

# the Edessan martyrdom-tale of Habib

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## I Habib

Burkitt's Syriac text is the basis of the translation below, with the numbers in the margins referring to page numbers there.<sup>1</sup>

### I.1 translation

#### *The martyrdom of Habib the deacon*

In the month of Ab/August of the year 620 of the kingdom of Alexander the 26  
Macedonian, in the consulship of Licinius and of Constantine, which is the year  
he was born, during the stategos-ship of Julius and Baraq, in the time of Qona the  
bishop of Edessa, Licinius waged a persecution on the church and the whole na-  
tion of Christians after the first persecution that emperor Diocletian had waged.  
Emperor Licinius commanded that there be sacrifices and libations, that burnt  
offerings be established everywhere, and that they should burn incense and frank-  
incense before Zeus. When the crowds were being persecuted, they asserted loudly  
in their freedom, "We are Christians!" and they were unafraid of the persecution,  
since the persecuted were more in number than the persecutors.

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<sup>1</sup>The Syriac texts listed in BHO for Habib are as follows:

- BHO 367 = Cureton, Anc Syr Doc 73-86 | Bedjan AMS 1.144-160 ("omissa extrema sententia" [!])
- BHO 368 = Jacob, Bedjan AMS 1.160-172
- Burkitt 26-43, from BL Add. 14645

In addition to the BL manuscript, which is from after 936, poss. 11th cent., the text is also found in Saint Mark's, Jerusalem, 203, ff. 63r-78r.

Habib, who was from the village of Telšhe and had been made a deacon, would secretly come into the churches that were in the villages, serve as deacon, read scripture, encourage and strengthen the crowds with his speaking, counsel them that they should be firmly established in the firmness of the faith, not to fear the persecutors, and he would give them commands. As the crowds were regaining their strength with his speech and affectionately<sup>2</sup> welcoming his remarks, being cautioned not to deny the stance they were in, and when the city trustees who had been appointed for the matter had heard about it, they went in and informed Ausonius,<sup>3</sup> the governor, who was in the walled city of Edessa. They said to him, “Habib, who is a deacon in the village of Telšhe, is secretly going around and serving everywhere. He’s resisting the emperor’s command with no fear.” 27

When the governor heard this, he was filled with rage against Habib, and made a report, and sent word and informed emperor Licinius about all Habib was doing, as well as to learn and ascertain what would be the command about him and those who were unwilling to sacrifice. (Although the command was for everybody to sacrifice, there was nevertheless no direction as to what should happen with people who didn’t do so, since they had heard that Constantine, who reigned in Italy, Gaul, and Spain, was a Christian and not sacrificing.) Emperor Licinius commanded Ausonius, the governor, “For anyone this audacious to have broken our command, our royal command is for them to be burned in fire, and as for anyone else who refuses to sacrifice, they should die by the sword!” 28

When the command reached the walled city of Edessa, Habib, who had been reported on, had already crossed into the country of Zeugmatites to serve as deacon there, too. When the governor sent word, he looked for him in the village and the whole surrounding region, but he wasn’t discovered. He ordered his family and fellow-villagers to be arrested, so they did so and put his mother and the rest of his family in chains, as well as some people from his village, and they brought them to the city and put them in prison. When Habib heard what had happened, he was thinking it over in his mind and considering thoughtfully, “It would be better for me to go show myself to the regional judge than to stay hidden and other people come in and be martyred because of me, and I end up completely ashamed. What help will the name ‘Christian’ be for someone who runs from confessing Christianity? Look: if they run from this, death goes in front of them wherever they go, and they can’t escape it, since this has been decreed for Adam’s children.”

So Habib got up and came secretly to Edessa, getting his back ready for beating,

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<sup>2</sup>This adverb is a play on Habib’s name: *ħabbibāʔit*.

