The Life of Isaac of Alexandria, by Mena of Pshati (Bohairic Coptic)

Coptic texts (anonymous) (5th–8th century)

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Life of Isaac of Alexandria - part 1

The life of the holy patriarch and archbishop of the great city of Alexandria, which the holy Abba Mina recounted, the most holy archbishop of the city of Pshati (Zawyat Razin). In the peace of God: Amen. The commemoration of the glorious Patriarch calls us today! O dearly beloved, it excites the gladness of our hearts, to rejoice in spiritual joy and to undertake its holy encomium. For who can tell the glory of the true shepherd, of the faithful archpriest of justice, who from his childhood loved virtue and the life of the holy angels, whom he has zealously imitated in their existence, and has made himself like them? In this he manifested himself with brilliance of all kinds, so that he was entrusted with the care of the lambs of the church of the great city of Alexandria, of all Egypt and even under the whole heaven. And how could I dare to make such a speech with myself, I who am so small? But what we have heard and what we have learned, this is what we have written for you who read or listen, for the glory of God and his saints. This saint then, my brethren, was a man of Egypt by his race, from a village called Pisho. His parents were very God loving.

They possessed a multitude of possessions, and servants and maidservants. It came to pass when the holy child came into the world that he was called by the name of Isaac: the meaning of this name is joy. When the day came to baptize him according to the traditions of the Christians, his parents took him to the bishop of that time: he was an inspired man. As he was baptizing the holy child in the pool in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the consubstantial Trinity, his eyes were opened, and he saw a luminous cross on the head of the child. As if he had been moved by the Holy Spirit, he cried out in a prophetic voice, saying, 'Thou art great, O Lord God, Creator of all things, thou alone art great, and no one shall question thee about thy thoughts.' After saying these words, the holy bishop gave the child to his parents, saying: 'Keep this child well, for he is a gift from God, he will be a great pontiff in the house of God and many peoples will be entrusted to him.' When his parents heard this, they raised their voices and said, 'From ever since and until forever, prasied be the name of the Lord!' When the holy child was advanced in years, his parents sent him to school, and in a few days he learned the value of letters and the things taught, so that all those who were with him in school admired him when they saw the knowledge that God had given him, and all his fellow-students bowed their heads to him.

And when he was full of knowledge and wisdom, his parents entrusted him to one of their relatives, named Meneson, secretary to Georgios, eparch of the land of Egypt: the little boy Isaac was to be a notary under his direction. As long as he was in this place, he set an example of a monk's life: first of all, he learned the psalms by heart, he fasted every day until evening, he always went to church services, he wore a tunic of hair on his skin and on it a magnificent garment. One day it happened that the prefect called Meneson, desiring to have him write a necessary letter, for he was the first of the notaries; but he did not find him immediately and became very angry. He asked the boy Isaac, 'Where is your master?' He answered, 'I don't know.' And when the little boy saw that his face was sad, he spoke to him as the holy David spoke to the king of Israel, saying: 'Why is the face of my lord sad? command me, and I will write the letter as you wish.' The prefect, surprised at his reply, said to him, as if to put him to the test: 'Go to one of the rooms, write it down, bring it to me, so that I may see it.' And when he had written it, he brought it and showed it to him, and when the prefect saw the letter that the little boy had written, he was stupefied.

The prefect spoke up and said: 'You have such merit and I have not known it until today? Truly man looks at the appearance, but God at the heart.' And from that day the prefect put him at the head of all the notaries, and everyone cherished him: all those who were in the praetorium loved him; he was called the saint because of the wisdom that was in him. From that point on his parents looked at him as at a mirror, hoping that he would become the master of all that belonged to them, and they desired to make him take a wife in the hope of seeing children born of him: they did not know that his was not the lot of Jacob, but rather that he was destined to be father to a multitude of children, and that the one who had distinguished Jeremiah while he was in the womb had also distinguished this saint.

