Martyrdom of Habib the Deacon

Documents of the Church of Edessa (2nd–5th century)

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Ancient Syriac Documents. Martyrdom of Habib the Deacon. In the month Ab, of the year six hundred and twenty of the kingdom of Alexander the Macedonian, in the consulate of Licinius and Constantine, which is the year in which he was born, in the magistracy of Julius and Barak, in the days of Cona, bishop of Edessa, Licinius made a persecution against the Church and all the people of the Christians, after that first persecution which Diocletian the emperor had made. And Licinius the emperor commanded that there should be sacrifices and libations, and that the altars in every place should be restored, that they might burn sweet spices and frankincense before Zeus. And, when many were persecuted, they cried out of their own accord: We are Christians; and they were not afraid of the persecution, because these who were persecuted were more numerous than those who persecuted them. Now Habib, who was of the village of Telzeha and had been made a deacon, went secretly into the churches which were in the villages, and ministered and read the Scriptures, and encouraged and strengthened many by his words, and admonished them to stand fast in the truth of their belief, and not to be afraid of the persecutors; and gave them directions.

And, when many were strengthened by his words, and received his addresses affectionately, being careful not to renounce the covenant they had made, and when the Sharirs of the city, the men who had been appointed with reference to this particular matter, heard of it, they went in and informed Lysanias, the governor who was in the town of Edessa, and said to him: Habib, who is a deacon in the village of Telzeha, goes about and ministers secretly in every place, and resists the command of the emperors, and is not afraid. And, when the governor heard these things, he was filled with rage against Habib; and he made a report, and sent and informed Licinius the emperor of all those things which Habib was doing; he wished also to ascertain what command would be issued respecting him and the rest of those who would not sacrifice. For although a command had been issued that every one should sacrifice, yet it had not been commanded what should be done to those who did not sacrifice: because they had heard that Constantine, the commander in Gaul and Spain, was become a Christian and did not sacrifice. And Licinius the emperor thus command Lysanias the governor: Whoever it is that has been so daring as to transgress our command, our Majesty has commanded that he shall be burned with fire; and that all others who do not consent to sacrifice shall be put to death by the sword.

Now, when this command came to the town of Edessa, Habib, in reference to whom the report had been made, was gone across the river to the country of the people of Zeugma, to minister there also secretly. And, when the governor sent and inquired for him in his village, and in all the country round about, and he was not to be found, he commanded that all his family should be arrested, and also the inhabitants of his village; and they arrested them and put them in irons, his mother and the rest of his family, and also some of the people of his village; and they brought them to the city, and shut them up in prison. And, when Habib heard what had taken place, he considered in his mind and pondered anxiously in his thoughts: It is expedient for me, said he, that I should go and appear before the judge of the country, rather than that I should remain in secret and others should be brought in to him and be crowned with martyrdom because of me, and that I should find myself in great shame. For in what respect will the name of Christianity help him who flees from the confession of Christianity? Lo! if he flee from this, the death of nature is before him whithersoever he goes, and escape from it he cannot, because this is decreed against all the children of Adam.

And Habib arose and went to Edessa secretly, having prepared his back for the stripes and his sides for the combs, and his person for the burning of fire. And he went immediately to Theotecna, a veteran who was chief of the band of attendants on the governor; and he said to him: I am Habib of Telzeha, whom ye are inquiring for. And Theotecna said to him: If so be that no one saw thee coming to me, hearken to me in what I say to thee, and depart and go away to the place where thou hast been, and remain there in this time of persecution; and of this, that thou camest to me and spakest with me and that I advised thee thus, let no one know or be aware. And about thy family and the inhabitants of thy village, be not at all anxious: for no one will at all hurt them; but they will be in prison a few days only, and then the governor will let them go: because against them the emperors have not commanded anything serious or alarming. But, if on the contrary thou wilt not be persuaded by me in regard to these things which I have said to thee, I am clear of thy blood: because, if so be that thou appear before the judge of the country, thou wilt not escape from death by fire, according to the command of the emperors which they have issued concerning thee.

