

Isaiah the Monk¹

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This translation has been made largely from the Latin translation provided by E. W. Brooks as a companion to the Syriac text, but I have occasionally consulted the Syriac. I have tried to include the Biblical citations, but not those that refer to other Syriac texts that relate incidents featuring Isaiah, The numbers in brackets are the page numbers of the printed Latin text. Zacharias makes it clear that the information in his text is based on eyewitness testimony.

The author of the text was Zacharias the Scholastic (456-535), who wrote a church history and an account of Peter the Iberian and Theodore of Antinoou. Zacharias was born near Gaza, where he was educated before moving to Alexandria and Beirut and then to Constantinople, where he was employed in government service. In later life he was consecrated Bishop of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos. His theological political stance was 'miaphysite', a new term for the older 'monophysite'. He is reticent about the early life of Isaiah, partly perhaps because he knew little about it and partly because physical home-life paled into insignificance when compared with the real home of the 'heavenly Jerusalem'. Some things appear to be certain: Isaiah was Egyptian by birth but moved at some point to Gaza,² possibly at the time of the Council of Ephesus (431). He was a well-established figure when the emperor Zeno issued the document known as the *Henotikon*,³ an attempt to reconcile the opposing parties of Chalcedon. The editor believes that the *Life* is a translation of one originally written in Greek.

The text is preserved in two mss.:

Berlin Sachau 321 (perhaps 741 AD)

B.M, Add. 12, 174 (1197 AD).

According to Brooks, the errors in both make it reasonably clear that they are not from the same archetype. The spelling of certain proper nouns also differs.

1 E.W. Brooks *Vitae virorum apud monophysitas celeberrimorum* CSCO 25 (1907). For the text of Isaiah, see *versio* pp. 1-18 and *textus* pp. 1 - 16. 29 of Isaiah's discourses on the ascetic life were published after his death and are available now in English, cf. J. Chryssavgis and R. Penkett *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses* (2002).

Discourse 30 contains sayings of Isaiah that have found their way into the collection known as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, an English translation of which can be found in B. Ward *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (1975) pp. 69ff.

2 Gaza was an important coastal trading centre that provided a link between Egypt and Palestine. It seems to have become a centre of intellectual activity, much as Akhmin (Panopolis) in Upper Egypt did with people like Nonnus and Pamprepius (see note 23), cf. L.M. Caverio *Greek poetry in the Thebaid 200-600 AD* (2008).

3 Issued in 482, cf. Evagrius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3, 14 for the text.

Account of the life of Isaiah,
who is among the saints

To the histories previously narrated I have attached a third, that of Isaiah the second prophet of this generation, who shared the same faith, right opinions and way of life as these famous holy men, Peter and Theodore.

Theodore⁴ was a great monk in Egypt, who performed wonders. When Timothy became archbishop of Alexandria after Dioscorus,⁵ he heard of Theodore and sent for him and made him bishop in the Egyptian city of Antinoou.⁶ When he had been there for some time, God performing miracles through him, he saw that the Church⁷ after the death of Timothy was under attack, and returned to the monastery from which Timothy had taken him. He lived here according to his fashion, while God performed miracles and gave signs through him and many came from all over and received help from him. Here also was Isaiah, who had written a book of admonition.⁸ There were three saints, Peter, Theodore and Isaiah, at the same time. Their story has been written by Zacharias the Scholastic, who wrote a church history.

Because of the virtue he achieved he was regarded as equal in status to the great Anthony, who initiated the monastic way of life in Egypt following the most praiseworthy Paul. Having emulated his way of life in every way, he made himself a model of all virtue for those who were to cultivate the monastic life after him. Physically an Egyptian, according to the nobility of his spirit he was a citizen of Jerusalem, a city that represents the celestial city and elevation to the pristine good of the place in which we lived, as the divine Gregory says.⁹ Brought up therefore in Egypt he gave himself to the life of monasticism and initially adopted the same way of life as them. He had a teacher, who conferred the *schêma*¹⁰ on him. But, after a short time, with disregard of the body, fervour of the

4 According to Brooks this paragraph seems to have been added by the Syriac translator.

5 Timothy Aelurus, who was consecrated Bishop of Alexandria in 454

6 The city in Middle Egypt built by Hadrian in the 130s for Antinous, who died in the river there under unknown circumstances. It is still known to Christians as Ansina, but its cartographic name is Sheikh Ibada. Syr. ܐܪܨܝܢܐ

7 ܪܫܝܚܐ

8 Perhaps also 'homily': ܪܫܝܚܝܢܐ

9 Perhaps Gregory of Nazianze Or. 25, 14: πατρίδα τοῖς ὑψηλοῖς τὴν νοουμένην Ἱερουσαλήμ

10 ܫܚܝܡܐ

soul and attention to the divine image, he progressed to the point where the grace given to him by God was universally admired (4) for the things to which his soul in loving selflessness applied itself, as he strove to perfect this way of life. Because he judged it more profitable to avoid the praise of people, he left the community and went into the desert, showing himself only to God, the creator of all, who is loved by and loves such souls and seeks the service of these souls because it is pure, sincere and completely stainless. He put all of his energy into completing all God's commands, especially when he he heard the commandment *Love your Lord God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbour as yourself*.¹¹ He completed the trinity of love due to God: he loved God with his whole heart, soul and mind, and he loved his neighbour as himself.

