

The Miracle of Chonae

Translated from the Greek

Anthony Alcock

The translation has been made from the continuous Greek text published by François Nau 'Le miracle de S. Michel à Colosses' *Patrologia Orientalis* 4 (1908) pp. 542-562. There is also a later Latin version, but the differences between the two are so numerous and sometimes so considerable that I have decided against referring to them, except where the Latin helps to elucidate the Greek. The notes that follow are based on those provided by Nau in his introduction to the text.

Colossae, the city to which the apostle Paul addressed one of his letters, lay between Laodicea and Apamea in Phrygia. According to an early account the apostle Philip and John the Evangelist opened up a spring in honour of Michael the Archangel. Its waters were healing waters. The sick daughter of a local pagan was healed by them, and her father built a small church in honour of Michael. As more people were healed, they converted to Christianity. Attempts were made to destroy the church but without success. It was then decided to divert two rivers that ran near Colossae in such a way that the church would be submerged by their combined waters. The custodian of the church, Archippus, refused to move in the face of the increasing waters. St Michael came to his rescue and created a deep chasm into which the waters could be channelled. The pagans were all turned into statues. The writer claims that these statues were still visible in his day. The waters flowed under the earth for some time before it re-appeared later on.

The story seems to combine elements of apocryphal gospels with an attempt to explain a phenomenon of nature. Herodotus (Bk 7, 30) writes: *Xerxes arrived at Colossae, a large city in Phrygia, in which the river Lycus disappears into a chasm in the earth and then about five stadia away re-appears, and this flows into the Meander.* The question of the chasm was investigated 'autoptically', as it were, by Mgr Le Camus,¹ who visited the area and reported that the river had been covered by 'de vastes couches de concrétion produites par les eaux pétrifiantes'.

The name Chonae is used in the title of the Greek and Latin versions and most likely derives from the Greek word meaning 'channel, gulf'. The Turkish name Honaz clearly derives from this name. The miracle probably happened at Colossae, about 4 km from Chonae. The Latin version appears to have been produced by the 'brothers of the Latin congregation of Mount Athos' so that Western Christians might become familiar with the miracle

Nau has a full discussion of the composition date of the miracle in his introduction, as well of course as details of the Greek and Latin manuscripts. I have followed the division of the text established by Nau.

Michael is most frequently called the Archstrategos and sometimes Taxiarch. I have replaced both with the title by

1 *Voyage aux sept églises de l'apocalypse* (1896) pp. 167-180

which he is most often known: Archangel. In fact, to avoid tedious repetition I have often omitted titles altogether. This is not standard scholarly practice. It might, for instance, be interesting to analyse the use of the various titles of Michael to determine which 'role' he was playing at any particular time. However, this translation is not meant to be a work of scholarship.

Narration of Archippus the church guardian
concerning the miracle performed
by
Michael the Archangel
at Chonae²

I. The beginning of the miracles, cures and gifts and acts of charisma given to us by God through the grace and intercession³ was announced by the apostles Philip and John Theologos. After John had driven the impure Artemis out of Ephesus, he made his way to Hierapolis to Philip, for he was battling against the serpent. They greeted each other and Philip said: "What are we to do, brother John ? I cannot uproot this impure and polluting creature from the city." For this was the most polluted and destructive of all unclean reptiles. Her whole body was bound with snakes: one around her head, the other around her neck, she standing on both snakes, and the area around her was full of reptiles. In a word, she was robed like a queen. The pagans⁴ considered her to be a great goddess, and all worshipped her and sacrificed to her. Often when Philip was sitting teaching, she ordered the reptiles to come upon him and kill him and she said: "Philip, leave this city, before I inflict a miserable death on you." Philip was preaching the truth and faith. The apostles prayed together and drove her out of the city of Hierapolis.⁵

II. After this most pious heralds of the truth went and took up residence in a place called Chairetopa,⁶ where the grace, gift and miracles of the celebrated Michael the Archangel were about to be revealed. They prayed and signalled to the people that Michael was about to descend and perform astonishing wonders. So the apostles came out and, as they were teaching in other cities, a spring of healing water immediately bubbled up in that place.

2 Latin is somewhat more economical: 'Miracle of St Michael the Archangel at Conae'.

3 *παρησία* 'speaking frankly'. I understand it to mean that Michael can say things to God that others would not be able to say. For a NT usage cf. Acts 14, 13. For its use in Hebrew cf. Dov Weiss *Pious Irreverence* (2014) pp. 8ff. The parallel Latin text uses the term 'praesentia'. The discussion of the term by Michel Foucault is of little relevance in this context. For a treatment of the Greek sources in which the term is used cf. Giovanni Scarpata *Parrhesia greca e parrhesia cristiana* (2001).

