they heard these words from the emperor, they did not dare to say anything further. Straightaway they took the imperial instructions and set off for the Orient with a large force of soldiers. Lysimachos took with him Primus the *comes*, his cousin, appointing him commander of the force of soldiers.

3. On reaching Mesopotamia<sup>15</sup> Selenos committed to fire and sword all whom they found confessing that they were Christians, giving orders that their bodies be thrown to the dogs.

The entire Orient was seized by fear and terror at the cruelty of the merciless Selenos.

14. Prosporphos is also the form of the name in the Greek, although there is a variant reading Porphyrios, which is also found in the Armenian.

15. The Greek provides a plethora of names: the Orient, the region of Palmyra (so too the Armenian), and Mesopotamia. In 297 the old province of Mesopotamia was divided up into two separate provinces, Osroene (centered on Edessa) to the west, and Mesopotamia (centered on Nisibis) to the east.

575 One night Lysimachos called for Primus the *comes*<sup>16</sup> and said to him, "My lord Primus, you know that although my father died a pagan, my mother died a Christian, and she was very eager that I too should become a Christian. Nevertheless I was not able to carry this out for fear of my father and the emperor. But I received from her the command that I should not do harm to any Christian, but rather that I should be a friend to Christ. And now here I am seeing Christians falling into the hands of this cruel Selenos and being put to death without mercy; my soul suffers greatly for them. Accordingly I want any Christians who are found to be sent off secretly before they fall into the hands of the merciless Selenos."

When Primus heard this, he stopped giving orders for the arrest of Christians; instead he sent messages to the monasteries telling them to take refuge and escape from the clutch of the cruel Selenos.

4. In the course of their traveling around these regions they wanted to enter Nisibis,<sup>17</sup> a town on the border with the Persian Empire, which was under Roman control. In this town there was a convent of women containing fifty nuns under the direction of 576 the deaconess Bryene.<sup>18</sup> Bryene was a disciple of Platonía,<sup>19</sup> who had also been a deaconess before her, and she kept the traditions and rule handed down to her by Platonía right up to the end. It had been Platonía's practice not to let the sisters do any work at all on Fridays; instead they used to gather in the place for prayer and celebrate the Office of Matins. Then, from dawn to the third hour (9 A.M.) Platonía used to take a book and read to them. After the Office of the Third Hour she would give the book to Bryene and tell her to read to the sisters until vespers. When Bryene took over as head of the convent, she continued this practice. She had two young women who had been brought up by her and who were well instructed in the monastic life; one was called Prokla, the other Febronia. Prokla was twenty-five years old, and Febronia twenty.

5. Febronia was the daughter of Bryene's brother, and she was of extremely handsome appearance: her face and features were so

16. The title is anachronistic.

17. Corrupted to Sibapolis in the Greek, and Saba in Armenian (for Soba, another Syriac name for Nisibis).

18. So too the Greek; Armenian "Brion."

19. The Greek has Platonis, and the Armenian Platon (!).

beautiful that the eye could never be sated by gazing upon her. Her great beauty meant that Bryene had a hard task looking after the girl, and for this reason she ordered Febronia to take food only once every other day, whereas all the other sisters would eat each evening. Febronia, on seeing herself restricted to such a regime, did not even satisfy her appetite with bread and water. 577

She had a stool on which she would rest when the time to sleep came; it measured three and a half cubits by one. Sometimes she would throw herself down on the ground, neglecting her body in order to subdue it. When she happened to be tempted by the devil by hallucinations at night, she would get up straightaway and beseech God, amid abundant tears, to remove the tempter Satan from her; then she would open the Bible and lovingly meditate on its living and spiritual words. She also had a great love of learning, so that many people, including the abbess, were astonished at the extent of her knowledge.

6. On Fridays, when all the sisters were gathered in the place of prayer, Bryene used to tell Febronia to read the divine words to them. Because, however, young married women used to come to the place of prayer on Sundays and Fridays to hear the word of God, Bryene instructed Febronia to sit behind a curtain and read from there.

She never saw any worldly finery and did not know what a man's face looked like. But she was the subject of much talk throughout the entire town—people spoke of her learning, beauty, humility, and gentleness. When Hieria, who had been married to a senator, heard all this, she was fired by divine love and became very eager to see Febronia. Now Hieria had not yet come to baptism, but she was still a pagan, and when she had only lived seven months with her husband,<sup>20</sup> he died, leaving her a widow; for this reason she returned to her own town to her parents, who were also still pagans. 578

Accordingly Hieria came to the convent and through the doorkeeper notified Bryene of her presence. When Bryene came out to her, Hieria fell down at her feet and did obeisance to her, grasping her feet and saying, "I adjure you by the God who made heaven and earth, do not repulse me, seeing that I am still a foul pagan and a plaything of the demons; do not deprive me of the

20. Based on Luke 2:36, where the Old Syriac has "seven days" instead of "seven years."

chance to talk to and learn from the lady Febronia. Through you nuns I will learn the path of salvation and as I travel upon it I will discover what is in store for the Christians. Save me from the emptiness of this world and from the unclean worship of idols. You see, my parents are forcing me to marry again: the torment  
 579 of the former error in which I have been living is quite sufficient for me to have to cope with: please let me acquire new life through the teaching and conversation of my sister Febronia.”

7. As Hieria spoke she drenched Bryene's feet with her tears. Much affected and moved by this, Bryene said, “My lady Hieria, God knows that ever since I first received Febronia into my hands at the age of two—and it is now eighteen years that she has been in the convent—she has not seen the face of a single man or any worldly finery and clothing. Not even her governess saw her face from that moment onward, even though she often besought me, sometimes even bursting into tears, to allow her a glimpse. For I do not allow Febronia to have any association with laywomen. Nevertheless, in view of the love you have toward God and toward her, I will bring you in to her. But you must wear nun's clothing.”

When Bryene introduced Hieria under this guise to Febronia, the latter, on seeing the monastic habit, fell down before her feet, supposing that she was a nun from somewhere else who had come to her. After they had greeted one another and sat down, Bryene told Febronia to take the Bible and read to Hieria. As Febronia read, Hieria's soul was so filled with sorrow and compunction as a result of the sight of Febronia and of the teaching that she heard that the two of them spent the whole night without any sleep: Febronia did not cease or tire from reading, and  
 580 Hieria never had enough as she listened to her teaching, in tears while she groaned and sighed.

8. When morning came, Bryene could scarcely persuade Hieria to come down and return to her parents' home. When they had bidden farewell to one another, Hieria departed, her eyes brimming with tears.

She went home and urged her parents to abandon the empty tradition of idolatry that they had received from their own parents, and instead recognize God, the Creator of all.

Afterward Febronia asked Thomais,<sup>21</sup> who was next in au-

21. The Syriac text has a variant reading *Thaumasia*.



thority to the abbess, "I beg of you, mother, tell me who is this stranger sister who was so given to tears as though she had never before heard God's Book?"

"Don't you know who this sister is?" replied Thomais.

"How could I recognize her, seeing that she is a stranger?" said Febronia.

"She is Hieria, the wife of a senator," said Thomais, "who has just come to live here."

"Why did you deceive me, and not tell me," said Febronia. "I addressed her as though she were a sister."

"These were the instructions of the abbess," replied Thomais.

Now it so happened that at that time Febronia fell gravely ill and lay on her pallet at the point of death. When Hieria heard the news, she came along and did not leave Febronia's side until she had recovered from her illness.