<sup>3</sup>This is the probable reading of the name, but the Syriac text has an initial L-.

his sides for scraping, and his body for burning. He went to the courtyard to 29  
Theotecna the elder, who was the chief of the governor's staff, and said to him,  
"I'm Habib of Telşhe, the one y'all are looking for." Theotecna said to him, "If  
nobody saw you come to me, obey what I tell you: go back out where you were,  
and stay there for now. Don't let anyone know that you've come and spoken with  
me and what I have counseled you, and don't let your family and fellow-villagers be  
worried about anything, because no one is going to harm them at all: they'll spend  
a few days in captivity, and the governor will release them, since the emperors  
haven't ordered anything bad or nasty for them. If you're not persuaded by what  
I've said to you, I'm innocent of your blood, because if you appear before the judge  
here, you won't escape a fiery death, according to what the emperors have ordered  
for you."

Habib said to Theotecna, "My family and my fellow-villagers aren't my concern,  
but rather, imperishable life. I am pretty worried, since I didn't happen to be  
present in my village on the day the governor was looking for me. It's because of  
me they're in chains, and I look like a runaway! So if you're not ready to bring me  
before the governor, I'll go by myself and show up to him." 30

When Theotecna heard him talk this way, he quickly grabbed him and handed  
him over to his family, and they took him with him to the governor's court.  
Theotecna went in and informed the governor, saying, "Habib, who is from tlhş?,  
the one your majesty was looking for, has come." The governor said, "Who is this  
exactly, and where did they find him, and what was he doing there?" Theotecna  
said, "He came here of his own will, with no one compelling him, since no one  
was aware of him."

When the governor heard this, he became extremely angry at him and said,  
"The guy who has acted this way has despised and disdained me, and not treated  
me like a judge. Since he's done this, it's not right for him to have friends, nor  
that I should rush to command the death the emperors have commanded for him:  
rather, I should be patient about him, so that his tortures and bitter judgements  
grow and grow. Using him, I can terrify many more into not daring to run away."

Lots of people had gathered and were standing at the door of the court, some  
from the government, and some regular inhabitants of the city. Some of them were  
saying to him, "You've messed up in coming and appearing before those who were  
looking for you, with no pressure from the judge." And there were others saying 31  
to him, "You've done what's right in coming and appearing of your own will, more  
than had pressure from the judge brought you, because now your confession in  
Christ will be recognized as from your own volition, and not pressured by other  
people."

This is what the nobles of the city heard from the people talking to him as they were standing at the door of the court. The fact that he had come secretly to Theotecna and he didn't want him to let anyone know about it had also come to their attention, and they informed the judge of all they had heard. The judge was incensed at what they were saying to Habib, "Why did you come and show yourself to the judge with no pressure from him?" He said to Theotecna, "Someone made chief over their companions shouldn't act tricky this way with their ruler and invalidate the command the emperors have made for the rebel Habib, i.e. that he should burn in a fire."

Theotecna said, "I haven't tricked my companions, nor was I intending to invalidate the command made by the emperors. What am I before your majesty that I should have dared to do this?! Actually, I questioned him as your majesty has also required of me, to find out whether he had come here freely on his own, or whether, on the other hand, it was because of your majesty's pressure directed through others. When I heard from him that he had come by his own volition, I 32 diligently brought him to the honored door of your rectitude's tribunal."

The governor immediately commanded them and they brought Habib in before him. The officials affirmed, "Here he stands before your majesty," and he started questioning him as follows: "What's your name and where are you from? Who are you?" He responded, "My name is Habib and I'm from the village of Telşhe. I'm a deacon." The governor said, "Why have you broken the emperors' command, but you're serving as deacon, something you weren't commanded by the emperors, and you're unwilling to sacrifice to Zeus, whom the emperors worship." Habib answered, "We Christians don't worship things made by people, who are nothing themselves, nor is what they make. Rather, we worship the God who made people." The governor said, "Don't keep on in the headstrong attitude you came here to me with and insult Zeus, the great pride of emperors!" Habib said, "If Zeus, this idol, isn't made by people, then you're right that I'm insulting him, but if the fact that he's carved out of wood and stuck together with nails screams against him that he's made, how can you say to me that I'm insulting him? Clearly the insult against him comes from him himself." The governor said, "By the very fact that you're not willing to worship him you insult him." Habib responded, "And if I'm insulting 33 him because I won't worship him, how much of an insult did the carpenter deal him when he carved him with an iron axe, and the smith when he pounded him and stuck him together with nails?"

