

FAITH THAT
MOVED MOUNTAINS



HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS
OF ALEXANDRIA

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This excerpt is from the “History of the Patriarchs of Egypt”. It retells the story of the miracle of moving the mountain at the time of Patriarch Abraham ibn Zar’ah the 62nd Patriarch of Alexandria

The Appointment of the Patriarch

There was a man, a Syrian merchant, whose name was Abraham ibn Zar'ah. He used to give alms to the widows, the poor, the hidden, and the feeble. He was an old man whose long beard resembled that of our father Abraham the first patriarch. He was highly regarded during the reign of Al-Mu'izz, the first Caliph of the Fatimid dynasty. In his days, he ordered that the event of the moving of the mountain be explained in this biography. May God exalt his rank and declare his sanctity and purity, and what God did to him, in all the ends of the earth.

King Al-Mu'izz and the men of his State were loved and honoured by the people of Cairo on account of his goods and of the ways in which he used to deal with. One day while the people were assembling in the Church of the two martyrs, Sergius and Bacchus in Kasr as-Sam, being a Catholic church, and while the bishops and the priests and the archons were assembling for the feast, Abraham ibn Zar'ah entered to pray in the Church. Then one of the archons made a sign to one of the bishops saying, "You are seeking for him who is fit for the patriarchate, and lo, God has sent to us him who is worthy of it". A number of those who were present heard this, and his words pleased them, but they did not show it. Then one of Abraham's friends, an archon, called him, as if he wished to speak to him about something. When he advanced and arrived in their company, they all cried out, "This is he whom the Lord has chosen". They seized him at once and put fetters of

iron upon him. He cried out and wept and said: "I am not worthy of this charge". They took him away at once and journeyed with him to Alexandria and consecrated him as Patriarch there.

His Achievements

Abraham abolished simony, which the patriarchs used to practice at the time. He gave alms of all that he possessed as he had great wealth, and his memory was honoured more than that of those who were before him. Al-Mu'izz used to call upon him for advice on what concerned him and to receive his blessing, and he asked him to live in Cairo.

When Abraham saw a number of the archons taking concubines and begetting children by them, he excommunicated them who did it. They all obeyed him except one high archon from among the chiefs of the Diwans, who had concubines. He did not send them away, and he disobeyed the patriarch. The father Abba Abraham the patriarch made a number of requests towards him, but he did not obey him and continued in his evil deed, as the viper which does not hearken to the voice of the charmer, and as one who does not take the medicine which the physician prepares. Then the patriarch rode and went to his house that he might speak with him, and he said within himself, "Perhaps if I go to him he will have respect before me". When they informed the archon that

the patriarch was coming to him, he shut the door of his house. When the patriarch reached the door, he stood and knocked at it for two hours, but no one answered. Then he excommunicated the archon and shook off the dust from his feet on the threshold which was of flint-stone, and it was divided in two. This miracle was manifested to the people, and all those who were in Cairo feared the patriarch. After a few days, that archon perished with all that he possessed.

The Evil plot against the Church

The prime minister of the king al-Mu‘izz was a Jewish man whose name was Bu Jacob ibn Killis, and he came with al-Mu‘izz from the West and had embraced Al-Islam at his hands. The prime minister had a Jewish friend whose name was Moses. He was accorded great fortune by al-Mu‘izz on account of his friendship for his prime minister. When he saw the love of the king for the patriarch and the access which he had to al-Mu‘izz, he envied him and took counsel against him. He said to Al-Mu‘izz, “I desire that you shouldn’t cause the patriarch of the Christians to be brought that I may dispute with him before you so that he may expose to you his religion”. Al-Mu‘izz did not confront the patriarch with this and he did not expose him to a disputation with the Jew, but he did say to him, “If you see fit to summon one of your sons, the bishops, that he may dispute with the Jew, do so”. They then arranged between themselves a certain day on which their meeting should be held, and there was present among

all the bishops a saintly virtuous bishop of al-Ashmunain called Severus (Sawirus,) and known as Ibn al-Mukaffa. He had been a scribe and then he became bishop, and the Lord had bestowed upon him grace and power in the Arabic tongue so that he wrote many books and memoirs. He who read his books recognised his excellence and the soundness of his knowledge. Severus disputed many times with the leader of the Muslim elders by the order of the king al-Mu‘izz, and he overcame them through the power of God and His grace.

