

The expugnatio hierosolymae A. D. 614 / Robert L. Wilken. —  
Extrait de : Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études  
syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue  
d'études et de recherches sur les églises de langue syriaque. — vol.  
16 (1990-1991), pp. 73-81.

Titre de couverture : Actes du 3e congrès international d'études  
arabes chrétiennes, Louvain-la-neuve, septembre 1988. — Bibliogr.

I. Jerusalem — History.

PER L1183 / FT36796P

## THE EXPUGNATIO HIEROSOLYMAE A.D. 614

BY

Robert L. WILKEN

The most complete account of the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 C.E. is the *Expugnatio Hierosolymae* of the monk Strategos (sometime called Antiochos) from Mar Saba in the Judaeen desert. Written in Greek, its original text has come down to us only in fragments<sup>1</sup>, but it was translated in Arabic and two Arabic versions are extant from the 10th century as well as a third Arabic version from the 13th century, an abridged Arabic version from the 14th century, and several Georgian versions from the thirteenth century and later<sup>2</sup>. Until recently the text has been known chiefly through its Georgian version, parts of which were translated into English early in this century and editions and translations of the later Arabic versions. But with Garitte's edition of the earlier Arabic texts, Codex Sinaiticus Arabicus 428 and Codex Sinaiticus Arabicus 520 both from the 10th century, we have a much better grasp of the original text as well as fresh evidence that the *Expugnatio* was valued by Arabic speaking Christians in Palestine. Though the *Expugnatio* was itself not written in Arabic, its translations over the course of several hundred years suggest that it embodies historical memories

---

1) The most important Greek fragment includes the text of Zacharias's letter to the Christian inhabitants of Jerusalem. Text in *PG* 86, 3227-3234. The monk's vision of Jerusalem's destruction (ch.6) is found in Greek in *BHG*, 1448w (III, p.206) and the story of the virgin and the magic ointment (ch.12) is found in *BHG*, 2028 (III, p. 8) and 1442 f-k (III, pp. 194-5). For other versions of these tales see the notes in Garitte's edition.

2) Gérard GARITTE, (ed.), *La prise de Jérusalem par les Perses en 614* (CSCO 202-203, Louvain, 1960); G. GARITTE, (ed.), *Expugnatio Hierosolymae A.D. 614* (CSCO 347-348, Louvain, 1974). For earlier editions and translations see Garitte's notes in CSCO 340 which serve as a general introduction to all the Arabic texts; G. GARITTE, (ed.), *Expugnatio Hierosolymae A.D. 614* (CSCO 340-341, Louvain, 1973).

that were treasured by Arabic speaking Christians in the years before the Crusades and later<sup>3</sup>. First a resume of the text.

After a lengthy introduction lamenting the tragedy that has befallen Jerusalem, the author begins his account with the arrival of the Persian armies in the territory of Syria. When they reached Palestine the Persians went first to the costal areas, specifically to Caesarea, the «mother of the cities», (3.1) and from there they set out for Jerusalem. Zacharias the patriarch of Jerusalem wanted to make peace with the Persians, but the inhabitants of Jerusalem, anticipating help from a company of soldiers garrisoned at Jericho, refused to heed his counsel. Caesarea had capitulated without a fight and the Persians were infuriated that the Jerusalemites would not make peace. But when help did not arrive, the Persians, convinced the Christian God had abandoned his people, occupied the city.