However, against his wishes, his parents took him and betrothed him to a young woman: they waited until the day of marriage came. But the young Isaac had within himself a great desire to lead the sweet regime of monastic life: this holy child remembered that the Lord had spoken out in his Gospel and had said: 'He who loves his father and mother more than me is not worthy of me'; and also: 'He who leaves his father, or his mother, or his wife, or his sister, or his brother, or his house, or his flock, or his children for the kingdom of God, shall receive them a hundredfold in this world, and eternal life in the world to come'; and the Apostle also proclaimed: 'The form of this world will pass away; but I desire that you should all now be without disquiet'; and the apostle John also said, 'The world will pass away with its desires; but he who does the will of God shall abide forever,' and also: 'All the things of this world, desires of the eyes and desires of the flesh, are unattainable in their violent desire for they are not things of God, but things of this world.'

This is what the righteous man meditated day by day, and he decided to abandon the vanity of this world with its cares. This being as it was, Georgios, the eparch whose notary the young boy had been, died. When the prefect was dead, as the saint found the opportunity he desired, he left the praetorium, went to his house, and stayed a few days near his parents. As for them, they loved and encouraged him, fearing that he would disappear from their

house because they saw the great fervor he had for good. Finally, things being this way, the young boy Isaac left the house, making sure that no one knew about it. He went to the holy mountain of Skete, where dwell the choirs of the holy angels of God, that is, of the blessed monks who have crucified their flesh in the sufferings of virtue, who endure at all times the death of Jesus in their bodies, hoping for the glory that will be manifested to them, as it is written: 'If we have suffered with him, we will also be glorified with him.' When he arrived at Skete, he dwelt as a guest in the monastery of Abba Zacharias of good memory, the priest and hegumen of the holy Laura of Abba Macarius and bishop of the city of Sais, who was a holy man with visions.

But when the old man Abbot Zacharias saw the holy young man coming to him, the Lord opened his eyes, and he saw the sign of the cross on his head. When he saw this glorious sign, he was greatly astonished and cried out, saying, 'How great are your works, O Lord! Your intentions are so deep!' And so when the holy old man Abba Zacharias took counsel to himself, and said to himself, 'What will become of this young boy?', immediately he was warned by an angel of the Lord, who said to him, 'Behold, the Lord has given you a great and holy gift: this young boy has come to you, for he will be a shepherd for the sheep of Christ and the patriarch of the bishops.' And when the old man heard the angel's words, he rejoiced greatly. When Isaac had stayed with the old man about three days, the old man spoke to him of his safety; He immediately sent him to Terenuti to the house of a friend, to stay with him until he knew what the parents of the young boy would do, for he feared that if they found him near him, they would harm the holy place, for this old man was very famous. But when this young boy had arrived at Terenuti and entered the man's house, the man's children said to him, 'Our father is in the field.' Then the boy climbed into the man's hayloft, took a bundle of hay, placed it on him, and fell asleep.

It happened that the man came back from the field, whose name was Joseph, and he was a priest: many have testified of him that he was a confessor, that he was brought up on the tribunal of the impious Cyrus, and that he was given a multitude of blows with a stick, because he confessed the faith. When the priest had come up from the country, he placed the she-ass in his stable, and went up to fetch hay to give the ass a bundle of it. He saw the bundle placed on the young boy having the shape of luminous crosses, throwing flashes of light. At the sight of this marvellous spectacle, the priest ran and when he arrived to look at and see the young and holy boy, he asked him: 'Where are you from, my son?' Isaac informed him of the reason. And immediately the priest took the boy's head and kissed it, saying, 'the blessing of the Lord is on the head of the righteous'; and also: 'upon their heads blessing and joy.' And the old priest left him with him for several days. Let us now bring back the discourse on the day when the young boy Isaac left his house: we will tell you everything for the glory of God. When his parents had looked for him without finding him, there were great tears and many mournings: their joy changed into sadness. When they had gone through all the monasteries and had not found him, they went to Skete to look for him.