581

9. It was during this time that news reached the town that Selenos and Lysimachos were about to arrive and they would compel the Christians to sacrifice to idols. Accordingly all the Christians in the town, clergy and monks, left their homes and fled. Even the bishop of the town hid out of fear. When the sisters in the convent learnt of this, they assembled before the deaconess and asked, "What should we do, mother? Those cruel men have come here as well, and everyone has taken to flight at their threats." Bryene said, "What do you want me to do for you?" To this they replied, "Tell us to go into hiding for a short period, in order to save our lives."

"Are you already thinking of flight before you have seen the battle?" asked Bryene. "You have not entered the contest; are you already defeated? No, my daughters, no, I beg you, let us rather stand up and resist; let us die for the sake of him who died for us in order that we may live with him."

10. On hearing these words the sisters fell silent. The following day one of them, whose name was Etheria,<sup>22</sup> said to them, "I know that it is because of Febronia that the lady abbess will not let us leave. Does she want us all to perish just because of her? I have a suggestion: let us go in to her and I will speak on your behalf, saying whatever is appropriate."

582

Hearing this, some of the sisters agreed to Etheria's proposition, while others found fault with it. A big argument ensued

22. Or Aitheria (so the Greek).

between them, and finally all of them went together to the deaconess to see what advice she would give them. Bryene, aware of Etheria's suggestion, looked straight at her and asked, "What is it you want, my sister Etheria?" "I want you to bid us to go into hiding to escape from this wrath that has come upon us," she replied; "We are not any better than the clergy or the bishop. You should keep in mind the fact that there are some quite young girls among us; you do not want them to be carried off by the Roman soldiers to have their bodies violated, thus losing the reward of their ascetic life. Or there is a danger that we might deny Christ, unable to endure the pain of torture; in that case we would become a laughing stock for the demons and we would lose our own souls. If, however, you give us the word to save our lives, we will take with us Febronia as well, and we will take to flight."

583 **II.** When Febronia heard these words, she exclaimed, "As Christ lives—the Christ to whom I have been betrothed and to whom I have offered up myself—I will not resort to flight; but let whatever God wills take place." Bryene said, "Etheria, you know what you have earned; I forgive you for this." Then she turned to the other sisters: "Each of you knows what is best for herself; choose what you want."

Once they had prayed and said farewell to Bryene and Febronia, they all left the convent out of fear, beating their breasts in great sorrow and tears.

Prokla, who had been brought up with Febronia, fell on her neck, sobbing as she said, "Farewell, Febronia, pray for me." Febronia took her by her hands and would not let her leave. "Fear God, Prokla," she said; "do you at least not leave me; don't you see that I am still unwell. What happens if I should die? Our lady abbess could not carry me to the grave alone. Stay with us, so that if it so happens that I die, you can help carry me to the grave."

"You have given your command, my sister: I will not abandon you," said Prokla.

"Now you have promised before God not to leave me." When it was evening, Prokla left and disappeared.

584 **12.** On seeing the convent thus stripped of sisters, Bryene went into the place of prayer and threw herself down on the ground, groaning in grief. Thomais, next to her in authority, sat with

her, trying to console her: "Stop crying, mother; God is able to effect a way out of affliction and temptation; he will enable us to bear up. Who has had faith in God and then regretted it? Who has persevered in serving him and then found himself abandoned?"

"Yes, my lady Thomais," said Bryene, "I know that it is just as you say. But what am I to do with Febronia? Where can I hide her to keep her safe? How could I ever bring myself to look upon her if she was taken captive by barbarians?"

Thomais replied, "Have you forgotten what I told you? He who can even raise people from the dead can certainly strengthen Febronia and save her. Just stop crying and let us go to cheer Febronia up; she is still lying there unwell."

13. The moment she reached the raised platform on which Febronia was reclining, Bryene wept out loud bitterly. Overcome with sobbing, she bent down her face. Seeing her thus, Febronia asked Thomais, "I pray you, mother, what is the reason for the lady abbess' tears? A little while ago, too, when she was in the place of prayer I heard the sound of her groans."

Thomais, herself in tears, replied, "My daughter Febronia, it is for your sake that the lady abbess is groaning and weeping, because of all the terrible things that are going to come upon us at the hands of these tyrants. It is because you are young and beautiful that she is tormented and full of grief." 585

Febronia said, "I beg of you both, just pray for your maidservant, for God is able to look to my low estate and strengthen me; he will grant me endurance, just as he does to all his servants who love him."

14. Thomais said, "My daughter Febronia, the hour of battle is at hand; if we are arrested by the soldiers, the tyrants will quickly put us two to death as we are both old women; but they will grab you, seeing that you are young and beautiful, and they will upset you with their advances and words of seducement. Don't listen to them. And if they try to win you over by promising gold and silver, make sure you don't pay any attention, my daughter; otherwise you will lose the reward for all your past life; you will become a laughingstock for the demons and an object of mockery to the pagans. For nothing is more honorable and choice before God than virginity: great is the reward that it will receive. Virginity's Bridegroom is immortal and he grants immortality to those who love him. Show yourself eager, Febronia, to see him

to whom you have betrothed your soul. Don't let him down or play false with his pledge to you and your covenant<sup>23</sup> with him. Full of awe is that day when a person is rewarded in accordance with his works."

As she listened to these words, Febronia plucked up courage and valiantly prepared herself against the forces of the devil. 586 "You do well, my lady," she replied to Thomais, "by encouraging your handmaid; my soul has greatly taken on strength at your words. Had I wished to escape from this battle, I too would have departed with the other sisters and taken to hiding; but because I am in love with him to whom I have offered my soul, I am eager to come to him, if he holds me worthy to suffer and endure the fight that is for his sake."

15. Hearing this, Bryene too added some words of precaution, saying to Febronia,<sup>24</sup> "Remember how you followed my instruction, remember that you too taught others; remember that when you were two years old I received you from your nurse into my hands: up to the present moment no man has set eyes upon your face, and I have not allowed laywomen to talk to you. Up to this very day have I preserved you, my daughter, as you yourself are very much aware. But now, my daughter, what can I do with you? Do not disgrace Bryene's old age, do not do anything that will render profitless the work of your spiritual mother. Remember the wrestlers who went before you, who underwent a glorious martyrdom, receiving a crown of victory from the heavenly ringmaster of the fight. These people were not just men, but they include women and children as well; remember the glorious martyrdoms of Lewbe and Leonida:<sup>25</sup> Lewbe was crowned at her 587 death by the sword, Leonida by burning. Remember the girl Eutropia, who, at the age of twelve, was martyred along with her mother for the sake of our Lord's name. Weren't you always amazed and filled with wonder at Eutropia's submissiveness and endurance? When the judge gave orders that arrows be shot in her direction in order to make her run away frightened by the arrows, she heard her mother call out, 'Don't run away, Eutropia my daughter,' and clasping her hands behind her back she did

23. See n. 12 in Chapter 3.

24. Bryene's words are much abbreviated in the Armenian.

25. Greek Lybe and Leonis (the Armenian omits this section). The Greek acts of Libye, Leonis, and Eutropia were edited by Halkin (see Appendix); cf. also J.-M. Fiey, *Nisibe, metropole syrienne orientale* (CSCO 388, Sub. 54; 1977), 20.

not run away; instead she was hit by an arrow and fell down dead on the ground. She showed complete obedience to her mother's command. Was it not her perseverance and obedience that you always admired? She was just an unschooled girl, whereas you have actually been teaching others."

So the night passed as they spoke thus, and much more, to her.

