

## CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN PRE-ISLAMIC SOUTH ARABIA\*

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The entrance and implanting of Christianity in pre-islamic South Arabia has been the subject of intensive study since the second half of the last century<sup>1</sup>. Though ample light has ever since been shed over numerous historical aspects, still many problems and questions are waiting for scrutinization and answers.

### A

The Arabian peninsula has been divided into two parts: the North and the South. The relations of the northern Arabs with Byzantium and Christianity have been studied satisfactorily enough so far; one can find information about it in specialized works<sup>2</sup>, but sometimes in general histories of Byzantium as well (Vasiliev, Karayannopoulos, Bury, etc.). The south Arabian peninsula has been less known to the non-specialist scholar. In this article we shall deal mainly with the «mysterious» South, after making a short reference to the Arabian North<sup>3</sup>.

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1. See, for example, A. Dillmann, *Zur Geschichte des Abyssinischen Reichs: Zeitschrift des Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 7 (1853), 338-364, W. Fell, *Die Christenverfolgung in Südarabien und die himjarisch äthiopischen Kriege nach abessinischer Ueberlieferung: Zeitschrift des Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 35 (1881), 1-74, E. Glaser, *Abessinier in Arabien und Africa, auf Grund neuentdeckter Inschriften*, München 1895.

2. S. Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London 1979, J. Beaucamp - Ch. Robin, *Le Christianisme dans la Péninsule arabique d'après l'épigraphie et l'archéologie: Travaux et Mémoires* 8 (1981), 45-61, A. Anani - K. Whittingham, *The Early History of the Gulf Arabs*, Essex 1986.

3. Besides the basic bibliography I shall give below, I refer the reader to my doctoral dissertation, which has already gone to press and will be published - God willing -

The north Arabian tribes had frequent contacts with the Byzantine Empire. They used to live in the areas at the south of Syria up to Iraq. The «Lives» of the famous saints, Symeon the Stylite, Euthymios the Great, and Symeon the Young, provide us with much information about the conversion, baptism and catechesis of these nomads<sup>4</sup>. Yet, a particularly important case are the tribes of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, who abandoned the nomadic life, accepted Christianity and formed vassal kingdoms. The Ghassanids settled at the south of Palestine (ca 490-7th c.), adopted Monophysitism, became allies of Byzantium and functioned as its military shield against the other tribes<sup>5</sup>. The Lakhmids settled in Iraq (ca 300-600), embraced Nestorianism (since they lived near Persia, where the Nestorian communities were especially influential) and served Zoroastrian Iran as its military satellite<sup>6</sup>.

## B

The south Arabian peninsula is supposed to have been the kingdom of the famous Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10: 1-13, 2 Chron. 8: 1-12). The Graeco - Roman world called it «Arabia Felix» because of its high prosperity and power<sup>7</sup>. The structures of its civilization were not nomadic but urban with complicated organization and economy based on trade and agriculture. Around the first century B.C. the leadership of the area passed to the tribe of the Himyarites<sup>8</sup>. The Himyarite kingdom almost coincides geographically with today's state of Yemen. That means that it was not next to the Byzantine borders. In fact, it was surrounded by the Arabian desert, the Red Sea and the

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soon: *Oi «Nomoi ton Omiriton», Ierapostoliki prosegisi kai istoriki-nomiki symvoli* (in Greek) [= «The 'Laws of the Himyarites'. Missiological Approach and Historical - Legal Contribution»], Forschungen zur byzantinischen Rechtsgeschichte, Athener Reihe, Sakkoulas publ.

4. H. Lietzmann, *Das Leben des Heiligen Symeon Stylites*, Leipzig 1908, E. Schwartz, *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis*, Leipzig 1939, P. Van den Ven, *La vie ancienne de S. Symeon le Jeune (521-592)*, Bruxelles 1962.

5. I. Shahid, *Ghassan: the Encyclopaedia of Islam* (n.e.) 2 (1965), 1020-1021.

6. I. Shahid, *Lakhmids: The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (n.e.) 5 (1986), 632-635.

7. Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie Chrétienne*, Sources Chrétiennes 141, 330-331.

8. H. von Wissmann, *Himyar, Ancient History: Le Museon* 77 (1964), 429-497, I. Shahid, *Preislamic Arabia: The Cambridge History of Islam*, la, Cambridge, etc, 1970, 3-29. The South Arabians were Semites, but not Arabs; nevertheless the inhabitants of the south Arabian city Najran were Arabs.