Habib said to Theotecna: It is not about my family and the inhabitants of my village that I am concerned, but for my own salvation, lest it should be forfeited. About this too I am much distressed, that I did not happen to be in my village on the day that the governor inquired for me, and that on my account lo! many are put in irons, and I have been looked upon by him as a fugitive. Therefore, if so be that thou wilt not consent to my request and take me in before the governor, I will go alone and appear before him. And, when Theotecna heard him speak thus to him, he laid hold of him firmly, and handed him over to his assistants, and they went together to conduct him to the judgment-hall of the governor. And Theotecna went in and informed the governor, and said to him: Habib of Telzeha, whom thine Excellency was inquiring for, is come. And the governor said: Who is it that has brought him? and where did they find him? and what did he do where he was? Theotecna said to him: He came

hither himself, of his own accord, and without the compulsion of any one, since no one knew anything about him.

And when the governor heard this, he was greatly exasperated against him; and thus he spoke: This fellow, who has so acted, has shown great contempt towards me and has despised me, and has accounted me as no judge; and, because he has so acted, it is not meet that any mercy should be shown towards him; nor yet either that I should hasten to pass sentence of death against him, according to the command of the emperors concerning him; but it is meet for me to have patience with him, so that the bitter torments and punishments inflicted on him may be the more abundant, and that through him I may terrify many others from daring again to flee. And, many persons being collected together and standing by him at the door of the judgment-hall, some of whom were members of the body of attendants, and some people of the city, there were some of them that said to him: Thou hast done badly in coming and showing thyself to those who were inquiring for thee, without the compulsion of the judge; and there were others, again, who said to him: Thou hast done well in coming and showing thyself of thine own accord, rather than that the compulsion of the judge should bring thee: for now is thy confession of Christ known to be of thine own will, and not from the compulsion of men.

And those things which the Sharirs of the city had heard from those who were speaking to him as they stood at the door of the judgment-hall—and this circumstance also in particular, that he had gone secretly to Theotecna and that he had not been willing to denounce him, had been heard by the Sharirs of the city—everything that they had heard they made known to the judge. And the judge was enraged against those who had been saying to Habib: Wherefore didst thou come and show thyself to the judge, without the compulsion of the judge himself? And to Theotecna he said: It is not seemly for a man who has been made chief over his fellows to act deceitfully in this manner towards his superior, and to set at nought the command of the emperors, which they issued against Habib the rebel, that he should be burned with fire.

Theotecna said: I have not acted deceitfully against my fellows, neither was it my purpose to set at naught the command which the emperors have issued: for what am I before thine Excellency, that I should have dared to do this? But I strictly questioned him as to that for which thine Excellency also has demanded an account at my hands, that I might know and see whether it was of his own free will that he came hither or whether the compulsion of thine Excellency brought him by the hand of others; and, when I heard from him that he came of his own accord, I carefully brought him to the honourable door of the judgment-hall of thy Worship. And the governor hastily commanded, and they brought in Habib before him. The officers said: Lo! he standeth before thine Excellency, And he began to question him thus, and said to him: What is thy name? And whence art thou? And what art thou?

He said to him: My name is Habib, and I am from the village of Telzeha, and I have been made a deacon. The governor said: Wherefore hast thou transgressed the command of the emperors, and dost minister in thine office of deacon, which thou art forbidden by the

emperors to do, and refusest to sacrifice to Zeus, whom the emperors worship? Habib said: We are Christians; we do not worship the works of men, who are nothing, whose works also are nothing; but we worship God, who made the men. The governor said: Persist not in that daring mind with which thou art come into my presence, and insult not Zeus, the great boast of the emperors. Habib said: But this Zeus is an idol, the work of men. It is very well for thee to say that I insult him. But, if the carving of him out of wood and the fixing of him with nails proclaim aloud concerning him that he is made, how sayest thou to me that I insult him? since lo! his insult is from himself, and against himself.

