

Martyrs of Najran

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The text entitled 'Martyrium S. Arethae et sociorum', translated here, was published in *Acta SS. Arethae et Rumae et sociorum martyrum Negranae* (1861) pp. 61-99.¹ The Greek text with Latin translation is divided by Carpentier into nine chapters and thirty-nine paragraphs, each chapter followed by notes. The first 64 pages of the book are devoted to an historical commentary, at which I have merely glanced and to which I have referred sparingly (as *CH* followed by paragraph number).² There is another version of the martyrdom of Arethas in *Patrologia Graeca* 115 cols. 1250-1308. The text translated here is from Paris Codex 1454, first edited by J.F. Boissonade *Anecdota Graeca* 5 (1833) pp. 1-62. From time to time Carpentier uses square brackets in the Greek text that are absent from his translation: I can find no explanation of the sigla used in his publication, so I have ignored them.

The following translation is not intended to be an in-depth work of scholarship. For scholarly studies, which I have not cited here for the simple reason that I have no access to them, see Irfan Shahid *Martyrs of Najran* (1971) and M. Detorakis *Martyrium S. Arethae* (2007).

The text provides an account of the fate of Christian martyrs of Najran (perhaps 523 AD)³, with special focus on Arethas and certain women of the city, at the hands of the Jewish king of Himyar who is known in the text as Dunaan. This is followed by an account of the war waged successfully on Himyar in 525 by the Ethiopian king, known in the text as Elesbaan, at the request of the Byzantine emperor, and his subsequent retirement to a monastery in Ethiopia.

Najran is now the name of a state and a city in the southwestern part of Saudi Arabia near the border with Yemen. It was formerly a place where caravans leaving Yemen came together before taking different routes. The possible meanings of the name are given in § 3. It is described by Strabo in his *Geography* (Bk. 16 ch. 4 §24) as 'good and peaceful'. Until 280 AD it was a province under Sabean control, after which it passed over to Himyarite control (known in classical texts as Homerite).

1 The text (from Paris Codex 1454) was first edited by J.F. Boissonade *Anecdota Graeca* 5 (1833) pp. 1-62.

2 Carpentier uses classical as well as Arabic sources when dealing with the topics in the commentary.

3 J. Ryckmans *La persécution des chrétiens himyarites* (1956) pp. 18-21 points out that a two year delay in retaliating against the Himyarite for the persecution is difficult to believe.

The traditions of pre-Islamic Arabia regarding religion are preserved in Ibn Ishaq's *Life of Muhammad*.⁴ the organized religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, seem to have made their appearance in the late 4th cent., though it is not impossible that Jews immigrated into the region after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

Ethiopia became Christian in the 4th cent., largely thanks to a Syrian Christian named Frumentius.⁵ He had been captured by pirates and sold the Ethiopian capital of Axum. He was able to convert the Ethiopian king and, on his release from slavery, made his way to Alexandria in 330 to ask the patriarch Athanasius to consecrate a bishop for Ethiopia,⁶ and this was the point at which proper organization began.

The situation in the entire region of South Arabia and Ethiopia was one not only of religious conflict but also commercial conflict. The text known as the *Letter* of Simeon bishop of Beth-Arsham in the late 6th cent.,⁷ provides interesting background on the political and commercial relations between South Arabia and Ethiopia.⁸ The Himyarite conversion to Judaism happened in 380 about 50 years after the Ethiopian conversion to Christianity. Among other reasons for the conversion to Judaism may have been their mistrust of the Christian Byzantine empire's aims to add Himyar to that empire.⁹ An additional factor that has to be taken into account when considering the period is the rivalry between Persia and Byzantium

A document that is more specifically concerned with the conflict between Najran and Himyar is the *Book of the Himyarites*,¹⁰ claimed by its writer in the last chapter to have been composed within living memory of the martyrs of Najran.

An intriguing element of the narrative is the presence of women as visible and voluble actors and not merely some sort of silent appendage of men. See, for example, Chapter Two.

4 Ibn Ishaq *Life of Muhammad* tr. A. Guillaume (1955) pp. 14ff.

5 E.A.W. Budge *Ethiopian Synaxary* p. 669 The copy I have used can be found at: http://www.stmichaelleoc.org/The_Ethiopian_Synaxarium.pdf

6 See note 85.

7 A copy of which, in Syriac with Latin translation, is published by J. Assemani *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 1 (1719) pp. 359ff.

8 It contains the substance of a letter from the Himyarite monarch to al Mundhir king of the Arabs in Hira that corroborates some of the narrative in the Arethas text, including, for example, the detail of Ruma removing her veil so that all could see her face (cf. Ch. 3 of this text).

9 Jacob Adler 'The Jewish Kingdom of Himyar (Yemen): Its Rise and Fall', *Midstream*, 36 no. 4 Volume (2000). One has to wonder if the Ethiopian attack, in response to a Byzantine request, was not also motivated the desire to establish a Christian presence in SW Arabia as a counterweight to the rising power of Mecca.

10 Axel Moberg *Book of the Himyarites* (1924), hereinafter cited as Moberg *Himyarites*. The title of the book is explained on p. xvii.

Chapter One

Himyar: its king rebels against the Ethiopians. Najran is betrayed and entered.¹¹

1. Year 5 of the reign of Justinian,¹² a follower of Christ and guardian of the Roman republic, indiction 2, year 835 of Antioch in Syria,¹³ in the month of Hyperberetaeus¹⁴ or October, when Timothy was patriarch of Alexandria,¹⁵ John of Jerusalem, Timothy of Constantinople, Euphrasius of Antioch, when Elesbaan¹⁶ was king of Ethiopia, a most righteous prince, in Axum, the capital city of Ethiopia.

The Himyarite (Homerite) king was Dunaan¹⁷, a Jew who was particularly bloodthirsty and cruel. This region of the Himyarites is called Saba in the Holy Scriptures and by foreigners Arabia Felix. In the kingdom of Saba lived Greeks and non-Greeks, not in accordance with

11 This episode is also mentioned in Moberg *Himyarites* ch. 10, but about half of the chapter seems to be missing. The trickery of the Himyarite king perpetrated on the Najranites is described in Moberg *Himyarites* ch. 9.

12 Justin I (518-527)

13 Year of the Seleucid Era (also known as the Year of the Greeks), the beginning of which is normally calculated at 311 BC (or thereabouts).

14 Month 12 of the Macedonian calendar.

15 Timothy III (518-536).

16 Ella Asbeha and Elesbas are other versions and Kaleb another name.

17 Ar. Dhu Nuwas (ذو نواس 'he of the sidelocks'), Jewish king of the Himyarites, whose defeat at the hands of Ethiopian Christians in 525 is described in the final chapters of this text. Prominent under the name of Masruq in Moberg *Himyarites*, from ch. 9 onwards. He was the last of Jewish kings of this region, the earliest proselytes dating back to about 380.

God's commandments but with the observances and contemptible precepts of Pharisee and Sadducee hypocrites. But in the universal world that always and everywhere glorifies Christ the True God, who rules with the Father and Holy Spirit, only the land of the Himyarites, which is called Saba, practised idolatry, masquerading as Judaism: they did not fear God and worshipped idols. The result was that there were constant wars between the king of Ethiopia and the king of the Himyarites, who paid tribute to Ethiopia. Elesbaan, the most Christian of kings, was moved by extraordinary divine zeal to march on the Himyarite king and attack him.