And the holy elders did not reveal it, for it is their custom to suffer for one another, to deliver themselves from all the desires of the world, to put all their cares into fulfilling the word of the Lord who said: 'There is no greater charity than for one to give their soul for a companion.' And when his parents saw that the monks did not reveal it to them, and they went to Alexandria to the archbishop, they told him about it. When the archbishop feared that the authorities would be warned and that misfortune would happen to the holy place, he sent a letter to Skete, that they might not place the boy to the west of the river. When the holy old man Abba Zacharias saw the snares of the devil, he resolved to face tens of thousands of dangers on his own rather than deliver him up again to his parents according to the flesh, fulfilling the Savior's words: 'He who receives a child in my name will receive me myself.' When he had shaved the child's head, he gave him the habit of the monks and he called one of his disciples, named Abraham, who was an ascetic, and said to him, Take this young boy, go to Mount Pamaho, and stay there until God has persuaded the hearts of his parents, and I will send for you.

They got up and walked, as their father had told them. And after they remained on this mountain for a multitude of days, up to six months, Saint Isaac spoke to the old man Abraham and said to him, 'Arise, come with me to my parents to show me to them, for surely if I do not show myself to them, they will not make me a free man.' When the old man Abraham heard this of Isaac, he was greatly saddened, thinking that the young man was devouring his heart and desired to give up the monastic life because of the afflictions that had been brought upon him. Then the old man spoke to him and said to him, 'Do not be fainthearted in afflictions, for it is written, 'Affliction produces patience, patience probation, probation hope, and hope is not confounded.' Now, therefore, my beloved brother, let us endure (our trials) during this short time, for it is written, 'The Lord instructs him whom he loves'; And likewise it is written: 'My son, if you come to work for the Lord, prepare your soul for temptation.' For it is written: 'O God, test me and know my heart. If God does not test us first, how will he know our love for him?' These and other similar things the holy old man told him. The young and holy boy Isaac answered him and said to him, 'Truly you give me excellent teachings, O my holy father; not only will I follow you, but I am also ready to die for the name of my Lord Jesus the Messiah, for whom I have left everything behind, in order to make myself worthy of eternal life, thanks to his goodness.'

When the old man heard these words of the boy, he rejoiced very much, so they both got up together, and walked with each other, meditating on God's words, until they reached the boy's village. There was a place outside the village belonging to his parents, and inhabited by an old monk, and there they sought hospitality at the moment when the sun had set. The old man received them with joy, but he did not recognize them. Young Isaac spoke to him, asking, 'Do you know, father, whether Isaac the notary has been found?' He answered, 'No, they have not found him: there is great sorrow in the boy's house because of him, for since he has been gone they have been in mourning.' Then Isaac said, 'I am Isaac.' After being amazed, the old monk greeted him, and he made him swear not to tell anyone. There was a relative of the young Isaac: he was a deacon named Philothea, a man filled with fear

in the presence of God, all his relatives looked upon him as a father. When Isaac had sent for him, he came and, when he saw the boy, he rejoiced greatly. Saint Isaac spoke to him and said to him: If I have found favor with you, speak to my parents about me, so that they may not hinder me. And when the deacon had left him, he spoke to his parents, made them take an oath, and then he revealed the matter to them.

When they heard of this, they uttered exclamations of joy and exultation, and there was eagerness of the whole village to run at once on account of the young boy. And when his parents saw that he was a monk, they did not know what to do. They were amazed, they did not know what to say, but they did nothing because of the oath they had sworn to the deacon. And they kept him with them for a month, until they were sated of his beauty; for he was beautiful in form, so handsome that one could almost say that he was an angel of God. He talked with them about what was good for their souls. And these are the words he said to them: 'O my parents, I beseech you, do not rest your hearts on these unstable riches; do not glory in the abundance of your goods, they will pass away quickly. Moreover, let not ephemeral things cause us to lose eternity. But now let the bowels of the poor be satisfied with what belongs to you. Thus he left his parents and went into the desert. It is reported of him that a multitude of times he saw a luminous cherub spreading his wings over him while he was sleeping, and he would see him ascend to heaven. O unspeakable graces which the Lord grants to the children of men!