Part of the work is given over to describing what happened to the citizens of the city after the Sassanid victory and it includes several charming stories about Christians who were martyred at the hands of the Persians<sup>4</sup>. There is also a brief section (expanded in later texts) directed against the Jews for their complicity with the Persians<sup>5</sup>. One of the most famous stories in the book is about a virgin from a convent on the Mt. of Olives who was given to a Persian soldier as his concubine. By claiming she had a magic ointment she was able to preserve herself from his sexual advances. She told him that she would demonstrate the protective powers of the ointment by putting it on her shoulders. Then she tells him to strike her with the sword. Of course the blow killed the virgin, protecting her virginity and frustrating the young virginity and frustrating the young soldier's amatory ambitions. This story has been

---

3) The early Arabic versions also help clarify certain historical details. For example, Cod. *Sin. Arab. 428* and Cod. *Sin. Arab. 520* provide the information that Modestus was buried in the «tomb of the patriarchs on the mount [of Olives]» (24.14). The other Arabic version simply says «in the tomb of the patriarchs». See G. GARITTE, «La sépulture de Modeste de Jérusalem», in *Le Muséon* 73 (1960) pp. 131-133.

4) For a discussion of the historical problems concerned with the Sassanid conquest see Zvi BARAS, «The Persian Conquest and the End of Byzantine Rule», in *Eretz Israel from the Destruction of the Second Temple until the Muslim Conquest*, ed. Zvi BARAS, Shmuel SAFRAI, Yoram TZAFRIR, Menachem SATRAN (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 303 (in Hebrew).

5) See for example Cod. *Sin. Ar. 531*, chs. 8-10. Also *Chronica Minora*, ed. Ign. GUIDI, *CSCO*, v. 1 (Louvain, 1960), p.26 (Syriac); v. 2, p. 23 (Latin translation). The role of the Jews during the occupation is disputed. See BARAS (note 4), pp. 323 ff. for discussion.

handed down independently and appears during the Renaissance in the long narrative poem *Orlando Furioso*<sup>6</sup>.

After capturing the city, the Persians took Zacharias captive and brought him to Damascus. On his way out of the city, led as a «as a thief in chains» (13.1), he paused at the summit of the Mt. of Olives. Taking one last look at Jerusalem he wept and spoke his final words to its inhabitants, a homily on the meaning of the events that had overtaken the city and its inhabitants. Then he bids farewell and gives a final blessing to the city, the land, and its inhabitants.

In Persea the captives were led into a room, presented with a cross, and asked to trample on it. Those who refused were killed. But Zacharias and his party were spared. They sang psalms about Jerusalem as the Israelites had done when in exile, and prayed to God to remember the devastation of the city and the churches. Zacharias was brought before the Persian king, and as Moses confounded the sages of Egypt with his wonders, so Zacharias confounds the Persian sages. Zacharias also wrote a letter to the Christians in Jerusalem. The work concludes with an account of the number of people killed in the Persian conquest, listing the numbers by locations in an around Jerusalem<sup>7</sup>. To its conclusion is appended another section, probably added later, on the return of the Holy Cross to Jerusalem by the emperor Heraclius.

## II

A bare outline conveys little sense of the character of this work and does not help us understand why it would have been preserved, translated, and copied by Arabic speaking Christians in the 10th century. First note that the *Expugnatio* is as much a lament over Jerusalem as it is an account of the historical details surrounding the conquest. «I do not bring you news of joy and happiness... but I cry out to you with grief. Lament my ( اتوجعوا ) brothers, lament for my soul is mournful from much weeping» (1:3).

---

6) See Giorgio LEVI DELLA VIDA, «Le Stratagème de la Vierge» et la traduction arabe du 'Pratrum Spirituale' de Jean Moschus, in *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves*, 7 (1939-1944), pp. 83-126; also «A Christian Legend in Moslem Garb», in *Byzantion* 15 (1940-41), pp. 144-57.

7) See J.T. MILIK, «La topographie de Jérusalem vers la fin de l'époque byzantine», in *MUSJ* 38 (1960-2), pp. 127-189.

When the Persians entered Jerusalem in 614 it was the first time the city had been occupied by a foreign army since it had come under Roman rule in the first century. As long as it had been a Roman and a Christian city it had enjoyed the blessing of divine providence. During this period the city of Jerusalem had been transformed into a Christian city, the «radiant sun of the universe»<sup>8</sup> as Sophronius called it, the «great city, the city of the Christians, the city of Jesus Christ» (3.5), the «holy city» (5.6), even the «city of God» (5.27), in the words of the *Expugnatio*.