Arabian Sea. Beyond these natural borders, three empires existed: The Christian Byzantine, the Zoroastrian Persian and — more close (geographically and ethnologically) to South Arabia — Christian (monophysite) Ethiopia<sup>9</sup>.

The south Arabians were pagans; their religion had a profound astral character<sup>10</sup>. At about the first century AD (if not earlier) Judaism entered the country. Between the 4th and 6th c. it was adopted by the Himyarite sovereigns, but not by the whole of the population<sup>11</sup>.

The first encounter of South Arabia with Christianity is veiled in obscurity. There are several traditions bearing both evidences of historical authenticity and legendary additions. Each of them, if studied properly, can furnish data of considerable interest for the history and the methods of Mission. These traditions are as follows:

1. The Byzantine historian Eusebius (first half of the 4th c.) mentions a tradition according to which the Alexandrian philosopher Pantaeus (2nd c.) undertook a mission to the area, where he found a copy of the Gospel according to St Matthew, which was said to have been left by the Apostle Bartholomew who had preached there<sup>12</sup>.

2. The Byzantine historiographer Philostorgius (by the end of the 4th c.) refers to the mission of Theophilus the Indus to the Himyarites. Theophilus, possibly an Arian, sent by the Emperor Constantius (337-361), succeeded in converting the Himyarite king, was confronted with officers of the Jews and erected three churches<sup>13</sup>.

3. The monophysite chronographer John, bishop of Nikiou, claims that Christianity was preached to the Himyarites by Theognosta, a nun who had been kidnapped by bandits and was presented as a gift to

9. E. Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians. An Introduction to Country and People*, Oxford 1973<sup>3</sup>. See, also, D. Letsios, *Die Aethiopisch - Himyaritischen Kriege des 6. Jahrhunderts und die Christianisierung Aethiopiens: Jahrbuch der Oesterreichischen Byzantinistik* 41 (1991), 25-41.

10. A.F.L. Beeston, *The Religions of Pre-Islamic Yemen: L'Arabie du Sud* (ed. J. Chelhod), I (1984), 259-269.

11. J. Ryckmans, *La persécution des Chrétiens Himyarites au sixième siècle*, Istanbul 1965, 12, S. Smith, *Events in Arabia in the 6th century AD: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16 (1954), 462, Beeston, *supra*, 276-277.

12. Eusebius, *Kirchengeschichte* (Werke II, 1, ed. E. Schwartz), Leipzig 1903, 450-452.

13. Philostorgius, *Kirchengeschichte* (ed. J. Bidez - F. Winkelmann), Berlin 1972<sup>2</sup>, 32-35.

the Himyarite king, who became, probably, the first convert of the zealous nun<sup>14</sup>.

4. According to another tradition, the Himyarites became Christians in early 6th c., when Emperor of Constantinople was the monophysite Anastasius (491- 518), from whom they asked and received a bishop<sup>15</sup>.

5. A local tradition, which, paradoxically, was saved from oblivion through the works of the Arabian Muslim historiographers, attributes the evangelization of South Arabia to Phemion, a holy man from Syria, ca. the 5th c<sup>16</sup>.

6. A tradition of Ethiopian origin speaks about Azkir, a holy man who preached, worked miracles and was martyred in South Arabia by the end of the 5th c<sup>17</sup>.

7. Of Nestorian origin seems to be the last tradition, which ascribes the South Arabian mission to Hannan, a merchant, ca. the first half of the 5th c<sup>18</sup>.

We are justified in supposing that each tradition echoes a certain missionary attempt. Probably many of them, and especially the earlier ones, had only ephemeral results. Anyway, the fact is that local churches-communities already existed by the end of the 5th c. and in the beginning of the 6th c., when South Arabian Christianity reached its martyrical colophon, as we shall see below.

The above mentioned missionary narrations have embodied a variety of missionary practice. Preaching, diplomacy, personal holiness, liturgical life, inter-religious dialogue *et al.* were used occasionally. Of course, it would take us much time to discuss each tradition separately; it is enough for the purpose of the present outline to observe that [according to the study I am working out on the relevant philological sources] each tradition can be understood within its own historical and

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14. R.H. Charles (transl.), *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiou*, Oxford 1916, 69-70.