2. There was a city of tens of thousands in the land of the Himyarites called Najran, illuminated by heaven and still revering¹⁸ the consubstantial and holy Trinity, having received this faith and teaching from the holy and theophorous fathers of great antiquity. It happened at about that time that the king of the Himyarite Jews, having suffered defeat, fled into mountain strongholds for safety, while the Ethiopian king returned to his own kingdom, leaving behind a general with an army to guard the entire country. The devil, who hates beauty and is the enemy of those who wish to live piously, armed the Himyarite king against those left by the Ethiopian king and murdered them. He instigated an inhuman persecution against all who worshipped the name of Christ, whether Greeks, Persians, Romans, Ethiopians, a demon incarnate, who took arms against all Christians in his territory.¹⁹ He ordered all Christians collected together under his sway to be murdered. He then moved his army against the aforementioned Christian city of Najran to destroy it. The land of the Himyarites to the south, which is under the Romans and called Phoenicon,²⁰ is thirty stations²¹ away and itself extends about twenty-five stations. It is as densely inhabited as Rosapha.²² The region of India, the source of spices and pepper, silk and pearls, is thirty stations away. Ethiopia is thirty stations

18 ἔτι καὶ νῦν perhaps refers to the time when this text was composed. ὁμοούσιον is probably a typographical error for ὁμοούσιον

19 παρική. lit. 'adjoining dwelling', used of communities living in a land other than their own, first used of and by Jews and later Christians, cf. J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (1929) p. 496.

20 Also known as Palmetum (because palms seem to have been its only produce), a desert region between the kingdom of Ghassan and the Arabian peninsula.

21 μονή. According to Carpentier note γ p. 66 a day's journey was approx. 8 parasangs, a total of about 45 km, in effect a 'station'. The text of Boissonade has 'seventy'.

22 Carpentier, in a complex note z on p. 66, connects this place with mod. Raqqa, a Seleucid foundation formerly known as Callinicus and later Leontopolis.

distant.²³ To the north Roman territory is sixty stations²⁴ away, so that one travels from Roman to Himyarite territory by sea, from the Roman empire to Ethiopia and from Ethiopia to Himyar. The sea extends from Himyar towards India and as far as Persia.²⁵

3. As the winter came, the Ethiopian king was unable to lead his army out against the Jewish king, who was attacking the venerable and renowned city of the holy and triumphant martyrs, Najran, a Hebrew name meaning Thundering City and again Impregnable Barrier.²⁶ The Jewish king approached and fixed the venerable sign of the Cross of Our Lord on wood. He then sent heralds, when the city was surrounded, and told them to announce: "If anyone does not blaspheme against the Cross and spurn this piece of wood, the sign of malediction, he will perish by fire and sword. Those who are with me and deny what the Galilean disciples call the Trinity will be greatly honoured and enjoy great freedom in my kingdom. All those left by the Ethiopian king in my territory and Christians under my authority and those said to be monks, I have put them all to the sword and into the fire. Christian churches in my jurisdiction have been burned and consigned to dust. Now I come to you, Najranites, with many troops and upraised arm and select men, 120,000, to attack you." The citizens replied: "We have been taught to venerate and worship Almighty God and his Word, through which everything has come to be, and his Holy Spirit, who breathes life into everything. We do not import multiple gods or recognize the reduction of monarchy but recognize rather one deity in three persons. We venerate and worship the same unique power as Abraham and others venerated."

4. The Himyarite king, most lawless in law,²⁷ became angry and besieged them for many days, with powerful machines of war. But he was still unable to capture the city founded on the rock of faith, like the citadel of Zion in Jerusalem, surrounded by hills and the Lord surrounding His people, from now until eternity. The terrestrial king of darkness forbade anyone to leave and expelled all in the suburbs and fields of the city from their possession, killing some and enslaving others for the benefit of his nobles. When he realized that he could not take the city,

23 Figure also given by Cosmas Indicopleustes, cf. E. O. Winstedt *Christian Topography* (1909) p.69.

24 The Gk text has 'miles' but the Latin translation 'stations'.

25 I am not competent to evaluate the geographical data. Carpentier's notes are quite extensive, but I am not sure that I follow them.

26 Both explanations of the name recur in the hymn to Najran in §24.

27 Perhaps a deliberate oxymoron. Or 'law' is an indirect way of referring to Judaism.

he became like a man-killing serpent, constantly envious of those who wish to live a pious life. He began to swear and call on God and the Law and holy powers: "I will not harm any citizen or force anyone to blaspheme against a religion you venerate but wish only for you to surrender that you may open the city for me to enter to get to know it and take what is owed to me for this year alone, that is the usual head tax from every resident: one helcas,²⁸ coin of the royal Himyarite mint. with a portion of gold, weighing twelve carats, which made the annual taxes paid by Najran one hundred and thirty talents of gold. The talent in Ethiopia and Himyar weighs thirteen pounds.²⁹

5. So the people of the city, in obedience to the sacred prescriptions of Our Saviour, said: " We have been taught by the Law and the prophets and apostles to worship and to follow and obey our rulers in matters that are fitting. We therefore commit ourselves to a faith that you have enjoined by oath and open our city that you may enter with those whom you will. But please note: if you subjugate us, our God will come and help us and your wickedness will turn upon you and your kingdom. Otherwise, we will show you the words of Ananias, Azarias and Misael, that, apart from your monarchical will, we have no intention of worshipping or subscribing to your blasphemy but prefer death and life in Christ, who died for us and came back to life. and let Christ live in us." Having said this, they opened the gates. and the treacherous serpent entered, the Himyarite king, swearing that he would keep them whole and safe from harm since they had willingly surrendered the city. On the following day, the gates open, the leading citizens went out with Arethas³⁰ to the king and prostrated themselves on the ground and paid homage to him. He ordered everyone to assemble, his belongings to be brought out of the city and the bishop Paul³¹ to be shown to him. The leading citizens in unison said that he had died two years previously. He did not believe them but sent to the place where the body was buried

28 See Carpentier note *oo* on p. 67. Perhaps el- is the Arabic article with an unknown Arabic word.

29 See Carpentier note *rr* on p.67. The tenor of this passage is interestingly varied: unmitigated violent hostility followed by a reasonable demand to collect the taxes owed to him.

30 Arethas is the Greek form of Hârith (حارث), which means either 'ploughman' or 'lion', the latter being the more likely. He is described by Carpentier (note *pp* p. 67) as a 'phylarch'. Mentioned several times in Moberg *Himyarites* cf. index p. xci.

31 Mentioned in Moberg *Himyarites* p. cxiv

and dug up his bones and ordered them to be burned³² and his ashes cast to the wind.³³

Chapter Two

Martyrdom of 427 clerics, monks and virgins burned alive. The wives of leading citizens beheaded. Number of martyrs

6. On the following day he ordered the entire army to collect wood into a very large pyre, to cover the area of one stade,³⁴ and to cast into it all the priests, deacons and other servants of the church, as well as those living the solitary life, the canonesses³⁵ and virgins, the chantresses who chanted night and day in the houses of God; all these, whether in the city or suburbs, were to be examined and burned, the intention being to frighten the remaining Christians. In total four hundred and twenty-seven were burned. Arethas, the most distinguished man, and other leading citizens were shackled, and the herald announced in the Himyar language: "Deny the one you call Christ, convert to Judaism, share my belief and you will live." The holy martyrs replied: "God forbid that we should deny the faith into which we were baptized." The king then said: "The Romans knew that when our fathers and doctors of the Law crucified a man in Jerusalem, by scourging, insulting and committing him to a shameful death, he was a man and not a god. How can you err by following this man? You are no better than the Nestorians who are still among you today and who say: 'We³⁶ do not have God himself but a prophet of God.' People of Najran, I am not asking you to deny the God of heaven and earth or worship the sun, moon and stars in heaven or a creature of the earth, sea or rivers, but only to deny the man called Jesus, because he said such blasphemous things and

32 A similar thing happened to the 14th cent. English church reformer John Wyclif, who died a natural death and was buried. Thirty years later he was declared a heretic and his body disinterred and burned.