16. The next morning when the sun had risen there was an uproar with shouting emanating from the inhabitants of the town: Selenos and Lysimachos had taken control of the city and the soldiers had seized a large number of Christians, throwing them into prison. Some of the pagans came forward and informed Selenos about the convent. He at once dispatched some soldiers to it and they broke down the door with hatchets. Entering the convent they seized Bryene, and some of the soldiers drew their swords, wanting to kill her straightaway; but Febronia, on seeing the danger, got up from the pallet and threw herself at the soldiers' feet, crying out at the top of her voice, "I adjure you by the God of heaven, kill me first so that I do not behold my mistress' death."

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When the *comes* Primus arrived and saw what the soldiers had done, he angrily ordered them out of the convent. He then addressed Bryene, "Where are the women who live here?" Bryene replied, "They have all left out of fear for you."

Primus said, "I only wish you too had escaped! There is still a possibility even now; go off and save yourselves wherever you like."

Therewith he removed the force of Roman soldiers and left the convent, not even stationing a guard there.

17. On arrival at the *praitorion* he went in to Lysimachos who asked him, "Was it true what we learnt about that convent?"

"What we heard was true," replied Primus, who then took him aside and added, "All the women living in the convent have fled, and we only found left there two old women and one young one. I am filled with wonder when I tell you what I saw in that convent: I beheld a young woman the like of whom I have never set eyes upon; no, I have never seen such beauty and shapeliness in any other woman. The gods know that when I saw her lying on a raised pallet, my mind was stunned. Had she not been poor and wretched she would have made a suitable wife for you, my lord."

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Lysimachos replied, "If I am under orders not to shed Christian blood, but instead to be a friend of Christ, how can I harm any who belong to Christ? No, certainly not. But I beg of you, Primus, remove the women from the convent and act as their protector, lest they fall into the hands of my merciless uncle Selenos."

Now one of these wicked soldiers ran off to Selenos and told him, "We have found an extremely pretty young woman in the convent, and the *comes* Primus is talking about her to Lysimachos as a suitable wife for him."

On hearing this, Selenos was filled with wrath and anger. He sent some men to guard the convent in order to prevent the women escaping, and then he sent out heralds to proclaim throughout the town that "tomorrow there is to be a public gathering," in other words, Febronia was to be judged publicly in the theater.

When the inhabitants of the town and those who lived around about heard this, they all came thronging, both men and women, to watch the spectacle of Febronia's "contest."

590 18. The following day the soldiers turned up at the convent and seized Febronia from the pallet on which she was lying. They secured her firmly in irons, put a heavy iron collar round her neck, and then dragged her out of the convent.

Bryene and Thomais clung to Febronia, and besought the soldiers with tears and groans to allow them just a little time so that they could speak to Febronia. They acceded to their supplication and gave them some time. After this the women asked the soldiers to take them off to the "contest" as well, so that Febronia should not be left all by herself; otherwise, if she were left all alone, she might get frightened. But the soldiers replied, "We have not been instructed to bring you as well before the judge's tribunal, only Febronia on her own."

Then the two women began to encourage Febronia and to give her precautions; Bryene said, "My daughter Febronia, you are going off to the 'contest.' Remember that the heavenly Bridegroom is watching this contest of yours, and the hosts of angels are standing there before him carrying the crown of victory, as they wait for your end. See that you are not frightened by the tortures—that would give pleasure to the devil. Do not pity your body when it is collapsing under blows, for this body, whether it likes it or not, will shortly disintegrate and become dust in the

tomb. I will stay in the convent in mourning, as I await the arrival of news about you, whether for good or for bad: I beg you, my daughter, let it be good news I hear of you. Let someone tell me, 'Febronia has yielded up her soul in the tortures'; let someone announce to me that 'Febronia has met her end and is reckoned amongst the martyrs of Christ.'" 591

19. Febronia said, "I have faith in God, mother; just as in the past I have never transgressed your commandments, so now I will not do so or be neglectful of your admonitions. Rather, let the peoples see and be astounded, let them congratulate the aged Bryene and say, 'Truly this is a plant belonging to Bryene.' In a woman's body I will manifest a man's valiant conviction. Let me go off now."

Thomais said, "As the Lord lives, my daughter Febronia, I will put on a laywoman's dress and come to see your contest."

As the soldiers were in a hurry to get going, Febronia said to them, "I beg you, mothers, send me on my way with blessings and pray for me. Let me go now."

Bryene then stretched out her hands toward heaven and said in a loud voice, "Lord Jesus Christ, who appeared to your servant Thekla in the guise of Paul, turn toward this poor girl at the time of her contest."

With these words she embraced Febronia and kissed her. She then sent her on her way, and the soldiers took her off. Bryene returned to the convent, threw herself down on the ground in the place of prayer, and groaned deeply as she supplicated God in her tears on behalf of Febronia. 592

20. Thomais put on laywoman's clothing and went out to watch the spectacle of the contest, as did all those lay women who used to come to the convent on Fridays to listen to the Scriptures. As they ran toward the place where the spectacle was to take place they were weeping and beating their breasts, mourning at the loss of their teacher.

When Hieria, the senator's wife, learnt that the nun Febronia was to be tried before the judge's tribunal, she got up and gave a loud wail. Her parents and everyone in the house asked her in amazement what was the matter. "My sister Febronia has gone to the court house," she replied. "My teacher is on trial for being a Christian." Her parents tried hard to get her to quieten down, but she lamented and wept all the more. "Leave me alone to weep bitterly for my sister and teacher Febronia," she begged them.

Her words so affected her parents that they started mourning for Febronia. Having asked them to allow her to go and see the contest, she set off with a number of servants and handmaids. As she came running in tears to the spectacle, she met on the road  
 593 throngs of women also running and lamenting. She also came across Thomais, and having recognized one another, they came together, lamenting and weeping, to the site of the spectacle.

21. When a huge crowd had gathered there, along came the judges. When Selenos and Lysimachos had taken their seat on the tribunal, they gave orders that Febronia be fetched. They brought her in, with her hands tied and the heavy iron collar around her neck. When the crowds saw her, they were all reduced to tears and groans. As she stood there in the middle, Selenos gave orders that the clamor cease. As a great hush fell, Selenos said to Lysimachos, "Put the questions and take down the replies."

Lysimachos addressed her, "Tell me, young girl, what are you, slave or freeborn?"

Febronia replied, "Slave."

"Whose slave are you, then?" asked Lysimachos.

"Christ's," said Febronia.

"What is your name?" asked Lysimachos.

"The poor Christian woman," replied Febronia.

"It is your name I want to know," said Lysimachos.

"I have already told you," replied Febronia, "the poor Christian woman. But if you want to know my name, then I am called Febronia by my mistress."

22. At that point Selenos told Lysimachos to stop asking the questions, and he himself began to interrogate Febronia: "The  
 594 gods know very well that I had not wanted to give you the chance of being questioned; nevertheless your gentle and meek disposition and your beautiful looks have overcome the force of my anger against you. I am not going to question you as though you were guilty, but instead I will urge you as though you were my own beloved daughter. So listen to me, my daughter. The gods are aware that I and my brother Anthimos have arranged the betrothal of a wife for Lysimachos, involving the transfer of a great deal of money and property. Today, however, I will annul the betrothal documents we made with the daughter of Prosphoros, and we will make a firm agreement with you; and you shall be wife to Lysimachos whom you can see sitting here now at my



right. He is very handsome, just as you are. So listen to my advice as though I were your father; I will make you glorious upon earth. Have no fears on the grounds that you are poor: I have no wife alive or any children, and I will make over to you all that I possess; I will make you mistress of everything I have, and you shall have all this written down in your dowry. You shall recognize the lord Lysimachos as your husband and I shall take on the role of your father. You shall be the object of praise throughout the world, and all women will count you happy for having attained to such honor. Our victorious emperor will also be pleased and he will shower the pair of you with presents. For he has given his promise to raise my lord Lysimachos to the exalted throne of the glorious eparch, and he will take on that office. Now that you have heard all this, give a reply to me, your father, which will please the gods and give joy to myself. If, however, you resist my wishes and do not listen to my words, the gods know very well that you will not stay alive in my hands for another three hours. So reply as you wish."