4 Lit. 'Greeks'. It is perhaps something of an irony that this name came to be used by Christians of those whom they identified as quite different from themselves in the same way that the classical 'Greeks' used the term 'barbarian' of those they regarded as quite different from themselves, cf. Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* Book 1 ch. 3, where he points out that Homer did not use the term 'barbarian' because the 'Hellenes' had not yet been 'separated off by contrast to one name' (*ἀντίπαλον ἐς ἓν ὄνομα ἀποκεκρίσθαι*). On Philip, Hierapolis and snakes cf. L. Kreitzer in R. Wooden, T. Ashley and S. Wilson (ed.) *You will be my witnesses* (2003) pp. 127ff.

5 It is conceivable that the serpent is echoed in the 'serpent-like' waters in the miracle to be related

6 For a possible identification of this place (which seems to consist of the words meaning 'greet' and 'place') with cf. J. Nesbit and D. Oikonomides *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals* vol. 3 (1996) p. 28. The Latin text calls it Reheretopa.

III. After the death of the apostles the pagans once again began to seethe and rage against Christians. Many years after the discovery of the holy water, news of it found its way into the rest of the country. Those who took refuge in that place were cured of whatever illness they had. Many pagans who came to witness these cures believed in Christ and were baptized. There was one man in the city of Laodicea, an impious idolater, who had an only daughter, born without the use of speech. Her father and many with the same mind as himself had wanted to dam⁷ the water of the spring because many pagans were hastening there to be cured of their illnesses and converting to Christianity. One day, Michael appeared to him in a dream and said to him: "Take your child to where the holy water appears and, by my name, if you believe, you will not come away grieving." The man set out with his daughter. He saw the gift of God's grace and believed and said to those being healed: "Who are you invoking when you throw the water over yourselves?" They replied: "The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and Michael the Archangel." He looked to heaven with outstretched hands: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, through the intercession of Michael, help me, a sinner." He took water and threw it over the girl's face. The child immediately cried out and said: "God of the Christians, help me, Truly your power is great. Michael." He was baptized and his whole household. He built a small oratory there in honour of Michael, which covered the holy water and returned home with his daughter, glorifying God. The pagans roared against the Christians and the holy water to dam it and remove it from the face of the earth.

IV. Ninety years after the oratory had been built over the water, a boy, about ten years of age, came from Hierapolis, named Archippus, of a faithful Christian family, and he settled there as the church guardian. This is how he lived. He lived for seventy years, sixty of them, from the time when he started to serve the oratory, without tasting bread, meat or wine and without washing. His diet was as follows. He boiled wild herbs without salt,⁸ and he used to do this once a week and he sprinkled three inches from the third water⁹ for his precious life, and he did this to revive his body. His clothes were two rough pieces of sack cloth, one of which did not leave his body until he died, at which point he was clothed in the second. His bed chamber was strewn with sharp stones, over which there was a coarse cloth¹⁰ that the stones might not be seen by those entering and under his precious head there was a cloth filled with thorns. The blessed one spent his reclining hours in these conditions, and it was a bitter sleep that the servant of God slept each night, for he had no relief,

7 Latin 'He decided to approach that water with many others . . .'. The Greek is not clear to me: βούλομαι/*decernere* and ἀπέρχομαι/*adire*, but one wonders if βούλομαι and βουλεύομαι have become confused with each other.

8 Lat. 'oil'

9 Latin: 'On the third day he sustained his life with a very small amount of water to revive his body rather than to drink it.'

10 Strictly, from the hair of Cilician goats.

exercising his body and keeping his life pure from the snares of enemy. Treading his narrow way full of travail, he said: "Lord, do not let me a sinner feel joy on this earth. Let not the good things¹¹ of this earth enter my field of vision. Let not even one day of the year be good and let not my eyes be buoyed by the foolishness of this world, but let them be filled with spiritual tears. Let my heart be enlightened with the knowledge of your commands and repay every gift I make to those who please you on earth. What is this body of clay to me ? It is merely foul-smelling filth and the flimsy ornament of the indestructible soul. The garment of the soul is the right faith in God, exposure and neglect of the flesh, hunger and thirst and angelic exercise, sleeping on the ground, lack of sleep, prayer and tears, lamentation and repentance, periods of rest and alms, and all the things pleasing to God. In all these ornaments the soul finds joy. What does the soul seek of the body ? Nothing except a just and sober life. The body, however, seeks to satisfy its all-consuming appetite for food and money, prodigality, lewd imaginings, every form of impurity, base desires and all the things not pleasing to God, these are what the body rejoices in and the poor soul is a prisoner in it. I am a wretched sinner. What am I to do ? Help me, Lord God, and shrivel my body like the mustard seed¹² and make my heart so humble that I become as nought with God, that I blossom in the early morning and wilt at evening and vanish. Still, I will not cease until I have mortified the limbs of my body to all base desires."

