

The Christian Martyrs of the Early Islamic Period: “Sectarianism” Between History and Memory

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Martyrdom of Elias of Heliopolis († 779/ 795; Greek):

A. PAPADOLOULOS-KERAMEUS. *Sbornik palestinskoj I sirijskoj agiologii/ Syllogeē Palaistinēs kai Syriakēs hagiologēs*. 2 vols. St Petersburg, 1907-1913; here: Vol. 1, pp. 42-59 [reprint, Thessaloniki, 2001].

For consultation:

Stamatina McGRATH. “Elias of Heliopolis: The Life of an Eighth-Century Syrian Saint.” *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations. Texts and Translations Dedicated to the Memory of Nicolas Oikonomides*. John Nesbitt, ed. Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. 85-107.

Martyrdom of Rawḥ al-Qurashī († 799; Arabic):

Ignace DICK. “La passion arabe de S. Antoine Ruwaḥ néo-martyr de Damas († 25 déc. 799).” *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), pp. 109-33 [with French translation].

Emanuela BRAIDA and Chiara PELISSETTI. *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurašī. Un decedent di Moametto che scelse di divenire cristiano*. Turin: Silvio Zamorani editore, 2001, pp. 95-113 [reprint of DICK, 1961; with Italian translation].

Martyrdom of Cyrus of Ḥarrān († 769; Syriac):

Zuqnīn Chronicle:

Amir HARRAK. “Piecing Together the Fragmentary Account of the Martyrdom of Cyrus of Ḥarrān.” *Analecta Bollandiana* 121 (2003), pp. 297-328; Syriac text: pp. 318-28. [critical edition based on BL ADD. 14.665 ff. 5r-7v].

Chronicle of Michael the Syrian:

J.-B. CHABOT, ed. & trans. *Chronique de Michael le Syrien*. Paris: 1901-1910; Syriac text: Vol. 4, p. 476; French translation: Vol. 2, p. 527.

****All translations are my own****

I. Martyrdom of Elias of Heliopolis

a. Conversion (Sections 6-7; PAPADOLOULOS-KERAMEUS p. 46)

προσελθὼν φάγε μεθ' ἡμῶν”. Καὶ προσελθὼν ἐν ἀκακίᾳ ὁ ἅγιος καὶ φαγὼν διήρκει τῇ ὑπηρεσίᾳ, καὶ τινες ἀναστάντες τοῦ δείπνου ὠρχοῦντο, καὶ κρατήσαντες τὸν ἅγιον συνορχεῖσθαι παρεσκευάζον· καὶ δὴ συστραφέντες λύουσι τὴν ζώνην τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ ῥίπτουσιν ἐκ πλαγίου· τὸ δὲ ἔνθεν, πρὸς τὸ μὴ κωλύεσθαι ῥαδίως ἐκλύεσθαι τὸ σῶμα πρὸς τὴν ὄρχησιν, λύεται δὲ καὶ τὸ δείπνον τῆς πονηρᾶς συσκευῆς.

7. Καὶ τῆς νυκτὸς διεληθούσης, ἀναστὰς τὸ πρωὶ ὁ ἅγιος μεγαλομάρτυς Ἡλίας, ἐπεὶ κατὰ τὸν οἶκον ἐκεκοίμηντο ἅμα πάντες οἱ συνδειπνήσαντες, περιζώννυται κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς χριστιανικῆς πολιτείας τὴν ἰδίαν αὐτοῦ ζώνην, καὶ νιψάμενος τὸ πρόσωπον ἐξῆει τοῦ οἴκου πορευόμενος θεῶ προσεύξασθαι. Ἐπικράξας δὲ τις ἐμπεφορημένος τοῦ ὀψινοῦ μεθύσματος λέγει· “Ἡλίας, ποῦ ὑπάγεις”; Ἀνταπεκρίθη ὁ ἅγιος· “Ἰπάγω εὐξασθαι”. Διαλαβὼν δὲ τις ἕτερος λέγει τῷ ἁγίῳ· “Καὶ οὐκ ὀψὲ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν σου”; Καταφρονήσας οὖν ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ λόγου καὶ μηδ' ἐπιστραφεὶς πρὸς τὸν εἰπόντα, ἀλλὰ πορευθεὶς εἰς τὴν προσευχὴν, κάκειθεν ὑποστρέψας ἔρχεται εἰς τὸ ἐργαστήριον καὶ εὗρισκει τὸν ἀποστάτην.