It happened that Severus was sitting with the Supreme leader, and a dog passed by them. It was a Friday and there were a number of witnesses there. The Supreme leader said to him, “What sayest you, O Severus, concerning this dog? Is it Christian or Muslim?” He said, “Ask it, and it will answer you itself”. The leader said to him, “Does a dog speak? We wish you to tell us”. Severus said, “Yes. It is necessary for us to test this dog. It happens that today is Friday on which the Christians fast and do not eat meat, and when they break their fast in the evening, they drink water of the beans, but the Muslims do not fast on Friday and do not drink this water on it, but rather eat meat. Put before the dog meat and the water of the beans, and if it eats the meat, it will be Muslim, and if it does not eat it, but drinks the water, then it will be Christian”. When they heard his words, they marvelled at his wisdom and at the strength of his answer, and they departed from him.

The patriarch Abba Abraham took this bishop on the day on which his attendance in the presence of the king

al-Mu‘izz had been fixed, and he went with him to the palace. Moses the Jew and the Prime Minister, Ibn Killis, were present and they sat for a long time in silence. Then the king al-Mu‘izz said to them, “Speak concerning that for which you are assembled.” Then he said, “Speak, O patriarch, and tell your deputy to say what he has to say”.

The patriarch said to the bishop, “Speak, O my son, and God will assist you”.

The bishop said to the king, “It is not lawful to converse with a man who is a Jew in the presence of the Commander Amir of the Faithful”. The Jew said to him: “You slander me and say in the presence of the Commander of the Faithful and his wazir that I am ignorant”. The bishop Abba Severus said to him, “If the truth be made manifest to the Commander Amir of the Faithful, will there not be anger at this?”

The king al-Mu‘izz said, “It is not allowed that anyone should become angry in the disputation, but it is requisite for those who dispute that everyone of them should say what he has to say and to set forth his argument as he wishes”.

The bishop then said, “It is not I who bear witness against you, O Jew, with regard to ignorance, but a great and illustrious prophet from God who has witnessed against you with regard to this”. The Jew questioned this, “Who is the prophet?”

Severus said to him: “He is Isaiah who says in the beginning of his book concerning God: ‘The ox has known

its owner, and the ass has known the manger of its master, but Israel has not known Me”. The king al-Mu‘izz said to Moses: “Is not this correct?” “Yes. This is what is written”.

Then the bishop said, “Has not God said, indeed, that the beasts are more intelligent than you. It is not lawful for me to converse in the council of the Commander Amir of the Faithful, that his might may endure with the Jew, for the beasts are more rational than he, and God, indeed, has attributed to him ignorance”. The king al-Mu‘izz marvelled at this and commanded them to depart.

Enmity became great between the two parties. The wrath of the Prime Minister was strong and he began to seek for a pitfall for the patriarch, because he had confounded the Jews in the presence of the king al-Mu‘izz, but the Lord Christ protects His elect and His servants. It happened after some days that he found a way to have an audience to say to al-Mu‘izz, “It is written in the Gospel of the Christians: ‘If one has faith as a grain of mustard-seed, and he says to the mountain: Be you removed and be you cast into the sea, it shall be done.’ Let the Commander Amir of the Faithful see his way to ask them to prove the truth of this saying, so that he may know that they are frauds and are liars. If they do not do this, it is requisite that there should be done to them what they deserve on account of their lie”. He approved of this word.

The king al-Mu‘izz sent to summon Abba Abraham and said to him: “What say you concerning this word? Is it in your Gospel or not?” The patriarch said: “Yes. It is in it”.

Al-Mu‘izz said to him, “You Christians are thousands and tens of thousands in this land, and I desire to be brought to me one of them that this miracle may be manifested at his hands; and you, O chief of them, it is requisite that this deed should be done by you, otherwise, I shall destroy you with the sword”. Then the patriarch was astounded, and great fear came upon him and he did not know what to answer to al-Mu‘izz, but God the Exalted inspired him to say, “Grant me a delay of three days, so that I may seek and beseech the Lord to render the heart of the Commander Amir of the Faithful favourable to his slaves”. He granted to him the delay.