Come, let us see the glory of the man whom the cherubim shaded. It is said of him that from the day he was born until the day he went to God, no male sperm came out of him. For it is written, 'The angels of the Lord will surround everyone who is filled with fear in his presence, and he will save them.' And a month after he had presented himself at his parents' house, they allowed him what he desired. Then he sang with the prophet and said, 'In the name of my God I will cross the fortification wall'; and also this: 'the trap has been broken'; and also, 'Thy right hand, O Lord, hath done wonders.' And when he arrived at Skete, the holy mountain of God, he repeated the words of the Theologian: 'Give me the wilderness with Christ.' And when his spiritual father saw him again, he rejoiced greatly. Moreover, he remained near the old man Abba Zacharias, assisting him in all his works, as Joshua had served Moses, considering the way of life of the brethren who were in the monastery, walked in rule and observance, and prevailed over each other in virtue, like trees laden with fruit. As for Saint Isaac, the virtues that appeared in him were marvellous, so that he surpassed all those who were in the monastery; his flesh submitted to the sufferings of his ascetic life.

He was meek, humble, adorned with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit; he did not sleep a multitude of hours during the night; and even on Sundays he did not sleep at all, he lit the fire for the brethren, served them, parting bread before them, imitating the Saviour who had said, 'Let the greatest among you serve others.' When his brothers came to see him and brought him an abundance of wealth and clothing, he distributed them to the brothers who lived in the monastery, and he was a consolation to all who came to him for encouragement. Their spiritual father gave this order to all the brethren who were in the convent: 'If Isaac

goes to the dwelling of any of you, stand until he goes.' As for him, he did not let him know it, lest he should become proud of heart. And when the Lord had made known to the old man all that was to happen to Isaac, the old man gave orders to the brethren, for it is written, 'Shall the Lord do anything that he does not tell his servants?' If I have said of this saint, O my dearly beloved, that he was chosen from the womb, I am not mistaken, for I see that this expression is appropriate. And when he had given his heart to the Scriptures, no search was impossible for him, especially in the discourses of the scribes of the Church.

There was an old man in the mountain who was a great ascetic. Everyone testified to his virtues. It came to pass that after seeing the holy Isaac, he said to the brethren who were walking with him, 'Here is an Israelite in whom there is no cunning: he will be archbishop of the city of Alexandria and patriarch; he will be great before God, and his words will reach the limits of the inhabited earth. When the brethren heard these words of the holy old man, they were filled with admiration and gave glory to God, who has made his mysteries manifest to those who are worthy, for it is written, 'They that see not shall see, and those that hear shall not understand.' But the holy Isaac progressed in all the virtues, so that his glory was heard of in all the land of Egypt, and many forsook the world and became monks: among them was Meneson, under whom Isaac had first been a notary. For when he heard that this saint had withdrawn from the world, he also went and became a monk near him. And another whose name was Ianni, who came from a high family and became the son of the saint, and belonged to the heresy of the accursed ones who say that, since the time of the holy Dioscorus, there has been no patriarch for them: in this they have divided the churches and become heretics.

When he came to Isaac, he became a Christian and a monk, and also became a saint, so that he was made a bishop and entrusted with a large population. These were the first gifts that the holy Isaac presented to the Lord; but the wicked devil could not see this saint make progress in virtue. It happened that, while the saint was sleeping, a demon blew into his ears. And when Isaac had risen from sleep, he could no longer sit down; he informed his father of this battle and he was very sad. And as the old man had no experience in this great war, he sent him to a great ascetic who had endured a great deal of suffering at the hands of demons. And when the old man saw him, the young boy told him about this battle. The old man said to him, 'My son, I cannot give you orders for your father's sake, for you are a child of cenobitism; but go to your father, what he tells you, do it; I hope God will give you rest. When he had gone, he informed his father of the old man's words; his father answered him and said, 'Go, and wash the brethren's seats; I hope God will give you rest.' He spoke this in peace, because on every occasion he followed humility: he remained six months in this suffering, drawing water for the brethren during the night and washing their seats during the night.