So, coming with guilelessness and eating [with them], the saint continued serving. And certain guests, rising from the banquet, began to dance, and they grasped the saint, prevailing upon him to dance with them. And gathering around him, they loosed the belt of the saint and cast it from his side, at that time, so it would not easily hinder his body from being drawn to the dance. Then the feast of the evil preparation came to an end.

And when the night came to end, while all the revelers were still reclining together throughout the house, Elias, got up early in the morning and girded himself with his belt, according to the practice of the Christian community. And washing his face, he left the house, walking off to worship God. But one of those still under the influence of the evening's intoxication said shouting [after him]: “Elias, where are you headed off to?” And the saint said in reply: “I am going to pray.”

Grasping him, that man said to the saint: “Did you not deny your faith late last night?” The saint, disdaining these words, and not even turning around to the speaker, walked out to pray. And then, returning from there, he went to his workshop and found the apostate.

b. Erasing all traces of martyrdom (Section 21; PAPADOLOULOS-KERAMEUS p. 55)

ἀπέθανεν, ἀλλὰ ζῆ". Κελεύει οὖν ὁ δικαστής ἐλκυσθῆναι τὸ σῶμα καὶ κρεμασθῆναι ἔξω τῶν πυλῶν ἐν τῷ κήπῳ, κεκλειῖσθαι δὲ τὴν πύλην τοῦ παραδείσου πρὸς τὸ ἀκριβῶς φυλάττεσθαι τοῦ ἁγίου τὸ σῶμα προσέταξε, μή τις τῶν χριστιανῶν πλησιάσας ἀφέληται τι ἐξ αὐτοῦ εὐλογίαν. Τότε καὶ τὸν τόπον, ἐν ᾧ ἀπετμήθη, πλύναντες οἱ δῆμιοι καὶ τὸν χοῦν ἐπισυναΐξαντες ῥίπτουσιν εἰς τὸ μέγα ῥεῦμα τοῦ παρακειμένου Χρυσορροῦ ποταμοῦ καὶ μέντοι

Now, the judge ordered the body to be dragged and to be hung outside the gates in the garden, and to shut the gate of the garden, in order to guard the saint's body, so none of the Christians, drawing near, would take away some blessing from him. Then, the executioners, washing the place where he was cut down, and gathering the soil, threw them into the great current of the river Chrysorrhoeas [Baradā].

c. Destruction of the saint's body (Section 25; PAPADOLOULOS-KERAMEUS pp. 57-58)

25. Τότε πορευθεὶς ὁ Ἄραψ διηγήσατο μυστικῶς Λεῖθι τῷ ἐπάρχῳ τῆς πόλεως· ὃς ἅμα τῇ διηγήσει ἀκούσας ἐντέλλεται πρὸ τοῦ πλατυνθῆναι τὰς ὀπτασίας κατενεχθῆναι τὸ σῶμα τοῦ ἁγίου ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ καὶ καυθῆναι πυρὶ, ἵνα μὴ (φησί) λαβόντες οἱ χριστιανοὶ ναοὺς κτίσωσι καὶ ἑορτὰς ἐπιτελῶσι πανηγυρίζοντες τὴν μνήμην αὐτοῦ. Τότε κατάγουσιν οἱ ὑπηρέται τὸ σῶμα τοῦ ἁγίου, καὶ σχίσαντες τὸ ξύλον τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ ὑποστρώσαντες, εἶτα ἐνθέντες τὸ σῶμα καὶ ἐπιθέντες ἄλλην ὕλην ὑφάπτουσι πῦρ· καὶ ἡ μὲν φλόξ ἐκουφίζετο ἐπὶ πολὺ ἕως ὕψους οὐρανοῦ, τὸ δὲ ἱερώτατον σῶμα ἔμενεν ἄκαυστον, οἶμαι δὲ διὰ τὸ γεγράψθαι τῷ

Then, the Arab went and secretly recounted this to Leithi, the eparch of the city. Having heard his report, he ordered that the body of the saint be brought down from the cross and to be burned with fire, before the vision spread, so that the Christians, seizing [the saint's body] would not build churches nor celebrate religious festivals, praising his memory. Then the guards brought down the body of the saint, splitting the wood of his cross and laying [it] under. And placing [him] there and adding another piece of wood, they lit the fire. The flame rose up greatly, [reaching] the highest heavens, but the most holy body remained unburned.

II. Martyrdom of Rawḥ al-Qurashī

a. Rawḥ recounts his life as a Muslim (Section 11; DICK p. 126, BRAIDA & PELISSETTI p. 111)

170.../ فَقَالَ الْقَدَيْسُ: «بِحَقِّ لَقَدْ أُعْطَيْتَنِي مُنْتَهَى الْيَوْمِ،

172.../ لِأَنِّي أَخْطَيْتُ إِلَى رَبِّي ثَلَاثَةَ مَرَّاتٍ، وَمَا أَظُنُّ أَنَّهَا تُمَحَا
عَنِّي إِلَّا بِضَرْبِ عُنُقِي.»

