

## ORIGINAL SYRIAC LIFE

### THE MAN OF GOD

1. The account of the man of God from the city of Rome. He was triumphant and received a crown because of his poverty and toil for Christ's sake in the days of the holy Mar Rabbula, bishop of Edessa.

My friends, let us hear with discerning affection the account of the marvelous man. For we rightly call him an angel of God, as he despised all the pleasures of this transitory world. Now the account of him is like this.

This man was heir to great wealth, but he chose for himself the hatred of wealth. He exchanged it for the love of poverty: not ordinary poverty, but [one]<sup>1</sup> of shame and reproach. For he was a destroyer of pride by his abasement, and of abundance<sup>2</sup> by his abnegation, but he was a builder of divestment<sup>3</sup> and of abasement.<sup>4</sup> He was perfect in fasting: from his belly<sup>5</sup> he barred food, and he did not yield to his belly so that he might not be enslaved like Esau.

He was a watchful and vigilant guardian to his body, because he fled far from marriage and from fornication. For virginity and chastity dwelt innocently in his body as if by agreeable ordinance. Like Abraham, he joyfully separated from his family and his country, for he yearned and was pressing in his petition to be enrolled and recognized in the Jerusalem which is above. What can I add to extol the praise of one whose extreme perfection overpowers every tongue from telling it? The account of such a person is beyond us and is inadequately told by us.

2. Our account of him begins in this way.

His parents were from the city of Rome, so from this point the inquiry ought to begin.

They were rich, renowned for family and for nobility. However, they lacked children. As much as their wealth increased and grew, so also their sorrow increased with their wealth because they could see no heir to their funds and they did not know for whom they were accumulating. For if Abraham, the father of all believers, could say in sorrow to his Lord, ‘My Lord, what will you give me, for behold I continue without sons,’<sup>6</sup> how much more would those mourn whose mind was fastened on their wealth? Now, through tears, many prayers and vows, a son was born to them, and our account is about him. He was dear to God, to his parents, to whoever saw him. His parents were relieved from their distress. Now the child was magnified even while still on milk: the privileges of nobility grew up with him, and these honors were his from his parents. When he reached the age for schooling, he went to school in great pomp with a large retinue of servants. However, he not only disregarded these transient things which pass away, but he even did the exact opposite. For he exercised himself in abasement as he quietly gave his attention to his study. While many of his peers sought very much to corrupt him with the arrogance of knowledge,<sup>7</sup> he did not relinquish his sobriety. Then the parents of the child, as they did not understand that he was a chosen vessel of God, began to be gloomy and mournful because they supposed that he was unsophisticated and incompetent in the ways of this world. So they secretly schemed that the child might be more worldly-wise and artful. His father ordered his slaves to be unrestrained with him and to accustom him to be assertive. But he rebuked and admonished them by his humble practices, and he turned away from them with a dignified, humble countenance. His mother also provided beautiful handmaids adorned with all sorts of gorgeous worldly ornaments, and she ordered them to wait upon him. The youth did not openly thrust them from his presence, but, with his countenance bent downwards, he assented to be waited upon by them. Afterwards, he ordered them with a dignified word to leave his presence

while he remained alone. The mother of this attractive (person) then asked his adorned handmaids if he spoke with them or laughed with them. But they said, ‘Not only does he not laugh with us, but we do not even dare to look at him because of his overpowering dignity.’

3. For a long time he maintained these [customs] in this way. But after time passed and he arrived at the full flower of youth, his parents proposed to betroth him a wife according to custom, which they did. When the time of the marriage drew near, they provided whatever was excellent and magnificent, and set up a splendid bridal chamber. All the city was invited to the wedding feast. But on the very first day of the wedding feast, as the bride was getting ready to enter in the procession, a holy readiness bubbled up in his soul's mind, and he asked one of his groomsman to go with him to the harbor. The groomsman thought that he spoke in jest. But, when [the groomsman realized that] he truly wanted to do this, he tried to prevent him by saying, ‘What! All the city is invited to be merry and rejoice today at your house, and we should seek out places that are deserted? Who will approve of us or who will not scoff at us when we do this? We turn joy to sadness, and great rejoicing is turned to sorrow for everyone who was expecting your joy.’ But as much as his groomsman attempted to detain him, just as much was that attractive [young man] persuading him that they should go. As his groomsman esteemed him, he was led to the view of the humble one. Together they took two horses and went to the harbor, while noone else accompanied them. He said to his groomsman, ‘Stay here, guard this horse for me while I divert myself and then together we will go to the wedding feast.’ Since [the groomsman] was unaware of what he planned to do, he did as ordered while entreating him, saying, ‘Let us return quickly and not be late and be scoffed at.’ Then the blessed one, after withdrawing himself a little way from the groomsman, prayed and said, ‘O you who more than matches our requests with your<sup>8</sup> gifts, open for me your door on which I knock,<sup>9</sup> and give me

now [this request] according to my heart.' As he was praying, behold a ship arrived while he was there, bound for Syria. Immediately he boarded it. By God's providence, a mighty wind came up for it and without delay brought it to the port of Seleucia in Syria. Then the blessed one left Seleucia and went all around begging and was brought to a city of the Parthians called Edessa. He remained there in the surrounding area until his death.