Declaring a Fast

Abraham returned to his dwelling place in Cairo and he caused to be brought to him the priests and the archons of Cairo and all the Orthodox people, and, whilst weeping, he made known to them the matter. There were in Cairo a number of monks of Wadi Habib, and Abraham imposed upon them all a penance that none of them should go to his dwelling-place for three days, but that they should assemble to continue in prayer in the church night and day. They did this for the three days and nights. As to the patriarch, he did not break his fast during the three days at all. Some of the monks broke their fast once every night with bread and salt and a little water. Abba Abraham did not cease to stand weeping before God on account of it during those days and nights until no energy remained in him.

St. Mary's appearing to the Patriarch

This blessed gathering took place in the Church in Kasr as-Sam, known as the Mu'allakah ('Hanging Church'). When it was the morning of the third day, the saintly patriarch fell to the ground from grief of heart and from his fasting and his weariness, and he slept for a while. He saw the Lady, the Pure Saint Mary, and she said to him with a joyful face, "What is it that has befallen you?"

He said to her, "Do you not know, O my Lady, that the king of this land has said to me: 'If you do not show to me a miracle this day in the mountain, I shall kill all the inhabitants of the Christian religion in the land of Egypt, and I shall destroy them from out of my kingdom with the sword'".

The Pure Lady Mary said to him, "Fear not, for I will not overlook the tears which you have shed in this church of mine. Rise now, and descend from here and go out by the door of the Darb al-Hadid which leads to the Great Market. As you go out you will find a man carrying on his shoulder a jar full of water, you will recognise him as he only has one eye, seize him, for it is he whose hands this miracle shall be manifested".

Finding the Tanner

The patriarch awoke at once and he was afraid. It was still dark, and he arose in haste and did not let anyone

know of him until he reached the door and found it closed. He doubted in his heart and said, "I believe that Satan has played a trick upon me". He called the door-keeper, and he opened the door for him. The first who entered by the door was the man about whom he was told.

He seized him and said to him for the Lord's sake, "Have pity upon this people". Then he informed him of the reason for their meeting.

The man said to him, "Forgive me, for I am a sinner, and I have not reached this degree". Thereupon, the patriarch informed him of what the Pure Mary had told him, when she appeared to him. Then he said to him, "What is your business?" The man wished to hide from him his case. Abraham solemnly charged him and bound him under anathema not to hide from him anything of his case.

The story of the one eyed man

Then he said to him, "O my father, I will inform you of my case. I am a man, a tanner, and this eye which you see; I plucked it out on account of the commandment of the Lord, when I beheld what was not mine with lust, and saw that I was going to Hell on account of it. I considered and said: 'It is better for me to go into life with one eye, as the Lord Christ says: 'It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell'.

I am living in this place as a hired worker to a man who is a tanner. I do not have over from what I receive from

my work every day anything except a bread to eat, and the remainder is for the destitute hidden of the brethren, women and men. This water I give them to drink every day before I go to my work. I take it to the poor people among them who have not the money to buy it from the water-carrier. All the day I work in the tannery and at night I stand praying. This is the state of my case, and I ask you, O my father, not to make it known to anyone, for I have not the power to endure the praise of men, but that which I shall say to you, do it. Go out with your priests and all your people to the mountain concerning which the king told you, having with you gospels, crosses, censers and large candles. Let the king stand with his soldiers and his troops on one side, and you and your people, on one side, and I, behind you, will stand in the midst of the people, so that no one may recognize me.

Then you and your priests and cry aloud, saying: 'O Lord, have mercy' repeatedly. Then command them to be silent and to keep quiet, and you shall prostrate yourself and all who are with you shall prostrate themselves, and I will prostrate myself with you. All this is done that no one recognizes me. Do thus three times, and every time that you shall prostrate yourself and stand up again, you shall make the sign of the cross over the mountain, and you shall see the glory of God".

