

POPE ABRAHAM THE SYRIAN

62nd Patriarch of Alexandria (975-978)

& THE MIRACLE OF MUQATTAM



- Anthony Alcock -

Pope Abraham the Syrian
62nd Patriarch of Alexandria (975-978)
& the Miracle of Muqattam

St Shenouda Monastery
Putty Rd, Putty, NSW, 2330
Sydney, Australia

www.stshenoudapress.com

Translated by: Anthony Alcock



ST SHENOUDA'S PRESS
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA
2019

Contents

Introduction	3
Historical Notes	4
Translation	6

Introduction

The Arabic of this text, with French translation, was published by L. Leroy in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 14 (1909) pp. 380-400 and 15 (1910) pp. 26-41. The following is an English version of the Arabic. In a footnote on p. 380 Leroy writes that it is a Karshuni text, Paris Syr. 65 that he has transposed into Arabic letters. It is different from the version in the *History of the Patriarchs*.¹ There is a brief notice on the Karshuni text by H. Zotenberg *Catalogue des manuscrits syriaques de Paris* (1872) p. 32.

The numbers in brackets throughout the translation are the page numbers of the Arabic text in Leroy's two articles: part 1 **390-400** and part 2 **33-41**. Arabic names have been rendered using the standard European form. Non-Arabic names have been rendered in the form most commonly used in English texts. I have used the term 'Anba' throughout, though it is merely the Arabic form of the Coptic 'Apa/Abba' (ⲁⲡⲁ/ⲁⲃⲃⲁ), according to dialect. Generally speaking, I have referred to the Patriarch by his name and the Fatimid ruler as al-Mu'izz or 'caliph'. I have omitted the invocations that follow various names, e.g. 'praise be to him'.

¹ An English version of this text, which may have been made by Aziz Atiya, can be consulted at: <https://sites.google.com/site/demontortoise2000/hist6-htm>. I have not used it here.

Historical Notes

First, the protagonists: Abraham, Simon and al-Mu'izz li Dîn Allâh. The Coptic patriarch is virtually unknown apart from the central feature of this story about the ability of faith to move a mountain, under the right circumstances. He is not attested in Coptic language sources. Simon too is known only from this story. His two sobriquets are اسكافى (shoemaker) and as الديغ (tanner). There are no texts written in Coptic that speak of him. The caliph, on the other hand is a well-known historical figure, who entered Egypt in 969 as Fatimid caliph from North Africa and built a new city, Cairo. The starting point for the miracle recorded in this story is an exchange between a Jew, a prosperous merchant named Mûsa, and a Jewish convert to Islam, Ya'qûb ibn Khillis,² who was the chief minister of the caliph. The exchange is generated by Mûsa's jealousy of Abraham's cordial relationship with the caliph. Mûsa wanted the caliph to test the credibility of the Christian claim that faith can move mountains. His suggestion was probably made to embarrass Abraham, and this may have been done within the framework of an inter-faith institution known as the المجلس (*majlis*), a session at which Muslims, Jews and Christians met.³

² The spelling in this text is always خلس

³ For a discussion of this institution cf. M.R. Cohen and S. Somekh

Second, places: the place most commonly mentioned in the text is Misr. The verb **مصر** seems to mean 'build, settle' and 'Egyptianize', but I do not know how they are related to each other. In this text it is never used as a verb but always as a place: either the entire country or the large area at the apex of the Delta. It parallels the name Egypt itself, which is the Greek form of *hwt-k3-ptḥ*, the 'soul chapel of Ptah', a name given to the entire residential area and pronounced something like 'ekepta' and by extension to the country itself. Generally speaking, the urbanized area at the apex of the Delta, now called Cairo, can be described as the northernmost development of an inhabited area that started 20 km further south c. 3100 BC at a place called *jnb ḥd* ('white walls'), which was supplemented, if not supplanted, by a toponym that was originally confined to the 6th Dynasty pyramid town of Pepi I (*mn-nfr*) and soon extended to the entire area in the Greek form Memphis. This development went via the place that came to be known as Babylon, which may have emerged, like 'ekepta' from an Egyptian form *pr-ḥꜥꜣ n jwnw* 'nile house of Heliopolis', the 'nile house' essentially being a place where the level of the inundation was measured. However, I do not know if there was ever any such structure at Babylon. The area was important because of its position at the beginning of the Nile-Red Sea canal. The largely Christian part of Cairo is still known as Misr Qadîma (Old Cairo), and it was north of here that the first Arab settlement known as Fustât developed, north of which Misr al Qâhira was constructed by the Fatimids.

'Interreligious *majâlis* in Fatimid Egypt' in H. Lazarus-Yagah et al. (ed.) *The Majlis* (2002) pp. 128 ff. It is clear from this and similar articles by one of the authors that Ya'qûb is a well-known figure from the collection of some 300,000 Hebrew documents, known collectively as the Cairo Geniza. This sort of meeting is evidence of al-Mu'izz's willingness to foster some sort of dialogue with other religions. To what extent this willingness was due to the personal open-mindedness of the caliph or to the position of a Shi'ite outsider in a largely Sunni community is, for me at least, a matter of speculation only.

Translation

In the name of God, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God

(390) With the help of God and his favour⁴ we will begin to give an account of the life of the holy father, blessed and virtuous, Anba Abraham the Syrian, 62nd spiritual Patriarch of the list⁵ of patriarchs, known as Ibn Âra'a.⁶ He died on Khoiak 6. In his time the mountain was moved, in the time of our ruler al-Mu'izz, the first of the caliph of the Islamic state.⁷ Our father Abraham was someone who dealt in transient mundane matters. But he became

⁴ This part of the opening formula of many Christian Arabic texts can be translated as something like the 'perfection of his success' (حسن توفيفه).