15. Theodoros Anagnostes, *Kirchengeschichte* (ed. G. Ch. Hansen), Berlin 1971, 152 and 157.

16. A. Jeffery, *Christianity in South Arabia: The Moslem World* 36 (1946), 199-200.

17. Jeffery, *supra*, 200-204.

18. J.W. Hirschberg, *Nestorian Sources of North-Arabian Traditions on the Establishment and Persecution of Christianity in Yemen: Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 15 (1939-1949), 332-333.

cultural context and with its own coherent logic. Even if we do not agree with certain methodologies, we must look carefully to the past experiences, take under serious consideration the data of time and place, and try to discern the true and essential.

Before proceeding, we shall make here a parenthesis. There is a question about the nature of the South Arabian Christianity. Most scholars agree that the majority of the Himyarite Christian communities were monophysite, under the influence of the Syrian and Ethiopian Churches. Yet, we should keep in mind some important parameters of the historical and religious map of that era and area:

a. Some of the said traditions may be posterior versions of older events, that is of evangelizing attempts which took place before the Council of Chalcedon (451)<sup>19</sup>.

b. It is very possible that the delicate dogmatic differentiations and debates could not easily reach the young Himyarite Church.

c. As we shall see below, in the beginning of the 6th c. a cordial alliance between Orthodox-Chalcedonian Byzantium and the monophysite Himyarites and Ethiopians saw the light. This coalition had to struggle against a front of Jews, pagans and Nestorians.

d. Given this occurrence, the Orthodox Church herself has accepted the martyrdom of the South Arabian Christians, canonized them as saints and celebrated their memory on October 24.

### C

As we said before, the 6th century has been extremely significant for South Arabian Christianity.

Around the early 20's the Jew Himyarite king, Dhu-Nuwas, persecuted with profuse atrocity the Christian communities all over his kingdom. The Christians were forced either to renounce their faith and become Jews or die. The whole structure of the Himyarite Church was eliminated. A special place in the martyrdom was gained by Najran, an important city at the north of the Himyarite state; its leaders and almost the whole of its population were Christians. The «first among the firsts» was Arethas (Harith) who was decapitated with all the nobles of the martyropolis Najran<sup>20</sup>.

19. I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Washington, DC 1989, 363-364 and 373-374.

20. I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran. New Documents*, Bruxelles 1971.

Immediately after this massacre, the Byzantine emperor Justin was informed about the events; since it was very difficult for the Byzantine army to be transported to remote South Arabia in time, Justin asked the king of Ethiopia, Ellesbaan, to invade South Arabia in order to protect the Christians and punish the persecutors. The Ethiopian king did so and after his victory a) appointed a Christian king in the Himyarite kingdom and b) asked the Patriarch of Alexandria for a bishop. About the identity of the new king there are some problems which cannot be discussed here; conventionally we shall refer to him as Abraham, the first Christian king in South Arabia. As for the new (arch)bishop, we shall also not examine the questions raised about him; we shall merely underline that Church tradition knows him as «equal to the Apostles», Orthodox St. Gregentius (November 19) and that he had been the outstanding personality who undertook the titanic task which, under those circumstances, should be described rather as a new planting of Christianity than as a mere restoration of it<sup>21</sup>.

Gregentius's missionary work bears some unique characteristics. We shall try to present an outline of his work, using as major source a text called «Laws of the Himyarites» («Νόμοι τῶν Ὁμηριτῶν») <sup>22</sup>. This text, originating most probably from South Arabia in the second third of the 6th century, is a peculiar chronicle which describes Gregentius's missionary experiment and, at the same time, proposes a certain missiological methodology<sup>23</sup>.

It was the first time that the Christian Himyarites prevailed politically and occupied the Himyarite throne. Up to that moment communities did exist in the country, but now a new reality emerged: the «Christian Himyarite State». This reality implied a new vision, that of a totally Christian society. Archbishop Gregentius and King Abraham espoused wholeheartedly the ideal which, in the words of Fr. Georges

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21. For the Ethiopian invasion and the said problems, see V. Christides, *The Himyarite - Ethiopian War and the Ethiopian Occupation of South Arabia in the Acts of Gregentius (ca 530 AD)*: *Annales d'Ethiopie* 9 (1972), 115-146, I. Shahid, *Byzantium in South Arabia*: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979), 24-94. See also S. Apostolopoulou, *Die byzantinische Aussenpolitik, wie sie sich uns im Martyrium des Heiligen Arethas und seiner Begleiter darstellt*: *Θεολογία* 63 (1992), 286-293, and our note 11.