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23. Febronia began, "O judge, I have a marriage chamber in heaven, not made with hands, and a wedding feast that will never come to an end has been prepared for me. I have as my dowry the entire kingdom of heaven, and my Bridegroom is immortal, incorruptible, and unchangeable. I shall enjoy him in eternal life. I will not even entertain the idea of living with a mortal husband who is subject to corruption. Do not waste your time, sir; you will not achieve anything by coaxing me, nor will you frighten me by threats."

On hearing these words, the judge became exceedingly angry. He ordered the soldiers to tear off her clothes, tie her up with rags, and let her stand there undressed, an object of shame in front of everyone. "Let her see herself naked like this and lament her own folly, now that she has fallen from honor and respect to shame and ignominy."

The soldiers quickly tore off her clothes, tied her up with rags, and made her stand undressed in front of everyone.

Selenos asked her, "What have you got to say, Febronia? Do you see what a good opportunity you have lost, and to what ignominy you have been reduced?"

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"Listen, judge," Febronia replied, "even if you should have me stripped completely naked, I would not think anything of this nakedness, for there is but one Creator of males and of females.

In fact I am not just expecting to be stripped naked from my clothes, but I am prepared for the tortures of fire and sword, should I be considered worthy to suffer for him who suffered on my behalf."

24. "You impudent woman," exclaimed Selenos, "you deserve every kind of disgrace. I know very well that you are proud of your shapely features, and that is why you do not think it a shame or a disgrace to stand there with your body naked; you even imagine it adds to your splendor."

Febronia replied, "Listen, judge, my Lord God knows that I have never seen a man's face up to this very moment, and just because I have fallen into your hands I am called a shameless and impudent woman! You stupid and imperceptive man, what athlete entering the contest to fight at Olympia engages in battle wrapped up in all his clothes? Doesn't he enter the arena naked, until he has conquered his adversary? I am waiting in expectancy for tortures and burning by fire; how could I do battle with these while I have my clothes on? Should I not meet torture with a  
597 naked body, until I have vanquished your father Satan, throwing scorn upon all your threats of tortures?"

Selenos said, "Seeing that she is bringing tortures upon herself, and makes light of the threat of fire, stretch her out between four men and apply fire beneath her; let four soldiers stand over her and lacerate her back with rods."

His orders were carried out and they went on striking her for a long time. Drops of blood ran down from both sides of her back onto the ground like rain. A fire was lit and it burnt her intestines. They added oil to the fire so that the flames became hotter and started consuming Febronia's body.

When they had been beating her mercilessly like this for a considerable time, all the people begged the judge, saying, "O merciful judge, spare the girl." He paid no attention but instead told them to go on striking her. When he saw that her flesh was all lacerated and was beginning to come off in bloody strips, he told them to stop the beating. Thinking that she was already dead, they threw her off the fire.

25. When Thomais saw the terrible things that were happening to Febronia, she fainted, collapsing on the ground at Hieria's feet.  
598 Hieria herself cried out with a loud voice, "Alas, Febronia, my sister, alas my lady and my teacher. Today we have been deprived

of your instruction, and not just yours, but also that of the lady Thomais, for here she is dead as well."

When Febronia heard Hieria's voice as she lay on the ground, she asked the soldiers to bring some water for her face. They brought it at once and applied it to her face. This at once revived her and she asked to see Hieria. The judge, however, told her to stand up and answer his questions.

"What have you got to say, Febronia?" he asked. "How have you fared in the first bout of the fight?"

"You have learnt from this first trial that I cannot be vanquished and that I despise your tortures," replied Febronia.

Selenos gave orders: "Stretch her out on a plank and comb her flanks with iron nails; then apply fire until you burn her very bones."

When the soldiers had done as they were ordered, they began combing her with nails until bloody strips of her flesh fell down onto the ground. Then they applied the fire and burnt her sides. Febronia kept her eyes toward heaven, saying, "Come to my help, Lord. Do not desert me at this hour." Having said this, she fell silent, severely burnt by the fire.

26. Many of the onlookers left the scene of tortures, shocked by the merciless cruelty of Selenos. Others cried out to the judge, "Let the fire be removed from her." Having ordered the removal of the fire, he wanted to interrogate her as she lay strung on the plank, but when she was unable to answer, he ordered that she be taken down from the plank and tied to another bit of wood, seeing that she could not stand on her feet.

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He also called for a doctor and told him, "Since this accursed and foul woman will not reply to the judiciary, let her tongue be cut out."

Febronia put out her tongue and motioned to a man holding a sword to cut it off. The man approached to cut it off, but the crowd cried out, urging the judge with oaths not to have her tongue cut out.

So instead the foul and accursed Selenos gave orders that her teeth be pulled out. The doctor took an iron instrument and started to pull them out, throwing them onto the ground.

When he had extracted seven and a great deal of blood was coming from her mouth, running down to the ground, the judge ordered the doctor to stop the blood, because she was fainting

from loss of blood. The doctor applied some medicament and stopped the flow.

27. The wicked Selenos began questioning her again, "What have you got to say, Febronia? Will you obey the judiciary now? Will you acknowledge the gods?"

Febronia replied, "May you be under a curse, you ill-fated and accursed man, for you are holding up my journey by not letting me go straight to my betrothed. Hurry up and remove me from the mire of this body, for my lover is watching and waiting for me."

Selenos said, "I will destroy your body little by little in the fire and with the sword. I am aware that so far the courage of your youthfulness has helped on your impudence, but you have got nothing to gain by this, for your pride has ensured that much worse things will come upon you."

Febronia was unable to reply because of the severe pain. This merely made the judge Selenos even angrier, and he gave instructions to the doctor, "Let those members of the impudent girl's body that provide milk be cut off and thrown to the ground." The doctor straightaway took a surgeon's knife and approached Febronia.

At this the crowds gave a groan and they supplicated the judge with the words, "My lord judge, we beseech you, let the girl be spared this torture." As they cried out begging him, he said angrily to the doctor, "Cut them off, you accursed man, stranger to the life that derives from the gods." So the doctor took up the surgeon's knife, and as he was starting to cut off the girl's right breast, she raised her voice heavenward and gasped in agony, saying, "Lord my God, look at my dire affliction; may my soul come into your hands." She spoke no more.

28. When her two breasts had been cut off and thrown to the ground, the judge ordered that fire be applied to the wounds. They applied fire for quite a while and it burnt right into her.

Crowds of people could not endure these cruel and merciless torments and so left the spectacle with the words, "Accursed be Diocletian and his gods."

Thomais and Hieria sent a message to the convent to tell Bryene all that had taken place. When the girl arrived at the convent, she said to Bryene in a loud voice, "The lady Hieria and the lady Thomais say, 'Do not let your hands that are stretched out to

heaven rest a second; do not let your heart cease gasping out to God in prayer.”

On receiving this message, Bryene cried out to God, “Lord Jesus Christ, come to the aid of your maidservant Febronia.” She threw herself down onto the ground in prayer for a long time, weeping and saying, “My daughter, my daughter Febronia, where are you?”<sup>26</sup>

The girl returned to the spectacle, whereas Bryene kept groaning out, with her hands stretched heavenward, “Lord, look upon the dire state of your servant Febronia; come to her help. May my eyes see that Febronia has been crowned and numbered with the blessed martyrs.”