33 The encounter between Dhu Nuwas and the Najranites is mentioned in Moberg *Himyarites* p. cviii.

34 Approx. 190m

35 G.W.H. Lampe *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (1966) p. 701 'consecrated virgin or widow'.

36 Based on a misunderstanding that Nestorius taught that Jesus was only a man.

made himself God and affirmed that the one who was crucified was a man and not God."

7. The holy martyrs of Christ replied: "On behalf of ourselves and all our people and the entire city and all who are important to us, we defend ourselves and bear witness and confess the beautiful confession, in which we believe and were baptized in the Father and Son and Holy Spirit and we do not deny the incarnation. Jesus, who was blasphemed by you, one of the Holy Trinity, who became incarnate in the last times³⁷ for our salvation from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin, taught us: 'you will be brought before leaders for my sake to bear witness to them and to Gentiles.'³⁸ But we reject you and your administration, you who offend against the law of God and traduce the truth." The Himyarite king then ordered more placatory words to be used that they might deny Christ. But the words were rejected and they said: "Even if you kill us with fire and torture, we will not deny our faith in the Trinity. It is a reward for us to live and die as Christians." The leading voice was that of Arethas, the teacher and instructor, the son of Khanef, who in his secular life was lord³⁹ of the entire city and surroundings. But many, when they realized the treacherous offence of the lawless monarch, fled for safety to the hills and caves, not because they were afraid of martyrdom but in the hope that in their affliction and straits and wanderings they would cry out naked to the One who hears the voice of the chicks of the crow and feeds them and that, in this way, they would be a monument and the seed of the Lord Sabaoth and would avoid the savage violence of the impious king, like Sodom and Gomorrah.

8. Four thousand two and hundred fifty-two people of both sexes and all ages, men and women, of the city and surroundings, gathered together and underwent martyrdom by not renouncing their faith, including priests and the rest of the martyrs, with Arethas the most just of men. Let us describe this monstrous crime of the most pernicious beast. The wives of the leading Najranites, in chains and on their way to martyrdom, were confronted by their husbands and children, in an attempt to insidiously cajole them and all the martyrs into obeying him and blaspheming against Christ, but the women all cried out together: "May God forgive us, but we renounce our families, homeland and property and take up the Cross of Christ and follow him who made the good confession under Pontius Pilate." He then addressed

37 I am not sure what this phrase means

38 ἔθνος cf. Matth. 10, 18

39 ἐθνάρχος. See Carpentier note *n* on p. 70.

the martyrs with flattering words: "Do not be misled into following the one called Christ, who was killed by our fathers through the agency of the lictors. Obey me and convert and you can live with your children. If you do not, you will die a cruel death." All the holy women with their children cried out, wailing and lamenting: "We are ready to die for Christ, our God, son of the Living God. We belong to him, we worship the Cross and will die for him. God forbid that we deny him, the king of all ages. Let us live until after our husbands have been killed." Dunaan said: " Foolish women ,do you choose to die for a mendacious trickster ?"

9. Ten of the women, who were canonesses and wore the virgin's veil, said to him: "May your mouth that speaks such foul things against the heavenly king be blocked up !" The king furiously ordered them all to be thrown into a pit and put to the sword in the same place as those who had suffered martyrdom by decapitation earlier. They were dragged by their hair, a total of two hundred and twenty-seven women. When the canonesses reached the place, they asked those were to die with them: " Please allow us, God-fearing women, to be the first to earn the reward of martyrdom, for, unworthy though we are, our prayers are made under the seal of virginity and the chaste virtue of angels. For you know that when we receive the holy mysteries we are the first, as brides of Christ, to call for participation, as used to be the case according to ecclesiastical procedure, followed by you the laity.⁴⁰ And so it is fitting that we receive the chalice of death." The women replied vehemently: "No. We are the wives and mothers of martyrs and are to die first that we may not witness the death of our husbands and children." And so each one began to encourage and drive forward those from whom they were being dragged so that they might die a swift death. It came about that every people, tribe and language, from those gathered with the impious king, when they saw these things, began to beat their faces and relieve their bitter weeping with the grinding of their teeth. All these holy women were beheaded together, invoking the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The king then said to his magnates mockingly: "You see what an enormous error the crucified one has been able to spread throughout the world."

Chapter Three

The martyrdom of a widow of Najran of a noble family and her two daughters⁴¹

⁴⁰ I can find no early source that corroborates this. It does seem clear, however, that there may have been a certain rivalry or 'pecking order' among the women, according to status.

⁴¹ Moberg *Himyarites* from ch. 20 onwards has an account of a woman (Ruhm), noble and beautiful, who suffers

10. The leading woman of the entire city was then brought forward. The serpent of the abyss ordered her to be brought to him in all ceremony and to stand before him, thinking that he would convince her with persuasive words. She was of incomparable beauty. He ordered her and her two daughters to be put in custody. And so, full of guile as he was, he reasoned to himself: "She surely has to spare herself and her daughters and her belongings and to be persuaded to blaspheme against the Son of God." She and her daughters went, sad and very distressed that they were not to be tortured with the other women. On the third day⁴² the king sent a general to the prison, who announced to her: "If you obey me and deny the one you call Christ, you and your children will live honourably and you will find favour with me. Otherwise you will die a gruesome death." When she heard this, she said: "Take me to the king and I will obey him in what he asks." The servants then led her shaded by an umbrella, or rather in a covered litter. For she had never been exposed to the sun, except where the sun's rays shone through the window.⁴³ She stood with her daughters in the presence of the heartless king, who said to her: "Woman, let not the trickery of the Cross deceive you. Do not let yourself be misled by the madness of your fellow-citizens, men and women who have been killed. You are a woman of honour from a leading family. For the sake of your birth, dignity and wealth, spare yourself, especially because of your beauty and that of your daughters. It has reached our ears that the only man you have had is the one to whom you were legally married, even though you had in your household more than three hundred men administering your property, as you still have today while you stand before us. Obey me therefore and, as I said, you will be welcomed by myself and my queen with honours in my palace." The holy woman replied: "It is impossible for a man who denies God to honour me. Nor will I live with a blasphemer who breaks the law and forces all to blaspheme and calls the God who granted him his kingdom a trickster."

11. The king then ordered her head to be uncovered and, with her hair flowing, to stand

martyrdom (ch. 22) with her daughter (Aumah) and granddaughter (Ruhm): it is interesting to note similarities between the two accounts of the pre-martyrdom period and interviews, including the episode of the child spitting in the face of the king.