Once Christian affection had been directed at the «heavenly city», but now it had as its object the actual city, the city on the edge of the Judaean desert, not only its heavenly counterpart. The *Expugnatio* is an outpouring of grief over the Jerusalem below and for this there is no precedent in Christian history or literature<sup>9</sup>. The texts that mourn the destruction of Jerusalem are all written by Jews, e.g. the Lamentation of Jeremiah composed after the city was destroyed in the Babylonians in the 6th century C.E., or the apocalypses of 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra written by Jews after the Roman victory in 70 C.E. Jews, so though the Christians, had mistakenly bestowed their affection on a city of stone, placing their hopes in an earthly city, mourning a city of stone, placing their hopes in an earthly city, mourning a city which no permanent foundation. As Jerome reports in the early fifth century were unmoved by the Jews who visited Jerusalem to lament the city's destruction on 9 Ab<sup>10</sup>.

In the *Expugnatio*, however, it is the Christians who mourn and lament Jerusalem's fall and who are griefstricken over the pillaging of the earthly city. In the most graphic line in the entire work the author of the *Expugnatio* writes: «The Jerusalem above weeps over the Jerusalem below» (8.9) وكانت بيت المقدس العليا تبكي على بيت المقدس السفلى. Nowhere else in early Christian litera-

---

8) *Anacreontia* 19, line 67.

9) Sophronius's *Anacraeontia* 14, On the Capture of Jerusalem, cited above, is also a lament over Jerusalem: «Holy City of God/Home of the most valiant saints/Great Jerusalem/What lament should I utter. Children of the blessed Christians/Come to mourn high-crested Jerusalem. In the face of such a calamity/The flow of my tears is too brief/Before such suffering/The dirge of my heart is too measured. Yet I cry out my lament/Weaving my garment of groans for you/Because you have suffered such brigandage/I conceal [with a dirge] the rusing forth of my tears» (lines 1-14).

10) See JEROME's sardonic account of Jews wailing before the western wall (*Comm. in Sophon.* 1:15-6, CCL 76a, pp. 673-4).

ture does such a sentiment appear<sup>11</sup>. For the author of this work Jerusalem was not simply a spiritual center, the site of the holy places, the goal of pilgrims and saints. It was not only a religious sanctuary, it was the home of Christians, the «city of the Christians», a political, social and cultural center, «the great city».

Secondly, the *Expugnatio* is one of the few Christian texts to use the term «holy land» to refer to Jerusalem and environs. When Zacharias bids farewell to Jerusalem he not only blesses the city; he also bids farewell to the land. «Peace be to you O Jerusalem; peace to you O Holy Land, peace over the whole land» (14.6) السلام لك يا أرض مقدسة على كل الأرض السلام

It should be recalled that the idea of Palestine as the «holy land» was not widespread among Christians in antiquity. Before the sixth century the term was seldom used, and then only to be rejected as a Jewish idea<sup>12</sup>. The architects of a Christian idea of holy land were the monks who had come to live in the desert surrounding Jerusalem<sup>13</sup> and later it was monks from the same monastic houses that were responsible for translating the *Expugnatio* into Arabic. In these circles Palestine that the idea that Jerusalem was the «city of Christians» and Palestine the «holy land» was remembered and perpetuated.

A third feature of the work is the imposition of a Biblical historical and theological framework on the events that had taken place in Jerusalem<sup>14</sup>. This too was a feature of Palestinian Christianity. During the Byzantine period the Christians of Palestine had begun to identify with the history of ancient Israel in a way that was not possible for Christians in other parts of the world. Some

11) Contrast the words of MELITO of Sardis in the second century: «The Jerusalem below was precious/ but it is worthless now because of the Jerusalem above» (*Paschal Homily* 45).

12) See for example ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum* 7.28 and Jerome, *ep.* 129 to Dardanus. On the history of the idea of the holy land see Robert L. WILKEN, «Heiliges land», in *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie* 14, 684-694.