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29. The judge next ordered that Febronia be untied from the plank. When she was untied, she collapsed on the ground, unable to stand. Primus then said to Lysimachos, “Why should this young woman perish?” Lysimachos replied, “Let it be, Primus, her labors are for the forgiveness of many—maybe for my own forgiveness. For I used to hear many such things from my mother. In any case it is not in my power to have her released and rescued. Let her gain her victory, for she has entered this contest for the salvation of many.”

Hieria got up and shouted at the judge, “You are an enemy to the equilibrium of human nature: are you not satisfied with the terrible things you have already brought upon this wretched girl? Are you not reminded of your own mother, who had the same body and wore the same sort of clothes as her? Are you not mindful of the ill-fated day when you were born, how you too received nourishment at those breasts flowing with milk? I am amazed that your savage and merciless heart has not been touched by such things. May the heavenly King not spare you, just as you have not spared this poor girl.”

The judge was enraged by Hieria’s words and gave orders that she too be brought down to be tried. On hearing this, Hieria hurriedly came down, full of happiness, saying, “O God of Febronia, receive me too, a poor pagan, along with my lady Febronia.”

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30. As she was making her way down, Selenos’ friends advised

26. Both the Greek and Armenian give a (corrupt) form of Syriac in transcription.

him not to bring her down in public, otherwise the entire city would join her in martyrdom and the city would be lost. Selenos accepted the advice, and so did not make Hieria stand there in public; instead, flaring up in a rage, he simply addressed her: "Listen, Hieria, as the gods live, you have become the cause of many further sufferings for Febronia." Whereupon he ordered both Febronia's hands and her right foot to be cut off. The executioner immediately brought along a block, placed it under her right hand and struck it off with a single blow of the axe. He did the same with her left hand. Then the executioner placed the block under her right foot and brought down the axe, but failed to sever the foot; he struck a second time but failed again. The crowd in the meantime uttered gasps and groans. When he struck her the third time with the axe, he only just managed to sever Febronia's foot. The blessed woman's body was quivering all over, and she was on the point of expiring; nevertheless, she tried to put her other leg on the wooden block, asking for it to be cut off as well. When the judge saw what she was doing, he exclaimed, "Just look at the perseverance of the impudent woman," and in a great fury he said to the executioner, "Go on, cut it off."

31. When her other foot had been cut off, Lysimachos got up and said to Selenos, "What else have you got in store for this wretched girl? Come on, it is time to go and eat."

The wicked Selenos said, "As the gods live, I shall not leave her still alive: I shall stay here until she is dead."

When Febronia had spent a considerable time in agony, Selenos asked the executioner, "Is the accursed woman still alive?" "Yes," he replied, "we beg to inform you that she still has some life in her."

Then Selenos gave orders for her head to be cut off. The executioner took a sword, grabbed hold of her long hair—like someone going to slaughter a lamb—and thus dispatched her, cutting off her holy head.

The judges straightaway got up and went off to eat. Lysimachos, however, went off full of tears, while the crowd dashed forward wanting to seize Febronia's body. Lysimachos accordingly ordered some soldiers to stay and guard her body. He himself was full of grief and tears; he could not eat or drink, but instead shut himself up in a room, lamenting Febronia's death.

When his uncle Selenos learnt that Lysimachos was so dis-

tressed, he too could not eat or drink but got up and took a stroll in the courtyard of the *praitorion*. He too was overcome by a painful depression, when all of a sudden as he was walking he looked up to the sky, stood there dazed for a while, and then, roaring like a bull, he leapt up and struck his head against one of the columns, whereupon he fell down dead.

32. When the cry was raised, Lysimachos rushed up and stood over the corpse, asking what had happened. On being informed he shook his head over him, exclaiming, "Great is Febronia's God: he has avenged her blood that was impiously shed." With these words he gave orders that Selenos be taken out. Once this had been done, Lysimachos called for Primus the *comes* and said to him, "I adjure you by the God of the Christians, do not disobey my instructions: quickly see to the construction of a coffin for Febronia, to be made of the best hardwood; and send heralds in every direction to proclaim throughout the town that any Christians who so desire should come without any fear to join Febronia's funeral procession—all the more now that my cruel uncle is dead. But do you, Primus, take those soldiers you want and get them to carry Febronia's body and convey it to her convent to Bryene. Do not let anyone from the crowd snatch away anything from her body, or any of her limbs that have been cut off; and do not let any dogs or any other unclean animals get a chance to lick any of the holy woman's blood that has been shed; but rather, collect up the earth where Febronia's blood was shed and convey it to her convent."

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33. On receiving these orders from Lysimachos, the *comes* Primus carried them out to the word. He had some soldiers carry Febronia's body, while he himself took her head, feet, and hands, all the parts of the blessed girl's body that had been removed, and wrapped them up in his mantle; thus he came to her convent. The crowds, however, rushed up, trying to snatch away some part of her limbs that had been cut off, so that the *comes* Primus was in considerable danger from the violence of the crowds, and in the end the soldiers had to hold the people off by drawing their swords.

When they reached the convent, hard pressed by the crowds, they managed to take in the saint's body without allowing anyone else to enter, apart from Thomais and Hieria. The soldiers held back the mass of the crowds outside, preventing them from entering the convent.

607 On seeing Febronia's body thus mutilated, Bryene fell down in a faint and lay on the ground for some time. Primus, having appointed guards to protect the convent, returned to Lysimachos to the *praitorion*.

34. Eventually, after a considerable time, Bryene got up and embraced Febronia's corpse, groaning as she said, "O my daughter Febronia, today you are taken away from the sight of your mother Bryene. Who will read the Scriptures to the sisters? What fingers will handle your books?"

As Bryene was speaking, all the sisters of the convent, together with Etheria, turned up. They too fell upon the holy body in tears, along with Etheria<sup>27</sup> too, groaning and saying, "I do homage to these holy feet that have trampled upon the head of the dragon.<sup>28</sup> Let me kiss the wounds and gashes on this holy body, for by means of them have the scars of my own soul been healed. Let me crown with the flowers of praise this head that has crowned our race with the beauty of these glorious achievements."

Such were Hieria's words as she sobbed, along with the rest of the sisters.

The time arrived for the service of the Ninth Hour (3 P.M.), and the abbess cried out, "My daughter Febronia, the time for prayer has come." Then she started calling to Febronia in Syriac, saying, "Where are you, Febronia my daughter, my little daughter, rise up, little child, rise up, come."<sup>29</sup> To which Thomais said, "My sister Febronia, you have never disobeyed the word of our lady abbess, why do you not listen now?"

608 35. As they were saying all this, there was a great commotion among the sisters as they sobbed.

When evening came, they washed the holy body of the blessed woman and placed it on a bier. They put each of her limbs exactly in place, and then Bryene gave instructions for the doors to be opened for the crowds. When they had entered, they gave glory to God. All the laywomen as well were weeping, mourning the loss of their teacher.

27. So the Syriac manuscripts used by Bedjan, but Bedjan has emended his text to "Hieria," the reading of the Greek; the phrase is absent from the Armenian.

28. Ps. 74:13.

29. The Greek and Armenian again give a corrupt form of Syriac in transcription.



Some of the holy fathers and many monks turned up, spending the whole night in a vigil service. Lysimachos called for the *comes* Primus and said to him, "Primus, I am renouncing all my ancestral customs, all my inheritance and belongings. I shall go over to Christ." To which Primus replied, "I too, my lord, anathematize Diocletian and his rule; I renounce everything to do with my parents, and I too will go over to Christ." They left the *praitorion* and joined all the people in the convent.