42 It could refer to the third day after she had been detained or Tuesday.

43 This detail seems to be quite expressive of the respect afforded to certain classes, in whatever condition they might find themselves.

before the whole army. The holy woman turned and saw a crowd of women lamenting and weeping and beating their breasts: "Illustrious free women, who share my faith and live among us, Jews and Greeks, listen to what I say. You know me to be wholeheartedly Christian. You know my rank and the privileges I have of wealth, family and property. I lack for nothing. If I had wanted to marry again in this unstable life after the death of my husband, nobody would have mocked my youth, as if I had broken a law of God. The teachings of the apostles urge us to marry lawfully rather than to burn.⁴⁴ I tell you that I have a fortune of more than 10,000 gold and silver coins. You know that the happiest day of a woman's life is her wedding day, but thereafter there is sorrow, tribulation, weeping and pain, especially when she gives birth to children, and when these children are taken by death, she grieves for them. From this day forward therefore let me be a stranger to all this and let me experience the same happiness as on my wedding day.

12. "These are my daughters, who are virgins. They have not been put to death with the women who invoked the name of Christ. The impious king does not order our arrest, but only that of the wives and children of martyrs, who were previously brought together and are now in shackles. And I, since I am a widow, was not added to their number with my daughters. Through this act of martyrdom we are joined with the true bridegroom, Jesus Christ, son of the living God who prepared his bridal chamber for the five wise virgins.⁴⁵ And, my most beloved sisters, for the second time you see my face uncovered, the first time being when I celebrated my earthly nuptials and now as I am about to enter the spiritual and eternal bridal chamber. Look at me and my daughters. We are no less beautiful than you. And if we were ugly, we would not be better than you free women and all the women of other nations standing around. Our beauty arises from wisdom, under the protection of Our Lord Jesus, and we have kept our virginity, my daughters and myself, except when I was united to the man given to me by Christ, as God and my conscience can bear witness. We have not been corrupted to the apostasy offered by the impious one. He was unable to deceive us into denying Christ, to whom you still bear witness today. Let it be said in future that gold and silver can bear witness that I was not in love with them but that I distributed them to each according to need."

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. 7, 9

⁴⁵ Matth. 25

13. When the king heard from some Christ-hating Jews that the mother, with her daughters, was haranguing the people and that those listening, men and women, were weeping, he ordered her to be brought to him with her daughters and said to her: "Look, I have been patient with you long enough. I have let you speak to the people, as you wanted. You have seen the tears and the love of those who pity you, but it is time to be merciful to yourself and obey me." She said: "You are asking me to renounce eternal life in favour of continuing this life on earth, but I am afraid of the eternal fire and the worm that never sleeps and the confusion of apostasy. It is better for us to die than obey. If we die in this faith, we will live." Turning around, she said: "May it not happen, Christ king of heaven, Son of God who sit above the Cherubim and are glorified by the Seraphim, that we deny your kingdom and divinity." The king replied angrily: "Cursed little woman,⁴⁶ this is blasphemy. I will lay my hands on your flesh and your entrails and I will investigate the marrow of your bones and see if the Nazarene, the trickster, comes to save you from my hands."

14. The smaller of the two daughters, who was about twelve years of age, approached her mother and filled her mouth with spit and trembling spat it in the face of the impious king. The royal guards then raised their naked weapons⁴⁷ and decapitated the two daughters. The king ordered their blood to be collected in their hands and brought to their mother. She tasted it and said: "I thank you, Son of God, that you have been good to your servant and judged me worthy to taste the sacrifice of my humble children." The king then ordered her to be beheaded, and he swore an oath to his magnates: "My soul is deeply saddened because of the beauty of this woman and her daughters. I have never seen anyone like her. I can only wonder at what makes Christians so deranged that they mistakenly believe in a man who calls himself God."

Chapter Four

Martyrdom of St Arethas⁴⁸ and his 340 companions

⁴⁶ γύναϊον. Term of contempt.

⁴⁷ γυμνά. Weapons not in active use were presumably normally covered, including axes.

⁴⁸ In Moberg *Himyarites* the martyrdom of Arethas is mentioned only cursorily.

15. On the following day he summoned St Arethas and another three hundred and forty in shackles and said to him: "I appeal to you, Arethas, you iniquitous old wretch. Why do you not follow your father, who ruled over the city and surroundings, who was honoured by the kings before me ? You wanted to be the sole ruler over Najran and surroundings, believing in a false magician and hoping to escape my hands. So spare your old age and have pity on your white hairs, venerable old man that you are, and be the cause of life for yourself and the other shackled prisoners with you and renounce the one you call Christ. You will die a cruel death, like the women the other day and those before them. The son of Mary and Joseph was unable to save those I have murdered, either in the city or in the region of Himyar." The illustrious Arethas replied: "I am greatly pained by the death of the Christians in this city. I told them not to open the gates of the city or believe you, but they would not listen. And I also advised them to go out and fight you on behalf of the people of Christ, but they did not. I was confident in my Lord Christ that I would defeat and crush you, like Gideon with the three hundred through the word of God, who overcame tens of thousands. But let the word of God come to pass ! For I know that we have suffered these things through our sins and have been handed over to you. Never has the truth issued forth from your mouth."

16. The royal assessor said: "Do the Christian scriptures teach you to inflict harm on the lords of the land ? Do you know that Jewish kings have been anointed by God ? " The saint replied: "Do you mean, my lord, the Scripture in Elijah the prophet, when Ahab the king of Israel said to him: 'So you are the one disturbing Israel ' to which Elijah replied: 'I have disturbed no-one but you and the house of your father.' Rebuking the king who acts unjustly is not a sin. He did not blush when he persuaded us to renounce the Word of God, through whom everything in heaven and on earth was made, both visible and invisible, who, seeing that man was held prisoner by the devil, did not neglect him but had mercy him on when he sent the flood, provided a Law and prescriptions to teach mankind, to warn them to refrain from evil; and when he had taught Israel about its abominable crimes, he took pity and recalled its people from Babylon. Then, when his creation had become the deformed image of its Creator, he, the Word of God, by a decree of his Father came down from heaven, assumed what was fallen and with his own body crucified sin. And so, in a body taken from us he became a sacrifice to God the Father for all mankind. How can I deny this ? And since only an hour or two of my life remains, do you wish to me to alienate myself from the kingdom ?

17. "The king who lies is not strong. Even when you swear an oath or make an agreement, you do not keep it. I see great kings who have defeated you in India, Persia and Ethiopia and in this region, but they never broke their word, which was always true. For this reason, peoples and nations, regions and cities, cohorts of armies called them gods. They obeyed them as they obey God, who gave them kingship. You should know that we will not follow you, who blaspheme against the Lord of glory. I have power over my own life and I will not renounce Christ, but struggle on his behalf. I am blessed in my old age. I am 95 and Christ has thought me worthy to die for him. I now know that God loves me. I have spent many years in this empty life. I have begotten children and I have seen the fourth generation of them. I have conducted myself honourably and bravely in various wars. And now I rejoice that my life will end among the holy martyrs. I am confident that my memory will live on in this city. I am persuaded that, as a vine pruned at the correct time gives a good yield of fruit, God will multiply the Christian population in this city and in the whole of Himyar. Before God I tell you: This church, which has been burned down by you, will be raised up.⁴⁹ In this region another kingdom will arise and Christians will become rulers. Your kingdom will be cut down and your religion destroyed."

18. He then turned and cried out in a loud voice to the holy martyrs: "Did you hear what the king said to me, brothers?" They replied in one voice: "We heard, venerable father, we heard." And he said: "If any of you is afraid of the command of the impious king, let him stand aside." The holy martyrs: "Be of good spirit, father, in this struggle. We will all die with you for the name of Christ, and none of us will leave your side." Saint Arethas then said: "Hear me, Christians, Jews and Greeks, if any of my kinsmen or those looking at me denies Christ, he will be denied by the future judge of the living and the dead and, on the day of resurrection, there will be no communion between us. I wish and hereby specify that all my belongings be given to a holy church to be built after my death. Those of my children and relatives who remain firm in the immaculate faith and are not found lacking are my heirs. But among my possessions, I want the most beautiful to be given to the church."