One of his contemporaries who professed the monastic life went into him and was suffering from cold in the head and neck because his garment was defective. Isaiah commiserated and empathized with him, so he too exposed himself to the cold. He did not have another tunic with which he could obey the divine command,¹² so he divided the cloak¹³ on his neck into two parts and kept one for himself and gave one to his visitor,¹⁴ for he was a diligent observer of divine commands. He was deserving of God because of his immeasurable asceticism and the virtues associated with it and the observance of the movements of his spirit and the vigilant struggle with the devil and the rest of the bitter demons and because of the humility that contended with them and is the repository of all virtue and various spiritual gifts, in particular those of wisdom and prophecy, which is why many came to visit him. His fame in Egypt was great and the reputation of the wisdom that had been granted to him to distinguish between monastic thoughts¹⁵ and all prophecy attracted people to him to give thanks to him, and in no way was he permitted to enjoy the peace he wanted, even though he was living in the inner desert. So he left Egypt and made for Palestine so that he might escape the praises of men, which he perceived as the blows of demons striking his ears, and so that he might settle in another country to acquire peace in this way. (5) When he arrived in Jerusalem, after having venerated the signs of the divine Coming and salvific Passion, the Cross of Christ, followed by the tomb and resurrection on the third day, he decided that he would live in the desert near Eleutheropolis.¹⁶ When he settled there, it was impossible to conceal his presence from all the saints in the Jordan area and in those places ideally suited to the pursuit of philosophy in Jerusalem and Palestine, the grace of God that had been granted to him proclaiming the man in every place, in

11 Matth. 22, 37

12 Matth. 10, 10

13 Syr. ܩܘܨܐ

14 The best known example of this charity is probably Martin of Tours.

15 ܩܘܨܐ

16 About 50 km SW of Jerusalem, known in Aramaic as Beth Gabra.

particular his gift of wisdom and prophecy. For this reason many went to him because of their demonic possession, seeking a cure. He cured those who told him of their possession, while those who tried to conceal it were healed in the same way, because God had revealed to him their inmost thoughts and the wiles of the demons. Others in distress got him to accept their difficulties¹⁷ through his prayers, compassion and counsel. Many troubled by demons and other passions, when they approached him, received the cure they needed through the grace of God whom they venerated and worshipped. The Egyptians, monks and laity, stopped visiting him because of the distance and stopped enjoying their customary spiritual benefit.

The fame of his God-given grace was so widespread among Egyptians and Palestinians that lay people, as I said earlier, could ask him about difficulties they were experiencing. Accordingly, when the servant of a man called Nestorius the scholastic, a town councillor¹⁸ from Gaza, stole money from him and fled, Nestorius asked those who love Christ who frequently came to visit the saint to take him with them to learn of the things that were troubled. And when he arrived, he found him speaking with others who had come before him about the sentence: *Man was made in the image of God*. Lest it be thought that he had come to him about the loss of the money as if to some fortune-teller,¹⁹ of which there are many among pagans, he concealed the reason why he had come and pretended (6) that he had come for spiritual counsel, and he asked him: 'How are we to understand this phrase: *Man in the image of God*'? Isaiah, after having learned from God the real reason why he had come to him, said: '*In the image* means that, when your servant steals your money, you will be able to find him with that money - you will not impute to him any malice but you will forgive him. The Lord says in the gospels: *Be merciful like your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun shine on the just and the unjust*.²⁰ Thus, he appeals to us to be like him and his Father and to be in the same image.' When Nestorius heard and saw that he had replied in one answer to the question concealed in his heart, he arose and before God fell to his face on the ground, admitting that this was why he had come. He was told: 'If you wish to find your money, keep God's commandment - and you are not a vindictive person - that you may see it *in the image*. Do not come to monks for mundane reasons but for what is spiritually useful.' He said he would do this and returned home, where he found his servant with the money he had stolen. Dionysius, also a scholastic from Gaza and one who loved Christ,²¹ told me a story about this saint: *I went to visit him with some others for*

