

Isaac
41st Coptic Patriarch
(686-689 AD)

Translated from Coptic into
English

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The following translation has been made from the text published, with French translation, by E Porcher 'Vie d'Isaac' in *Patrologia Orientalis* 11 (1914). It is a Bohairic text and is to be found in Cod. Vat. 62 fols. 211 ff. The numbers in brackets in this translation are those of Porcher's text not those of the manuscript. I have mostly omitted repetitive terms, such as ⲉⲑⲟⲩⲁⲃ (holy/saint). Language notes are largely for the benefit of anyone in the early stages of studying Coptic. Other notes are intended to shed light on details of the text.

Isaac became the 41st Patriarch of the Coptic Church approximately 45 years after the Muslim Arab invasion of Egypt. For reasoned speculation about Isaac's chronology one should consult H.G. Evelyn-White *Monasteries of the Wadi Natrun* (1923) p. 283: if Isaac became patriarch at about the age of 50, this would put his birth at about 634. See also my note 23.

There is a notice of Isaac in B.T.A. Evetts (ed. and trans.) 'History of the Patriarchs' *Patrologia Orientalis* 5 (1910) pp. 21 ff. It goes without saying that the *Life* is a longer and more detailed text than the brief recital of facts in the *Hist. Pat.*. Towards the end of this notice reference is made to another copy (نسخة اخرى) of the text, but without any further information as to what sort of text it was.

Translation

The life of the great patriarch and archbishop of the great city of Rakote, Abba Isaac, narrated by Abba Mena, the most holy bishop of Pshate.¹ In the peace of God.

The remembrance of the revered patriarch, which stimulates the joy of my heart, summons us today, my beloved, to leap² for spiritual joy and me to make way to his holy encomium. For who will be able to speak the praise of the true shepherd (304) and the faithful high priest of righteousness who loved virtue from childhood and the angelic life, which he strived to emulate. He was like an angel. In this he appeared shining in such a way that he was entrusted with the care of the lambs of the Church of the great city of Rakote and the whole of Egypt,³ indeed all of what is under heaven. I, a wretched person, have not dared to say a word of my own, but the things that I have heard and that I have seen. These are the things that are written for those who can read and hear for the glory of God and His saints.

This saint, my brothers, was Egyptian by birth. He was from a town called (305) Pisho.⁴ His parents were pious and very wealthy with servants. Their son was the holy young man whom they named Isaac, which means 'joy'. When it was time, they baptized him in accordance with Christian practice. His parents took him to the bishop of that time, a spiritual man. As he was baptizing the boy in the font, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Consubstantial Trinity, his eyes opened and he saw a cross of light on his head. As he was moved by the Holy Spirit, he cried aloud in the voice of a prophet, saying: (306) "You are great, Lord God Almighty and you are great. About your thoughts no-one will ask us." When the bishop said this, he gave the boy to his parents and said: "Protect him. He is a gift of God. He will become a great high priest in the house of God. He will be entrusted with many people." When his parents heard this, they raised their voice: "Let the name of the Lord be blessed forever."

1 É. Amélineau *Géographie Copte* (1895) pp. 277ff. has a detailed entry on this place, which is also known as Nikiu.

2 CD 260a

3 Rakote was the Egyptian name (*r' qd*) of Alexandria. H.I. Bell wrote his article entitled 'Alexandria ad Aegyptum' *Journal of Roman Studies* 36 (1946) pp. 132ff.) to dispel the notion that Alexandria was simply a part of Egypt and to emphasize that it was 'next to' the country, the *χώρα*, a term used more than once in this text. Indeed, the 'demotic' script, first used in the 7th cent. BC, was referred to by early Egyptologists as 'enchorial', the script of the *χώρα*.

4 *Géog. Copte* pp. 352.

When the boy was old enough, his parents sent him to school. Within a short time he was able to write and think in such a way that all those at school with him admired him when they saw the understanding that God had given him. (307). All those in the school deferred to him. After his studies were completed, his parents entrusted him to a relative of theirs, whose name was Meneson, a *chartularius*⁵ of George the eparch of Egypt, so that Isaac could become a *notarius* with him. While he was there, Isaac openly lived a monastic life. First he learned the Psalms by heart, fasting daily until evening, steadfastly observing the *synaxeis*⁶ and wearing a hair shirt under a shining white garment.

One day the *archon* called Meneson because he wanted to write an urgent⁷ letter, for he was the chief *notarius* (308), and when he did not find him available, he became extremely angry. He then called Isaac and asked him where his master was, and Isaac replied that he did not know. Seeing that his face was sad, he spoke to him like David before the king of Israel:⁸ "Why is the face of my lord sad? Order me and I will write the letter as you wish." The *archon* was astounded at his reply and, as if to test him, said: "Go into one of these chambers and write it. Bring it that I may see it." When he had written it, he brought it and showed it to him. When the *archon* saw the letter the young man had written, he marvelled at it. He said: "How can you be such a person and I have not known of it until today? Truly (309) man looks at the face, but God looks into the heart."⁹ From that day on the *archon* made him chief *notarius*. Everbody loved him. All those in the *praetorium* loved him and called him 'saint' because of the wisdom in him.

His parents on the other hand looked at him like a mirror, hoping that he would become master of all they possessed. They wanted him to marry, hoping for children from him. But they did not know that such was not the lot of Isaac¹⁰ but that he should become the father of many children. The one who set apart Jeremiah in the womb also set apart this saint. His parents, however, forced him against his will and betrothed him to a wife and waited for the (310) wedding. But Isaac felt a strong attachment to the sweet monastic life, in mind of what the Lord had said in the gospel: "He

5 LSJ renders this term as 'keeper of archives'. The job probably included letter-writing. As with other specialized terms I have left in the Latinized form. The 'eparch' was a prominent official who undoubtedly required assistance with his correspondence. What the precise difference between 'chartularius' and 'notarius' is, I cannot say. The *praetorium* is the governor's residence.

6 This term can be understood in so many ways that, like Porcher, I have retained the Gk. G.W.H. Lampe *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (1961) 1352 meaning (6) 'times', e.g. after a vigil, in the early morning, after a fast.

7 Gk word is usually understood as 'necessary'

8 Seems to be an unspecific reference to the complex relationship between David and Saul in 1 Sam. 18

9 1 Sam. 16,7

10 Interestingly miswritten as 'Jacob' cf. Gen. 27.

who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."¹¹ And again: "He who abandons father, mother, wife, brother, house, stable or son for the kingdom of God, will be rewarded double in this life and the life to come, eternal life."¹² The Apostle cries out: "The form of this world will pass, but I want you to be without care."¹³ The apostle John: "This world will pass and its desire. He who does the will of God will be forever."¹⁴ (311) And again: "Everything in the world, desire of the eyes and flesh, are not punished as they deserve"¹⁵ They are not of God, but of this world." These were the daily meditations of the just man as he decided in his mind to leave the vanity of this world and its cares.