19. The old man said to the king: "I praise you for this alone: that you have kept the tradition from the earliest times of kings and princes by not interrupting my speech but by listening to everything I wanted to say. Now is the time to stop the questioning, for the time has come

⁴⁹ Probably a ref. to the church in Moberg *Himyarites* ch. 13

when we are to be consumed by martyrdom. Everyone who has refused to be martyred will be rejected his creator. Let him perish from the land of the living who does not rush to this prize, who does not confess that Christ is the Son of God and the Creator. May the one who shares your belief and that of the Jews who agree with you be deprived of future goods. May he be like Dathan and Abiron, who were swallowed up by the earth.⁵⁰ I say to you: 'In the same way that the goblet was offered to me while I once used to recline with my brothers, now that the chalice of martyrdom is offered, I will be the first to drink of it. I therefore bless the people around me with the sign of the Cross in the name of the Trinity.'" Each martyr crossed himself, inclining his head in the form of a cross, because his hands were tied behind his back. They began to cry out: "May our souls be as acceptable as the ointment poured over the head of the priests of God and our blood as the sacrifice of praise on the horns of the altars."⁵¹ They also cried out: "Our venerable father, you will be received by Abraham. Let us not live after your death."

20. When the king saw this, he realized that it would be impossible for them to change their mind and he ordered them to the swift waters of Obedian,⁵² where a ditch had been dug containing those martyred previously. He ordered that their heads protrude from the ground and that their remains be left for the birds of the air and the beasts of the land. When the martyrs arrived at the place, they stood with their eyes and minds raised to God on high, crying out: "Jesus Christ, come to our assistance and make us complete. Give us the strength to complete this martyrdom. Let the blood of your holy servants be a propitiation and remission for the Christians being persecuted and murdered by this impious tyrant. Raise your temple burned down by the tyrant. Be merciful to those who have not rejected you and bless all to whom our confession is of value. Raise the horn of Greek Christians⁵³ and give the kingdom of the impious Jews to Christians, who will do as you wish. Strike the wretch and his root. as you struck Pharaoh, Amalek, Sehon and Og. Let us see the spectacle of your glory and accept the good news from your angels of the speedy downfall of the royal scoundrel and the misguided pride of the Jews." After the speech they all cried out weeping: "Peace to you with a holy

50 Num. 16, 31

51 A reference to various Biblical passages, e.g. Ex. 29, 12.

52 Also known as Odias, which may be the Gk form of Arabic 'wady' (وادی)

53 Allusion to Lk. 1, 68ff.

kiss."⁵⁴ Arethas replied: "May you his holy disciples receive peace from the crucified Christ. Amen." He lowered his head, all the martyrs doing the same, and four of them supported his shoulders and arms, like Moses on the mountain. One of the soldiers cut off his head. All the martyrs rushed together to anoint themselves with his blood so that those entrusted with killing them gazed and wept for a long time. And so the saints, with lowered neck, all achieved martyrdom in the month of Hyperberetaeus, that is October, day 24 in indiction 2."

Chapter Five

Martyrdom of a five-year old boy and his mother. Many children consigned to slavery

21. A certain Christian woman, holding her four or five year old son and seeing how bystanders blessed the saints and anointed their faces with Arethas' blood, ran up and, taking some of the blood, crossed herself and her son with it, saying: "Let the Jewish king suffer the same fate as Pharaoh." She was immediately seized and taken before the Jewish king. He ordered a pit to be dug and the woman to be thrown in it with wood and sulphur and pitch, which was then lit and into which the woman was thrown. While she was being restrained, the child looked up at the king sitting on high and ran towards to the great pavilion, where he was living because he did not want to stay in the city. The boy embraced his feet and kissed him. But the king extended his arms and took the child on to his lap and said in a kindly voice: "Tell me, child, what is better: to go with your mother or stay with and I will adopt you ?" The boy replied: "It is better for me to stay with my mother, for she told me to come that we might all be martyrs. And I asked her what being a martyr was. She said it meant living again." The boy then said: "Let me to go to my mother because I see men dragging her." He then cried out: "Amma, amma !" But the king said: "Do you know the one called Christ ?" And he said: "Yes." The king said to him: "How do you know him ?" The boy said: "Every day I look at him in church when I go there with my mother. If you want to come with, I can show you."

22. The king then said: "Do you love me or the one you call Christ ?" The boy: "I love Christ because we worship him." The king: "Do you love me or your mother ?" The boy said: "My mother. Let me go to her." The king then asked the boy why he had left his mother and come to

⁵⁴ 1 Cor, 16, 20

him, a Jew, kissing his feet. The boy replied: "I thought you were a Christian and I came so that you might set my mother free." The king said: "I am a Jew. If you want to be with me, I will give you nuts and almonds and figs and whatever you want." The boy said: "Let me go to my mother. I will take nothing from you because you are a Jew." The king said to his magnates: "You see this perverse root, how cleverly he replies." One of those standing by said: "Come with me, boy, and I will take you to the queen." The boy refused. And, from a distance, he saw how his mother was being dragged and thrown into the flames and wept: "I want my mother." But they forced him to stay and the king held him back. The boy then bit the king's thigh, and the king handed him over to his nobles: "Take him and feed him and teach him how to be a Jew." He led the boy away by the hand and when he met other nobles, he told them what the boy had said and how he had bitten the king. They were not far away from the fire, and the boy slipped out of their hands and ran towards the fire and threw himself on it and so became a martyr with his mother. All the magnates and nobles prostrated themselves before the king and asked him to spare the other Christians and, if he wanted, to resume the persecution at a later time.

23. The king had all the Christian children of fifteen and younger of both sexes and all classes, noble, citizen, peasant, worker and slave, gathered together, in total 1, 297, and distributed them as slaves among his nobles and the others who helped him in the persecution. The one enslaved by sin enslaved the children of freedom and the promise, of whom Christ said: "Let them come to me and do not stop them, for the kingdom of heaven is made up of such as these."⁵⁵ The impious king reduced the children of the faith of Abraham into slavery, whom Christ had redeemed from the curse of the Law with his precious blood.⁵⁶ Truly your works are great and wondrous ! Who is able to scrutinize the mystery of your providence. As soon as the martyrdom was complete and the children had been distributed as slaves, the impious king was returning to the capital city when suddenly a huge fire appeared from heaven in much of the northern sky. It filled the sky, terrifying and testing all who opposed the Lord for forty days from evening to midnight. Inside a fiery cloud stirred up dust and emitted sparks as if coming from a furnace on the face of the earth.⁵⁷

55 Matth. 19, 14

56 Since Abraham pre-dated the Law, Christians would perhaps see no conflict in appealing to him.

57 It seems unlikely that this event is directly connected with the 'cloud' described by Procopius and dateable to 536 AD. For a description of that event and other similar phenomena. cf. A. Arjava 'The mystery cloud of 536 AD: Mediterranean sources' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (2005) pp. 73-94. This event is not mentioned in