⁵ من عدد is probably something like the *Liber Pontificalis* of the Catholic Church

⁶ The name in Zotenberg *Catalogue* is ܐܒܪܗܡ, which would be transposed into Arabic as زرعة. It is not clear to me how Leroy, who transposed the text, could have understood the first letter of the Syriac as Arabic 'alif', but his Arabic text has ارعة, which of course he has rendered Ar'a in his translation.

⁷ The term used here, خلفاء, is the plural form of a title that is used infrequently in this text, in which al-Mu'izz is usually called ملك (king) in the early part of the text and الحاكم (ruler) in the later part, but I have consistently used the term 'caliph'. The Fatimid caliphate was set up in the early 900s in N. Africa and ran parallel with the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, which means that al-Mu'izz was caliph when he entered Egypt.

someone who dealt in precious spiritual matters. I will tell this under the protection of the Lord and with his blessing upon us. Amen. Glory be to God forever.

He said:⁸ He who lights the torches of reason with his law, who unlocks hearts with teaching and clarifies the path of life with his signs, who makes clear revelation and laws to the head priests with his guidance. who has verified the perfection of his goodness and made flesh his Word and revealed the inexplicable choice mysteries of his quintessence, let us glorify him for the abundant excellence in gratitude for this blessing worthy of the greatest and most complete acknowledgement which the tongue is unable to repeat and let us ask him to make us worthy to hear his divine words and please him with our acts, listening **(381)** and obeying the head priests, as we are told by him to keep the precepts and laws which have been laid down for us by our fathers, the apostles, in the peace of the Lord. Amen.

My beloved, I am eager to tell you the virtuous life and the wondrous deeds of Abraham and a little of what God (praise be to him)⁹ performed through him in terms of wonders and miracles,¹⁰ in the peace of the Lord. My beloved, at the death of Mena the 61st Patriarch, his flock was entrusted to the shepherd of shepherds, Our Lord Jesus Christ, glory be to him and his Father

⁸ It is not clear to me who the subject of this verb is.

⁹ Such phrases following the mention of God are not typical of Coptic texts and seem to indicate the influence of Islamic religious use, e.g. after the name of Muhammad 'peace be upon him'. I have omitted subsequent uses of them.

¹⁰ معجزات: often used of miracles performed by the Prophet.

and the living and holy Spirit. The see became vacant and all the bishops of Egypt, from the Delta and the Sa'ïd, came together with the scribes of Egypt and the priests of Alexandria.¹¹ Several days elapsed and they found no-one on whose advancement¹² they agreed.

There was in Misr (**391**) a Syrian merchant named Abraham ibn Zar'a.¹³ He used to donate money to widows, the needy, the poor and the sick. He was elderly with a long beard that went down to his chest, like that of our father the first Abraham. He was on particularly friendly terms with al- Mu'izz and his soldiers because of the merchandise and goods he dealt in and he was their agent. All the top people in Misr liked him and were generous to him. His kindness to the poor was a virtue. He was well-known for his uprightness, knowledge and work.

One day, when everyone was assembled in the Church of Sergius and Bacchus,¹⁴ the great martyrs, in Misr in Qasr al Jama'a,¹⁵ the

¹¹ This form of the name is never used in Coptic, where it is always ρακοτε.

¹² التقدمة

¹³ cf. note 4

¹⁴ Now known as Abu Sarga in Old Cairo. It was the episcopal see from the 7th cent. to 1047, when this honour was transferred to the Mu'allaqa (Hanging Church) by the Patriarch Christodoulus.

¹⁵ The reference is to the Fortress of Babylon. The word used here is الجمع (assembly), but it makes little sense. The 14 cent, historian al Maqrizi, in his work *Churches and Monasteries* ed. and tr. B. Evetts (1858), uses the name 'Fortress of the Candle' (الشمع). Evetts in his note on p. 72 suggests that the Arabic was merely a corruption of the Egyptian word for Egypt (Ⲭⲏⲙⲓ): the Fortress of Egypt. One possible difficulty with this is: how did the final vowel of the Egyptian word become a consonant (voiced pharyngeal fricative) in

bishops, priests, officials, for the feast, Abraham entered to pray in the church. One of the officials signalled to one of the bishops, saying: "You are looking for someone to be patriarch. This man is worthy. He has been sent by God." The bishops in attendance heard and approved this suggestion, but did not abandon their own feelings. By the will of God and with their agreement, one of the officials, a friend of Abraham, summoned him on the pretext of discussing business. When Abraham was in their midst, they all cried aloud in unison "This is the man chosen by the Lord." Abraham cried out: "I am not worthy of this office." They took him off without delay to Alexandria, where he was consecrated. Once he was installed on the throne of St Mark, he distributed his entire fortune to monasteries, the poor and the needy. He rooted out lax moral behaviour everywhere in his patriarchal jurisdiction. He forbade the clergy to accept gifts from anyone to promote him to some church office and anathematized¹⁶ this corrupt practice.

He forbade all the faithful to have concubines.¹⁷ Many thought this harsh, but those with concubines, when they learned of this, were afraid of God and the patriarchal anathema and sent their concubines away. They then presented themselves to the patriarch, where they did penance. He forgave them and absolved them. Only one man refused to comply. He was a member of the divan¹⁸

Arabic?

¹⁶ See also note 17 on 'excommunicate': احرَم

¹⁷ سرية. HP p. 136 adds 'and fathering children with them'.