4. Now, these were the practices of the blessed one in Edessa: during the day he was constantly in the church and in the martyrion, while he took nothing from anybody. For he decided to dispense with food during the day, so that he could keep his fast until evening. When evening arrived, he would stand by the door of the church, his hand stretched out, and he would accept alms from whoever was entering the church. When he had received from them what he deemed necessary, he would draw back his hand from taking. Now the ration<sup>10</sup> of his food was about ten minin<sup>11</sup> of bread and two of vegetables. If by chance he would receive more, he would immediately give it to someone else, and from alms he would make alms. There are proofs and attestations concerning this from many people about the Man of God<sup>12</sup>. He did not dwell apart from the poor. But when night came, after all the poor whom he was with were sleeping, he would rise up. He would crucify<sup>13</sup> himself to a wall or to a column and he would pray. He would enter with the earliest who were coming to church for prayer, and [would stay] until day-break. In this way he filled up every day.

He told noone about his former life and his dignity; not even his surname would he consent to declare in order that his [former] way of life might not become known or be discovered through his name.

5. Now that groomsman, when he had waited a long time and [his master] did not return to him, went around the whole harbor and made inquiries as he sought him. When he learnt that he

had embarked on a ship, he returned to the home of the blessed one and announced what had happened. No one can describe the grief and sorrow that seized the parents of the humble one. In keeping with their wealth and rank, they sent into all harbors and countries as they sought him. Now, one of his Christian servants was among those who went out on the search for the saint. As they went about in the cities, they came also to Edessa where their master was begging. This [Christian] servant of the saint entered and made known to the praiseworthy bishop Rabbula of Edessa this man's case. [The servant] not only did not find [the blessed one], but he was not even believed because the case was so extraordinary. Since [the servant] was not able to come across him, he left and took himself off to other regions in search of him. However, the blessed one had recognized his servants when they had entered the church and when they left. But they, although he was begging right in front of them, had not the least idea it was he as there was no sign of stateliness in him because of his extreme poverty. For how could they recognize him in a man clothed in shameful rags and begging? [It is] likely that he even accepted alms from them.

6. Now, after a long time had passed, one night a pious custodian<sup>14</sup>, one who deserved to see the sight, was going out to see if the time for the liturgy had arrived. As he was going along, he found that humble one in a cruciform position praying while everyone was asleep. He saw this not once or twice but many times during long nights. Then one night that custodian went and stood by him and interrogated him, 'Where do you come from?' and 'What is your occupation?' At first the blessed one did not return an answer to the custodian who asked him. Finally, it was dragged out of him by the violence of the petition, and he answered and said to him, 'Hey, why are you interrogating me about these things, man? Ask those around you. From them you can learn who I am and where I am from, for I am one of them.' But the custodian could not bear to leave this astonishing (person) uninvestigated. For his mind was afire. He took an oath and put

himself under a curse not to leave him alone and not to go away from him until he learnt the truth about him. But the Man of God was in torment because he feared the oath and the curse as he surely was not a heretic<sup>15</sup>, and he consented to reveal the truth to the custodian. But he also exacted an oath from the custodian not to reveal (it) to anyone while he was alive. Then he revealed everything to him as he said, ‘That Christian who came some time ago seeking a man was my servant, and he was seeking me.’ The custodian, when he heard these things, entreated him greatly and besought him to live with him. When he would not consent, he left him. From then on, that custodian, although he had been doing his work well,<sup>16</sup> improved himself<sup>17</sup> by austere practices. He trained his body<sup>18</sup> more than previously until even his appearance bore witness to his austere practices as he said to himself, ‘If this one who used to live in great luxury does these things, what ought we wretches not do for our redemption?’

7. Now after a long time, the blessed godly humble one became sick and had fallen between the columns. The custodian, as he passed here and there and did not see the saint as usual, sought for him diligently. When he found [the blessed one], he entreated him to come into his house with him and be taken care of because of his sickness, but [the blessed one] did not want to. So [the custodian] said to him, ‘After you are well again, I will let you return to your customs.’ But he did not consent. The custodian then said to him, ‘Well then, I will bring you to the place for strangers.<sup>19</sup>’ After a great deal of persuasion, [the blessed one] just barely consented, while he exacted of [the custodian] an oath to do nothing more for him than [was done] for the strangers. [The custodian] lifted him up and carried him there, and he visited him constantly. But God, who always works the will of those who fear him, completed the length of the saint's life, and finished his crown.<sup>20</sup> He protected his humility for him even after his death. For on the day that he was to leave this world for his eternal dwelling, an obstacle arose for the

custodian, and he was unable to go as usual to visit the humble one. When the blessed one gave up his spirit, immediately those of the place for strangers, as is their custom, took him out without any fanfare on a stretcher to where they bury strangers hurriedly.