24. O earthly city, with its celestial heights and martyrs and confessors like spiritual stars !
 O city not destroyed by a prince of the powers of darkness. For your spiritual stars fly up
 through the air to meet the Lord !
 O city. replica of Jerusalem, surrounded by its hills and its people surrounded by the Lord, now
 and forever !
 O city, second citadel of Zion. which has witnessed those preaching the word of the Lord and
 choosing to suffer death for it !
 Your name is Najran, which in Hebrew means that the suffering of the martyrs who have
 imitated Christ has sounded like thunder as high as the heavens.
 Your name is Najran because your enemy has not broken down your barriers and gates and
 columns of martyrs and confessors.
 O city, like a gushing spring of the rational waters of life, which in the eyes of the mindless
 seem to die but which, for those who live eternally, flow among the people from such a great
 multitude of martyrs and confessors !
 I will call you Paradise: you have the rich teachings of those who resist sin even to the point of
 death, and you have remained firm and immovable on the rock of faith.
 O city, afflicting all the kingdoms of the earth with its tribulation and bringing joy to the
 multitude of heavenly powers with its renewal !
 As the prophet says of the three forms of impiety, this depraved king is guilty of the second
 and third and is working on one from which the Lord will not deflect him.
 For this reason the Lord has struck down an impious and unjust king, as he once struck
 Pharaoh down in the Red Sea.⁵⁸

Chapter Six

Dunaan the Himyarite king persuades several kings to persecute Christians. The emperor Justin encourages
 Elesbaan the Ethiopian king to wage war on the Himyarite tyrant.

Moberg *Himyarites* cf. p. xxxiii

58 The hymn to Najran, according to Moberg *Himyarites* (p. 33), marks the end of the martyrdom narrative.

25. The other aforementioned Pharaoh⁵⁹ wrote to the Persian king⁶⁰ asking him to kill all the Christians there, as he himself had done, adding that the sun and the father of the sun, who he said was the god of the Hebrews, was kindly to him. He sent envoys to the Saracen ruler Alamundarus⁶¹ under the authority of the Persians, telling him what he himself had done to the Christians and encouraging him to do the same. He promised the Saracen 3,000 denarii if he would persecute the Christians in his area. But he who is admired among his saints, the king of ages, who constantly sees the venerable death of his saints, he inspired the godlike Justin, emperor of the Romans, to send a priest, Abramius,⁶² a most religious man and beloved of God, to Alamundarus, also known as Sacchicas, to urge him to treat the Christians under his authority well. The letter of the execrable king was read by Alamundarus, in the presence of Abramius, Persian delegates, Simeon the presbyter and plenipotentiary of the Persian Christians, John the sub-deacon, also known as Mandinus, Angaeus the Count, son of Zet,⁶³ the Christian ethnarch of the entire military colony. Also present was Silas, the Nestorian bishop of Persia, with many others, who wanted to insult and dogmatically confound the orthodox Romans and Persians, while pleasing the Jews and Gentiles.

26. Silas and his entourage said: "We ask your majesty to join the Himyarite king. We are Persian. It has come to our attention that the Roman emperor and his priests now acknowledge that it was a man and not God who was crucified. For we, recipients of the divine teaching of Nestorius, are of the opinion and believe that the crucified one was powerful but not God." They cried out, in mockery of the idolaters: "Is God born of woman ? Is he formed by the blood of a woman ? Is he wrapped in swaddling clothes, hungry, fearful, tired, dying, as they, Angaeus and Abramius, Isacius, John, Romans and their Persian companions, mistakenly teach ? Let them be silent. God is not resurrected from death." Abramius the beloved of God together with the Romans and their Persian companions then began to tear their garments and scatter earth on their heads: "God forbid ! The faith of the Romans is founded on the

59 'Pharaoh' as oppressor recurs in §28.

60 Kavād I (488-531), whose religious affiliation is unclear, but is implicitly portrayed here as anti-Christian

61 Al-Mundhir III, Lakhmid king from 503-554, allies and clients of the Sasanians. The name Sacchichas occurs in various forms, cf. *CH* §88. No Arabic form is given there. The section in Moberg *Himyarites* that deals with the embassy has not been preserved, cf. p. xxxiv.

62 Abraham, the son of Euphrasius, and Simeon bishop of Beth-Arsham (not far from Seleucia-Ctesiphon) were part of the delegation sent to al-Mundhir by Justin. For the other people mentioned here, cf. Carpentier p. 84

63 The family was probably converted to Christianity by Euthymius in the 4th cent.

tradition of the apostles and councils, which teaches us the mystery of the divine incarnation, namely that the Divine Logos, living in the womb of the purest mother of God, united itself with body and soul and was made man like the rest of us, except for sin. In his flesh we conclude that he suffered, but in his divinity we confess his power. They are Nestorians, expelled with their impious teacher from the holy Catholic church. They were anathematized and started to wander from place to place, with the intention of corrupting the souls of the simple."

27. The servants of God made a treaty with Alamundarus and went home. They told the emperor Justin of the letter of the Himyarite king and of subsequent events. Without delay he wrote to Timothy the bishop of Alexandria with a request that he forward the letter to the Ethiopian king, Elesbaan, encouraging him to prepare an army to attack and destroy the impious one with their king. The emperor wrote as follows: "I know how devoted you are to Christianity. That rebel to whom you entrusted the kingdom of Himyar has taken the opportunity to put to the sword all the Ethiopian Christians you have sent as well as Romans and Persians because they refused to deny that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. He made Najran an uninhabitable wasteland. He then wrote to the Persian king and Alamundarus Sacchicas, asking them to do similar things to Christians there. We encourage and adjure you, by the holy and consubstantial Trinity, to attack the execrable and impious Jew by land and sea, taking with you the power of the holy angels as assistance. If you hesitate to do this, you and your state will incur the wrath of God. We will send a large army of Blemmyes⁶⁴ through Coptos and Berenice and nomads, who will march through your country, ravaging it and bringing ruin and destruction to the Himyarites. Greetings."

28. O power of Our Lord Jesus Christ ! The first Pharaoh, having hardened his heart even after ten plagues, was drowned in the sea in pursuit of the Israelites. But now the second Pharaoh, trying worse things against the people of God living in his territory, wrote to neighbouring kings and is found to have dug a lake into which he fell.⁶⁵ For God knew how to rescue the

64 A 'standard' Coptic name for them is **ΒΛΖΜΟΥ**. They seem to have lived in the desert between the Sudanese Nile and the Red Sea and were Christian from the 3rd cent. until their conversion to Islam in the 15th cent. They raided Egyptian towns and monasteries from time to time. See, for example, *Vita Sinuthii* ed. J. Leipoldt (1906) §§ 89-90, where they are described as **ΒΑΛΝΕΜΩΟΥ**

65 It is not clear to me if this is an early reference to the death of Dhu Nuwas. In this text (§37) he dies at the hands of the Ethiopian king. Various other versions of his death are given in Th. Wright *Early Christianity in Arabia* (1855) p. 61, who records Arabic traditions of how Dhu Nuwas threw himself from a precipice, like Sappho according to a fragment of Menander, into the sea. Unfortunately, Carpentier has no note on this

pious from death and keep the impious for the day of punishment. In Alexandria of Egypt,⁶⁶ therefore, in the month of April, indiction 3, the blessed Archbishop Timothy, in an assembly of all the orthodox and multitude of monks from Nitria and Scetis⁶⁷ in the church of St Mark, issued a promulgation that there be a public procession and vigils and, on the following day at the end of Mass, that the divine oblation be placed on a silver vase and sent it with a priest to the Ethiopian king whom he exhorted to do as Samuel had done, when he incited Saul against Amalek, to draw up his army and lay waste everything with fire and sword.⁶⁸

Chapter Seven⁶⁹

King Elesbaan prepares for war. He visits a certain holy stylite. Part of his fleet arrives at Himyar.