¹⁸ This Persian word often refers to high government office. The institution

with a high position in government. He was not afraid of God or the anathema of the patriarch, who begged and patiently pleaded with him, making him promises. But the man did not relent and was not afraid to be ruined by God, even though he saw that Abraham prostrated himself at his feet. After this Abraham continued to instruct him (392) encourage him to improve. He became humble in the name of Christ the Creator and went to his house. When the recalcitrant one heard that Abraham was coming, he bolted the door. Abraham waited outside for two hours, knocking on the door. But it was not opened and there was no word. When Abraham realized that the wretch would rather entrust himself to his own hands than the care of Christ and that he had become utterly corrupt, he knew that he had nothing to blame himself for because of him and thought it was proper to cut him from the body¹⁹ lest he corrupt the other limbs. He took full responsibility and excommunicated²⁰ him and shook off the dust of his dirty sandals at his polluted door.

God revealed a sign at that moment to those present: the stone threshold of the house broke into two. A miracle. But the wretch was not moved. God then gave another sign of his justice: the man lost all his money and was left without a dirhem, lost his position, became an object of scorn, contracted a painful illness and died a cruel death after having had his hand cut off in the time of al

dates back to the early caliphs.

¹⁹ I take this to be a metaphor for the 'body' of faithful Christians. This detail is absent from *HP*, as are the details of this man's subsequent life.

²⁰ As for 'anathematize': احرم

Hâkim, and this was a lesson²¹ to all. He was defiled through much sinning and his punishment inspired great fear.

It was during Abraham's patriarchate that the caliph and his retinue went out to visit one of the monasteries, though he was a Muslim ruler, and was able to witness the moving of a mountain from its place at a word from Abraham.

This happened when the country was under Muslim rule and the ruler was al-Mu'izz li Dîn Allâh, who constantly summoned Abraham and took his advice in all matters, asked him for his blessing and wanted him to live in Misr, because as patriarch he was resident in Alexandria.

The vizier of al-Mu'izz was a Jew named Ya'qûb ibn Khillis, who had come with the caliph from the west and become a Muslim with his help. Ibn Khillis had a Jewish friend called Mûsa, who had received great largesse from the caliph and become very wealthy through his friendship with the vizier. When he saw the friendship between Abraham and the caliph and Abraham's privileged position with him, he became jealous and devised a plot against him. He said to al-Mu'izz: "I wish you to send the Christian patriarch to me to debate with him in your presence. He will explain his religion and I mine." The caliph did not confront the patriarch in this way and did not propose to him (393) a debate with the Jew. He merely said to him: "If you want to send one of the bishops to debate with him, do so," They agreed on a

²¹ عبرة

date for the meeting. One of the bishops present was one who occupied the see of Alexander of Ashmûnein called Severus,²² known as Ibn al Muqaff'a. He was a scribe before becoming a bishop and divinely gifted with a profound knowledge of Arabic, so that he wrote many books, sermons and debates. Those who read his books knew his ability and the depth of his knowledge. On many occasions he debated with leading Muslim sheikhs at the request of al-Mu'izz and, with the power and blessing of God, vanquished them. He was chosen by Abraham and it was agreed that Severus should go to the palace, where Mûsa and the vizier Ibn Khillis were present. They sat for some time in silence: "You are not talking of what you are here to discuss." He then turned to Abraham: "Will you not tell your representative to say what he has to say?" Abraham said to the bishop: "Speak, my son, for God will give you success." The bishop said to the caliph: "It is not permitted to address a Jew in the presence of the Prince of the Faithful." Mûsa said: "You shame me in front of the caliph and his vizier when you say that I am ignorant."²³ The bishop said to him: "Know this, Jew, that when the truth appears, the caliph will not be angry." al-Mu'izz said: "There will be no anger in the course of the debate, but each party will set forth the arguments and explanations that suit his case." The bishop said: "Jew, it is not I who will convince you, but a great and glorious prophet of God." "Which one?" "Isaiah, who says in the opening of his book: *The bull knows its master and the ass knows the stable of its master,*

²² Brière says in a note (p.393) that the name in the ms. is encircled and in the margin is the word *مذموم* 'heretic'. Why this should be is not clear.

²³ The beginning of a brief anti-Jewish diatribe.

but Israel does not know me."²⁴ al-Mu'izz said to Mûsa: "Is this true?" He said that it was. The bishop then said: "Did not God say that the animals were more intelligent than you? I am therefore not permitted, in the course of discussion before the caliph, (394) to speak to one who is less intelligent than the animals and whom God classifies as ignorant. al-Mu'izz admired this reasoning and ordered them to go away. As a result of this a cordial enmity developed between them. The vizier was so angry that he sought to make the patriarch stumble,²⁵ because his friend had been humiliated in front of the caliph. But the Lord Christ protects his chosen and his servants.

One day the vizier found an opportunity and told the caliph of the passage in the Gospel that the one who had faith no bigger than a mustard seed could tell a mountain to move and fall into the sea and it would.²⁶ The caliph should use his usual intelligence to test the truth of this claim and he would see the absurdity and mendacity of it when they failed to do it and treat these impostors as they deserved. The caliph was pleased by this suggestion and summoned Abraham: "What about this passage? Is it in your Gospel?" Abraham said that it was. The caliph said to him: "You know that there are many thousands of Christians in this land, and I want you to bring one of them to me to perform this miracle in my presence, unless you do it yourself. If you do not do as I say, I swear that I will destroy you with the sword." The patriarch was

²⁴ Is. 1, 3

²⁵ Abraham was not directly culpable but clearly regarded as responsible.

²⁶ Matth. 17, 20

dumbfounded and became very afraid and did not know what to say. But the Almighty restored his senses and said: "Give me three days to pray to God that he might make your disposition more favourable to his subjects." The caliph agreed. Abraham went down to his cell in Old Cairo.²⁷ He assembled all the priest and dignitaries and, in tears, told them of the caliph's demand. Now, at this time there were monks from Wadi Habib²⁸ at Misr. He instructed them all that none was to return to his monastery within the following three days and that all were to pray in the church. This is what they did: they prayed with sobs and moans, weeping that God might save them from this calamity. Abraham did not eat during this period, either day or night. Some fasted from night to night, taking only bread, salt and a little water.