At this point George the *notarius*¹⁶ died, to whom the young man had been an assistant. When the *archon* died and the saint found the opportunity he wanted, he left the *praetorium* and went home and stayed with his parents for some days. They looked after him and gave him strength, fearful that he might disappear (312) from them when they saw his great fervour for good. At length, while matters were so, the young man left his home without letting of his family know. He went to the holy desert of Shiêt,¹⁷ populated by choruses of angels of God, that is, the blessed monks, who mortify their flesh with the labours of virtue and bear the death of Jesus at all times in their body, hoping for the glory that will be revealed to them, as it is written: "Since we suffer with him we will also be glorified with him."¹⁸ When he arrived at Shiêt, he stayed in the monastery of the one of blessed memory, Abba Zachary the Presbyter and hegumen of the holy *lavra* of Abba Makarios, (313). the one who became bishop of Soi,¹⁹ a holy man who saw visions. When the elder, Abba Zachary, saw the young man coming to him, the Lord opened his eyes and he saw the light of a cross on his head. When he saw this unbelievable sign, he was astonished and cried out: "As your works, Lord, have become great, your thoughts have become very deep."²⁰ As Zachary was wondering what would happen to this young man, he was immediately instructed by an angel of the

11 Matth. 10, 37

12 Matth. 19, 29 (and others gospels). 'Double' translates the Coptic **ΚΩΒ**, not the Greek *ἑκατονταπλασίονα* 'a hundredfold'.

13 1 Cor. 7, 31

14 1 John 2, 17. This tradition is in line with that of Jerome, viz. that John the Evangelist wrote at least the first letter of John cf. *de viris illustribus* (§18) in which the view is expressed that *duas posteriores Epistolas Joannis, non Apostoli esse, sed Presbyteri*.

15 This is essentially a quotation 1 John 2, 16, but the phrase **†ΜΕΤΡΕΩΖΩ ΜΠΑΒΙΟΣ** 'the pride of this life' is replaced by a completely different phrase **ΖΑΝΑΤΩΤΑΖΩΟΥΝΕ ΞΕΝΠΟΥΘΙΜΠΩΩ**., which may be translated as 'they are unattainable in their punishment.' (for **ΜΩΩ** cf. CD 207b) The phrase is not only intrusive, it also unintelligible. The translation provided here, from the suggestion made in a note by Porcher, may not be defensible but is at least intelligible. 'Bundling' of scriptural references is not uncommon in this text.

16 The next sentence describes him as *archon*.

17 The Greek form of this name is Scetis

18 Romans 8, 17

19 *Géog. Copte* p. 406

20 Ps. 91, 6

Lord who said: "The Lord has granted you a great gift: this young man has come to you. (314) He will become a shepherd of the sheep belonging to Christ and a patriarch of the bishops." When the holy elder heard this from the angels, he rejoiced greatly.

Isaac spent three days with the elder speaking of his salvation. He sent Isaac to Terenoute²¹ to stay with a dear friend of his until he learned what the parents of the young man intended to do. He was afraid that they would find the young man with him and do harm to the holy place because of him, for the elder was a very well-known person. When the young man arrived at Terenoute, he went to the man's house and was told by his sons that their father was in the fields. The young man went up to the barn, took some straw, covered himself with it and went to sleep. (315) The man returned from the field. His name was Jospheh and he was a presbyter, of whom many testified that he was a confessor²² who had been arraigned before the tribunal of the impious Cyrus and badly beaten for his confession. When he returned from the field, he put his donkey in the stable and went up to the barn to get *bersim*²³ for the animal. He saw the straw covering the young man, the form of a cross of light above him and flashes of light issuing from it. The presbyter was astonished at this miraculous vision. He went up to inspect the young man and asked him where he was from. The young man explained. (316) At that moment he took the young man's head and kissed it: "The blessing of the Lord upon the head of true one"²⁴ and again: "Upon their head is blessing and joy." The presbyter let him stay from some days.

Let us return to the day when Isaac left his home and we will tell you what happened²⁵ for the glory of God. When his parents looked for him but did not find him, there was great weeping and mourning. Their joy became mourning. They looked through all the monasteries but did not find him. They went to Shiêt in search of him, but the holy elders did not reveal him to them, for it was their custom to help each other and to keep each other from the desires of (317) of the world, doing their utmost to complete the word of the Saviour: "There is no love greater than that one lay down

21 *Géog. Copte* p. 493

22 Samuel of Kalamun is also called 'confessor' cf. A. Alcock *Samuel of Kalamun* (1983) p. 16. Cyrus was sent to Egypt around 631 to try to persuade the largely monophysite Egyptian Church to accept some form of the Christology ratified at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Cyrus was from the Black Sea town of Phasis and was known as the Colchian. He organized a synod of some sort in Alexandria and made his way to the Fayyum, where he was greeted with some ceremony by the Victor the bishop of that place. It is clear that in his dealings with those who refused the document he wanted them to sign, probably the Henoticon of Zeno but known dismissively as the Tome of Leo, violence was involved.

23 The term used in mod. Egypt for the clover (*trifolium alexandrinum*) which is harvested by farmers for their animals on a daily 'need to use' basis.

24 Prov. 10, 6 followed by Is. 35, 10

25 Paraphrase of **πλξωκ**. The 'flashback' technique is common enough in non-linear narrative, but I have the feeling it is rare in Coptic.

one's life for one's fellow."²⁶

When his parents saw that he would not reveal himself, they went to Rakote to the archbishop²⁷ and told him of the matter. He became afraid that they would tell the authorities²⁸ and that harm would come to the monastery. He sent a letter to Shiêt that the young man should not be allowed west of the river.²⁹ Zachary saw the snares of the devil and chose to take upon himself myriads of dangers for him rather than give him up to his parents again, in fulfilment of the word of God: "He who receives a child like this in my name receives me."³⁰ **(318)**

After he had shaved the head of the young man, he put the monastic garb on him. He called one of his disciples named Abraam, an ascetic, and said to him: "Arise and take the young man and go to the monastery of Pamaho.³¹ Stay there until the Lord convinces his parents, and I will send for you." They arose and went as their father had said. They stayed in the monastery for up to six months. Isaac said to Abraam: "Arise and come with me to my parents and I will reassure them, for if I do not reassure them, they will not release me." When Abraam heard this, he was very sad, thinking that the young man had repented³² and wanted to leave the monastic life because of the troubles that were assailing him. **(319)** The elder spoke to him: "Do not be downhearted in your troubles, for it is written, 'Trouble generates endurance; endurance experience; experience hope; hope does not make one feel ashamed.'³³ Now, my beloved brother, let us endure for this short time, for it is written: 'He whom the Lord He teaches.'³⁴ And again: 'My son, if you go and work for the Lord, prepare your soul for tests.'³⁵ It is also written: 'Test me. God. Know my heart.'³⁶ If God does not first test you, how will He know our love for him?" Abraam said this and other things like it to Isaac. **(320)** The young man replied: "Your teaching is good, holy father. Not only am I prepared³⁷ to follow you but I am prepared to die for the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the one for whom I have left everything and followed Him to³⁸ become worthy of eternal life through His goodness."

26 John 15, 13

27 Probably Benjamin (623-662).

28 The only authority higher than Benjamin was presumably the Arab Muslim viceroy, chronologically the most suitable being Abdallah ibn Sa'ad (646-656).

29 I do not understand this.

30 Matth. 18,5

31 H.G. Evelyn-White *History of the Monasteries of the Wadi Natrun* (1923) p. 283

32 The reading must be οϋϱωμ , as in Porcher's critical apparatus cf. CD 478b. It is interesting to compare this idiom with the English 'eat one's heart out'

33 Romans 5,4ff.

34 Prov. 3, 12

35 Eccl. 2,1

36 Ps. 25,2

37 One has at least to understand †ϭεβτωτ if not to supply it.

38 εϱωπ

When the elder heard this from the young man, he rejoiced greatly.