29. The servant of God, Elesbaan, assembled an army from his own kingdom and neighbouring peoples of 120,000. By the providence of the Saviour 60 merchant ships of Romans. Persians and Ethiopians, as well as from the islands of Pharsan,⁷⁰ were also assembled; 15 ships from the city of Aela; 20 from Klyisma;⁷¹ seven from Iotabe;⁷² two from Berenice;⁷³ seven from Pharsan; and nine from India. Elesbaan gathered them together into one naval station called Gabazan, within the borders of Adulis,⁷⁴ situated on the sea, and ordered them to be dragged over the sand. In the winter of indiction 3 he himself put together ten Indian vessels and

incident. Tabari *History* SUNY 1999 vol. 5 p. 207 tells the story of how he directed his horse into the waves of the sea never to be seen again

66 Alexandria became a major urban foundation after the Macedonian conquest. Before this it had been a relatively small village/town called *r^c-qd*, which became **ⲣⲁⲕⲟⲧⲉ** in Coptic, a name that was always used by Egyptians. Its position vis-à-vis Egypt is reflected in Latin attachment to the name *ad Aegyptum*

67 4th cent. monastic settlements, together with Kellia, to the SW of Alexandria: Nitria (**ⲛⲉⲣⲛⲟⲩⲭ**) and Scetis (**ⲱⲛⲧ**)

68 I Sam. 15

69 For a critical treatment of the account of this campaign, cf. Ryckmans pp. 19-20.

70 Carpentier gives a latitude that places them somewhere at the northern extremity of the Red Sea, not far from Elat and Aqaba.

71 Suez.

72 Perhaps the island now called Tiran at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. In the 6th cent. an important source of tax revenue.

73 The southernmost Red Sea port of Egypt.

74 Ruins are now in the Eritrean city of Zula.

equipped seventy. He sent 15,000 Ethiopians south by land to cross the sea and from there to march east that they might learn about various parts of Himyar. They were already there unexpectedly when the ships with their troops were about to arrive. The 15,000 Ethiopians then marched for thirty days, followed by another seven through inaccessible and arid mountains, unable to reach Himyar or return to Ethiopia, and they died wretchedly. After Pentecost, when the Ethiopian king had prepared everything for the imminent campaign, he set out on a procession to the great holy church of God where the kings and priests are buried. When he arrived at the narthex, he took off the elaborate clothing normally worn by kings and put on humble clothing of the people, entered and, between the horns of the altar, with hands outstretched he cried up to heaven:

30. "Lord God Almighty, creator of heavenly virtues, of the visible and invisible, who are praised by thousands of angels, including the many-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim, singing with constantly moving lips: 'Holy, holy, holy Lord Sabaoth. Thrice holy God of gods and dominator of dominators, king of kings, Father of Our Lord and Saviour, bringer of light, victor, prize-winner, prince of the stadium, you decided to send your Son and Logos of your substance to save the lost sheep of the 100-fold flock of mankind. He descended from heaven and became flesh from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and did everything necessary for our salvation, illuminating us in our darkness, that we might know you and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And look at what is now happening, The mother beats herself with impious earth and ashes for her sons. Your priests and your flock are ruined. Arms are being taken against your son and the horn of the altar ! And now, Lord, confident in the sign of your anointed one, I have drawn up battle lines against the impious adversary. Do not disappoint me, even when the ignorant say: 'Where is their God?' If my many sins stand in the way of my prayers, strike me down and do not hand over your heritage to the hands of the impious who blaspheme against the Trinity. We are your people and your flock and we glorify you forever. Amen."

31. After he had said this, he left the royal city for his army of 310,000 infantry. In the Ethiopian city of Saba there was a Roman of the city of Aela, a most holy monk, strict ascetic and prophet named Zonenus.⁷⁵ The king, wearing plebeian clothes and accompanied by five

⁷⁵ Carpentier (p. 91 note dd) believes this is Pantaleon, on whom see *Ethiopian Synaxary* (senkessar) October 16. He speculates that the Greek form ζώνεως might contain the word 'Ionian', the term used to indicate Greek ethnicity.

men, went to question him in the name of God. He had lived for forty years in a small tower, with no door or window, two cubits wide and and, like the building itself, five cubits high. There was a small opening at the base of the tower through which his words could be heard. The king brought seven censers, each one with ten denarii in the upper part and said: "Bless me, father, and pray to God that he may guide us in life and work with us." The servant of God replied: "May the one who rules with you be with you. Remove deceit and it will be removed from you." The king said to the old man: "Who am I, father?" The old man replied: "Do not try to question me." The king understood that he was speaking because of the gold.⁷⁶ The old man said: "The prayer of Timothy of Alexandria and the tears of Justin as well as the sacrifice of the fragrance of the martyrs have gone up to heaven to the spiritual altar."

32. After receiving the blessing from him, the king went down to Adulis and Gabaza. He ordered the whole army to take provisions for twenty days only. They were taken there on seventy ships. When the Himyarite king learned of the destruction of the above-mentioned 15,000, he knew that the Ethiopians could not attack him by land, so he conspired against the righteous judgement of God. There is a narrow part of the sea, two stades wide, between Ethiopia and Himyar and the strait in some places is shallow.⁷⁷ The Himyarite king ordered a large quantity of iron to be gathered and made into a chain. Each link weighed 180⁷⁸ pounds. He joined 50 of them, inserting light wild palm wood between the 50 links or joints. And in this way he was able to create a barrier from one shore to another that would block the passage by sea. And where there were shallows, he filled up the links with lead.⁷⁹ Where the sea was deep, he filled it with logs and tree trunks. The king, in full armour, arrived with an immense army at the river, where he had said he would meet Elesbaan.

33. Those in the ships did not know that the sea passage was blocked by a chain and when they reached the narrow strait, the first ship got as far as the chain and, by the grace of Almighty God, who frustrates the designs of the impious, was lifted by a wave above the chain

76 The denarius was a gold coin. I do not understand the exchange.

77 Most probably the Bab al-Mandab, which is just over 25 km wide at its narrowest point and divided by an island (Barîm) into a wider strait on the African side and a narrower strait on the Asian side, cf. Carpentier note *qq* p. 93.

78 Translates the Latin text. Gk text has 180, cf. Carpentier note *rr* p. 93.

79 I think this is the meaning. Carpentier has reservations about the accuracy of the description (note *ww* p. 94)

and lowered down on the other side, so that those in the ships following thought that it had landed in a shallow. The same thing happened to nine more ships: a storm arose and the tempestuous waves lifted the ships at the same time as the logs so that they were able to get beyond the chain. This happened again and again until the chain broke. In this way ten ships were able to pass through. The remaining sixty, in one of which was the king, were thrown back by the tempest and force of the winds up to twelve stades. Those ten ships, with favourable winds, completed their journey and arrived at the place where the Himyarite king was, fifteen miles away. He sent generals with 30,000 armed soldiers and cavalry to meet them.