Abraham remained on his feet (395), weeping his prayers to God and motionless. The blessed gathering took place in the Church of Our Blessed Virgin Mary at Qasr al Sham'a, known as al Mu'allaqa.²⁹ Abraham also told those in monasteries and convents in Misr al Qâhira³⁰ and kept them informed. He ordered them to fast without interruption for the three days and nights, to pray to

²⁷ مصر العتيقة. The usual adjective now is القديمة. The Arabs built their first settlement (al Fustât) to the north of it and over 300 years later the city of Cairo (further on identified as مصر القاهرة) was built by the Fatimids quite a bit further to the north of that.

²⁸ To the northwest of Cairo. Coptic name: Ⲫⲏⲏⲧ.

²⁹ The 'Hanging Church', because it is perched high up on the south gate of the fortress of Babylon and can be entered only via a staircase leading to it from the ground.

³⁰ There were Christian foundations in the Fatimid city, e.g. the 10th cent. Church of the Virgin in Harat al Zuweila.

the Almighty and be humble before him, as well to the Virgin, the glory of mankind. Abraham took no rest because he was their shepherd and every shepherd is responsible for his flock. In the words of David the prophet: *I will not rest my temples or my eyes or assuage my eyelids until I have saved the people of God.*³¹ He raised his hands broken-hearted to heaven and spoke to the Lord:

“Lord, do not make us laughable before foreign nations. Comfort us by delivering us from them. Save your people and bless your people. Be merciful, save us and deliver us. Forgive us and do not punish us in accordance with the wickedness of our action. Do not visit upon us the sins we have committed. Do not lead us into this harsh trial. Be well-meaning and merciful. You know the condition of your subjects, that they have no-one to intercede with you on their behalf in good words. No-one cares for them or is kind to them, except you, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us, for you said, and your word is true, that if one has faith as small as a mustard seed, tell a mountain to move, and it will move without difficulty. Our enemies have seized upon this saying. Act with us as you always do. If we lack confidence or faith, if our hearts are full of doubt, do not be harsh with us, but let your word be a light before these unbelievers so that your holy name will be glorified.”

The patriarch repeated this prayer continually, praying with the glorious psalms and formulae of praise, (396) as he stood before the column with the portrait of the BVM. Each time he completed his prayer he raised his tearful eyes, begging the merciful Virgin. He remained in this position for three whole days. On the morning

³¹ Ps. 132, 4ff. The final part has a different wording.

of the third day he redoubled his prayers and pleas and applied himself with greater force to meditation, mortifying his flesh to the point of exhaustion.³² He then remembered that the envoys of the governor were coming in the morning to take him to the governor. He implored God humbly and wept bitterly, with great sadness for the people of God. He fell asleep where he stood near the column. The Lady of Mercy spoke to him in his sleep and said with a joyous face: "What is wrong with you?" He replied: "Do you not see my sorrow and the situation the caliph has placed me in? He has told me that if I do not perform the miracle of the mountain, he will kill all Christians and make them disappear from his land by the sword." The Virgin said: "Have no fear. My beloved son is with you and he will help you. I too will help, for I will not forget the tears you have shed in my church. But arise and go down³³ from here. Leave by the new gate that leads to the great market, and there you will find a man carrying a pitcher of water on his shoulder. His single eye marks him out. Take him with you, and he will perform the miracle." The patriarch awoke and was troubled. He walked to the gate without acknowledging anyone he knew. He found the gate locked and felt doubt in his heart: "I think the devil is playing with me."

He called the gatekeeper, who opened the gate for him. The first person he met was the one he had been told about in the vision. He said: "It is the sign³⁴ of the Lord. Have mercy on these

³² الحسر

³³ This would be meant quite literally in the case of the al Mu'allqa church.

³⁴ The Arabic text has مضاسة, which has been transposed from Syriac

people.” Abraham then told him why he had come to find him, the man replied: “Forgive me, but I am a sinner, and I am not able to do this.” Abraham said to him: “In truth, my son, you are truly the one on whom the safety of the world depends.” And the water-carrier said to him: (397) “My father, I am a sinner with many faults.” Now, this man had formerly been a shoemaker called Simon. One day he was visited by a woman because of her shoes and her leg was uncovered. She was very beautiful. When Simon saw her leg, he was shocked. He looked at her with longing. He then recalled the Gospel passage in which Jesus said: *If your eye offends you, tear it out and throw it away. It is better to enter life with one eye and than to have two and be thrown into the fire of Hell.*³⁵

When the shoemaker realized that his eye was looking at the woman's leg with desire, he promptly struck it with a metal punch he used for leather work and tore out his eye, which fell on to his cheek. At the sight of this the woman became alarmed and cried out: “This man is mad.” He said to her that a spirit had left him and he was the most reasonable being on earth. She then left him. From that day on he found no more work as a shoemaker and went to work as a hireling³⁶ for a tanner. He distributed all of his money, apart from what he needed for food, to the poor, the indigent and the needy.³⁷ This holy man went around filling up³⁸