The two set off together and walked with each other reciting the word of God until they reached the young man's village. His parents had a place outside the village in which a monk lived. They stayed here after the sun had set. The monk gladly received them, even though he did not know them. Isaac asked him: **(321)**"Do you know, my father, if Isaac the *notarius* has been found?" He replied: "No, he has not been found. There is great mourning in the young man's house because of him. Since he left, they have been mourning his loss." He then replied and said: "I am Isaac." The aged monk was astonished. He then worshipped him. Isaac³⁹ made him swear not to tell anyone. Isaac had a relative, a deacon named Philotheos, a God-fearing man, who was like a father to all his relatives. Isaac sent for him and he came. When they saw each other, they rejoiced greatly. Isaac said: "If I have found favour in your presence, speak on my behalf to my parents so that they do not hold me back." The deacon left and spoke with his parents.⁴⁰ They swore to him. **(322)** He then told them everything. When they heard him, they cried out with joy and exultation. The entire village was quickened⁴¹ over the young man. When his parents saw him as a monk, they did not know what to do. Astonished, they did not know what to say. In particular, they were unable to do anything because of the oath they had sworn to the deacon. They kept him with them for a month to get their fill of his beauty, for he was very comely in appearance, almost one might say an angel of God. He spoke to them of what was good for their soul: "My parents, I beg you. Do not put your faith in this unstable wealth and do not gloat because of the extent of your possessions, for they will pass quickly. **(323)** So do not let temporary things destroy the eternal things you have. Let the bellies of the poor be sated from what you have" Thus he came away from his parents and went out to the desert.

It was said of him that when he was asleep he often saw cherubim of light coming and covering him with their wings so that he arose from sleep, and in this way he saw himself going up to heaven. The unutterable favours God confers on the sons of man, come and see the glory of this man protected by the cherubim.

It was also said of him from the day he was born until the day he went to God he remained sexually

39 As elsewhere in Coptic texts the 3rd person pronoun is used rather more freely than in English. I have occasionally replaced the pronoun with a proper name in the interest of clarity.

40 Something appears to be missing here: it would seem that Isaac is interviewing his parents and is trying to persuade them not to keep him there.

41 Parallel to the early English word meaning 'animate, enliven'.

abstinent. For it is written that the angel of the Lord encompasses⁴² all those who fear him and he will save them. **(324)** A month after he had left his parents, they granted him everything he wanted. He kept chanting⁴³ with the prophet:⁴⁴ "With the help of my god I will go through a wall" and "The snare is broken" and "Your right hand, Lord, has done a work of power."⁴⁵ When he came to Shiêt, the sacred desert of God, he kept saying the word of the Theologos:⁴⁶ "Give me the desert and Christ" When his spiritual father saw this, he rejoiced greatly. He stayed with Abba Zachary, giving him a hand in all he did, as Joshua served Moses. He observed the conduct of the brothers in the monastery, as they went about spiritually edified with care⁴⁷ and surpassing each **(325)** other in virtue, like trees laden with fruit. Isaac's virtues were miraculous, those which he exhibited in his conduct, so that he was above everyone in the monastery. He humbled the flesh through the labour of ascetic practice.⁴⁸ He was also kind and humble, adorned with all the graces of the Holy Spirit. He did not sleep much at night, but on Sunday he did not sleep at all. He lit the fire for the brothers, waited on them, laid the table for them, like the Saviour. He it was who said: "The greatest among you will be your servant."⁴⁹ His brothers used to come to him with lots of money and clothes, and he would distribute them to the brothers in the monastery. He was a **(326)** comfort to all the brothers who came to him and received great strength from him. Their spiritual father ordered the brothers in the convent: "If Isaac comes to the cell of one of you, stand until he leaves", but he did not tell him lest he become proud. When the Lord told the holy elder what would happen to him, he ordered the brothers, as is written: "The Lord will do nothing without telling the servants."⁵⁰

If I said of this saint, my beloved, he was singled out from birth, I am not wrong. For I see that this is true. When he applied his attention to the scriptures, no question was beyond him, especially the writings of the doctors of the Church. **(327)** There was an elder in the desert, a great ascete, to whose virtues everybody attested. When he saw Isaac, he said to the brothers who were with him: "He is an Israelite. There is no guile in him."⁵¹ He will be archbishop of the city of Rakote and patriarch. He will be great before the Lord and his words will reach the ends of the earth." When the brothers heard this from the elder, they marvelled and glorified God, the one who reveals his mysteries to those worthy of them, as is written: "Those who have not seen will see and those who

42 CD 127b

43 To reflect the iterative nature of the Imperfect.

44 Ps. 17, 30. David, 'author' of the Psalms, was also known as prophet, e.g Ps. 8, 3ff. is taken as a prophecy

45 Ps. 17, 30: 123, 7; 117, 16

46 I cannot locate this quotation. For Theologos as a name cf. G.W.H. Lampe *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (1961) 628a

47 This is a paraphrase of: **ἡενογκωτ νενογαρεζ**. The word **κωτ** can also refer to a rule.

48 Gk. ἄσκησις conceptually similar to the spiritual aspect of the Ar. *jihâd* (جهاد)

49 Matth. 20,26

50 Amos 3,7

51 John 1, 47

hear have not understood."⁵² Saint Isaac continued to make progress in all the virtues so that fame of him was heard in every part of Egypt.

(328) Many renounced the world and became monks, one of them Meneson, who had been a *notarius* to him previously. Meneson had heard that Isaac had renounced the world and himself came to be a monk with him. There was another one called Ianne, from a well-connected family, a companion of this saint, an adherent of the faction of the 'unblessed', of whom it is said that they have not had an archbishop since the days of Dioscorus.⁵³ They seceded from the Church and became heretics. When he came to him, Isaac made him Christian and a monk. He became like a saint so that he was consecrated bishop and entrusted with the care of many. These were the first gifts that Isaac brought to the Lord. The wicked devil was unable to watch Isaac making progress in virtue.

(329) One night when the saint was asleep, a demon blew in his ears, and Isaac woke up. He was unable to sit up. He told his father about the struggle.⁵⁴ He was very troubled. As the elder had no great experience⁵⁵ of this struggle, he sent him to a great ascete, who had had a great deal of trouble from demons. When the ascete saw Isaac, the young man told him of his struggle. The elder said; "Young man, I will not be able give you a command because of your father, for you are a community man. Go to your father and do what he tells you. I hope to God that you find peace."⁵⁶ He went back and told his father the words of the elder. His father replied: "Go and clean the latrines⁵⁷ of the brothers. I believe that God will give you peace." (330) Isaac accepted the word in peace. He was constantly pursuing humble activities, and spent six months doing so, drawing water and cleaning the latrines. After this great struggle facing him⁵⁸ God granted him much healing.

Once the brothers had gone to the fields for kindling material. They came back after they had finished their work and went into their cells. On their way Saint Isaac fell behind the brothers, picking fragrant desert flowers. He came to a fragrant tree to pluck from it and there was a viper in the middle of it that rolled itself around his hand. When the brothers saw this, they cried out

52 Mk 4, 12

53 Porcher has no note on these people. CD 336a quotes this passage, apparently the only one known when Crum compiled his dictionary, with the speculation that these people may not have received communion.