36. When morning arrived, the coffin was brought along all ready. They went in procession with the holy body of Febronia, accompanied by prayers and tears; then they laid it in the coffin, arranging each of her limbs in its proper place—that is to say, her head, feet, and hands and the other parts, whereas her teeth were placed on her chest. The crowds filled the coffin with so much myrrh, must, and fine unguents that her body could not be seen for all the fragrant herbs.

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There was a great noise and clamor from the crowds who would not allow the coffin to be closed. The bishop of the town and the rest of the monks and clergy tried hard to get them to put the lid on but without success. Then Bryene went up to a raised position of vantage and begged the crowds, "I beseech you, sisters and brothers, allow her to go to her due place." Thus the entire people yielded to Bryene's words, and amidst prayers and tears and songs of praise, they processed with the body of the saint, placing it in a holy spot in the convent, all of them praising God the while.

37. Large crowds of pagans came to believe in our Lord and were baptized. Lysimachos and Primus themselves were baptized, and renouncing the world, they went off with the abbot Markellinos<sup>30</sup> to live a life pleasing to Christ, completing their days in peace. Many of the soldiers believed in our Lord and were baptized, as were Hieria and her parents. Hieria left her parents, renounced the world, and went off to the convent, which she endowed with all that she possessed. She requested Bryene, asking her, "I beg you, mother, let your handmaid take the place of the lady Febronia: I will toil as she did." So Hieria threw off all her jewelry, and she had the blessed girl's coffin covered with gold and pearls all over.

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38. On the anniversary of the blessed girl's victory and repose,

30. Markellos in the Greek and Armenian.

when they celebrate her memorial, the women's convent and many other people as well gather together. The particular reason for this is the portent that takes place at midnight: as they say the prayers of the *night office*, the blessed Febronia is seen standing in her old place until the prayers of the Third Hour: a great fear grips everyone for that period, and no one dares to approach or question her. This is because the first year that she appeared, whereas all the other sisters were very much afraid, Bryene had cried, "It is my daughter Febronia," and she rushed to embrace her—whereupon Febronia vanished. Thus no one again dared approach her; nevertheless many tears were shed at their joy in just seeing her.

39. The bishop of the town built a splendid and beautiful shrine to the blessed woman, completing it in six years. When it was finished, he invited the bishops from the surrounding towns and gave a huge reception, holding a vigil on 24 June.<sup>31</sup> So many people gathered that the shrine and the convent could not contain them all; and so the service was celebrated in several places at once. When morning came and they had completed the hymns for the light, the bishops came to the convent to take up the saint and lay her in the newly built shrine. A large crowd followed them, with candles, torches, and censers. When they had gone in to the convent and prayed there, they sat down and called for Bryene, addressing her as follows, "The fruits of your monastic way of life and of your glorious labors are recognized all over the world, and no one is able to give fitting praise. It is appropriate for all those who are appointed abbesses to offer up to God similar fruits. Since, however, we are unable to express fitting praise for this holy martyr, we will be silent, because no tongue is capable of singing her praises. Since we can neither do nor say anything that is worthy of her, we have come to you, as though to our own sister, asking you to join us in honoring the glorious martyr. Give her to us, so that she can dwell in the shrine that has been built in her name."

40. On hearing this, the sisters fell down at the feet of the bishops, imploring them, "By your holy footsteps, we beseech you have pity on us poor women: do not deprive us of our pearl." After much time had passed while they wept and besought the

31. So Bedjan's text; the Greek, Latin, Armenian as well as the manuscript(s) he cites in his apparatus, all have "25th."

bishops, the bishop of Nisibis spoke to Bryene, "Listen, my sister, you know what zeal I had in building this shrine in honor and glory of this saint who is clothed in victory; it is now six years that we have been toiling away at its construction. Do not let it be your desire that all our labor should prove useless and bear no fruit." 612

When she had heard this, Bryene said, "I beg you, my lords, if it seems good in your eyes and if it seems good to the blessed girl herself, who am I to prevent it? Come in, then, and take her off."

The bishops got up and entered to say the Office, whereupon Hieria started weeping and exclaiming, "Alas for us, you are depriving our convent of a great blessing today! Alas for us, today bereavement and affliction are come to our convent! Alas for us, we are handing over our pearl!" She came sobbing to Bryene, saying, "What are you doing, mother? Why are you depriving me of my sister for whose sake I left everything to take refuge here with you?" Bryene, seeing Hieria in such a state, asked her, "Why are you crying, my daughter Hieria? If she wants to go, she will go."

41. When the bishops had finished praying and everyone had said "Amen" after them, they approached to take up the blessed girl's coffin. At that moment there was a clap of thunder in the sky, and all the people fell down in fright. Then after a while they put out their hands to take the coffin, but this time there was a great earthquake, so that they imagined the entire town would be ruined.

The bishops and all the people thus realized that the holy martyr did not want to leave her convent. Sorrowfully, the bishops said to Bryene, "If the blessed woman does not want to leave the convent, let her give us just one of her limbs that were cut off as a blessing: we will take it and be off." 613

So Bryene took a key and opened up the coffin: Febronia's body was like a ray of the sun, and it was as though fire and lightning were flashing out from her. Full of trepidation Bryene stretched out her hand and touched the hand of Febronia, wanting to give it to the bishop; but her hand was held fast as she tried to pick it up. "I beseech you, lady Febronia, do not be angry with your mother," implored Bryene in tears; "remember all the toils Bryene has been through; do not put my old age to shame." Having said this, she returned the hand to its former place. Then she stretched out her own hand again, this time gasping out,

"Grant us some blessing, my lady; do not disappoint us." And she took one of her teeth that had been placed on her chest. This she gave to the bishop and straightaway she closed the coffin.

614 42. The bishops received this pearl on a gold dish and went off rejoicing, preceded by a large crowd singing psalms as they carried candles and censers. When they reached the shrine, the bishops went up to a raised area and exposed the relic to the people: all the blind, lame, and possessed were healed. When news of this became known, boys came running up carrying the sick on their shoulders or on beds, while others were brought on animals; everyone was healed of whatever disease he had.<sup>32</sup>

The crowds did not allow the pearl to be put in its proper place until people had stopped bringing the sick. Once those with various illnesses had been healed and had given praise to God, then the pearl was put away. This was on 25 June.

Having enjoyed such wonderful gifts, the people returned home in peace, rejoicing and praising our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever, amen.

43. Bryene lived for a further two years after the dedication of the blessed woman's shrine. Having arranged everything, she then fell asleep in peace.

615 After the repose of my lady Bryene, I, the poor Thomais took her place. Because I had a knowledge of everything that happened to the blessed Febronia from the very first, and had learnt the rest from my lord Lysimachos, I have written down this martyrdom to the praise and glory of the glorious woman, and for the salvation and encouragement of those who hear it, in the hopes that their minds may be awakened at this contest for the faith, and that they too may be held worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom belongs the glory and the power, for ever and ever, amen.