After this hard battle that he had to endure, God gave him the grace of many healings. It happened once that the brothers went into the fields to gather some fuel, and when they had finished the work they returned to their dwelling. As they were walking along the

road, Saint Isaac stayed behind to gather fragrant flowers for them; but when he came to a flowering shrub to gather it, a viper in the middle rushed upon his hand. When the brothers saw him thus, they cried out, believing that he would die on the spot. But he threw the viper away, without any evil having reached him. When the brethren saw this wonderful work, they bowed down and worshipped it. You see, my dearly beloved, a holy young man imitated the apostles and became like them, according to what the Lord said to his apostles, whom he resembled, 'He who keeps my commandments will make all the signs that I have made.'

Life of Isaac of Alexandria - part 2

It happened at this time that the archbishop sought a wise man to make his successor and secretary: they spoke to him of the holy Isaac, and he sent for him to Skete. When Isaac, who could not disobey, had arrived, and the patriarch had seen him clothed in a humble garment, he asked him, “Are you Isaac?” He replied humbly “it is I.” He was ordered to write a letter, to see if it was as he had heard about him, so he wrote it badly of his own free will, thinking that on account of it the patriarch would send him away and not take him, because he loved the solitary and quiet life, following the example of the prophet David when he withdrew from the presence of Achish king of Gath, and the servants said to him, “It is King David, it is the one of whom the virgins of Israel sang in their choirs, saying: Saul has killed thousands, and David tens of thousands. ” And so he did what he wanted, and when those who were standing by the patriarch saw this letter, they said to him, “We need a man of this kind.”

When the patriarch knew that he had written of his own free will, he said to him, “It is well, go, write thus, but know that you will not leave this place.” But when the saint saw that he had not obtained what he desired, he wrote a second letter which was very wonderful; and when the archbishop saw it, he rejoiced greatly, after the manner of the man spoken of in the Gospel, when he found a precious stone. And the archbishop cried out, saying, “As we had heard, we saw,” and he said to those who were standing near him, “Truly, my children, what we asked for, we have obtained, by the power of God, for it was such a man that we needed.” Then the young man was distressed: he did not want to go into the midst of men. And after he had prayed to the archbishop many times, he scarcely persuaded his heart to release him. However, he promised to spend a month with him every year and to write heortasics for him, and then he left in peace, and he returned to the desert he loved. In the meantime, the bishop of Sais passed away, and they took his spiritual father, and made him bishop of Sais. Saint Isaac remained in the monastery with his brothers. It happened once that they went out to visit him and see him, and when they had met each other, they rejoiced.

And there was a man named Isaac who was a tax collector of the land of Egypt, who was very much a God-loving man. He was from a village called Djebronathonini, which had a holy bishop Abba Zacharias, in whom great confidence was placed. And he went to him to

beseech him, and said, “Since the king has sent for me to give him an account of the public money, I beg you to implore the Lord for me in this matter, that he may reveal to you what will happen to me, and that I may put my house in order.” The holy bishop replied, “My son, I am not capable of such a thing, as you think.” The man replied, “I trust in God, and whatever you ask of him, he will give you.” And when evening came, it happened that the bishop said to Isaac his disciple, “Let us pray together this night, that the Lord may reveal to us what will happen to this man.” And as they stood and prayed, behold, at that moment the whole place became resplendent with light, and the old man had not strength to endure the light, and he fell to the ground. And the holy Isaac stood still, looking at the light of the Lord with courage, and the angel told them what was to happen to the man.

When the bishop arose, he said to the saint, “Your holy works are greater than mine, my son.” Isaac humbly replied, “It is the Lord with (the help of) your prayers that has given me strength, O my father!” For the holy bishop meant that because of his purity he had endured the vision. For it is written, “Blessed are those who are pure in their hearts, for they shall see God.” And verily it is fulfilled upon these saints the word of the Savior, saying, “If two of you gather together on earth to pray in my name, whatever they ask will be granted to them by my Father who is in heaven.” Thus he went from his father’s house, returned to the desert he loved, and stayed with the brothers in the monastery, where he was their consolation, and was looked at as a mirror And he was to them like an angel of God encouraging them, inviting them to the struggle. And this was his custom when he entered Holy Lent: he retired to a small dwelling outside the desert, where he received no one. It happened that once Abba Abraham and Abba Georgios, the great ascetics, went to him. When they came to him, they confided their thoughts to him, and they received great profit. And when they looked into his dwelling, they found nothing but a little bread and salt: they admired his abstinence.