The governor said: By this very thing, that thou refusest to worship him, thou insultest him. Habib said: But, if because I do not worship him I insult him, how great an insult, then, did the carpenter inflict on him, who carved him with an axe of iron; and the smith, who smote him and fixed him with nails! And, when the governor heard him speak thus he commanded him to be scourged without pity. And, when he had been scourged by five men, he said to him: Wilt thou now obey the emperors? For, if thou wilt not obey them, I will tear thee severely with combs, and I will torture thee with all kinds of tortures, and then at last I will give command concerning thee that thou be burned with fire. Habib said: These threats with which lo! thou art seeking to terrify me, are much meaner and paltrier than those which I had already settled it in my mind to endure: therefore came I and made my appearance before thee.

The governor said: Put him into the iron cask for murderers, and let him be scourged as he deserves. And, when he had been scourged, they said to him: Sacrifice to the gods. But he cried aloud, and said: Accursed are your idols, and so are they who join with you in worshipping them like you. And the governor commanded, and they took him up to the prison; but they refused him permission to speak with his family, or with the inhabitants of his village, according to the command of the judge. On that day was the festival of the emperors. And on the second of Ilul the governor commanded, and they brought him from the prison. And he said to him: Wilt thou renounce the profession thou hast made and obey the command which the emperors issue? For, if thou wilt not obey, with the bitter tearings of combs will I make thee obey them.

Habib said: I have not obeyed them, and moreover it is settled in my mind that I will not obey them—no, not even if thou lay upon me punishments still worse than those which the emperors have commanded. The governor said: By the gods I swear, that, if thou do not sacrifice, I will leave no harsh and bitter sufferings untried with which I will not torture thee: and we shall see whether Christ, whom thou worshippest, will deliver thee. Habib said: All those who worship Christ are delivered through Christ, because they worship not creatures along with the Creator of creatures. The governor said: Let him be stretched out and be scourged with whips, until there remain not a place in his body on which he has not been scourged. Habib said: As for these inflictions, which thou supposest to be so bitter with their lacerations, out of them are plaited crowns of victory for those who endure them.

The governor said: How call ye afflictions ease, and account the torments of your bodies a crown of victory? Habib said: It is not for thee to ask me concerning these things, because thine unbelief is not worthy to hear the reasons of them. That I will not sacrifice I have said already, and I say so still. The governor said: Thou art subjected to these punishments because thou deservest them: I will put out thine eyes, which look upon this Zeus and are not afraid of him; and I will stop thine ears, which hear the laws of the emperors and tremble not. Habib said: To the God whom thou deniest here belongs that other world; and there wilt thou be made to confess Him with scourgings, though thou hast again denied Him. The governor said: Leave alone that world of which thou hast spoken, and consider anxiously now, that from this punishment to which lo! thou art being subjected there is no one that can deliver thee; unless indeed the gods deliver thee, on thy sacrificing to them.

Habib said: Those who die for the sake of the name of Christ, and worship not those objects that are made and created, will find their life in the presence of God; but those who love the life of time more than that—their torment will be for ever. And the governor commanded, and they hanged him up and tore him with combs; and, while they were tearing him with the combs, they knocked him about. And he was hanging a long while, until the shoulder blades of his arms creaked. The governor said to him: Wilt thou comply even now, and put on incense before Zeus there? Habib said: Previously to these sufferings I did not comply with thy demands: and now that lo! I have undergone them, how thinkest thou that I shall comply, and thereby lose that which I have gained by them? The governor said: By punishments fiercer and bitterer than these I am prepared to make thee obey, according to the command of the emperors, until thou do their will.

Habib said: Thou art punishing me for not obeying the command of the emperors, when lo! thou thyself also, whom the emperors have raised to greatness and made a judge, hast transgressed their command, in that thou hast not done to me that which the emperors have commanded thee. The governor said: Because I have had patience with thee, therefore hast thou spoken thus, like a man that brings an accusation. Habib said: Hadst thou not scourged me, and bound me, and torn me with combs, and put my feet in fetters, there would have been room to think that thou hadst had patience with me. But, if these things take place in the meanwhile, where is the patience towards me of which thou hast spoken? The governor said: These things which thou hast said will not help thee, because they all go against thee, and they will bring upon thee inflictions bitterer even than those which the emperors have commanded.