54 Gk. πόλεμος, conceptually similar to the martial aspect of the Ar. *jihād* (جهاد)

55 CD 775a

56 Illustrates the division between the two different sorts of monastic life, cenobitic and eremitic, and the respect each had for the other.

57 Lit. 'sitting places'.

58 Porcher: 'qui pesa sur lui'.

thinking that he would die. He shook it off and no harm came to him.(331) When the brothers saw this miracle, they threw themselves down and worshipped him.

My beloved, you see this young saint is like the apostles and came to resemble them. As the Lord said to His apostles: "He who keeps my commandments, all the wonders that I have performed, they too will perform them."⁵⁹

At that time the archbishop was looking for an able man to make him his *syncellus* and *notarius*. He was told about Isaac, and he sent to Shiêt for him. Isaac went, for he could not disobey him. When the archbishop saw him wearing a humble garment, he asked him if he was Isaac, and Isaac replied humbly that he was. (332) He ordered Isaac to write a letter than he might see it, as he had heard about him. He wrote a letter, but deliberately ruined it, thinking that, for this reason, the archbishop would dismiss him and not detain him, because he loved the solitary life. He compared himself with the prophet David, who retired⁶⁰ before Achous king of Geth. His servants told Achous that this was King David, for whom the maidens of Israel had danced, that Saul had smitten thousands but David tens of thousands, but still he did not get what he wanted. When the attendants of the archbishop saw the letter, they said to him: "We need people like you." (333) The archbishop learned that he had done it deliberately and said to him: "Good. Go. Write like this. But know this: you will not leave this place." When the saint saw that he had not obtained his wish, he wrote a second letter, which was quite marvellous. The archbishop rejoiced greatly like the man of whom it is written in the gospel that he found a pearl⁶¹ and said: "As we have heard, so have we seen."⁶² He said to those standing around him: "Truly, my children, what we⁶³ have asked for, we have obtained through the power of God. For a man such as this we need."

(334) The young man was distressed. He did not wish to go among people and frequently implored the archbishop. At length he persuaded the archbishop to release him. However, the archbishop

59 Acts 38, 3ff.

60 The reference is to 1 Sam. 21,11ff. and since, in my view, the connection between the two events is not immediately obvious, I will provide a summary of the Biblical episode here: David has fled to the Philistines to escape the anger of Saul; he is well received by Achous (known in Psalm 34 as Abimelech), a Philistine potentate, but begins to regret his disgraceful behaviour and apparently feigns madness.

The Coptic text reads ⲉⲧⲁⲩⲁⲓⲩ ⲛⲉⲟⲓⲩ. CD 378b cites the passage and says of ⲉⲟⲓⲩ, 'meaning unknown'. On the basis of the Biblical story Porcher suggests ⲛⲉⲟⲓⲩ: 'he made himself foolish'. which seems to refer to David's peculiar behaviour in the story: the Sahidic version published by James Drescher *Kingdoms I and II* (1970) describes David as ⲉⲁⲩⲣⲟⲉ ⲛⲓⲛⲉⲧⲧⲟⲩⲥ ⲛⲉⲒⲏⲧ 'he having become like those who are deranged'.

61 Matth. 13, 46

62 1 John 1,1

63 Text: 'you'.

convinced him to stay for a month each year⁶⁴ to write the feast regulations. He then left to return to the desert which he loved. In the meantime the bishop of Sais died. His spiritual father was chosen and made bishop of Sais. Isaac remained in the monastery with his brothers.

Once he went to visit and see him. When they met each other, they rejoiced. And there was a man named Isaac, a *chartularius* of the country of Egypt. There was someone from a town called (335) Jebronatheni⁶⁵ who had great faith in the bishop Abba Zachary. He went to him to ask: "Since the governor has sent for me to give him an account of taxes, I would ask you to pray to the Lord on my behalf that He might reveal to you what will happen so that I can make arrangements for my household." The bishop replied: "My son, I cannot do as you think I can." The man said: "I believe in the Lord that whatever you ask He will give it to you." In the evening Zachary the bishop went to Isaac his disciple and said: "Let us pray together this evening so that the Lord Our God will reveal to us what will happen to this man." While the two stood praying, at that moment the entire place became full of light. The (336) elder was unable to bear the light and fell to the ground. Saint Isaac remained motionless until⁶⁶ he contemplated the light of the Lord in fortitude and the angel of the Lord told them what would happen to the man. When the bishop stood up, he said to the saint: "Your good deeds have given me strength, my son." Isaac replied humbly: "God is with your prayers. They have given me strength, my father." The bishop said:⁶⁷ "It was because of his purity that he was able to bear the light." It is written: "Blessed are those who are pure in their heart for they will see God."⁶⁸ Truly the word of the Saviour has been fulfilled in this saint: "If two of you gather in this land (337) for anything they will ask, it will happen to them from my Father in heaven."⁶⁹

Thus he left his father and went to the desert he loved and stayed in the monastery with his brothers. He was a comfort to them and they looked at him as a mirror. He was like an angel of God to them, giving them strength and summoning them to the struggle. During Lent he would retire to a small cell outside the monastery and have contact with no-one. On one occasion he was visited by Abba Abraam and Abba George the great ascete, who came to consult him⁷⁰ and found great benefit.

(338) They looked at his cell and saw nothing but some bread and salt. They marvelled at his self-

64 Lit. 'of the years'

65 *Géog. Copte* p. 149. There were probably irregularities in Isaac's tax collecting procedure, for he knows that he will be punished by the governor. Unfortunately we do not learn what happened to him.

66 The conjugation prefix is *ⲟⲁⲣⲉ-*, which usually means 'until'. I suggest that 'while' makes more sense here.

67 If the 3rd person is kept here, then this statement must not belong to the exchange between Zachary and Isaac and was presumably made at some later date. If one alters the pronoun to the 2nd person, then it can be understood as part of the exchange.

68 Matth. 5, 8

69 Matth. 18,3

70 Lit. 'they put their thoughts to him'

restraint. They asked him him: "What did you eat in the forty days?" He replied: "What all the brothers eat." They said: "We see nothing except bread and salt." He said: "This is what the brothers eat." They begged him to let them bring some olives." He refused saying: "It is fitting for me that I endure more hardship than the brothers." When they left him, they told everyone⁷¹ about his asceticism. There was much good report of him among everyone and the country of Egypt, as the gospel says: **(338)** "A city placed on a mountain will not remain concealed. A candle is not lit and placed under a bushel. It is placed in a lamp that it might illuminate all in the house."⁷²

They tried various times to make him bishop, and he fled, wishing to live in a state without cares,⁷³ as it is written: "Be still, and know that I am God."⁷⁴ One day during Lent Sant Isaac went to the small cell as usual. The brothers forgot to bring him bread. He spent the first, second, third, up to the fifth day without eating. On the fifth day of his hunger he looked and saw a large plate of bread in front of him, as if they had brought it at that moment from the oven. **(340)** He arose and prayed, thanking God. He took a little of the bread and ate. On the following day he took the rest to the monastery and gave it to the brothers, and they ate it. The brothers asked him: "Where did get this soft bread from ?" He concealed it from them and said: "It was brought to me from Egypt." They asked each other if anyone had brought him bread that week from Egypt. They found nobody who had brought it for him. And they immediately thought that it had come from God. As it is written: "Those who are my servants will be satisfied, and you will be hungry. Those who are my servants will drink, and you will thirst."⁷⁵ And again: "If you obey me, you will eat the good things of the earth." Does not this miracle surpass that of the prophet Elijah, after bread had been brought to him from heaven by the angel when he killed the prophets of shame.⁷⁶