مكسرهم, but neither is attested in either language

³⁵ Matth. 18, 9

³⁶ بالجرة

³⁷ A somewhat decorative phrase: ارباب الفاقة

water containers for churches and monasteries. As for the wretched woman for whose sake he had torn out his eye, she was full of admiration for him and told her neighbours what he had done and the boastful woman wagered with them that she would induce him to sin with her. The women placed their wagers and said: "A man who behaves as he does and has taken out his eye because of a glance will never do that." But this woman employed all her skills and artifices to excite his lust. He was not disturbed by this and yielded not an inch to her. He did not even look at her and prayed to God to strengthen him against her wiles. He resisted her courageously and repulsed her. After she had wearied of this and had no more tricks to use against him, she said: "Listen to me, I know you. If you do not give me satisfaction, I will hand you over to someone who will have no mercy with you, and I will call you a liar." Simon said: "Use all your wiles. God will support me and cover me (398) and protect and save me from your wickedness." The vile woman knew that he had vanquished her with the power of God and she withdrew in some embarrassment. Simon, meanwhile, continued with his water deliveries until the Virgin told Abraham of his secret. Abraham took Simon with him and made him stay there. He said: "My son, it has been revealed to me that the salvation of the people depends on you." He made Simon stay where he was until the envoys of the caliph arrived who were to come and look for him and the whole people. At the appointed time the envoys came to the patriarch together with the chamberlains, the emirs and dignitaries, and they escorted

³⁸ This rather colloquial formulation is an attempt to express *كان يعمل*, which I think expresses the notion of repeated action in the past.

Abraham and Simon, the faithful, bishops and deacons with them. They were carrying censers, crosses and candles. They were brought before al-Mu'izz, who said to them: "The three days have elapsed." They replied: "Yes, lord, do with us as you will, but the Lord will reveal his strength."³⁹ The caliph left, followed by all the people, and went to the foot of the mountain. He said to the Christians: "I want you to make this mountain move, to take it from where it is and put it elsewhere. This will not be difficult for you. Your Gospel says so." They replied: "My lord, we ask you to be fair." He said: "What more do you want me to do for you? I have already given you three days. What do you want me to do now? They replied: "We would like our Muslim masters to be the first to pray and ask the mountain to move. Then we would like the Jews to pray. We will be the last to pray." The caliph said he would do as they wished so that they would have no further complaint to make. They said: "To hear is to obey." The Muslims made their ablutions and purified themselves, for they believe that water purifies and they made the call prayer⁴⁰ and prayed for a long time. Some of the venerable sheikhs called on the mountain in a loud voice and ordered it to move. They came next with their great rabbi. They prayed until the caliph became angry. They cried aloud in unison for the mountain to leave its place, but the mountain did not move. The Muslims then came forward and said to the caliph: "Lord, is this passage written in our books or those of the Christians?" He said: "Those of the Christians." (399) They

³⁹ قدرة

⁴⁰ اذان

said: “Why are you shaming Muslims by making them mix with infidels? There will be no shame, unless the mountain moves from its place through the prayers of the Christians. If it does not move, this is what will happen: as Islam is the true religion, I will not leave any of the Christians over two days alive. They will be put to the sword. I will take away their women, and their children will become orphans and I will cleanse the earth of them. They will henceforth be unable to call on a good reason.” He summoned Abraham to his presence. He asked: “Do you have anything to say.” Abraham replied that he did not. The caliph said: “What are we waiting for? Call upon the mountain to move.” At that moment Abraham ordered all the Christians to sing *Kyrie eleison*⁴¹ in a loud voice, and the crowd repeated it four hundred times. They then offered incense and pronounced the words of absolution. The patriarch stood in front of the crowd and Simon the shoemaker stood behind him. He instructed Simon to call out to the mountain and said to him: “Speak, and I will speak after you, and if pleases the Almighty, the mountain will move and we will all be saved.” Abraham and Simon called in unison: “Blessed mountain, I order you, by the truth of the one who set you down there where you are, to leave your place and come to us, and not to cause the loss of any of God's creatures.” At that moment the mountain moved from its place and advanced gradually towards the assistants. The caliph cried out: “Stop it, lest it kill people and annihilate them.” Abraham ordered the mountain to stop moving, and it did. According to eye-witnesses the mountain, when it moved, made a

⁴¹ كيريا اليسون

loud noise and caused a trembling and shaking of the earth. People thought it was the Resurrection. Pregnant women in Misr and the surroundings gave birth because of the trembling. People thought the sky was falling in on to the earth.

The caliph ordered Abraham to return home, and he did so with his retinue, honoured and blessed. There was indescribable joy and happiness among the people. That evening the caliph sent for Abraham to come and he came, a highly honoured guest. When he arrived, the caliph dismissed his servants from (400) his presence and he kissed the hand and embraced the feet of the patriarch, who was unable to stop him. He said to Abraham: "I recognize the truth and accept without doubt that the Christian faith is the true one. But tell me, patriarch, what is the arrangement⁴² of your teaching? Explain to me how the Almighty has a son? Did God marry a woman to have a son with her?" The patriarch said: "This is unworthy of a man such as you, intelligent, educated, magnanimous and worthy. He who says this blasphemes against God. Heaven forbid that God should have a son with a woman, like the rest of us. No! He sent the Word to Mary daughter of Joachim, perfect in purity and full of grace, without fault, utterly undefiled, a choice receptacle of purity. It was Gabriel who was sent to her. At the sight of him she was seized by fear, but the angel reassured her and pacified her. He greeted her and spoke sweetly to her and revealed to her the mystery of which Paul the apostle says that it has remained concealed since before the

⁴² ترتيب

creation of the worlds.⁴³ When the angel said: “Greetings to you, full of grace, the Lord is with you.”⁴⁴ At that moment, when Mary heard this and gave her consent, the Word became incarnate in her, and her pregnancy lasted nine months, like that of other women. Nine months later she gave birth, as the angel had foretold: *The child born of you will be holy and be called the son of God.*⁴⁵ After his birth, he grew, like other children. At the age of thirty he was baptized by John, son of Zachary, in the Jordan River and he bequeathed to us his life as a model to follow. In the Gospel it says: *The one who is not baptized with water and the spirit will not see the happiness of the kingdom.*⁴⁶ According to our teaching, he who is not baptized by a priest and dies unexpectedly, even if in the same position as Abraham, will not see the grace and sanctity of God.