When the governor heard him talking this way, he commanded him to be beaten mercilessly. When he had been beaten by five officers, the governor said to him, "Will you submit to the emperors now? If you won't, I'm going to lacerate

you with combs and torture you with every torture, and in the end I will shortly order you to be burned in the fire.”

Habib said, “These threats you’re trying to scare me with are tinier and smaller than the ones I had already made up my mind to endure. This is why I came and have appeared before you.” The governor said, “Throw him in a murderer’s iron holding-cell, and let him be beaten as he deserves.” Once he was beaten, they said to him, “Sacrifice to the gods!” He shouted and said, “Your idols are banned, and their worshipers with you, just like you.” The governor commanded and they took him up to the prison without allowing him to speak with his family or fellow-villagers, according to the judge’s directive. It was the emperors’ festival-day.

On the second of Elul/September, the governor commanded and they brought him from the prison, and he said to him, “Do you deny the view you were holding, and will you submit to the command of our lords, the emperors? If not, I’ll bring 34  
you bitter lacerations, so that you will!” Habib said, “I’ve not submitted to them, and there’s no thought in my mind that I should, not even if you judge me with harsh judgements, including those the emperors have ordered.” The governor said, “I swear by the gods, unless you offer sacrifices, there’s not anything hard and bitter I’ll omit torturing you with. And we’ll see whether that Christ you worship will save you.” Habib said, “Everyone who worships Christ is saved, who are in Christ, who ought not worship created things together with the creator of created things.”

The governor said, “Have him stretched out and hurt with rods, until there’s no spot on his body where he’s not hurt.” Habib said, “From these intimidations, which you assume to be bitter in their lashes, crowns of victory are woven for those who endure them.” The governor said, “How can y’all call intimidations a relief, and consider your bodies being tortured a crown of victory?” Habib said, “You don’t have any right to question me about this stuff, because your propensity to deny makes you unworthy to hear any pleading about it. I’ve said I’m not going 35  
to offer sacrifices, and I say it again.” The governor said, “You’re among these judgements because you’ve merited them. I’m going to blind your eyes, which gaze on this Zeus, but don’t revere him, and I’m going to stop up your ears, which hear the laws of the emperors but don’t tremble at them.” Habib said, “That other world is God’s, whom you’re denying here, but you’ll confess him there amid tortures, but go ahead, keep on denying him.” The governor said, “Forget that other world you mentioned, and pay attention to the present judgement you’re in, which nobody can save you from, unless the gods do, in the event you sacrifice to them.” Habib said, “People who die for the name of Christ and don’t worship fabricated or created things will find their lives in front of God, while people who love temporal life more than this will have eternal torture.”

The governor commanded them to hang him up and lacerate him, and as they did so they would pull at him. He hung there so long that his shoulder-blades audibly cracked. The governor said, “Will you at last agree to set incense before Zeus?” Habib answered, “I haven’t complied with you in the face of these tortures. Now that I’ve suffered them, how can you think I would comply, and in them lose what I had found in them before?” The governor said, “I’ve got tortures stouter and harsher than these to make you hear, according to the emperors’ command, until you do what they want.” Habib said, “You’re judging me for not having submitted 36 to the emperors’ command, but look, you, too — the one the emperors upgraded and made a judge — you have broken their command, since you haven’t done to me anything of what they commanded.” The governor said, “Is it because I’ve been patient with you that you’ve spoken like a prosecutor?” Habib responded, “Had you not beaten me, imprisoned me, ripped me with combs, and shackled my feet, someone might think you’ve been patient with me, but with these things out in the open, where is the patience toward me you mentioned?” The governor said, “What you’ve said won’t help you, because it’s all against you and will bring pressures against even more distressing than those the emperors have commanded.” Habib said, “Had I been unaware that they would help me, I wouldn’t have made a statement before you.” The governor said, “I will silence your words in a single moment, and appease the gods, whom you don’t worship, with you, and placate the emperors, whose command you have rebelled against.” Habib responded, “I’m not afraid of the death you’re trying to scare me with: if I were, I wouldn’t have been traveling and ministering from house to house, the very reason I’ve been ministering.”