Habib said: Had I not been sensible that they would help me, I should not have spoken a single word about them before thee. The governor said: I will silence thy speeches, and at the same time as regards thee pacify the gods, whom thou hast not worshipped; and I will satisfy the emperors in respect to thee, as regards thy rebellion against their commands. Habib said: I am not afraid of the death with which thou seekest to terrify me; for, had I been afraid of it, I should not have gone about from house to house and ministered: on which account I did so minister. The governor said: How is it that thou worshippest and

honourest a man, but refusest to worship and honour Zeus there? Habib said: I worship not a man, because the Scripture teaches me, "Cursed is every one that putteth his trust in man;" but God, who took upon Him a body and became a man, Him do I worship, and glorify.

The governor said: Do thou that which the emperors have commanded; and, as for that which is in thy own mind, if thou art willing to give it up, well; but, if thou art not willing, then do not abandon it. Habib said: To do both these things is impossible: because falsehood is contrary to truth, and it is impossible that that should be banished from my thoughts which is firmly fixed in my mind. The governor said: By inflictions bitter and severe will I make thee dismiss from thy thoughts that of which thou hast said, It is firmly fixed in my mind. Habib said: As for these inflictions by which thou thinkest that it will be rooted out of my thoughts, by means of these it is that it grows within my thoughts, like a tree which bears fruit. The governor said: What help will stripes and combs give to that tree of thine? and more especially at the time when I shall command fire against it, to burn it up without pity.

Habib said: It is not on those things at which thou lookest that I look, because I contemplate the things which are out of sight; and therefore I do the will of God, the Maker of all things, and not that of an idol made with hands, which is not sensible of anything whatever. The governor said: Because he thus denies the gods whom the emperors worship, let him be torn with combs in addition to his former tearings: for, amidst the many questions which I have had the patience to ask him, he has forgotten his former tearings. And, while they were tearing him, he cried aloud and said: "The sufferings of this time are not equal to that glory which shall be revealed in" those who love Christ. And, when the governor saw that even under these inflictions he refused to sacrifice, he said to him: Does your doctrine so teach you, that you should hate your own bodies?

Habib said: Nay, we do not hate our bodies: the Scripture distinctly teaches us, "Whosoever shall lose his life shall find it." But another thing too it teaches us: that we should "not cast that which is holy to dogs, nor cast pearls before swine." The governor said: I know that in speaking thus thy sole object is that my rage and the wrath of my mind may be excited, and that I may pronounce sentence of death against thee speedily. I am not going, then, to be hurried on to that which thou desirest; but I will have patience: not; indeed, for thy relief, but so that the tortures inflicted on thee may be increased, and that thou mayest see thy flesh falling off before thy face by means of the combs that are passing over thy sides. Habib said: I myself also am looking for this, that thou shouldst multiply thy tortures upon me, even as thou hast said.

The governor said: Submit to the emperors, who have power to do whatsoever they choose. Habib said: It is not of men to do whatsoever they choose, but of God, whose power is in the heavens, and over all the dwellers upon earth; "nor is there any that may rebuke His hands and say to Him, 'What doest Thou?'" The governor said: For this insolence of thine, death by the sword is too small. I, however, am prepared to command the infliction upon

thee of a death more bitter than that of the sword. Habib said: And I, too, am looking for a death which is more lingering than that of the sword, which thou mayest pronounce upon me at any time thou choosest. And thereupon the governor proceeded to pass sentence of death upon him. And he called out aloud before his attendants, and said, whilst they were listening to him, as were also the nobles of the city: This Habib, who has denied the gods, as ye have also heard from him, and furthermore has reviled the emperors, deserves that his life should be blotted out from beneath this glorious Sun, and that he should not any longer behold this luminary, associate of gods; and, had it not been commanded by former emperors that the corpses of murderers should be buried, it would not be right that the corpse of this fellow either should be buried, because he has been so insolent. I command, that a strap be put into his mouth, as into the mouth of a murderer, and that he be burned by a slow lingering fire, so that the torment of his death may be increased.