(33) Even if he fasted like Jeremiah, were as perfect as Abraham the friend of God, were to endure all sorts of trials like Job the Just, were as perfect as Elijah; even if he performed miracles like the saints, revived the dead, anyone who died without having been baptized by a priest would go a merciless place where there is no rest and he would never see the blessing of God or the power. For the Gospel, whose words are true, says: *If one is not born of water and the Spirit, one will not see the kingdom of God.*⁴⁷ This word

⁴³ Ref. to Col. 1, 26. The expression 'of the worlds' seems to quite common in Islam, e.g. Koran sura 1, 3

⁴⁴ Lk. 1, 28

⁴⁵ Lk. 1, 35

⁴⁶ John 3, 5

⁴⁷ John 3, 5

will continue to be true even when heaven and earth cease to be. Our Saviour said: *Heaven and earth will pass away but my word will not.*⁴⁸ This teaching is fundamental to the Christian doctrine: **(34)** baptism. It is basic to Christianity, the principle, the light, the strength, the guarantee, the support and the virtue. An unbaptized child of one day or one hour would not see the kingdom of God, and the parents commit a great sin of negligence if they neglect to baptize the child. Has this child, my lord, committed a sin and does the child know how to distinguish right from wrong?" The caliph said: "No." The patriarch then said: "The word of God in the Gospel, that an unbaptized child will not see the kingdom of God, is sufficient authority, as the passage cited earlier: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will not.* My lord, faith without baptism has no value. As for your question about how the Word, by which heaven and earth were created, became flesh in the womb of the Virgin, the glorious Gospel says that the Word became incarnate. At the same, your Koran says of the Virgin that God inspired her with his spirit and that Christ, the wonder of the world, came forth from her."⁴⁹ It is said in your Koran that he spoke while still in the cradle and that he healed the deaf, the dumb, the leprous and the paralytic, that he resuscitated the dead and performed miracles of all sorts. You allow that the word of

⁴⁸ Matth. 24, 35

⁴⁹ The only passage of the Koran known to me that deals with this Sura 3, 47. but it does not mention 'inspiring' (نفخ). I can say nothing of the other claims made in this passage about the Koran's testimony of Christ, other than that it seems clear that 'Messiah' is used as a name and, unlike in Christianity and Judaism, not as a title. There are apparently 15 suras in he Koran mention Jesus and Mary, but I have not studied them.

two or three witnesses is valid. The same is true of the Torah and the Gospel, and your book testifies of Christ that he is the Spirit of God and his Word.

“The Jews err by three thousand years in their evaluation and are still waiting for him. As for us Christians, all of our books, old and new, attest that he is the one designated by the prophecies and that it is through him that the heavens and the earth were created and founded by the spirit of his mouth. Paul says of Christ that God created the world through him and that he is the splendour of his glory and eternal image.”

The caliph said: “Patriarch, I believe you, for I have seen the mountain move at your order and tremble at your command. I do not doubt you. But you say that the world was created by him and that he is the splendour of God's glory and eternal image. You have made two and suggest that there are two Gods.” The patriarch replied: “God would not be pleased by this. We say that God is one and the Lord is one, and that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are **(35)** one. The Father is the substantial principle, the Son is the Eternal Word and the Holy Spirit emanates⁵⁰ from the Father. They are not two substances or two separate beings divided from each other, but one substance, one God, one Lord. Only the presence of the Word is clothed in a glorious body, has spoken in a live voice with people, has lived among them and possessed all human traits except for original sin. He did not come from sin and never committed it. He did not

⁵⁰ منبثق

come by the will of man or the flesh. He was conceived by God in a generation that surpasses the human intellect. The philosophers of Greece have been unable to penetrate this mystery and it is beyond the understanding of man.” The caliph then said:

“Patriarch, why is all this necessary when God has the power to do what he wants and is in a position of might?”⁵¹ The patriarch said: “Lord, the apostle Paul says: *Who has ever counselled God and who has ever known his mind?*”⁵² Just as it is impossible to know what a person is thinking, there is no angel or man that can penetrate the intimate thoughts of God, only the Holy Spirit. Who will understand the divine plan in the Incarnation, the wonder of wonders, the birth of Our Lord from the Virgin, who remained intact after the birth and whose virginity was never to suffer. You Muslims call Jesus the wonder of the world. I will give you an example, my lord, that you can understand: caliphs, kings, chosroes,⁵³ sovereign, caesars, pharaohs, when they wished not to be recognized as kings but to pass for ordinary individuals, would disguise themselves as merchants and so on and went about unrecognized among the '*ulama*',⁵⁴ walking through the markets and among buyers and sellers, transacting business with them. They would sometimes hear insults and harsh words levelled against them. They let them pass,⁵⁵ pretending that they had not heard them. They then went back to real life, with its business and

⁵¹ محل عزة

⁵² om. 11, 34

⁵³ A Persian word that acquired the meaning 'king'