8. When those who were to bury him had left and had gone a distance, the custodian came and asked after him. When he learnt that he was dead and they had left to bury him, he immediately began to mourn and to groan greatly. He ran to the saintly bishop Rabbula and fell at his feet calling out and saying, ‘I beseech you, my lord, remember me and have pity on me.’ (Now the light of Bishop Rabbula's bodily eyes was still unimpaired.) Then he and those with him quieted the custodian from calling out and they asked him, ‘What is the cause of this cry?’ So he told him everything that had happened and besought earnestly that that clean and pure body be honored with great honor and pomp<sup>21</sup>, and be laid in a special place. The bishop was astonished when he heard these things. Ablaze with fire because he was zealous for virtuous deeds, he at once ordered that they go to where the saint had been taken for burial. Lo and behold, as they were on their way, those porters who had buried him met them as they were coming from where they had buried the victor. When asked, ‘Where did you bury that stranger?’, they told them, ‘With his fellow strangers.’ The bishop and those with him took those porters along with them to point out the grave. When they arrived at the grave, the bishop ordered that it be opened again, and he and his associates with the porters entered to see the corpse and take it to be honored. They looked, and they saw that the rags<sup>22</sup> in which the saint was wrapped were laid by themselves in position, but there was no body. Astonished, they sought the corpse throughout all the burial area, but they did not find it. Only the rags. Great amazement and trembling seized them for a long time. The bishop, when he recovered his composure, said, ‘Let us pray.’ As he prayed, the holy Rabbula wept and said, ‘From

henceforth, may the Lord keep me far away from any other business than only to diligently grant relief to strangers. For who knows whether there are many like this saint who delight in abasement, but are nobles to God in their souls, not recognized by people<sup>23</sup> because of their abasement.' From then on the holy lord Rabbula took great pains and was in charge of the strangers. Consequently,<sup>24</sup> with much diligence he was always multiplying his gifts for the poor and for strangers, and in his speech he was urging the love of strangers. For he desisted from constructing many buildings and turned away from concern for transitory things. Only for orphans and for widows did he take heed, and he was solicitous for the unfortunate and for strangers. He was solicitous and cared not only for those of his own city, but he also busied himself for strangers in far-off cities and distant regions. He did not neglect to support them with his gifts so that he might share in God's blessing for those who have mercy. As he began, so the blessed Rabbula ended in the love of strangers.

9. Now this narrative about the man of God which we told above was publicly proclaimed by that custodian who was the friend of the blessed one. It was also written down by him for a record. For he took care and interrogated the saint with oaths and curses and [the saint] made known to him all his former exalted life and his later abased life and did not conceal anything from him.

Here ends the narrative which is about the man of God.

1. Amiaud, following BMAdd 14655, reads ‘a true [poverty]’ **የኢትዮጵያ**.
2. Amiaud reads **የፋይነት** ‘haughtiness.’
3. To translate **የፋይነት**, I have used the root meaning of **አለ** ‘to take off, to strip,’ rather than ‘to send.’ McLeod emends to **የፋይነ** ‘eremitical life.’
4. A resonance to Jer 1:10: “I appoint you...to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”
5. Amiaud: ‘mouth.’
6. Gen 15:2.
7. B “while very many of his peers played before him”; DEFGH “in the impudence of games.”
8. The third person masculine suffix is used here.
9. Mt 7:7-8/Lk 11:9-10.
10. Greek **τακτόν**.
11. A min is about one-and-a-half ounces.
12. Amiaud takes this sentence to be about tests and trials of the man of God by other people.
13. Clearly, the meaning is that he would extend his arms in the form of a cross, but the image is striking.
14. Greek **παραμονάριος**.
15. Amiaud translates: ‘because he was not fond of quarrels;’ Mcleod: ‘and also because of his dislike of disputes.’ The sentence explains why the Man of God fears the oath, as he is not a heretic who disregards God.
16. Taking ms **ቃጻች**, rather than Amiaud **አንተ**.
17. Reading ms **እኔና**, rather than Amiaud **እኔና**.
18. Literally, ‘stretched out his limbs.’
19. Greek **ξενοδοχεῖον**. It has the meaning of ‘hospital,’ but I have kept the literal meaning because

of the significance of ‘stranger’ in the text.

20. His garland of victory, a common metaphor for attaining heaven.
21. These two words were used to describe how he was sent to school by his parents.
22. He is earlier described (fol123r, col2) as dressed in ‘shameful rags.’
23. The ms, which has תְּדַבֵּר, is rightly emended by Amiaud to תְּדַבֵּר.
24. Follow manuscript רָאָזֶן, not Amiaud רָאָזֶן.