22. Gregentius, *Homeritarum Leges*, *Patrologia Graeca* 86<sup>1</sup>, 563-620.

23. The following presentation of the «Laws» is based on my doctoral dissertation; see our note 3.

Florovsky, can be described as «the Empire», i.e. the Christianization of universal society, as opposed to the ideal of «the Desert», i.e. the defensive withdrawal of the community<sup>24</sup>.

So, the «Christian Himyarite State» set forth a strange procedure towards the Christianization of the whole country. This procedure consisted of three successive steps:

a. All the (non-Christian) Himyarites were hastily baptized, either by death-threat (the pagans) or after religious dialogue (the Jews). So, the majority of the population suddenly became newly-baptized, but without having been «catechumens» before. This problem was «solved» by the next steps.

b. The whole territory was divided into small administrative departments called «regiones» («γειτονίαι», neighbourhoods); so, the everyday life of the newly-baptized Himyarites could be easily supervised and guided.

c. A new law-code was promulgated. Church tradition credits Gregentius himself with its composition. One of its major goals was to instruct (catechise) practically the converts about their new duties and to conduct their new life in accordance with the claims of their new faith. In other words, the state legislation claimed to have incorporated the divine commandments!

Besides, the new laws had another purpose. They were the main instrument for the Christianization of the social structures, so as to do away with all contradictions between social and personal life. In order to inculcate the new, Christian spirit into every aspect of life, the 63 articles of the laws pursued three basic sub-aims, which, in fact, embody a great variety of legal issues:

a. The renovation of sexual and familial life. For example, adultery and prostitution were banned and, if committed, severely punished; on the other hand, the women were protected against men's abuse.

b. The protection of the weak and poor. The «Christian Himyarite State» showed itself as the realization of the heavenly Kingdom on a special part of the earth.

c. The humanization of the state power. That is, provisions were

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24. G. Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture* (Collected Works, II), Nordland, Belmont 1974, 67-100.

made so that the unchecked authority of the nobles and the state officers was restricted.

Given these sub-aims, a detailed analysis of the laws has convinced us that their function was twofold: on the one hand they tried to impose Christian principles upon social life; on the other hand, their positive and radical provisions (in favor of social justice, etc.) were, in the eyes of a fresh convert or a skeptical non-Christian, the tangible proof that Christianity was indeed essential for human life.

#### D

What has been drafted above is the missionary concept as found in the text «Laws of the Himyarites». Of course, it does not lie beyond criticism. In many cases the legislator reveals himself as a broad-minded person who had the ability to make the proper use of his contemporary cultural data (religious beliefs, political conditions, social ideas, economic relations, etc.)<sup>25</sup> in order to make the expansion of Christianity more acceptable by his contemporary people. Yet, judging from the point of view of the authentic ecclesiastical ethos, one has to admit that the authoritative policy of the State-Missionary (e.g. especially when sin is considered a crime confronted by the state penal law) may result in the elimination of human freedom and in the reduction of Christianity to a severe system of social discipline.

The «Christian Himyarite State» did not last more than 50 years; in around 570 - 575, Persia invaded South Arabia<sup>26</sup>. Almost 50 years later, Islam swept the peninsula like a tide. But it is the South Arabian Christianity that exercised a considerable influence on early Islam in favor of Christianity. This will be more easily understood if we take into consideration that one quranic sura (chapter) praises the Christian martyrs of Najran!<sup>27</sup>

Anyway, what is deduced from our study of the missionary history, is the fervent desire of the Church to witness, so that — according to the «Laws of the Himyarites» — *the people are illuminated and the devil suffers great damage*<sup>28</sup>.

25. For example: it was probably not by chance that Gregentius entrusted so much to legislation; the highly developed urban structures of South Arabia included the legal ones, so the Law (in general) was something familiar to the South Arabian way of life.

26. G. Fiaccadori, *Yemen Nestoriano*: Studi in onore di Edda Bresciani, Pisa 1985, 195, N. Pigulewskaja, *Byzanz auf den Wegen nach Indien*, Berlin etc 1969, 268.

27. Sura 85, 4-8. See my *Hristianismos kai Islam; opseis tis protis synantisis tous* [= Christianity and Islam; Aspects of their First Encounter]: Exodos 8 (1992), 21-32 (in Greek).

28. P.G. 86<sup>1</sup>, 573 D: «Καὶ ἐφωτίζοντο ὁ λαός, καὶ πολλὰ ζῆμια ἐγίνοντο τῷ διαβόλῳ».