Chapter Eight

The Himyarite king is overthrown and killed

34. Three days later another forty ships appeared three stations⁸⁰ below the position of the Himyarite king. The other twenty ships, including the royal ship, hastened to the place where the Himyarite king was. The Himyarites thought that the Ethiopian king was among the contingent of forty ships, and the Himyarite king took most of his force and followed the forty ships. He unloaded the provisions as well as the water from the ships. The armed Himyarite soldiers, stationary from morning to evening, were burned by the heat of the sun, but the horses on which they were sitting had gone into the water up to their knees. The son of the devil⁸¹ then came up with a new stratagem: he ordered large tents to be made and carried by the camels, the awning supported on poles above four camels, to cover an area of five cubits, so that the soldiers had shade from the side and from above. There were three armies, corresponding to the positions of the ships. Those in the ships, fatigued by heat, hunger and the burning sun, were beginning to become afraid and lose hope. From a distance, when they saw the tents moving, they all thought that that by some magic mountains were moving and the trees in the forest were prowling about. They were afraid to disembark lest they be drowned in the midst of them. None of this was in the interests of the Himyarite king, so he sent one of his relatives with 20,000 cavalry to ascertain which ship was carrying the Ethiopian king. A certain Himyarite royal eunuch, not knowing this and thinking that the

⁸⁰ μωνή is understood by Carpentier (p. 96) to be 48.5 km. W. Beveridge *Codex Canonum Ecclesiae* (republished in 1848) p. 47 understands it to mean a day's journey, a meaning also given by G.W.H. Lampe *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (1966) p. 880. The term 'below' probably means 'south', cf. Carpentier note *b* p.96.

⁸¹ Dhu Nuwas.

king's relative was leaving to do his exercises, took five small lances encrusted with gold and jewels in the quiver which he was carrying on his neck, and joined the contingent of spies. When they came to above-mentioned place, they found the Ethiopian leader exercising the greatest caution and vigilance.

35. The king's kinsman and the eunuch alone with three servants looked to see if they could continue the hunt for their prey. The servants of the Ethiopian king, dying of hunger and thirst, stole a raft and went on land. On the shore under a rocky bay they found the royal kinsman and the eunuch with the three servants and attacked them. They killed the eunuch and the servants, but took the royal kinsman with them to the ships. Elesbaan offered the five gold lancets to God. Afterwards he disembarked with his entourage on to the skiffs. The leader of the Himyarites and most of those with him were mounted on horses that were up to their knees in the water. Meanwhile, the Ethiopians with their king lowered themselves from the skiffs into the water up their necks and swam off. Both parties collided with each other. All the impious were defeated and succumbed to the sword, none of them escaping to inform the Himyarite king, who was camped opposite the forty ships, of what had happened. Elesbaan, with the captive Himyarite king's kinsman showing him the way, marched on the royal city of Zafar, which he took with its princesses and wealth.

36. Five hundred men in the forty ships died of hunger and thirst or threw themselves overboard. But the remaining Ethiopians, deliberating about what to do, said: "We cannot return to Ethiopia. Here we are oppressed by hunger and do not know if our king will die. So that we may not die a slow death and be thrown into the sea and as Christians be mocked by Jews, we will invoke the Lord Our God, who is powerful in war. " All the ships came together and were tied to each other. The masts, the yardarms and the rest of the planks were dismantled and assembled on the decks of ⁸²the ships to make them look a city. The ships were unable to move away from each other. The skiffs were brought and bound together at the base of the ships. The sails were extended and looked like two shaded porticoes. Everyone gathered and prayed to God, offering spiritual sacrifices. After receiving the divine mysteries, they climbed down fully armed into the skiffs and stood them on their sides to form a wall that would protect them against the enemy's weapons. The skiffs bound together to form a wall were pushed by the sailors and the monks who had followed the fleet until they reached land

82 I take this to be the meaning of ὑπεράνω τῶν πλοίων.

and there was a wall between the two opposing sides.

37. Before the day was complete the Himyarite king knew that Zafar had been captured with the princesses and, fearing that seven of his kinsmen would be added to the booty of Elesbaan, he made an iron chain and, binding them and himself, sat on the seat in his golden litter, with the seven kinsmen also sitting on golden seats. Meanwhile, the enemy, with spears and lances, broke through the sides of the wall of upright skiffs. The Ethiopians under pressure cried out in tears to God. Suddenly, the echo of a clear voice came from heaven: "Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel." At that point a monk emerged from among those pushing the skiffs in the water, bearing an iron rod with a sign of the Cross above and a spear below. He cut through the cavalry and, seizing a horse by the tail, plunged the spear into its side. The horse reared and threw its rider. The Himyarites were so struck with fear and confusion that they fled towards land. The Ethiopians, rising up, slew the enemy, keeping the Himyarite king and his seven kinsmen captive. The same heavenly voice was heard once again, announcing salvation and a great victory. Elesbaan was told of this, and he came and killed the Himyarite king with his seven kinsmen, crying: "May God arise and His enemies be scattered."⁸³ Altars were set, and he prayed to God.

Chapter Nine

St Elesbaan, after making several appointments in Himyar, returned to Ethiopia and became a monk and, after a most holy life, died.

38. Returning to the royal city he put all those living in the palace to an accursed death. Some of the illustrious magnates took flight, but then came back and were baptized. With his own hands the king excavated an area in the palace for seven days and built the most holy church that can now be seen there. As soon as possible he told Timothy archbishop of Alexandria and via him the emperor Justin. The archbishop consecrated⁸⁴ a holy and orthodox man bishop and sent him to Elesbaan and the Himyarites. On his arrival he blessed the temple that Elesbaan had built and baptized everyone in the name of the Holy Trinity. He also ordained

⁸³ Ps. 68, 1

⁸⁴ Leading prelates in the Ethiopian church were ordained by the patriarch of Alexandria until Cyril VI conceded autocephalous status to the Church in 1959.

priests in some places together with deacons and other ministers of churches. He then took the one sent to be bishop and went to Najran, the martyrs' city, and founded a church there. He made the son of St Arethas governor and ethnarch there.⁸⁵ From royal property he donated five estates to the church, and at the bidding of St Arethas he donated three estates of his own property. He made the place where the martyrs' bodies had been thrown after burning venerable and a place of asylum. Full of joy and happiness he returned to the royal city of the Himyarites. He appointed a certain Abraam, a prudent God-fearing devout Christian, regent of Himyar, to whom as a most holy bishop he entrusted the care of 10,000 Ethiopian Christians.⁸⁶ Having done this, he returned to his own kingdom with considerable booty.

39. Elesbaan said that he could offer nothing in return worthy of such a great blessing of God . The only thing he could think of was to put aside the crown and assume the monastic habit. One night he went forth without any entourage and came to a mountainous and high place. There was a monastery of ascetics, and he went into a cell and decided that he would not come out alive but that he would stay there until the day he died. The cell was empty except for a mat and a dish for water, a small basket and the monastic garments he was wearing. For food he ate three slices of dried bread a day, without wine, oil or fruits of any sort. If anyone brought him green vegetables, he ate them raw. Nobody dared to speak to him for the rest of his life or to visit him. The royal crown that he used to wear, gold encrusted with jewels, he offered to Christ, sending it to Jerusalem and asking bishop John⁸⁷ that it might be hung in sight of the door of the life-giving Sepulchre, in which Christ son of God showed us the principle of resurrection and immortality when He rose from the dead. Glory be to Him and the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

85 Carpentier has a long note *g* on p. 99 on the person of Arethas.

86 In 2008 a relief sculpture depicting a crowned ruler was discovered at Zafar by Paul Yule (Heidelberg), who thinks it might represent an Ethiopian 'puppet' ruler of the late 6th cent. See his article in *Antiquity* 87 (2013) issue 338 pp. 1124-1135.

87 Carpentier (note *t* on p. 100) says that this final part of the text is not reliable. There was no-one called John at this time in Jerusalem.