173/ قَالَ لَهُ الرَّشِيدُ: «وَمَا هَذِهِ الثَّلَاثَةُ ذُنُوبٌ؟»

174/ فَقَالَ⁸² لَهُ: «أَمَّا الْوَاحِدَةُ فَإِنِّي صَلَّيْتُ، وَأَنَا حَنِيفٌ، فِي

مَكَّةَ بَيْتِ الْحَرَامِ مَرَّاتٍ، 175/ وَبِحَقِّ إِنَّهُ، كَمَا سَمِّيَ، حَرَامٌ مِنَ
اللَّهِ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِالْمَسِيحِ. 177.../ وَالثَّانِيَةُ إِنِّي نَحَرْتُ فِي يَوْمِ

الْأَضْحَى⁸³، 179.../ وَالثَّالِثَةُ فَإِنِّي غَزَوْتُ⁸⁴ إِلَى أَرْضِ الرُّومِ، وَقَتَلْتُ
أَنْفُسًا⁸⁵ مُؤْمِنَةً بِسَيِّدِي يَسُوعَ الْمَسِيحِ. 181.../ وَبَعْدُ، فَإِنِّي أَرْجُو

أَنْ يَمْحُوَهُمُ الرَّبُّ عَنِّي بِضَرْبِ عُنُقِي، وَيُعِمِدَنِي بِدَمِي.»

Then the saint said: “In truth, you have granted me my wish today, for I have sinned against my Lord three times, and I do not think that they will be erased from me except by my decapitation. Then al-Rashīd said to him: “And what are these three offenses?” He said in reply: “As for the first, it’s that while I was a *ḥanīf*, I prayed in Makka at the Masjid al-Ḥarām many times. In truth, it is – as it itself is named – forbidden by God for those who believe in Christ. The second is that I sacrificed on (‘Īd) al-Aḍḥā. The third is that I raided into Byzantine territory, and killed people who believed in my Lord Jesus Christ. And after all this, I pray that the Lord erases [these sins] from me through my decapitation and baptizes me with my blood.”

III. Martyrdom of Cyrus of Harrān

a. Michael the Syrian: Summary (CHABOT, Vol. 4, p. 476; HARRAK p. 298)

ܩܝܪܘܫ ܩܪܝܫܬܝܢ ܕܗܪܪܐܢ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
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A certain Christian by the name of Cyrus, apostatized on account of some illness/ passion, and later repented. He was captured by 'Abbās and tried, but he did not surrender to his will. So he cut off his head and then burned his body in the fire.

b. Zuqnān Chronicle: Accidental conversion (Fol. 5v; HARRAK p. 320)

[27] ܩܝܪܘܫ ܩܪܝܫܬܝܢ ܕܗܪܪܐܢ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[28] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[29] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[30] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[31] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[32] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[33] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ

27. When he heard these from the deceitful ones, he captured the man and asked him with great anger (:)

28. “Are you a Christian?” + Then (the man) replied: “Yes.” Then the judge said: “How [...]

29. [...] to the Christian man [...] (who is) summoned for the poll tax + Cyrus

30. told him the reason without any falsehood, and how he had been registered against his will

31. on the diptychs/ rolls + Then the judge said: “It is impossible (for you) to have been registered

32. after you became a Muslim. But come up here and pray, and if (not) I swear

33. you shall suffer a wicked death at my hands + [...]

c. Zuqnān Chronicle: The *Shahāda* in Syriac (Fol. 5v; HARRAK p. 320)

[37] ܩܝܪܘܫ ܩܪܝܫܬܝܢ ܕܗܪܪܐܢ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
[38] ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ

37. But come up here and pray and confess that God is one and He has no companion

38. and Muḥammad is the servant of God and (His) messenger and prophet, and he is the seal of the prophets

d. Zuqnān Chronicle: Christians Flock to Islam (Fol. 6r; HARRAK p. 322)

- [11] [...][...] . [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...]
- [12] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...]
- [13] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...]
- [14] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...]
- [15] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...]

- 11. Therefore, according to what you have said, everyone – even the elderly and the priests
- 12. who were (once) Christians and are becoming Muslims – have destroyed their souls by their back-sliding
- 13. [...] them in books like you. Lo, many have converted to Islam,
- 14. the young as well as the old. If only they had know that through their back-sliding
- 15. they were destroying their souls, they would not have converted to Islam [...]