(341) One day Horion the bishop of Sais, when he was a reader before becoming bisop, came to visit him to receive his blessing. It was the week of the Pasch. It was his custom not to be idle during the Pasch but to be in the fields working. He went to him and took the net⁷⁷ from him and worked on it. The boy said: "My father, I wish to become a monk, but the tears of my father will not let me."⁷⁸ The saint fell into a deep sleep and awoke suddenly and said: "Horion, you cannot become a monk." When the young man heard this, he became afraid. The saint said: "Do not fear on

71 Coptic $\alpha\gamma\alpha\chi\iota \ \eta\alpha\tau\omicron\tau\omicron\upsilon\gamma \ \eta\text{-}$ 'they spoke about them to . . .'

72 Matth. 5, 14

73 Equivalent of Gk. ataraxia

74 Ps. 45, 11

75 Is. 1, 19 and 65, 13

76 1 Kg. 18

77 The word $\omega\eta\eta$ is explained elsewhere as $\sigma\pi\upsilon\tau\acute{\iota}\delta\iota\omicron\nu$ ('small basket') cf. Alcock *Samuel* p. 8 line 43

78 Clearly two different types of 'father' are meant here.

my behalf. Go and obey your father until he dies. The one who has just spoken to me has told me that after the death of your father it will be necessary for you (342) to achieve a high rank", meaning the bishopric, which he deserved. When the young man heard this from the holy man, he left and went home in peace, glorifying God. As is written in the prophets: "The spirits of the prophets submit⁷⁹ to the prophets."

Later his spiritual father Abba Zachary the bishop fell ill from a terminal illness. As God had told him beforehand, he went to his monastery. Isaac tended to him in his illness. When he was about to die, he called all his children like the patriarch Jacob. He blessed them and said to Isaac: (343) "My son, if you are elevated, think of your brothers." As he said this, he signalled the grace that attend him. After having commanded his children, he gave up his soul to the hands of the Lord, as the great saints of Shiêt sat around him. He was buried with great honour and placed with his fathers. The deeds he had performed in his life were then commemorated. It was said of him that he had a disciple who had weak sight. He went to the elder, who placed his hands on him, and immediately he was able to see. He glorified God and submitted himself to the father for the rest of his life. He had a kinsman in the world, who happened to have the same problem of blindness. When he heard about him, he grieved greatly. He sent for the kinsman, who came to the desert (344) of Shiêt. The brother who had recovered his sight came to the elder and begged him to do for his brother what he had done for him. The elder saw them both weeping and became very distressed. He gave the communion and took the cloth of the chalice and wiped it on the man's face. At that moment he recovered his sight as if he had never suffered an infirmity. He threw himself down and worshipped. He returned to his home, glorifying the God who performs miracles.

There was a man called George in Sais, a powerful man. The devil had caused his downfall. Nobody, except God who knows all things hidden (345) and revealed, knew why. God immediately punished him, as it is written in David; "The sinner is caught in his own handiwork."⁸⁰ When they arose early next day, they found the young man stretched out like a corpse. His parents picked him up⁸¹ and brought him to Abba Zachary the bishop. When they met him, they threw themselves down and worshipped him, weeping and begging him to intercede with the Lord on behalf of their son that he might recover. He asked them what had happened to him. They said: "We do not know." God had told him before they came to him. He then arose and prayed over him, and straightaway he was well, as if he had never been ill. (346) The bishop said to him: "Keep yourself from the sin

79 1 Cor, 14, 32

80 Ps. 9, 17

81 For the standard causative form cf. CD 446b

you have committed. Do not do it, lest evil happen to you." When this fathers heard this, they marvelled at the things he said, not knowing what their son had done. They begged the elder: "We will do everything you have told us" and came away from him glorifying God. He was honoured by everyone, who glorified God like the holy apostle of Christ.

A month after his father's death, he will still troubled because of his departure from this vain world. The archbishop John begged God to reveal to him who would be a worthy successor to care for the hly Church. (347) He was instructed in a vision: "Send to Shiêt to the monastery of Abba Zachary for Isaac the ascetic monk to be your successor." He arose immediately and sent for him. When Isaac came. John detained him and did not release him until he (John) died.⁸² The governor sent for the archbishop at that time to arrange a meeting him, one of several occasions, out of love for him. The governor's name was Abd el Aziz and his title was 'Emir'. He had two God-loving *chartularii*, Athanasius and Isaac and their sons. The entire *praetorium* was full of Chrstians. In the beginning he started to do damage to the churches, broke crosses and did much harm to the archbishop. (348) But God, who reprimanded Pharaoh, also put fear into Abd el Aziz once in a dream: "Take care of the archbishop", and the emir came to love him like an angel of God. The archbishop became ill from a terminal illness. The archons heard of this and came to his side to visit him and receive his blessing. They found him very ill. They told the emir and he released him. He went to Rakote and died. His body was put in the church of St Mark, who had built it. He said that Isaac should be brought in his place, as he had been told by the Lord.

There was a deacon George, who desired the high priesthood against the will of God (349), who makes kings what they are. He persuaded the bishops there to make him archbishop, but he was punished for his iniquity. They made him presbyter and invested him with the stole, thinking to make him archbishop in the middle of the week, they being prepared to act against canon law. The archdeacon cried out over the sanctuary, as if moved by God: "God forbid that we do something against the law. Let us wait until Sunday." Thus the Lord prevented him from becoming a priest forever, as it is written: "A man of deceit and blood is an abomination to the Lord."⁸³

In those days the great bishops came to Rakote. (350) When they heard that the archbishop had died, they wished to ordain⁸⁴ the one chosen by God, Isaac. They found the others present,⁸⁵ who

82 Coptic is less scrupulous with pronouns than some modern European languages.

83 Ps. 5,7

84 CD 279a II present

85 CD 306a

supported George, and there was a division between them. Agents of the emir then arrived in Rakote to bring the bishops to him so that he might know who was to be appointed.⁸⁶ When he arrived at Babylon, Isaac was serving George and had no idea of this. An enquiry into the life of George was made, and a good deal of fault was found with him. In particular, he was married, with some very bad children. Thus, people put him to shame and decided to appoint the one chosen by God, Isaac.