⁵⁴ علماء 'learned', i.e. in the Koran

⁵⁵ تجاوزوا

pleasure, oblivious of what had happened. In the same way Our Lord mixed with people and did what they did, except commit sin. From the moment of his birth he had to listen to and endure from the unbelieving Jews things unworthy of his goodness. Sometimes they made him simply the son of Joseph the carpenter⁵⁶ **(36)** and sometimes they claimed that he expelled demons through Beelzebub, the archdemon⁵⁷ or that he was possessed.⁵⁸ When he tried to instruct them and reproach them for their wickedness, they picked up stones to stone him, but he hid from them and did not return. That day they witnessed extraordinary miracles. Our Lord healed the one born blind, who was also paralytic, by taking some earth, spitting on it and anointing his eyes⁵⁹ and restored his body to perfection to demonstrate that man had been created from earth and that the one who effortlessly made perfect the body of the blind man was the same one who had effortlessly created Adam. He ordered, and it happened. We say of him that he was here yesterday, is here today and will be forever. Know, my lord that everything returns to its principle and its element. Our Lord came from God and went back to him. His light from light, true God from true God. He was from God and, having saved humanity from the depths of disbelief and corruption, went back to him. When he ascended to heaven, he sent his chosen apostles to all parts of the world. He gave them the power to heal the sick, expel demons, open the eyes of the blind and revive the dead. He blew

⁵⁶ For example, the disbelief expressed in John 6, 42

⁵⁷ Matth. 13, 55

⁵⁸ John 7, 20

⁵⁹ Ref. to John 9, 6

on them and said: *Receive the Holy Spirit, and from that day they spoke all languages and were able to foretell the future.*⁶⁰ They worked with great zeal to clean the world of drunkenness and bring men back to the knowledge of the truth.

The entire universe, my lord, consists of twenty-four parts and twenty-three of them are Christian while Islam has only one part. Your Majesty knows that this part was won by the sword and God is witness that most Muslims hold different views from those which they appear to hold and that they are afraid of violence and many of them secretly go to Church but openly to the mosque, where they pray without conviction. When they are ill, they turn to Christ, of whom they have a representative image⁶¹ in them because of the intensity of their faith. No-one comes to you (37) of his own accord, but they are dragged there against their will. You tempt men with riches and gifts, expensive garments and magnificent presents, the flattering vanities of this world which are always so attractive to people. With these favours you attract a certain number. Others come to you for fear of punishment.

I do not have to say more or give long explanations or extended praise of our religion in order to demonstrate its excellence and superiority over all other religions. Your Majesty has seen the miracle accomplished by the power of our religion as a testimony to its dignity and glory. You can be sure that the minds of most who saw it were changed and shaken. Their faith is no longer as

⁶⁰ The following sentence repeats the previous one, so I have left it out.

⁶¹ *مصور مشخص*

strong after seeing their sheikhs and '*ulama*' powerless to move the mountain. They were not called by God because he did not grant their wishes. We, poor as we are, implored the Lord and asked him not to make us a shameful laughing stock before the world and not to repel our prayer. When we prayed to the mountain, it moved with all the other mountains next to it,⁶² and if we had not asked God to stop the movement, the whole area would have been destroyed. What your Majesty saw comes from the excellence of our faith and proves its truth. If your Majesty wishes to be saved and come over to us, he will do so willingly and he will feel no doubt. He will see things in Christianity greater than I have shown him and will realize that so far he has seen or understood nothing. He will soon learn everything from me.”

The caliph then asked the patriarch: “Ask me for anything you need today before tomorrow. What I can, God willing, I will do it soon, for I know that I am about to die. Delay is subject to accidents. Whatever you want, I will do it, and it will be fixed forever.”

The patriarch said: “My lord, you have substantially increased the *jizya* tax⁶³ for Christians and taken harsh measures against them, much harsher than normal, and you are destroying them. But now that God has lifted from your heart the veil of foolishness and has illuminated your heart and has stimulated your soul and

⁶² The Muqattam Hills are a range of hills.

⁶³ Levied on non-Muslims

intelligence and you have moved from one condition to another, I beg you to desist from your oppression of them, for Our Lord says in the Gospel: *Here I am with you (38) every day until the end of time.*⁶⁴ Know that God will not abandon this humble community. He will always bring forth shepherds for them. He will take care of them and be merciful to them.”

The caliph said: “Ask me for something else, and I will do it. What you have just asked is easy and of little importance.” The patriarch replied: “Will you please occupy yourself immediately with the salvation of your soul.” The caliph then said: “Baptize me tonight with your own blessed hand.” The patriarch replied: “That is not possible, for this must be done in a church. Know, my lord, that as long as you remain among Muslims you will behave like them. As long as you allow the sheikhs, the qadis and '*ulama*' access to your person to strengthen your belief, they will continue to tell you that Christians are impious and magicians and that their magic is powerful enough to move mountains and enable us to see someone who can move the earth by striking a piece of cloth and invoking the architect of the world, who can call on spirits to descend from above to make of us magicians and astrologers and, as enemies, say of each other, they can do everything possible. I can tell you now that, as long as you remain unbaptized, you will continue to listen to and be swayed by them. I warn you that the enemy, that is Satan who seeks to sow darnel⁶⁵ among all people, will enlarge your kingdom in your eyes and exaggerate the

⁶⁴ Matth. 28, 20

⁶⁵ الزوان

greatness of your throne. He will tempt and say to you: 'How can you leave your place and your rank, your greatness and your kingdom?' He will paint an attractive portrait of women, children, concubines, villas, palaces and wealth and he will tell you how difficult it would be for you to leave your present situation. This is my warning. I also tell you, my lord, that if you leave these transient goods, you will receive a hundred for one. Do not say: 'How can I leave what my eye can see for what it cannot see?' Know that that which is nearest to you is that which covers your eyelids and all the transient goods that you leave behind will be kept in a stronghold by the Lord, who will give you more than you wish. You will see happiness, a kingdom and goods that the ear has not heard, the heart has not thought of and the eye has not seen."⁶⁶

When the caliph (39) saw that dawn was breaking, he said to Abraham: "How short this night seemed in your company!" Then he repeated what he had promised him: "My father, tell me what I can do for you before I renounce my empire." Abraham replied: "You can please re-build the church of the great martyr St Mercurius."⁶⁷ This church was built in an unsound way and was later destroyed."