32. The Armenian ends here.

## Shirin

## INTRODUCTION

In the course of his *Book of Perfection* the seventh-century East Syrian monastic writer Martyrios (Sahdona) tells of a remarkable holy woman who had evidently had a major influence on his own spiritual formation. Since she was already in her eighties when Martyrios was a child, around the end of the sixth century, her life will have spanned much of the sixth century. Martyrios never specifically describes her as a nun and so it is possible that she was a laywoman who lived as if she was under monastic vows and who recited the monastic office—a spiritual descendant of the “daughters (or members) of the covenant” of the early Syriac Church; if this was the case, the character of her life must have resembled in many ways that of a “beata” in sixteenth-century Spain.<sup>1</sup> The only other detail that we glean from Martyrios’ description is that she lived in the same village as his parents; this village we know from other sources to have been Halmon in the district known as Beth Nuhadre (in north Iraq).<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Martyrios’ short description lies in his portrayal of Shirin as a spiritual adviser to

1. See W. A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981), 16.

2. The sources on Martyrios’ life are discussed by A. de Halleux, “La vie mouvementée d’un ‘hérétique’ de l’Eglise nestorienne,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 24 (1958): 93–128, esp. 115.

monks as well as to laywomen: this is a feature of feminine sanctity that one only rarely finds mentioned in the hagiographical literature.<sup>3</sup>

This Shirin is not to be confused with Shirin the martyr whose *Acta* survive in Greek.<sup>4</sup>

### *Shirin*<sup>5</sup>

64. But why should I just talk about men? Let us examine the weak nature of the frail female sex to see whether the beauty of the virtuous life is not also revealed to us in the godlike women who trampled on sin and Satan.<sup>6</sup> I myself am ashamed to gaze on their valiant deeds when I consider the laxity of us men; but it is right that this beauty should be made public—to our greater confusion, and to the glory of those women.

(Editor's note: Sections 65–68 are not of direct interest)

69. Out of all these women let the example of just one suffice, the holy Shirin, blessed among women. Like Jael, whom God answered,<sup>7</sup> she pulled out desire like a tent-peg from the tent of her body, brandished it, and laid low at her knees the hidden enemy who fights against the saints: by means of visible hardships and hidden prayer she brought down his entire valor, knocking his head into the ground. For the Evil One is greatly shamed: having first of all vanquished a woman and managed to sow his error, he is now himself vanquished by women, thanks to Him who was born of a Virgin and who gave strength to women's nature.

70. This Shirin was an aged woman whom I myself saw when she was in the region of eighty years old. To tell of all the labors she engaged in from her youth up to the final years of the course of her life would be a difficult task and would require a lengthy book on its own. It is not our intention to do this here; rather, we shall just adduce a few examples of the beauty of her virtues as a testimony and illustration of what we want to say. By way of

3. Some other examples (all anonymous) will be found mentioned in passing in some of Cyril of Scythopolis' *Lives* (Euthymios 3, Saba 75, John the Hesychast 20, 23, 24, and so on).

4. Edited by P. Devos in *AB* 64 (1946): 87–131.

5. The section numbers are those of de Halleux's edition (see Appendix).

6. Cf. Gen. 3:15.

7. Judges 5:24–27. In the Syriac Bible Jael appears as 'Ana'el, "God has answered."

demonstration, for everyone to behold, of complete perfection of way of life, we are going to highlight a number of details concerning her spiritual beauty in order to corroborate our narrative, just as we did previously in the case of the holy men whose own beauty of life we briefly highlighted as an incitement to ourselves to imitate them. (In their cases too it would have required thousands of lengthy paragraphs to relate the entire story of their exploits.)

**71.** Once this holy woman had set her desire upon imitating them, she began to manifest in herself their likeness. The very sight of her moved everyone to wonder, and her admirable deeds were the cause for praise to God. To such an extent was she held in honor and respect by all that all the monastic abbots of the time—men of perfection whose glories we have told of earlier<sup>8</sup>—considered her as a blessed spiritual mother, worthy of heavenly bliss. From afar they would give her greeting, entreating her to pray for them, and when once in a while she went to see those who lived in the vicinity, so that she too might receive blessing from them in accordance with the law of love, they would minister to her needs like eager disciples, holding her in great respect, for they considered her, who was much honored by God, to be greatly worthy of honor.

**72.** Despising the whole world out of love for God<sup>9</sup> and considering it as mere refuse, in order to gain Christ<sup>10</sup> she rejected and pushed aside everything else, attaching herself totally to him with a love that was without any guile<sup>11</sup> as she lived out the perfect life of asceticism in all its rigor. Things that had been hard for others—even those well exercised in virtue—were straightforward to her who from the very first was well acquainted with the goal of perfection.

**73.** Having completely stilled the desires of the belly (which prove extremely troublesome to most people) by means of sheer scorn, very much in conformity with her outstanding self-will, she appeased her belly's continual hunger by just enough to support her body, and not at all in response to its desires; each evening she sustained herself with a small cake made out of pulse

8. In sections 43–63.

9. Cf. 1 John 2:15.

10. Cf. Phil. 3:8.

11. Cf. Matt. 19:27, 2 Cor. 6:6.

and some boiled vegetables. By means of this food, along with a drink of water, she supported her frame, while all the while her face was radiant with the grace of the Spirit who nourished her—so that everyone imagined that she was living off dainties,<sup>12</sup> whereas in actual fact for much of the time she ate only once every four days, or even just once a week.

74. As someone who had chosen the way of life of Daniel and his companions, it was appropriate that she should also receive the power of grace like them; for their faces surpassed in radiance and beauty those of all their companions.<sup>13</sup> For who could behold her standing during the long hours of the Office despite the fatigue of old age, without at once feeling quite sure that she was fortified by the grace of the Spirit so as to withstand the desires of her own will? I myself went to visit her many times in order to pluck blessings from her, and I would gaze upon her in great astonishment at the ease with which she performed the hardest tasks.

75. So immensely eager was she in prayer and so attentive during the long, drawn-out Offices that one would not be far off the mark if one said that she was occupied in this continuously.<sup>14</sup> Her unrelenting labor consisted in the Office of the Psalms and in heart-felt prayers intermingled with groans, to such an extent that she would spend most nights without any sleep, being occupied with continual singing of the Psalms and with prayer. During the daytime, however, she would divide her time between this and reading the Scriptures, the lives of upright men, and uplifting works written for the guidance of the monastic life and for instruction in true religion.

76. Only someone who had actually seen her can fully know how serene and gentle she was, how pure and full of simplicity, how she brimmed over with compassionate love for everyone, and how deeply joyous she was to receive strangers and to see to their comfort.

77. Monks and other strangers to the world who shared her reverence for our Lord used to come to visit her from all over the place, for they held her as a holy spiritual mother. They would gather from different places as children coming for lessons in

12. Martyrios is comparing her to Daniel and his companions: see Dan. 1:8–15.

13. Cf. Dan. 1:15.

14. Cf. Rom. 12:12.



sanctity with her, wanting to receive her blessing and to gain benefit from her. She, for her part, would receive them lovingly and would minister diligently to their needs, providing both bodily sustenance as well as spiritual food: for while she saw to their bodily comfort, she would give joy to their souls at the same time, both by her words and by her actions.

In this way they would depart from her, giving thanks to God and carrying with them all sorts of beneficial provisions as a result of what they had seen and heard.

78. Women in particular frequented her company, seeing that she was someone to whom they found access easy, in view of the status they had in common. They greatly profited from her, both from talking with her and from just seeing her; and they were drawn to imitate her zealously, in so far as was possible. This was something that could be observed in my own blessed mother: set on fire by the very sight of her, my mother was consumed by a zeal for her way of life, which she wanted to imitate as far as she had the strength to do so. And ever since I was a child she would exhort me to choose to live a life that conformed with Shirin's.

79. My mother was greatly afraid that physical love might cause me to slip toward the world, and so she told me continually, "I would rather die than live, were I to see you—God forbid!—entangled in the world like so many others." She would bring me to see this blessed woman regularly, since she lived in our village; in this way she would draw the holy woman's blessings upon myself and instil in my heart all the greater ardor for the life of perfection as a result of seeing and hearing her. This ardor grew stronger every day, until my desire that originated from that source as it were consumed my youthful days.<sup>15</sup>

15. The exact sense of this sentence is obscure in Syriac.

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### 3A. Martha

#### Sources

- BHO 698. Translated from AMS 2, 233–41. Bedjan used a manuscript of 1869 belonging to Abbeloos (now Berlin or. oct. 1256–57), copied from the now lost manuscript Diyarbekir 96, of the eleventh to twelfth century (cf. A. Scher, *Journal Asiatique* 10, no. 10 (1907): 398–401). Martha is mentioned in passing (but not by name) in Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 2, 11, a short section on her father.