The moving of the Mountain

When the man had said this word, the heart of the

patriarch was reassured by what he heard from him. Then Abraham rose up and all the people with him, and they went up to the king and said to him, "Go out to the mountain". King al-Mu'izz commanded all his army and those who were attached to him and the notables of his State to go out, and that trumpets should be sounded. The king went out and his Prime Minister with him, and he ordered the disbelieving Moses to go out. The father, the patriarch, did as that Saint had said to him. The king al-Mu'izz and his companions stood on one side and all the Christians and the patriarch, on the other side, and the man stood behind the patriarch, and there was none among the assembly who recognized him, except the patriarch alone, and they cried out, 'O Lord, have mercy' many times.

Then Abraham commanded them to be silent and he prostrated himself upon the ground, and all who were with him prostrated themselves three times, and every time that he lifted up his face and made the sign of the cross, the mountain was lifted up from the ground. When they prostrated themselves the mountain came down to its base.

The king al-Mu'izz feared greatly and the king and the Muslims cried out, "God is great. There is no God besides You!" Then the king al-Mu'izz said to the patriarch after the third time, "Enough, O patriarch, I have recognized, indeed, the correctness of your faith". When the people had become calm, the patriarch turned to look for the saintly man, but he did not find him.

Then the king said to the patriarch Abba Abraham, "Desire of me something and I will do it for you".

Abraham said to him, "I desire nothing, save that God may strengthen your State and give you victory over your enemies".

Al-Mu'izz said to him, "Desire of me something, O patriarch". He repeated to him the speech three times. Then the king al-Mu'izz insisted that he desire something of him.

The patriarch said to him: "If it is necessary, then I will ask our lord to command, if it be possible, to be built a church of Abba Mercurius in Cairo". When they had demolished this church, they did not allow the Christians to restore it, and it has been turned into a storehouse for sugar-cane; likewise the restoration of 'Hanging Church' in Cairo in Kasr as-Sam, since a great part of its walls had fallen down and part of them was in a state of decay.

Al-Mu'izz ordered at once that a decree should be written for him giving him the power to do this, and he gave to him from the Treasury what he would have to spend on the restoration. Abraham took the decree, but he returned the money and said to the king al-Mu'izz, "May the Lord strengthen your kingdom, but the Treasury has more right to this money".

When the decree was read at the Church of Abba Mercurius, the sellers who were there and all the people and said, "If we are all slain with one sword, we shall not allow anyone to place one stone upon one stone in this church". Then the patriarch returned to the king al-Mu'izz with the news. Al-Mu'izz became wrathful at this, and he

rode at once with all his troops till he came to the place, and he halted and commanded the foundations to be dug. They were promptly dug and a large number of masons were assembled for the rebuilding, and stones were carried to the site from every place by the order of the king al-Mu'izz, and they began to build the foundations at once.

No one dared to say a word except an elder who used to lead in the prayers for those sellers in the mosque which was there. It was he who used to assemble the congregation and presided over them. He threw himself into the foundations and said, "I desire to die today, for the Name of God and not to let anyone build this church". When the king al-Mu'izz was informed of this, he commanded that stones should be thrown upon him and that they should build over him. When lime and stones were thrown upon him, he wished to stand up, but the assistants did not allow him to do so, since al-Mu'izz had commanded that he should be buried in the foundations into which he had thrown himself. When the patriarch saw this, he threw himself before al-Mu'izz and besought him on behalf of the elder until al-Mu'izz commanded that he should be got up from the foundations. It was with difficulty that he managed to escape from the foundations safe, after he had almost died.

The king al-Mu'izz returned to his palace, and no one dared after that to say a single word till the rebuilding of the church had been completed, and likewise that of the Church al-Mu'allakah at Kasr as-Sam'. The patriarch rebuilt all the churches which were in need of restoration.

No one opposed the patriarch in anything of this affair. He re-built likewise many places in the churches at Alexandria which had become weakened, and he spent on this a great deal of money, and was not able to pay to the Alexandrians the thousand dinars which had been agreed upon for them for the expenses of their churches. After many demands, it was agreed upon that he should give to them each year five hundred dinars.

Abba Abraham was Patriarch for three years and six months, and then departed with his saintly fathers.

May his blessings be with us all, Amen.

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