17 ܘܡܫܘܟܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܝܫܝܢܐ

18 βουλευτής, reproduced in Syriac as ܕܘܢܝܫܝܢܐ

19 ܘܡܫܘܟܘܢܐ

20 Matth, 5, 45

21 Like the author Zacharias. He is one of the many identified, but not seriously, as Dionysius the Pseudo-Aeropagite.

spiritual counsel. On the way I fell into a quarrel with my servant and struck him. Isaiah told us when we got there before he had heard anything from anyone of the group or my servant. He nodded to each of the others and spoke of the animal passions that beset him and promised a cure for these in such a way that those who confessed their misdemeanours, which they thought that only they knew, were afflicted with penitential grief and weeping. He said clearly to me: 'Do not be quarrelsome and angry and so not strike the image of God.' Refuted by him in wisdom and grace, we begged him to entreat God to be merciful with us.

Because of such a great gift and the refutation of human sins that proceeded from this, he wanted to avoid vainglory and observe the commandment that says: *Judge not that you may not be judged.*²²

(7) All who came to him, whether monk or layperson, their deeds were revealed to him. He settled in Gaza, where he built a monastery and enclosed himself in a cell. The only person he spoke to was Peter, his chief disciple, whose physical place of birth was Egypt but who was a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, a man worthy of him in all spiritual matters and teaching who observed the canonical hours and the service of God from matins to nones. It happened that after the nones God-loving men came to him. The great Isaiah knew beforehand and left an equal number of gifts for those about to come to him so that his disciple would not trouble him after nones on their account.

This is a story we learned from scholars from the maritime region of Gaza: *At the time of the rebellion of Illus and Pamprepius against Zeno, who died in the fear of God,*²³ *there was a disturbance because of Illus,*²⁴ *who is said to have been led astray by Pamprepius the magician and slid into paganism (and they expected those people to open up the pagan temples if they were victorious against Zeno), we came to him and found his disciple, mentioned earlier, after nones carrying a basket with gifts for each of us. He told us that the Isaiah had prepared these gifts for us and that we should not be troubled by the revolt, because it was merely a cloud that would soon disperse.*²⁵

They then went to visit Peter the Iberian for the same reason and heard the same response. Both had one and the same gift: they were true servants and ministers of the One God who is worshipped in the sacred and consubstantial Trinity, spiritually a pair who deserved the same satisfaction in the things they requested from God. So, when Palestinian monks began to discuss the question of whether we should confess that we have the same body as that of the Lord and the celebrated Peter anathematized those who refused to confess this, some of them supported him, together with those

22 Matth. 7, 1

23 ܐܝܫܝܐ ܕܩܙܝܗ

24 Pamprepius was a 5th cent. non-Christian Upper Egyptian poet of Akhmîm (Panopolis), who developed a good relationship with Zeno's *magister militum*, Illus, a Christian. The revolt in question was nothing less than an attempt to overthrow Christianity.

25 The same story is told about Athanasius and Julian in Rufinus *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1, 34

who shared (8) his opinion, when the matter was being discussed and they promised each other that they would agree with whatever he said. They came to him and heard the same reply against those who refused to confess that the Lord Christ was of the same essence as the Father or that he was of the same essence as humans. On the canonical question being discussed at Alexandria among those who disagreed with each other, they provided, when questioned on the subject, a consensual opinion. The celebrated Isaiah was visited by the admirable John, who was archimandrite of an Egyptian monastery, and the Bishop of Sebennytus,²⁶ well known for his spiritual gifts, and other holy men, including Agatho, John known as Pnpsws and father Pnsw.²⁷ And because it was necessary for this holy man to receive them for talks and do so equally and not receive others or appear to receive others, his door was open during this time and he showed himself to all who came and talked to them. Such was his divinely-given wisdom that, even though he had no proficiency in pagan knowledge, Aeneas a sophist of Gaza, a most Christian and learned man distinguished for his learning, so I was told by one his close followers, said: 'Often, when I am not sure about a passage in Plato or Aristotle or Plotinus, and am unable to find a solution in those who teach and interpret their texts,²⁸ I ask him, and he clarifies my thinking and their meaning, and in this way error is refuted and the truth of Christianity confirmed.'²⁹ Thus, the man instructed in all things by God, both practice and theory of physics and theology, so that he yielded to none of those said to be skilled in the theory of philosophy. He wrote works of counselling and other things relating to the monastic life, a testimony to the words of Paul: *We have this treasure in earthen vessels*³⁰ and *God chooses the ignorant and despised of the world to destroy the strong*.³¹