V. While Archippus the servant of God was reciting this litany and completing each day his angelic exercise, he glorified God who endowed him with such forebearance. Crowds of Christians and pagans in that place ran towards the healing water, confessing in fear and faith their belief in the Trinity: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God, through the intercession of Michael, have mercy on us." As they said it, they threw holy water on their illnesses and were healed. The unbelievers and enemies of the truth did not wish to witness the glory of God and every hour started to roar like lions to dam the water¹³ and kill the servant of God. The impious would often come and whip him, some would seize the crosses from the sanctuary and beat the holy man on the head, some would take him by the hair and drag him outside, some grabbed him by the beard and threw him to the ground, some ran to the holy water to dam it. Their hands overpowered him.¹⁴ As they ran forward, they saw a flame issuing from the water in the direction of their faces. Shamefacedly the impious retreated. They said to each other: "If we do not dam this water and kill this custodian,¹⁵ all of our

11 A curious way for a committed ascetic Christian to describe mundane pleasures

12 Matth. 17, 20

13 Similar conceit used earlier in §III, as well as the purpose clause expressed by the genitive articular infinitive, used several times in the text.

14 The text becomes slightly incoherent at this point.

15 Naus suggests 'casularius', which I cannot find, but the formation and meaning of which seem fairly clear.

gods will be reduced to nothing by those being healed." They continued to torture the servant of God each day, and the blessed man received immeasurable punishment from the idolaters, but he patiently and ceaselessly glorified God day and night.

VI. In that place there was a river descending from the left called the Chryses and went around as it approached the altar of God from the beginning of the world. The enemies of truth often tried to mix the holy water of the altar with the river but could not. When they tried, the water divided into two courses, and the divided water from the river made its way to the right parts of the altar, and this continues to be its course to the present day.

VII. In those days two rivers came from the east approaching the sacred place from about three miles away, the Lykocapros and the Kouphos. They converged at the head of the great mountain, made their way to the right and went around in the direction of Lycia. The eternal and cursed devil,¹⁶ the one who plants evil seeds into the hearts of men, who helps and advocates evil, who denies God and is hated by the angels, who kills saints and persecutes churches, who destroys cures and tests the sick, who deceives the world, who hates heaven and earth and loves the darkness, the apostate¹⁷ of those wishing to be saved and the opponent of those struggling for salvation, who hates good and Christ, the one in the dark abyss who never ceases to provoke idolaters into trampling upon the holy shrine of God. He then suggested to them that they turn back the rivers against the shrine so that it might be submerged beneath them, for the place was ideally suited for this. The pagans from the cities around came, about 5000 of them, and in a body descended upon Laodicea, where the residents made common cause with them and devised empty plots against the incorporeal Archangel Michael. The ringleaders said to the crowds: "The place is ideal for submerging under water, for the rivers come down from a great height, so let us divert them against the one who has enchanted our gods and reduced their divine powers to nothing with all these cures. We are not able to kill this one and block this spring, but with the force of the rivers and the fullness of water and the help of our gods that shrine will be destroyed."

VIII. Near the altar was a firm rock with a long flat surface, of which one could not see the bottom, surrounding the oratory at the front and the back for about seventy cubits. The impious enemies of truth came and started to dig a channel from the head of the rock to the head of the high mountain where the two rivers flowed to change the course of the water that it might submerge the shrine of

16 What follows is a litany of the sort that occurs earlier in the text.

17 Latin adds: 'who had become an apostate from being an angel' (*ex angelo apostata factus*).

God. The man-slaying devil spurred them on. When they finished the channel, they blocked the water for ten days so that the accumulation of it would cover the shrine. The rivers filled with water and the mountain streams became full.

IX. Archippus, the guardian, understanding the intentions of the devil and the degenerate behaviour of the idolaters, threw himself to the ground like a corpse, begging God and Michael to protect the holy place from the water. He then spent ten days prostrate on the ground without food or water, glorifying God: "Blessed be God, I will not leave the oratory and I will not flee. But I too will die from the water, for I believe in God who will save me from pusillanimity and tempest through the intercession of Michael that he might not abandon this home of his or this land until the end of time."