The governor said, “How is it you worship and revere a human being, but you refuse to worship and revere Zeus?” Habib said, “It’s not a human being I worship, because it is written for me, ‘cursed is anyone who trusts in a human being’,<sup>4</sup> but 37 God, who took a body and became human, is who I worship and glorify.” The governor said, “Just do what the emperors have commanded. As for what’s in your mind, if you’re willing to let it go, good, but if you’re not, then don’t give it up.” Habib said, “Both of these can’t be, since falsehood and truth are opposed, and it’s impossible that what’s fixed in my mind can be removed from my thought.” The governor said, “I’m going to use bitter and harsh coercion to make you expel from your thought what you’ve said is fixed in your mind.” Habib responded, “These coercions you think can be used to uproot this from my mind, it’s thanks to them it will grow throughout my thought, like a tree bearing fruit.” The governor said,

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<sup>4</sup>Jer 17:5.

“What good are tortures and lacerations to this tree of yours, especially when I order up a fire to mercilessly burn it down?” Habib said, “I’m not looking at what you’re looking at, since I’m focused on hidden things. This is why I do the will of God, the maker, and not of a made idol that can’t even feel anything.”

The governor said, “Since this is the way he has denied the gods the emperors worship, he should be torn with combs again, on top of the first time. With all the questions I’ve patiently interrogated him with, he’s forgotten the first cuts.” As they were tearing him with the combs, he shouted, “Present sufferings are not worthy of the glory to be revealed in people who love Christ.”<sup>5</sup> When the governor realized that he was still refusing to sacrifice even with the coercions, he said, “Does your doctrine teach y’all to hate your bodies?” Habib said, “We don’t hate our bodies. It’s actually written for us, ‘whoever might lose their life can find it’,<sup>6</sup> but another thing written for us is that we shouldn’t throw holy things to dogs, or toss pearls out to pigs.”<sup>7</sup> The governor said, “I know that everything you’re saying this way is so that my anger and ire will rise, and I’ll order you a quick death. So I’m in no hurry to do what you want, but I will be patient: not for your comfort, but to turn up the pressure on your tortures, and so you will see your skin fall off in front of you when the combs go over your sides.” Habib said, “I’m also looking forward to you torturing me even more, like you said.” The governor responded, “Comply with the emperors, who have authority and who do whatever they please.” Habib said, “There’s no one who does whatever they please except God, whose authority is in the sky and in all the earth’s inhabitants, and there’s no one who can accuse him and say, ‘What are you doing?’” The governor said, “Death by a sword is too little for this audacity of yours: I’m ready to order you a death more bitter than from a sword.” Habib said, “I’m waiting for you to order up this drawn out death-by-the-sword for me whenever you want to.”

After this, the governor began to give him the death-sentence. He shouted before his officials, who were attending him, together with the city’s free people, “This man, Habib, who has denied the gods, as you’ve heard from him yourselves, and further, who has cursed the emperors, deserves for his life to be obliterated<sup>8</sup> from under this honored sun: he shouldn’t see this light, a comrade of the gods. And were it not the case that the ancient emperors had commanded that the corpses of murderers should be buried, it would not even have been right to bury

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<sup>5</sup>Romans 8:18.

<sup>6</sup>Mt 10:39.

<sup>7</sup>Mt 7:6.

<sup>8</sup>It’s not easily reproducible in English, but there’s a wordplay between this word and the verb translated “denied” immediately before this: they’re both from a root  $\sqrt{\text{kpr}}$ .

him, he's been so brazen! I hereby command you: put a gag on his mouth, as with murderers, and let him burn in a gentle, drawn-out fire, so that there's plenty of pain in his death."

