

# Maurice the Emperor

## A Short Syriac Text

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Maurice was emperor from 582 to 602. He rose to military prominence in 577, when he became commander-in-chief of the army despite having no discernible previous experience. Nevertheless, he conducted successful campaigns against the Sassanians and the Avars. He is commemorated in one of the texts published by F. Nau 'Les légendes syriaques d'Aaron de Saroug, de Maxime et Domèce, d'Abraham, maître de Barsôma, et de l'empereur Maurice' et Jules Leroy 'Les miracles de Saint Ptolémée' *Patrologia Orientalis* vol. 5 ( 1910) pp. 696-807 in the text printed on pp. 773 - 778. The manuscript is described by Nau as Paris syr. 309, 'perhaps of Nestorian origin'.

Nau finds it (p.698) strange that someone who had always been 'en communion avec la chaire de S. Pierre' should have become a martyr in the Jacobite church. According to Michael the Syrian he also instigated a persecution of Monophysites in Melitene.<sup>1</sup> An historical account of Maurice's reign is given by Theophanes the Confessor in his *Chronographia* ed. and tr. by J. Classen (1839) pp. 412-449.

I have used the divisions made by F. Nau, in the Syriac text indicated by paragraphs and in the translation by numbers.

### **History of Saint Maurice, Emperor of the Romans**

In addition to his many qualities and righteous life, Maurice, emperor of the Romans, also held the position of *hyparch*, that is, judge. He was alarmed that one of the acts of his reign might be wrong, that justice might have been blackened and laws bent to spare the wealthy and let the guilty go free. He also divided the hours of day and night: the first three hours were reserved for judgements, the second two for affairs of state, the following two for listening to various people and giving orders, the eighth and ninth for dining, three for prayer and four for sleep. As for the remaining eight hours, he diligently<sup>2</sup> performed the offices and recited the Psalms<sup>3</sup> of David. For the various seasons and lengths of the day and night,

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1 *Chronicle* Bk. 10, 25

2 *ἰσχυρῶς*

3 *ψαλμοῦ*

everything was arranged and various matters regulated.

2. In old age he became consumed by asking God<sup>4</sup> to punish him for his transgressions and not to deprive him of his perfect reward.<sup>5</sup> One day three hours elapsed in which he failed to say this prayer, and an angel appeared to him in a form that was glorious and calm. The angel saw him performing his office<sup>6</sup> and said to him: “You have been tiring<sup>7</sup> God for a long time with your bellowing.<sup>8</sup> You beg God with your petition and demand to be punished for your sins, without which you would not be worthy of the perfect degree,<sup>9</sup> and not to be deprived of the perfect good. I can bear witness that you have sins that would deprive you of the highest degree, but you will be part of the community of saints. If you wish to keep your empire and the life of your children for a long time, stop asking and, at the Resurrection, your reward will be that of the righteous. If you wish for a higher reward and punishment on earth, this is the punishment: you will lose your kingdom and your children will be slaughtered before your eyes. and finally you will be burned by your enemies.<sup>10</sup> Choose what you wish. I will return in twenty days, and what you choose will happen to you.”

3. Maurice had eight children. The youngest child lived with his nurse at the end of town, having developed a strong affection for the nurse, and Maurice did not want to separate them after weaning.<sup>11</sup>

4. The emperor was not deterred from choosing the better course in spite of all the disastrous events outlined to him by the angel, but his resolve was reaffirmed all the more to continue with his petition and wait until his prayer was answered.

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4 This seems to be a variation on the passage in the *Chronographia* p. 439

5 ܕܘܪܕܝܢܐ

6 ܪܫܘܢܐ ܕܥܡܐ

7 The verb is ܪܫܐܢ

8 The Syriac seems to be less flattering than Nau's 'prière': ܪܫܐܢ

9 ܐܝܢ

10 According to Theophanes (p. 449) Maurice was relieved of the empire by the 'rebel' (τύραννος) Phocas and murdered with his five sons, their heads put on public display in the 'Camp Tribunal'. Maurice's wife, Constantina, and their three daughters were placed by Phocas in a private house (έν οίκῳ ἰδιωτικῇ).

11 ܪܫܐܢ

5. After twenty days the angel appeared to Maurice as on the first occasion and asked the emperor: "What is your choice ? To spend the rest of your reign in peace and the rest of your days with sufferings, and afterward accept a medium place in the new world ? Or to take away this care that would keep you from all distress and, in this case, everything I told you on the first will happen to you ?" The emperor said: "I choose disgrace with suffering and death, and I will continue in the better course. Through all this, as a support, I will have the strength of Christ." The angel departed.

6. Two days later a Roman general named Phocas staged a coup against him, stirring up the Romans as follows: "Our emperor is weak and soft. He does not know how to govern the empire. You have seen with your own eyes that the enemies have occupied many of our provinces because of his negligence and weakness. If we do not wake up and try to save ourselves, our only option is to perish totally. As long as Maurice or any of his children is alive, the empire will be enfeebled and our enemies will continue to grow. If you are willing to listen to me, we will destroy him and his family and he will be the last to die." The Romans listened to him and said unanimously: "Do as you will. We are with you."

7. They then assaulted the emperor and took him prisoner. They took seven of his children and slaughtered them before his eyes. Maurice said: "If you wish to destroy my entire family, I still have a son with a nurse, the daughter of so-and-so. Take him and do what you will."

8. While they were assaulting the emperor and his sons, the child's nurse seized the boy. She went off and hid him with the nurse who was looking after her own son. She took her son and brought him instead of the emperor's son. <sup>12</sup>

9. When Maurice made known the whereabouts of his son and the nurse, the people rushed off to find them. They brought him before the emperor and his enemies and said to him: "Will you tell us if this is your son ?" Maurice looked and knew that it was the nurse's son. He recognized her love and blessed her: "May God reward you for having had the foresight to substitute your son for mine." The nurse, as if the Romans had misinformed her, gave them the following excuse: "The messengers were in great confusion when they reached me. I came without knowing what it was all about. Send someone with me and I will bring the emperor's

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<sup>12</sup> On the nurse's role cf. *Chronographia* p. 448. For another version of the nurse's story cf. Theophylact of Simocatta *Historiae* ed. C. Boor (1887) Bk. 8, 11:5

son." She finally brought the emperor's son, who confirmed that it was his son. The Romans mercilessly put him to death with his brothers.

10. Phocas and his courtiers had a skiff<sup>13</sup> brought to the harbour, filled it with wood and poured oil<sup>14</sup> on the wood. He had Maurice brought, his hands tied behind his back, and put him in the middle of the boat. The boat was torched and sent out into the middle of the sea. The fire became more intense at the back of him and burned away the bonds that tied his hands, which he then raised to heaven and cried aloud to God that he had thought him worthy of this grace.

11. The residents of Constantinople stayed at home and listened to the praises offered by Maurice to God. This is how he ended his life and how his struggle<sup>15</sup> had a happy ending. The end of the story of Maurice the Emperor. Glory forever to God. Amen.

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13  Bears a striking resemblance to 'coracle', a small boat made of willow and leather hide (*corium*), waterproofed with bitumen, not uncommon in parts of Britain.

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