On Sunday (351) all the bishops gathered with much of the laity of Babylon, Rakote and every part of the country in the place⁸⁷ of St. Sergius. Isaac entered dressed in white. While he was praying, the lamp suddenly broke on him and covered him with oil. The congregation then cried out: "Worthy, worthy, worthy, the 13th apostle, Isaac the archbishop." The bishops and the *archons* then took him to the inner part of the sanctuary, saying: "This is the new David." On that day the God-loving *archon*, lord Isaac the *chartularius* made a great celebration for the bishops and the clerics. The bishops took Isaac and (352) placed him above them against his will, saying to him: "The Holy Spirit summons you. The Holy Spirit ordains you, as it is written: 'God our God has anointed you with oil of joy before all your companions.'" On the following day the matter was disclosed to the emir and he was told of all that had happened. He ordered the two to be brought before him and they were presented to him. He saw George in the garments of the priesthood and Isaac in the modest garments of monkhood. He said to the bishops and the congregation: "Which of these two do you want?" They cried out: "This monk is our father." The emir replied: "He is a weak man." (353) The bishops and *archons* then cried out the more: "He has been a prophet of God since childhood. He is a pure virgin." George kept on saying:⁸⁸ "Give me the throne and I will give you money." When the bishops and the congregation heard this, they anathematized him: "Let your money perish with you, for you wish to acquire for yourself the gift of God with money."⁸⁹ The bishops thus estranged him completely from the priesthood. And what is written was fulfilled in him: "He bored a pit and dug⁹⁰ it out, and he will fall into it, the pit which he has made." And again: "He who elevates himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be elevated."⁹¹

So, by divine election and with the agreement (354) of the people. Oh, the great joy and happiness

86 Were previous appointments also as political as this one?

87 τόπος often refers to a monastery, but in this case the church is meant. From the 9th cent. it is a church traditionally associated with the election of patriarchs.

88 Coptic uses the Imperfect, which often has an inchoative or iterative sense.

89 Acts 8, 20. According to Evetts *History* p.22 it was not only attempted bribery that was the undoing of George, but also his lies that John had recommended for office.

90 For the Coptic word cf. CD 828a. Ps. 7, 16.

91 Lk. 14, 11

that happened in the whole land of Egypt ! The people started to process before him, each town on the east and west side of the river greeting him in turn, from Babylon to Rakote.⁹² He was accompanied by many bishops, who had gathered around to strengthen the Church. Among them were John of Pshati, the head⁹³ of the episcopacy of the upper country, a man of perfect divine wisdom and Gregory of Kais, the head of the lower country episcopate, with all the bishops.⁹⁴ When they reached Rakote, all the people came out (354) to greet him, clerics with gospels and crosses, censers of incense and burning candles. Singing psalms, they took him to the city.⁹⁵ This, he was elected patriarch on the 8th day of Khoiak, a Sunday. He was seated on the apostolic throne of the evangelist, St Mark, the flame who shines on us. The pontifical service was completed in accordance with apostolic canons. He received the power to bind and loosen from God and illuminated the entire land.⁹⁶

To those in the episcopal palace he decreed that those living there should be left in peace to study the holy scriptures and attend mass together. He often spoke with them, stimulating their desire to the life of those in Shiêt. (356) When the other bishops and monks heard that Isaac was patriarch, they went to him and made obeisance to him, knowing as they did his great wisdom and asceticism, He was a model for them in all good things.

This saint, my beloved, God granted him healing powers of many sorts. Every time he went to the altar to perform the Holy Offering, his eyes ran with tears until he had completed the service. On reaching the point when the Holy Spirit came upon the altar, he would see the Holy Spirit descending on the offering and changing the bread and the wine⁹⁷ into the divine body of Christ. When the saint saw this great revelation, he would be seized by fear and joy. At (357) that moment his face would radiate with light so that everyone marvelled: "God has made us worthy of a saint like this." In the great teachings his mind was as full of light as that of the great Athanasius and the wise Cyril and all their successors.

92 The procession went through the western part of the Delta: if the Canopic branch of the river was still navigable. the procession might have taken it as far as Canopus, from which Alexandria is not too far SW.

93 The word is **ἀποτρίτης**, which is explained by Porcher as **τοποτηρητής**, attested in LSJ as a title. On the identification of Pshati with Nikiu cf. *Géog. Copte* p. 277

94 This bishop has a 'bad press' in the life of Samuel of Kalamun *op. cit.* p. 101. He is also named, along with James of Arwât and John of Nikiu, as a bishop in favour of George cf. Evetts *History* p. 22.

95 This suggests that they met him at the quayside and escorted him to the city

96 At the risk of drawing a banal comparison with pharaonic Egypt, the pharaoh's ability to illuminate the entire land is standard in the repertoire of language used in praise of a king, as in the Middle Kingdom inscription of Sehetep-ib-re cf. W.K. Simpson and others *Literature of Ancient Egypt* (2003) pp. 172 ff.

97 Lit. 'cup'

When Isaac left Egypt,⁹⁸ he turned many from their heresies and brought them to the upright faith of Jesus Christ. Some he baptized, others he received to himself. When their heresies were anathematized through grace, God granted him grace through his soul-saving words. God brought him to Psanasho⁹⁹ and he baptized many there, men, women, old and young.(358) Once while he was dining with bishops, a man who had been ill-used was brought, his insides on fire, so that even he were to drink a lake full of water, it would be as if had never drunk anything at all, so strong was the fire inside him. When he came in, he raised his eyes to heaven and sighed: "You are a righteous of of the Lord and your judgements are upright." The patriarch took of cup of wine, blessed it in the name of the Trinity, gave it to the man, who drank it. At that moment the fire inside the man was extinguished, and he returned home glorifying God.

Athanasius the chartularius, about whom (359) we spoke earlier, was a source of grief to this saint. He had power and the elder entrusted the care of him to God, but then he was punished by God for his faithlessness.

His oldest son became ill through God so that he almost died. His father brought many doctors but he was not cured. On the contrary, he came nearer to death. Athanasius became dispirited, seeking comfort for his son but finding none. He did not recover¹⁰⁰ at all. All the *archons* of the city sat around him. That night the Lord revealed to the archbishop: "Send to Athanasius the *chartularius* tomorrow and tell him: 'If you believe in Christ, who has set me over (360) the holy Church, the Lord will heal your son.'" When the saint awoke from his vision, he called his disciple: "Is there a bishop here?" and he said that Abba George was there with Abba Gregory and Abba Piamot the bishop of Tamiati.¹⁰¹ The patriarch called the bishops and told them what he had seen in the vision. Abba Gregory said: "Do you know that this man became angry with your sanctity. Perhaps this vision was an illusion and the word would not come true and do us harm?" The archbishop replied and, as he knew what was between himself and God, said: "What I said to you, say it freely before everyone.(361) It is Mark the Evangelist who tells you." They went as he said and came to the house of Athanasius, whom they found weeping for his son and whom they told what the archbishop had said to them. Athanasius replied: "Truly, if my son is cured by the archbishop, I will believe in God, like Athanasius, Cyril, Ignatius and Severus. Athanasius and his wife prostrated themselves at the feet of the bishops: "We beg you to ask the archbishop to pray to God for him that

98 Going to Rakote means leaving Egypt.

99 *Géog.* p. 373. The information there is not especially helpful.

100 νήφειν

101 Damietta.

he might be well, for in truth we will not be able to look at him for all the wickedness we have done to him." The bishops went and told the patriarch what Athanasius had said. (362) The patriarch went to the young man, stood over him, prayed and made the sign of the cross with his hand. At that moment the young man arose from his bed, as if he had never been ill. He asked that something be brought for him to eat, for he had tasted nothing since the day he fell ill. When Athanasius and his wife saw that their son had been healed by the archbishop, they prostrated themselves at his feet to beg his pardon. The archbishop said to Athanasius: "My son, beware of causing pain to the Church in future, for he who goes against the Church goes against Christ."