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### 3B. Tarbo

#### Sources

BHO 1149. Translated from AMS 2, 254–60. Bedjan's edition was based on the earlier edition by Assemani (ASM 1, 54–59) and two nineteenth-century manuscripts, Berlin Sachau 222 (of 1881) and or. oct. 1256–57 (of 1869; for this manuscript see under Martha); Assemani's edition was based on Vat. syr. 160 and 161 (both tenth century?). The martyrdom is transmitted (along with several other martyrdoms under Shapur II) in a number of manuscripts, both East and West Syrian; the oldest of these is a fifth- to sixth-century fragment in the British Library, Add. 14654.

There are Greek and Sogdian translations, the former (BHG 1511) edited by Delchaye, the latter by Sims-Williams; in Greek her name has been corrupted to Pherbuthe. A short account of her martyrdom is also given by Sozomen (who calls her Tarbula) in his *Ecclesiastical History* 2, 12.

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- Sims-Williams, N. *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C 2* (Berliner Turfantexte XII, Berlin, 1985), pp. 137–53, 140–44.

### 3C-D. *Martyrs of Karka d-Beth Slokh* (Kerkuk)

#### Sources (C)

Translated from AMS 2, 288–89. Bedjan used Assemani's edition (ASM 1, 101) and the two Berlin manuscripts (see under Tarbo).

#### Sources (D)

BHO 705. Translated from the sixth-century history of Karka d-Beth Slokh, AMS 2, 513–14. Bedjan used the same two Berlin manuscripts.

#### Secondary Literature

Hoffmann, G. *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer* (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, vol. 7, fasc. 3, 1880; repr. 1966), 43–60 (German summary of the history).

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### 3E. *Thekla and Companions*

#### Sources

BHO 1157. Translated from AMS 2, 308–13. Bedjan again used Assemani's edition (ASM 1, 123–27) and the two Berlin manuscripts.

#### Secondary Literature

Braun, O. *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer*, 106–9. Kempten and Munich, 1915. (German translation)

Peeters, P. "Le Passionnaire d'Adiabène," AB 43 (1925): 261–304.

### 3F. *Anahid*

#### Sources

BHO 47. Translated from AMS 2, 565–71, 583–603. Bedjan's edition is based on two nineteenth-century manuscripts, both East Syrian, of



which only one now survives, Berlin or. oct. 1256-57, of 1869 (on this manuscript see under Martha). There is also a West Syrian Life of Pethion in British Library Add. 12174, of 1197 (ed. J. Corluy in *AB* 7 [1888]: 5-44), but this does not contain the section on Anahid. A fragmentary Sogdian translation of the whole Pethion cycle (including Anahid) has recently been reedited and translated by N. Sims-Williams.

#### Secondary Literature

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 Sims-Williams, N. *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C 2* (Berliner Turfantexte XII, Berlin, 1985), pp. 31-68, 33-41.

### 4. The Women Martyrs of Najran

#### Sources

The translations are made from two sources. For Section A, "From Simeon of Beth Arsham's Second Letter," the translation is from I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran* (Subsidia Hagiographica 49, 1971), vii-xi, xvii-xxvii. For Section B, "From the Book of the Himyarites," the translation is from A. Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites* (Lund, 1924), chap. 21 (= pp. 31-36 of the Syriac text). Shahid's edition is taken from Damascus Patriarchate ms 12/18 of A.D. 1184/5, and Moberg's from a manuscript in a private collection dated April A.D. 932. (The First Letter (= *BHO* 99-103), not represented in the translations here, was edited by I. Guidi, *La lettera di Simeone vescovo di Beth-Arsham sopra i martiri omeriti*, in *Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei*, ser. 3, *Memorie*, 7, 1881, 471-515 (reprinted in his *Raccolta di scritti* 1 (Rome, 1945), 1-60); an English translation by A. Jeffery can be found in *The Muslim World* 36 (1946): 204-16.)

#### Secondary Literature

A full discussion of the background and the various problems connected with the Najran martyrdoms is to be found in I. Shahid's *The Martyrs of Najran*. The following may also be singled out:

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- Ryckmans, J. *La persécution des chrétiens himyarites au sixième siècle*. Uitgaven Nederlands hist.-arch. Instituut te Istanbul, vol. 1, 1956.
- Pigulevskaya, N. V. "Les rapports sociaux à Nedjran au début du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3 (1960): 113-30; 4(1961): 1-14.
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## 5. From John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*

### Sources

BHO 689 and 1109. Translated from E. W. Brooks, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 17 (1923): 166-86 (chap. 12), and 18 (1924): 541-58 (chap. 27). Brooks's edition is based on British Library Add. 14647 of 688 and six other manuscripts of the ninth to thirteenth centuries.

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- . "Town, Village and Holy Man: The Case of Syria." *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien*, edited by D. M. Pippidi, 213-20. Bucharest, 1976; repr. in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 153-65. Berkeley, 1982.
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## 6. Anastasia

### Sources

BHO 242. Translated from F. Nau's edition of the Syriac in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 5 (1900): 391–401, based on Paris syr. 234 of the thirteenth century. For the present translation, use has also been made of British Library Add. 14649 of the ninth century (whose text is in fact very similar). The original Greek (BHG 79–80) was edited by L. Clugnet in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 5 (1900): 51–59 (three versions corresponding to sec. 5–9 of the Syriac) and 67–70 (corresponding to sec. 1–4 of the Syriac). Clugnet republished the texts as a separate volume, *Vie et récits de l'abbé Daniel le Scétiote* (Paris, 1901): Syriac text on pp. 68–77.

### Secondary Literature

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Garitte, G. "Daniel de Scété." *DHGE* 14 (1960): cols. 70–72.

Fusconi, G. M., in *BS* 1 (1961): 1039–40.

## 7. Febronia

### Sources

BHO 302. Translated from *AMS* 5, 573–615. Bedjan's edition rests on British Library Add. 14647 of 688, with some variants from Add. 14649, of the ninth century. Add. 14647 is the earliest of a number of Syriac manuscripts containing the martyrdom; the majority of these are West Syrian, but at least one, Add. 7200, is East Syrian. In the notes to

the translation occasional reference (especially in the matter of names) is made to the Greek text (perhaps a translation from Syriac), published in *Acta Sanctorum Iunii* 5: 14–35 (25 June; *BHG* 659), and to the Armenian (*BHO* 303), edited in *Vark' ew V'kayabanutiwnk' srboč'*. Vol. 2, 409–29. Venice, 1874. The martyrdom also enjoyed popularity in Latin; furthermore, it provided the model for several other hagiographical texts in Greek.

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- Aubert, R., in *DHGE* 16 (1967): cols. 791–93.

### 8. *Shirin*

#### Sources

Translated from A. de Halleux, ed. *Martyrius (Sahdona), Oeuvres spirituelles I, Livre de Perfection*, I. iii. 64, 69–79. (= *CSCO* 200, *Scriptores Syri* 86, 44–48.)

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Cover illustration: Resurrection appearance of Christ to the holy women (Matthew 28:9). From a Syriac Gospel Lectionary manuscript of the 13th century (British Library, Add. 7170, fol. 160r). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Library.

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