This story was told to me by Bosporius, who later became Bishop of Sinope, when he was secretary of the Prefect:³² *I went to visit him when I was being oppressed by thoughts, and it occurred to me to ask him if I should marry. He, though he had heard nothing from me, sent me a message with Peter his disciple: 'Why is your soul troubled like the sea? It is for you to do as you wish.' It occurred to me to ask him if the end was near, especially since I had heard him asserting this with*

26 The Greek form of *tbt-ntr* or *ΧΕΜΝΟΥΤΕ*, a town in the eastern half of the Delta.

27 I cannot identify either name in Coptic: ΠΕΝΤΑΚΟΥΣ or ΠΑΝΕΚΟΥΣ, the former apparently undocumented, but the latter documented in M. Hasitzka *Namen in koptischen dokumentarischen Texten* (2007) p.69 in former The Syriac forms are ܡܢܩܘܣܘܣ ܘܡܢܩܘܣܘܣ

28 Lat. *sententias*, for which there is no word in Syriac.

29 Aeneas (d. 518), a convert to Christianity in later life, His best known work is a dialogue entitled *Theophrastus*, the text of which can be found in *Patrologia Graeca* 85 col. 872 ff., just before some of the works of Zacharias.

30 2 Cor. 4, 7

31 Allusion to 1 Cor. 1, 27

32 For speculation on the identity of this figure cf. G. Greatrex *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah* (2011) p. 13 n. 33.

σκρινιάριος reproduced by Syr. ܡܢܩܘܣܘܣ

others and, that being the case, if I should not marry. He sent me a message: 'It is the final hour',³³ and let your heart be in no doubt that the end is near.' He was asked by some holy men to own up whether he had conquered the passions and deserved such a state by the grace of God. He replied that he was like a farmer walking around his land and pulling up any weeds he saw.

Signs of the grace granted by God to these three saints, whose lives I have attempted to write on the basis of faithful accounts told separately to me and, in part, personal experience: when Zeno, who died in the fear of God,³⁴ heard and wished to see the men, he sent Cosmas,³⁵ one of the imperial eunuchs and a leading citizen, to them with a letter, asking them to attend him with certain saints that he might see their virtues with his own eyes and receive their prayers and have the benefit of their teaching and holy and spiritual blessing. But the great Peter learned of the force³⁶ of this before it was given to him and, as one who fled from all vainglory, hid himself and did not appear. At which time he left Palestine and made for the coastal region of Phoenicia. The admirable Theodore, when asked at Alexandria by the eunuch of the imperial bedchamber who had been appointed and the one who was in charge of military and civil matters, to go, accompanied by ascetics, bishops, monks and presbyters, to the emperor so as not to harm others who wanted to agree to the royal summons what was just, appeared to agree. When a time was found that would afford him an opportunity, he too hid himself and did not appear. The one who brought the imperial letter (10) took some to make his way to Isaiah in Palestine, but he eventually arrived and gave him the imperial letter and urged him to speak with him. He found Isaiah, according to the prayer that he had made,³⁷ lying, his body swollen, on his sickbed. He heard him praying for the emperor and praising his faith and at the same time saying that because of an infirmity that was all too visible he would be unable to attend the emperor, unless by chance he was willing to carry to the emperor a body that would die and soon become a cadaver. When he heard this, Cosmas begged Isaiah to pray for the emperor, the empress, the state and himself and asked him to do the emperor the honour of writing to him. He did this and performed everything that was said before dismissing the imperial eunuch with blessings and the letter. After Cosmas had left, Isaiah arose healed, without a blemish on him. He revealed himself to be without suffering³⁸ and above vainglory and, with the power

33 A cryptic ref. to 1 John 2, 18

34 cf. n. 23

35 A copyist/translator error: *σπάδος* (eunuch) for *σπαθάριος* (guard), cf. Zacharias *HE* 3, 22. Zeno appears to have threatened Peter more than once to end his dissension and re-establish the union (of the Church).

36 Peter clearly knew that he was being summoned by the emperor to give his consent to the *Henotikon*. The English 'force' translates Syr. ܦܠܝܚܐ

37 ܦܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ

38 ܦܠܝܚܐ

granted to him by God to trample upon the devil and his creatures³⁹ and made himself a second Anthony before God and left the temporary body of earth and departed to him whom he loved, leaving behind his successor and deputy, Peter.

You have the lives of the three celebrated saints of our generation, which we have written to glorify the consubstantial Trinity. With their prayers and supplications, most magnificent Misael who loves Christ, may your life be well directed, with the care of the imperial bedchambers, and may you escape fully from the trials of the furnace that is here and take your place in the heavenly kingdom of God and the Saviour Jesus Christ, king of kings and Lord of Lords. And glory be to you forever.⁴⁰

39 Lk 10, 19

40 This may be a reference to the escape experienced by the three saints in the furnace, cf. Daniel 1-3.