Near this church was a barn⁶⁸ in the enclosure of Khan al Qasab.

⁶⁶ 1 Cor. 2, 9

⁶⁷ The church that contains the so-called Baptistery of the Sultan (al-Mu'izz).

⁶⁸ شونة. Taken over from Coptic Ⲭⲉⲩⲏⲏⲓ, derived in turn from an Ancient Egyptian word. For details of the etymology cf. J. Černý *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (1976) p. 258. The church is also known as Abu Sîfain ('He of the

The caliph had a large church built on the site of the church and storehouse. He also ordered the re-building of the Church of al Mo'allaqa at Misr near the Qasr al Shama'a, the walls of which had become dilapidated. He ordered that a document authorizing⁶⁹ this be written for him and he released money from the treasury⁷⁰ to pay for it. Abraham took the document and promised him that God would confirm him in his faith. He then took his leave and departed full of joy. He made his way to the Church of Mercurius and read out the document in public. The shopkeepers and other residents assembled and said: "Even if we are put to the sword, we will not allow any building activity on this church."

Abraham then returned to the caliph and told him what had happened. He flew into a violent rage and left immediately on horseback with his soldiers. He arrived at the site of the church and ordered foundations to be dug, and this was done quickly. He assembled a large number of masons and ordered them to start work. No-one dared to say word except for a sheikh who was praying with the shopkeepers in a nearby mosque. He was the one who gathered the crowds and told them to stop the patriarch building his church. He came forward and threw himself on the foundations and said; "I am willing to die today rather than allow anyone to build a church here." The caliph learned of this and

Two Swords), after the soldier Mercurius north of the wall of the Babylon Fortress, The first building was destroyed and turned into a sugarcane storehouse (خان القصب). It was rebuilt at Abraham and served as the Cairo seat of the Coptic patriarch from 1300 to 1500.

⁶⁹ سجل يتمكنيه

⁷⁰ بيت المال

ordered him to be stoned and build over his body. When plaster and stones were being hurled upon him, he tried to get up but the workers would not let him because the caliph had ordered the man to be buried in the foundations. When Abraham saw this, he went down of his own accord and threw himself at the feet of the caliph to intercede for the sheikh, who ordered him to be brought up from (40) from the foundations out of which he had despaired of coming alive and well, having seen death so close. The caliph returned to his palace and no-one was able to say a word until the church had been re-built. He restored al Mo'allaqa and other churches in need of repair without the least opposition from anyone. He also restored all the churches of Alexandria and spent considerable amounts of money on this.

Ibn Khillis, of whom we spoke earlier, used all his influence to destroy a certain Qazmân ibn Mîna⁷¹ and the angry caliph wanted to kill him. But the Lord saved him by revealing his innocence to the caliph and he realized how dishonest⁷² he was. The caliph had the vizier executed and replaced him with Qazmân after showering honours on him. Qazmân took his fortune of 90,000 dinars and gave it to Abraham before departing to a faraway place. Before he left he said: "If I die, use this money on churches, monasteries, the poor and the needy." Qazmân was away for a long time, so Abraham spent the money as instructed. After some time Qazmân returned and reclaimed his money. Abraham told him what he had done, and Qazmân was overjoyed

⁷¹ I can find no further information about this person

⁷² كذب

and thanked him for his excellent work.

As for the caliph, when he saw Abraham engaged on restoring churches, left the citadel⁷³ by a secret gate for a monastery, where he was baptized. He became a monk and gave himself to all sorts of unimaginable ascetic practices. His retreat became a byword in Misr and the provinces, and women praying to God for children would say: "God willing, you will leave my body as the caliph left the city."

As for the mountain which the Egyptians call al Muqatta' (the cut mountain) and is also known as the 'pruned' mountain,⁷⁴ because its summit, which was once level, has been split into three sections about twenty cubits⁷⁵ from each other. It was a great miracle that happened in his patriarchate, which lasted for three and a half years, when the Lord wished (41) him to go to his rest. There was a man named Bâby el Surur al Kabir, a powerful man with many concubines. Abraham told him to send them away, but he did not. Abraham anathematized and excommunicated him. But this man was not afraid of God and had no respect for people. Treacherously he made the saint drink a strong poison, which caused him to die. Abraham went to eternal happiness while the impious wretch was consigned to eternal hell, where the worm does not sleep and there is gnashing of teeth.

⁷³ القلع. Construction on this did not start until 1176.

⁷⁴ المقضب and المقطم. The name of the range is المقطم, and the nicknames probably refer to what happened to the range as a result of the miracle

⁷⁵ ذراع

This great Abraham was like the Old Testament patriarch through works pleasing to God. He was installed among the just in heaven in the place prepared by God. We beg him to forgive our sins, to be indulgent to our faults and lapses, to efface our iniquities, to endow us with enough grace to accomplish good things before we die, to remove all demonic temptation, sickness and temporal tests from us. Let him make us hear this joyful passage: “Come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you before the creation of the world, which the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard and the heart cannot conceive, through the intercession of the Our Lady, the angels, the fathers and the prophets, the apostles and holy martyrs and all those who have been pleasing to God through good works and will continue to be so. Amen.”

End of the story about the moving of the mountain by Abraham the Syrian. The story was finished on the 3rd of Qanûn el Awwal, in the Greek calendar. The author was the most wretched servant of God, Kyriakos, monk and priest of Diyarbekir of the province of Mârdîn from the blessed and victorious Wastira. May God be merciful to all those who are merciful to the scribe, the reader⁷⁶ and their relatives.

⁷⁶ Ar, القارى. The Gk term would be ἀναγνώστης



 **SAINT SHENOUDA PRESS**