From that day the archbishop has been revered by Athanasius, who honours him like an angel of God. (363) The archbishop said to Athanasius during a frank exchange¹⁰² about the Evangelion¹⁰³ of Rakote that he should repair¹⁰⁴ it because over time it had fallen into decay. Through the grace of God he restored it and decorated it with great beauty. In his days the wood was also struck:¹⁰⁵ previous archbishops had been unable to do this because of the enemies of our faith. God gave him a safe pass before the Muslim governor and he was greatly honoured by him, who did him great honour. He often summoned the patriarch to him that they might sit with each other and talk, because the governor had seen Isaac perform many cures.

One day, while our father was celebrating Mass, the governor (364) passed by with his retinue. He went to the door of the church and looked in. He saw the archbishop standing at the altar, surrounded by fire and a powerful light at his back which gave him strength. When the governor saw this vision, he was astonished and said to one of his entourage: "Go and call the archbishop for me", for he wanted to know about the power surrounding him. "Who is speaking to him where he stands?" As he was about to send the man in, the governor saw the light coming out. He took fright and fled hastily with his escort. Nobody saw the vision except the governor. When he returned home, he lay down, frightened, like a corpse. He was unable to speak that day. The *chartularius* came and went into to visit him. He (365) found him sick with fright. When asked about his illness, he told them what his eyes had seen. When they heard, they marvelled and glorified God. He sent

102 Coptic: 'between them and with each other'.

103 The Angelion was built or rebuilt by monophysite Copts after Justinian had denied them access to existing churches in the city for refusing to acknowledge the Melkite patriarch Paul (537-540). It was built on the site of the Serapeum.

104 For this meaning cf. P. Lond. 3, 1044: 22

105 The wood was resonant and was used to publicly announce church services, as metal church bells have done in Europe since the time of Paulinus of Nola (400 AD). From time to time, after the Arab invasion, the use of the sounding board (also known as *καλλελε*) was prohibited. Another example may be found in J. Forget (ed.) *Synaxarium Alexandrinum I* (1905) p. 106, which relates an incident in the 11th cent. when Christian churches had been re-built and re-opened by the Fatimid caliph Al Hâkim *تضرب الناقوس* 'with the striking of bells'.

one of them and called the archbishop. When he arrived, he questioned him: "When you were standing at the altar, who was the one you were speaking to or who was the one I saw standing beside you¹⁰⁶ like a fiery light?" The archbishop replied: "I was speaking to my God." The archbishop was not unaware of the power standing with him every time he went up on the altar, including this one. The governor said: "Do you see your God every time you go up on the altar?" And the archbishop replied that he did. The governor marvelled and said to the arch (366) bishop: "The belief of you Christians is great. I thought until today that Abba John your predecessor was great with God, but now I know that you are his father and have a higher position with God than he does." From that day the governor considered him a prophet and always called him 'patriarch' and took him on all his travels. The saint was distressed because he was not allowed to dwell in his episcopal residence and because he loved seclusion at all times.

One day the governor was in Helwan,¹⁰⁷ which he rebuilt when he was governor. He summoned the archbishop and took his hand. He led him into his house and let none of those who attended him accompany them. He took him into (367) one of his rooms and left him there alone. He then went on his way. The governor's wife saw large groups of angels wearing white garments in the room with the archbishop and a great light like that of burning lamps. Isaac was in the middle of them, as they glorified God the whole night, as Christians do.¹⁰⁸ When the light came, she told the governor what she had seen. "I almost lost consciousness through fear of the things I saw and heard." The governor was astonished at what he heard from his wife. (368) The governor said to her: "He was the only one I took into the room that he might pray for us and our children." And she swore an oath: "I saw a great assembled around this man, saying prayers to their God." So he released Isaac the next day. The governor built churches and monasteries for monks around the city because he loved Christians.

At this time a revered man came from the land of the Saracens,¹⁰⁹ a Christian by religion. He had two sons. One of them had a demon and the other went to Egypt, with the intention of rejecting Christianity, for he was unable to do this in his own country out of fear of his father, who was a perfect Christians (369) His father searched for him but did not find him. He set off for Egypt to get him and he found him having rejected his faith and chose the portion of Judas over that of Jesus. The father brought his younger son, who had the demon, to Egypt so that the bishops of Egypt

106 CD 329a

107 The site of early dynastic burials opposite Saqqara south of Cairo.

108 Not what one expects a Christian to say. Is it based on a report from a Muslim?

109 Presumably the Arabian peninsula. One thinks of Najran in the SW of the area. One also guesses that the phrase about choosing the portion of Judas over that of Jesus is a metaphor for betrayal.

might pray over him and cure him because he had heard that they were saints of God. The Christian man came to Egypt. Abd el Aziz received him with great joy because he was a kinsman. He asked him why he had come. The Christian told him why, and he was received with great joy and honour.

The man saw that his son did not listen to his call to convert and wept in distress. He said: "Your blood is upon your own head,¹¹⁰ my son, **(370)** for you are now a stranger to me in this life and the life to come." He sought a holy bishop to pray over the young man. There happened to be¹¹¹ a false archbishop, one of the acephalous heresies, of whom it was said that he was a bishop. Not knowing that he was a heretic, the man brought his son to him to pray over him that he might be cured. The impious archbishop was unable to cure him, and the wicked spirit continued to torment him, not allowing him any peace. The man was extremely distressed. When the governor saw his sad face, he asked him what was wrong with him. The man told him. The governor asked him who this bishop was. He was told that the bishop was one of the Nioubershenoufe.¹¹² The man **(371)** was distressed when he learned that the bishop was a heretic. The governor then sent for the patriarch Isaac to be brought. When he arrived, the governor told him about the young man and how his father was grieving for him. He took some oil, prayed over it and anointed the boy with it: "In the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, may you cure this young man." At that moment the demon left him in the form of a fiery flame. Everyone who saw it marvelled and glorified God. The man arose and threw himself at the feet of the archbishop and worshipped him. He gave him choice perfumes which he had brought from his land. **(372)** The patriarch spoke great words about the Christian faith and salvation of the soul. The God-loving man begged the patriarch to copy the Gospel of John for him. He said prayers over the bread of *eulogia*¹¹³ for him, asking for blessing from the archbishop that he should protect for the rest of his life. And he left glorifying God. As Our Good Saviour said: "He who loves me, my Father will love him and I will be in him."

After this some Saracens who hated our faith came to the governor. They laid a charge against the archbishop, saying: "Look, you honour Isaac and receive him, but he abominates us and our faith." The governor said to them: "I love **(373)** him, for I know that he is a man of God and that he submits¹¹⁴ to us. What you are saying is not true. They replied: "You wish to know if he hates us and our faith and if what we say is true? Then have him eat with you from this dish and the food on it

110 Acts 18, 6

111 CD 306a

112 The name Barsanuphius suggests itself. Association with heresy?

113 1 Cor. 10, 16

114 Lit. 'bends his head'. Though clearly used here in a secular sense, 'submission' is embedded in the word اسلام 'Islam'

without crossing himself." The governor said: "I will convince you in this matter." He called the *chartularii* and said to them: "I want the patriarch to convince me by eating with me: if he loves me, he will not cross himself." The two *chartularii* said (374) to the governor: "We are Christians. It is not possible for us to eat without crossing ourselves first. If you let the archbishop first cross himself at dinner, he will eat with you and you will be pleased with him. But if you do not, we do not think that he will eat with you." The governor replied angrily: "I will have him eat with me and I will not let him cross himself. If he does, I will kill him." They were unable to reply because of his anger, so they remained silent.