And he went out from the presence of the governor, with the strap thrust into his mouth; and a multitude of the people of the city ran after him. And the Christians were rejoicing, forasmuch as he had not turned aside nor quitted his post; but the pagans were threatening him, for refusing to sacrifice. And they led him forth by the western archway, over against the cemetery, which was built by Abshelama, the son of Abgar. And his mother was clad in white, and she went out with him. And, when he was arrived at the place where they were going to burn him, he stood up and prayed, as did all those who came out with him; and he said: "O King Christ, since Thine is this world, and Thine the world to come, behold and see, that, while I might have fled from these afflictions, I did not flee, in order that I might not fall into the hands of Thy justice: may this fire, in which I am to be burned, serve me for a recompense before Thee, so that I may be delivered from that fire which is not quenched; and receive Thou my spirit into Thy presence, through Thy Divine Spirit, O glorious Son of the adorable Father!" And, when he had prayed, he turned and blessed them; and they weeping gave him the salutation, both men and women; and they said to him: Pray for us in the presence of thy Lord, that He would cause peace among His people, and restoration to His churches which are overthrown.

And, while Habib was standing, they dug a place, and brought him and set him within it; and they fixed up by him a stake. And they came to bind him to the stake; but he said to them: I will not stir from this place in which ye are going to burn me. And they brought fagots, and set them in order, and placed them on all sides of him. And, when the fire blazed up and the flame of it rose fiercely, they called out to him: Open thy mouth. And the moment he opened his mouth his soul mounted up. And they cried aloud, both men and women, with the voice of weeping. And they pulled and drew him out of the fire, throwing over him fine linen cloths and choice ointments and spices. And they snatched away some of the pieces of wood which had been put for his burning, and the brethren and some persons of the laity bore him away. And they prepared him for interment, and buried him by Guria and Shamuna the martyrs, in the same grave in which they were laid, on the hill which is called Baith Allah Cucla, repeating over him psalms and hymns, and conveying his burnt body affectionately and honourably to the grave. And even some of the Jews and pagans

took part with the Christian brethren in winding up and burying his body. At the time, too, when he was burned, and also at the time when he was buried, there was one spectacle of grief over spreading those within and those without; tears, too, were running down from all eyes: while every one gave glory to God, because for His name's sake he had given his body to the burning of fire.

The day on which he was burned was the eve of the Sabbath, the second of the month Ilul—the day on which the news came that Constantine the Great had set out from the interior of Spain, to proceed to Rome, the city of Italy, that he might carry on war with Licinius, that emperor who at this day rules over the eastern portion of the territories of the Romans; and lo! the countries on all sides are in commotion, because no man knows which of them will conquer and continue in his imperial power. And through this report the persecution slackened for a little while from the Church. And the notaries wrote down everything which they had heard from the judge; and the Sharirs of the city wrote down all the other things which were spoken outside the door of the judgment-hall, and, according to the custom that existed, they reported to the judge all that they had seen and all that they had heard, and the decisions of the judge were written down in their Acts.

I, Theophilus, who have renounced the evil inheritance of my fathers, and confessed Christ, carefully wrote out a copy of these Acts of Habib, even as I had formerly written out those of Guria and Shamuna, his fellow-martyrs. And, whereas he had felicitated them upon their death by the sword, he himself also was made like them by the fire in which he was burnt, and received his crown. And, whereas I have written down the year, and the month, and the day, of the coronation of these martyrs, it is not for the sake of those who, like me, were spectators of the deed, but with the view that those who come after us may learn at what time these martyrs suffered, and what manner of men they were; as they may learn also from the Acts of the former martyrs, who suffered in the days of Domitianus and of all the other emperors who likewise also raised a persecution against the Church, and put a great many to death, by stripes and by tearing with combs, and by bitter inflictions, and by sharp swords, and by burning fire, and by the terrible sea, and by the merciless mines. And all these things, and things like them, they suffered for the hope of the recompense to come.

Moreover, the afflictions of these martyrs, and of those of whom I had heard, opened the eyes of me, Theophilus, and enlightened my mind, and I confessed Christ, that He is the Son of God, and is God. And may the dust of the feet of these martyrs, which I received as I was running after them at the time when they were departing to be crowned, procure me pardon for having denied Him, and may He confess me before His worshippers, seeing that I have confessed Him now! And at the twenty-seventh question which the judge put to Habib, he gave sentence against him of death by the burning of fire. Here endeth the martyrdom of Habib the deacon.

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