13) See CYRIL of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas* 57 for the term «Holy land» to designate Jerusalem and its environs.

14) The contrast between the way Christians reacted to the sack of Rome in 410 and the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 is instructive. In contrast to Rome or Constantinople, Christian Jerusalem's destiny was part of sacred history. When Alaric plundered Rome Christians were stunned and griefstricken, but the catastrophe was not a spiritual event, at least not within the framework of Christian theology and biblical history. For Jerome's reaction, see *ep.* 127.12.

of the monks who came to live in the Judaeen desert undertook their journeys with the words of God to Abraham on their lips: «Go up to the Land that I will show you»<sup>15</sup>. And Cyril of Scythopolis said that St. Sabas had come to the desert around Jerusalem «to colonize» the land in fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah<sup>16</sup>.

The Persian conquest, and the exile of the patriarch of Jerusalem Zacharias, followed shortly by the Muslim victory, prompted Christians in Palestine to draw parallels between the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C. and their own fate. According to the *Expugnatio*, when Zacharias was taken into captivity by the Persians he «remembered the captivity of the children of Israel», and recited the Psalms: «If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!» (18.9-15)

### III

The Arabic manuscripts in which the *Expugnatio* is found include spiritual and devotional writings and tales of martyrs. Ms. A. Codex Sinaiticus 428 from the tenth century includes sermons of S. Ephraem, Isaac, John Chrysostom, Macarius, Anastasius of Sinai, lives and martyr accounts of saints Serapian, Mark, Al-Harith of Nagran, and according to the catalogue, of «Zacharias the Patriarch from the land of Babylon», and an account of the reinstatement of the Cross of the Passion of Our Lord in Jerusalem by Emperor Heraclius. The other manuscripts are similar<sup>17</sup>.

No doubt the text was translated and preserved because it recorded the story of the captivity of the patriarch of Jerusalem, Zacharias, and provided a detailed listing of the number of martyrs after the Persian conquest (23), as well as the tale of the virgin who deceived the Persian soldiers, and other martyr accounts. It also included the story of the return of the Holy Cross, though this seems to have been added later. In the summary of contents at the beginning of the *Expugnatio* this event, which occurs at the very end, is not mentioned<sup>18</sup>.

---

15) THEODORE of Petra, *Vita Theodosii* 4; PAUL of Elousa, *Vita Theognii* 5.

16) *Life of Sabas* 6.

17) Margaret Dunlop GIBSON, *Catalogue of the Arabic Mss. in the Convent of St. Catharine on Mount Sinai* (Studia Sinaitica 3), London, 1894, pp. 19-20.

18) Gérard GARITTE, «La sépulture» (see note 3), 131-132.

Another reason the text may have been translated into Arabic was that it preserved the memory of Jerusalem as a Christian city and the land as a Christian land. In support of this, let me point to two pieces of evidence roughly from the same period, the famous passage in the Kitab al-burhan on the «testimonies of the churches» located the holy places, and the mosaic floor of the recently excavated church at Um er-Rasas in Jordan.

In the Kitab al-burhan the author appeals to the churches in various cities of Palestine and Syria as evidence of the truth of the events that took place in these locales and hence of the truth of the gospel. With rhetorical finesse he begins each paragraph with the same formula: «the church of such and such a place bears witness to...»<sup>19</sup>. The list of places is a catalogue of the holy places in Palestine and the neighboring regions: Nazareth, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Jordan river, Cana in Galilee, Magdala, Capernaum, Banyas, Kursi [excavated within the last decade]. The list also includes places outside of Palestine, e.g. it mentions churches in Damascus, Constantinople and Rome, but it is clear that these do not fit within the original plan. They come only at the end and are not presented in the same way. The principle behind the list is to include places where Christ was present in the flesh.