One day the archbishop came to visit the governor, as he usually did, and sat with the governor, his entourage, the great Saracens and many *archons* of Egypt. While he was sitting there, a basket of fine dates was brought before the governor. (375) The saint, who was also wise in the affairs of God and men and on whom the Holy Spirit had come to rest, like the prophet Daniel, raised his right hand and took the basket of dates with great dexterity and said to the governor: "How do you wish me to eat? This way, or this way or this way?" The governor did not understand what the archbishop had done, but the *chartularii* and the *archons* knew and marvelled at his great presence of mind and the unbelievable grace granted to him by God. The governor replied: "Eat them whichever way you like." When they had finished eating the dates, the governor let him go (376) and said to the *chartularii* and the *archons* as they were flattering him: "I made him eat without the cross." They replied joyfully: "He did not eat without first crossing himself." The governor said: "How?" They replied: "By putting his thumb on the four sides of the basket and asking how he should eat, that is when he made the sign of the cross over the dates." The governor marvelled: "Truly, I have never met anyone as clever as this man." God, who gave glory and grace to Daniel the prophet before the Chaldean and Persian kings, also glorified this saint before the Saracen governor, (377) who also glorified Isaac, always calling him 'patriarch' because of the grace of the God in him. Listen, and I will tell you another miracle.

It happened at that time that the king of Makouria¹¹⁵ sent some of his agents to the archbishop with a letter as follows: The bishops in his country had become fewer because of the length and time of the journey. The king of Mauretania would not allow them to pass until the two countries made peace. There were two kings in one country, both Christians, but in conflict with each other. One of them had made peace with the Saracens, the king of Mauretania. The other, whose country was larger,

115 The Arabic text of the History of the Patriarchs writes Ethiopia الحبش in place of Makouria and Nubia النوبة in place of Mauretania.

Makouria, was not at peace with the Saracens. (378) When the archbishop read the letter and understand the contents of it, he grieved greatly for the churches and wrote to the king of Mauretania, with words of instruction and advice and of the Holy Scripture: "You are both Christians." He wrote a good many words to him to fortify his soul and the orthodox faith of the Son of God. He then wrote to him about not hindering those further south¹¹⁶ from passing through his land who were coming because of their bishop so that the churches would not be deserted, otherwise "you will find great shame before God". When the enemies of the faith learned of this, they slandered the archbishop to the governor: (379) "Let us say, governor, that the king of Makouria wrote to Isaac the archbishop to appoint a bishop to be taken to their country. And not only that. But he wrote to the king of Mauretania that he should make peace with the king of Makouria, our enemy. If this happens, they will be united and rise against us in warfare." The governor was angry when he heard this and immediately sent agents to Rakote with a letter to the *Augustalis*: "As soon as these messengers of mine reach you with this letter, arrest the archbishop and send him to me straightaway."¹¹⁷

(380) The governor had resolved that when Isaac arrived he would behead him with a sword. When the governor's letter arrived, Isaac was in church. It was Easter Sunday,¹¹⁸ the salvation of Christ. Oh, the grief and distress that happened on that day among not only those of our faith but those familiar with his frankness with God. They all grieved for their shepherd, not knowing his offence against the governor. They mounted him quickly and removed him to Babylon to execute him. When the archbishop, mounted on the donkey, rode through the streets of Babylon, the crowd went with him, as they usually did, until¹¹⁹ they learned what was going to happen to their shepherd.

(381) On his way to the governor two men on high wearing white garments. No human tongue can describe their glory and honour. He saw them walking on either side of him, one on the right and one on the left: "Do not fear, faithful patriarch. We are with you. No harm will come to you. He asked them who they were in such great glory. The one on the right, of elderly appearance, replied: "I am Cephas, called Peter. The other is Mark, my noble son. We have been with you since you were installed on the patriarchal throne and will accompany you until you reach your destination. Take heart and do not fear. This is the year of your fulfilment and (382) you will go to join your fathers in peace after you have completed your time as a monk, a shepherd and, with the Lord's will, a confessor, holy shepherd."

116 Lit. 'upper part'

117 According to the Arabic text Isaac's secretaries sought to avoid unpleasantness with the governor by sending him forgeries of the letters (كتباً غير كتب) that Isaac had actually written to the two kings.

118 Lit. 'the Pasch'.

119 The conjugation prefix *ⲱⲁⲧⲉ-* can also indicate purpose.

Some of the brother monks saw him speaking to someone but they could not understand it. When they reached the *praetorium*, the governor was informed that the archbishop had arrived. He ordered them to bring in him, his heart bent on mischief. When he saw the saint of God and the great glory surrounding him, he marvelled. His eyes also saw the two apostles, illuminated, coming in with him. He was astonished and gripped by fear. **(383)** When he was in control of himself, he said to the archbishop gently: "Is it true what they say about you ?" Isaac defended himself to the governor with great frankness and convinced him. He sat with him as is written: "I will give you a spirit of wisdom that non-one will be able to contradict."¹²⁰ And again: "If your brought before kings and governors, do not worry about what you will say. The Holy Spirit will instruct at that time in the things to say."¹²¹ The governor then received the archbishop: "Swear to me by God and and the glory surrounding you that you will conceal nothing from me in what I ask you." The saint replied that he would tell him everything he knew. The governor said: **(384)** "When you came, who were those men with you ? I saw two men and the three of you were surrounded by a great light. I have never seen anything like it before. Had they not disappeared, I would have died of fear." The saint replied: "Those two men were disciples of Christ. he king of kings, the one through whom kings are kings. Those whom you saw walk with me at all times. For this reason, governor, stay away from the Church and do not grieve it, for the one who grieves the Church grieves God." When the governor heard this from the archbishop, he became very frightened.

(385) The governor then ordered the archbishop to build a church in Helwan, the town he had built. It was completed in all beauty.# The archbishop fell ill and was in great pain. When the overnor learned of this, he became very distressed. He released him to be transported back to Rakote, where he worshipped in the church of St Mark. When his spiritual brothers of Shiêt heard of his grave illness, they came and ministered to him until the Lord came to visit him. As the revered archbishop was about to die, he was surrounded by bishops, clerics and monks. In this way Isaac, the faithful archbishop and confessor, gave up his spirit to the hands of God **(386)** on 9th of Hathor.

Abba John the bishop of Terenoute, his spiritual brother, was considered worthy of placing his hands on his eye, as Joseph placed his on the eyes of his father Jacob. He was buried in glory and honour and all the bishops and clerics spent the whole night singing psalms around him. On the following day a great multitude assembled and the holy office was performed over him. The entire

120 Lk. 21, 15

121 Lk 12, 11

multitude then partook of the body and blood of the Lord. His body was then placed next to Abba John the patriarch in the church of St Mark.

His body is with us on earth. His spirit is with God in heaven, interceding on our behalf. We believe that all the saints will precede the patriarchs and the prophets, the apostles and all the saints. May we obtain mercy from his holy prayers with Jesus Christ Our Lord, the one whose glory belongs to Him and His good Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.