He went out gagged before the governor, with a crowd of people from the city running after him: the Christians were glad that he hadn't moved away or left his stance, while the pagans were threatening him, since he was unwilling to sacrifice. They led him from the western gate of the arches to the cemetery built by ʿAbshelama bar Abgar. Habib's mother was wearing white and accompanying him there. When he eventually got to the place they were going to burn him, he stopped and prayed, with everyone else who had come out with him, and he said, "King Christ, whom this world belongs to, and whom the world to come belongs to, look and see that, although I could have run away from these pressures, I didn't, so I wouldn't be subject to your justice. May this fire I'm going to burn in become a repayment to you, so I will be saved from that unquenchable fire. Accept my spirit before you, in the spirit of your divinity, glorious son of the praiseworthy father!" Once he had prayed, he turned and blessed them, and both men and women greeted him back in tears, and said to him, "Pray for us before your lord, that he would effect peace with his people, and a renewal for his churches that are torn down." 40

When Habib had stopped, they dug a new spot, and they brought him and stood him in it. They stuck a piece of wood in there with him and went to tie him to it, but he said to them, "I'm not leaving this spot your going to burn me in." They brought more wood and arranged it all around him. Once the fire had been lit, and the flame had instantly risen, they screamed at him, "Open your mouth!", and the moment he did so, his soul ascended. Men and women moaned with a tearful voice and pulled him up out of the fire, throwing fancy linens, special oils, and incense on him, grabbing him from the burning. The "brothers" and lay-people picked him up, got him together, and buried him with the martyrs Gurya and Shmona in the same grave they had been put in, on a hill called the Temple of <QQL?>, as they recited psalms and hymns over him, carrying his burned body in the burial procession with affection<sup>9</sup> and honor. Some Jews and pagans even joined the Christians in getting his body ready and in the burial, both at the burning and when they actually buried him. A general look of gloom had spread over both groups, the internal and the external, and tears were flowing from every eye, while everyone was giving praise to God, for whose name he had given his body up for burning. 41

The day he was burned was a Saturday, the second of the month of Elul/September,

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<sup>9</sup>Again, like Habib's name, *ḥabbibāʿit*.



the same day it was learned that Constantine the great had begun to leave Spain for Rome, in Italy, to war with Licinius, who now reigns in the eastern parts of the Roman territories. Regions on both sides are upset since no one knows which of them will win and continue to control the empire. At this news, the persecution in the churches abated a little bit. Court-clerks had been writing down all they heard from the judge, and reliable people from the city were writing down additional things that had been said beyond the door of the court. As was usual, everyone listening and watching gave a report to the judge, and the decisions were recorded in the records. 42

I, Theophila — who have denied the evil inheritance of my fathers and confessed Christ — I took it upon myself to make a copy of these records for Habib, just as I previously did for his companions, the martyrs Gurya and Shmona. Since he treated them well in their own deaths-by-the-sword, he became like them in the fiery burning of his crowning.<sup>10</sup>

I have recorded the year, month, and day of these martyrs' crownings, not for people like me who actually saw them happen, but so that future readers may learn when they lived, and they are also in the records of the earlier martyrs in the time of emperor Diocletian<sup>11</sup> and of other emperors who waged a persecution against the church and killed a lot of people with beatings, combs, harsh coercions, sharp swords, burning fire, the dreadful sea, and the merciless mine — I've recorded all this and similar things in hope for a future payoff.

It was the tortures of these martyrs, and what I heard about them, that opened my own eyes — Theophila — and illuminated my mind, and I confessed that Christ is the son of God, and God. May the dust of these martyrs' feet, which I received while running after them when they went out to be crowned, forgive me, because I did deny him, and may it confess me in front of his worshipers, because I later confessed him. 43

At question twenty-seven that the judge asked Habbib, he pronounced a death-sentence of burning against him.<sup>12</sup>

*The end of the martyrdom of Habib*

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<sup>10</sup>A metaphor in Syriac for martyrdom.

<sup>11</sup>With a small change to the text's "Domitianus".

<sup>12</sup>This is where this sentence is in the text, but it should possibly be moved up earlier in the narrative.