X. When the ten days were completed, the pagans came to move the rivers against the Archangel. "Let us release the rivers and watch the place being destroyed." They stood to the left and looked south, pointing out to each other the water as it came roaring and crashing¹⁸ down the hillside.

XI. The servant of God Archippus, the guardian, lay looking at the oratory, his tears falling to the ground and calling out incessantly to God until he rose with the help of Holy Spirit and began to sing this psalm.¹⁹ "The rivers have raised their voices, Lord. They raise their mighty waves from the voices of many waters. The height of the seas is wondrous and the Lord is wondrous in the heights. Your testimonies have been greatly confirmed. The shrine is fitting for your house, Lord, for the length of days." When he completed the psalm there was a great roar of thunder. The Archangel came down to that place and stood on top of the firm rock and said in a loud voice to the servant of God: "Guardian, leave the oratory, before you drown." The blessed one went out to see the coruscating appearance of glory and fell to the ground like a corpse. Michael addressed him for a second time: "Arise, just soul, and come to me." Archippus replied: "I am not worthy to go to you. I shudder at the sight of you." The Archangel Michael said: "Do not be disturbed and afraid. Arise and come to me." Archippus arose and fled back into the oratory and hid under the altar, trembling and commending his soul to God. Michael said to him: "Have the confidence²⁰ to come to me because the waters are roaring down on you." Archippus replied: "I believe, my lord, that God has great power like Michael, who will not let this holy place be destroyed until the end of time."

18 This word is intended to translate an entire sentence: τὸ δὲ ὕδωρ κατερχόμενον ἐκ τῶν ὀρέων ἐπαράττοντο σφόδρα. One would expect the verb to be singular.

19 Ps. 93, 3ff. More of an allusion than a quotation.

20 See note 1

Having said this, he went out of the oratory. The Archangel said to him: "If you believe that the Lord can protect this place from the waters, then come here to see his power." The servant of God went out and stood to his left and heard his voice and saw the magnitude of his glory, a pillar of fire rising from the earth to heaven. Michael then said to him: "Do you know who I am, holy man, that you shudder at the sight of me?" And Archippus replied that he did not. Michael said: "I am the Archangel of the Lord, who stands before God. I am unable to look upon the fearful glory of the undetectable Lord and the unbearable light of the immeasurable power that comes from the sight of him. But if you cannot bear the sight of me and you shudder at the form and power of his servant, then how will you look upon the one at whose side I stand trembling?"²¹ The Archangel said: "Holy man, do you see the waters coming down from the top of the mountain?" Archippus replied: "No, my lord, but I hear much noise." And the Archangel said to him: "Do not be afraid and stand your ground steadfastly."

XII. While they were still talking, the water came down from on high and came towards them. The Archangel raised his voice against the rivers: "Kouphos and Lykocapros, against whom do you think you are coming? Who has deceived you into leaving your course?" He made the sign of the cross in front of them: "Stay where you are." The rivers stopped and rose to a height of ten men. The Archangel said to Archippus: "Do you see the power of God?" He said that he did. The Archangel then said: "Do not be afraid of the threat of the water." As Moses stretched out his hand parted the Red Sea with his staff, so also did Michael stretch out his right hand like Moses holding a staff and struck the rock, splitting it this way and that. The echo of the splitting rock was a hundred times louder than thunder and the whole of that earth quaked. Michael said: "Do you see the power of God?" Archippus said: "Yes, my lord, I see the wonders and the power of the one who works with you." Michael stretched out his right hand and made the sign of the cross over the chasm below and said: "In this place all sickness and weakness will be driven away, all poison and enchantment and energy of the wicked one. Those who are bound will be loosened together with those harassed by unclean spirits. Those who are ill will be healed and everyone who takes refuge in this place in faith and fear, calling upon the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and Michael the Archangel, by the name of God and mine, will not leave this place in grief. The grace of God and my power will shade this place in the name of the Trinity. Our enemies who stand and look at us will become petrified while the waters cover my shrine."

He then said to Archippus: "Enter on my right." Straightaway he stood at the right hand of the

²¹ It is not easy to follow the logic behind these words of encouragement,

Archangel, who said in a loud voice to the waters: "Hurl yourselves into this channel and stay in this chasm roaring until the end of time, in return for having been prepared against me.²² The glory of this place will remain through Jesus Christ Our Lord, to whom is glory and power now and always."

²² Gk: ἀνθ' ὧν κατ' ἐμοῦ ἠτοιμάσθητε. The Latin text is different and quite a bit longer.