In the paragraph introducing the list the author tells us why it is that he has compiled the list and how Christians should regard the places in which the churches are located. The text reads: «Christ has given us, too, vestiges of himself and the places of his sanctification in this world as a heritage and a pledge of the kingdom of heaven... Wherever there is a place that God glorified and hallowed by the appearance in it of his Christ and the presence of his holy Spirit, be it plain or mountain, wherever there is a place in which God spoke to any of his prophets before that or in which his wonders were seen, he has set all these places in the hands of those who believe in Christ to pass on as an inheritance from fathers to sons forever»<sup>20</sup>.

What first caught my attention in this passage was the term inheritance. According to the author of the text, probably a monk living in Palestine, the places Christ has sanctified have been given to the Christians as an «inheritance» and they have been placed in the hands of believers in Christ

---

19) EUTYCHIUS of Alexandria, *The Book of the Demonstration*, § 310ff., ed. Pierre CACHIA (CSCO 192, Louvain, 1960), pp. 165ff.

20) *Ibidem*, § 310.



«to pass on as an inheritance» from fathers to sons «forever» (310). The Arabic term is the same root as the Hebrew *yarash*, the term that occurs in the Scriptures in the phrase «inherit [or possess] the land». This phrase is a refrain that runs throughout Jewish tradition and came to be a way of expressing the Messianic hope that the land would one day be restored to the Jews. «Your people shall all be righteous; they shall *possess* the land forever, the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands» [Isaiah 60:21]. Out of this tradition in ancient Israel had grown the idea that the land was a holy land. Whether the author of this section of the *Kitab-al-burhan* had this tradition in mind is uncertain. But inheritance is a proprietary term and that seems to be the idea latent in the passage. Because God has «glorified it» (مَجَّدَهُ) and «hallowed it» (قَدَّسَهُ), i.e. the places where Christ appeared, they belong in the hands of Christians and are to be passed on from one generation to another until the coming of the kingdom.

After the Muslim conquest the term holy land, which had not gained currency in Christian circles during the Byzantine period, appears only infrequently. But it does occur in the Arabic version of the *Expugnatio*, though not in the Georgian version. The Georgian version, according to Garitte's Latin translation, reads: «Pax tibi, gloriosa terra plus quam omnes terrae, pax tibi». The Arabic text A reads: Peace to you O Holy land (14.6). Whether one should make anything out of the difference between the Georgian and Arabic versions I cannot say. The Georgian text was probably produced in Palestine as well. But the use of the term in the two early Arabic versions is noteworthy.

Finally, the recent excavations at Um-er-Rasas in Jordan have given us another list of cities from the area, thought of a quite different sort<sup>21</sup>. From inscriptions on the floors of the churches discovered there, one was constructed in 756 A.D. and the other in 785 A.D., i.e. in the Abassid period. The floor inscriptions are in Greek, according to convention, but the language of the community was Arabic. On the mosaic floor of one of the churches there is a wide border with 25 panels, each paneling depicting a city in the region. Eight cities are from Palestine, Jerusalem, Neapolis, Sebastis, Caesarea, et al. 7 from Jordan, Philadelphia, Medaba, Areopolis, Kastron

---

21) M. PICCIRILLO, *Um er-Rasas (Kastron Mefaa) in Giordania* (Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 1986).

Mefaa (the site of the churches), and 10 from the delta of Egypt. How one should interpret these panels will of course be a matter of scholarly debate, but when one sets these panels alongside of the Medaba map, and the list of churches in the Kitab al-burhan, they provide further evidence of the idea of a Christian territory, an area centered on Jerusalem but extending far beyond the holy city.

For Christians living in Palestine and Trans-Jordan, in contrast to those in Constantinople or in the west, the Christian presence in the lands of the Bible had left behind a unique legacy. Jerusalem and the cities that surrounded it were important not simply as a symbols of something else, as places in their own right, cities where Christians lived and preserved the memory of Christ's sojourn on earth. The existence of several Arabic translations of the *Expugnatio* is evidence that amidst the upheavels that overcame Christians in Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and the Egyptian delta, that the thread of memory to the Christian past had not been broken.