They asked him, “father, what do you eat in these days?” He answered, “What the brothers eat.” They said to him, “We see nothing but bread and salt.” He answered them, “That’s what the brothers eat.” They beseeched him, saying, “Do you want us to bring you some olives?” But he did not suffer it, and said, “What I need is to endure a little more suffering than the brethren.” And when they had left him, they spoke of each of his ascetic deeds. And he had a great good reputation with one and every place in the land of Egypt, according to the words of the holy Gospel: “A city shall not be hidden, if it be set on a mountain, and a lamp is not lighted to be placed under a bushel, but it is placed on a candlestick, so that it may give light to those who are in the house.”

And certainly they often tried to make him bishop, but with no success, as it is written, “Take heed, know that I am God.” It happened that one day, during the holy Lent of our salvation, Saint Isaac went to his little dwelling according to his custom, and the brethren forgot and did not bring him bread. And after he had passed the first, second, and third days, he remained five days without eating. On the fifth day of his abstinence, he looked, and saw a large round loaf of bread in his presence, as if it had been brought from the oven

at that very moment. Immediately he got up, prayed, thanked God, and took some bread. The next day he brought the rest to the monastery, and gave it to the brethren, who ate it. The brothers questioned him, saying, "Where did you get this fresh bread?" But he hid it from them and said, "It was brought to me from Egypt." When they asked one another, "Has any of you brought him bread this week?" they found no one who had brought him bread. And they knew that the work was of God, as it is written, "Those who serve me have been filled, and you have hungered; those who serve me have drunk, and you have been thirsty"; and again: "If you listen to me, you will eat of all the good things of the earth."

Does not this miracle surpass that of the prophet Elijah, when the angels brought him bread from heaven after he had killed the prophets of shame? It happened that one day Orion, Bishop of Sais, came to him, who was still a reader and was not yet a bishop, and wanted to receive his blessing. It was Easter week, and it was Isaac's custom not to sit at all during Easter, instead he stood upright, working with his hands. When Orion came to him, Isaac took what he was weaving and worked on it. The boy said to him, "Father, I wanted to become a monk; but my father's tears prevented me from doing so." And the saint lost consciousness into sleep, then immediately jumped up and said to him, "Orion, you cannot become a monk." When the young man heard this, he was frightened. Isaac said to him, "Do not be afraid, but obey your father until he reposes, he who has just spoken to me has told me, but when your father is dead, you must go to a high rank"; he meant the episcopate of which Orion was worthy. And when the young man heard these words from the saint, he left him, he returned in peace to his house, giving glory to God, as it is written, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

After this, his spiritual father, Abbot Zacharias, the holy bishop, was ill with the disease from which he was to die, and as God had informed him of it first, he came to his monastery. The holy Isaac served him in his sickness. And when he was about to repose, he called all his children as the patriarch Jacob had done, and after blessing them all, he said to Saint Isaac, "My son, when you are brought up, remember your brothers"; He spoke thus to signify the dignity to which he was to be raised. When he had finished giving his recommendations to his children, he committed his spirit into the hands of God, while all the great saints of Skete were seated near him. After burying him with great glory, they laid him beside his fathers, for they still remember him and the miracles he performed during his life. It is reported of him that he had a blind disciple: when he came to the old man, the latter laid his hands on him, and immediately he saw and gave glory to God, and he remained subject to his father until the day of his death. He also had a relative in the world: it happened that this relative fell into this same disease, blindness. When he heard this, he was very saddened. After he had sent for him, and after the other had come to him at Mount Skete, the brother who had regained his sight came before the old man and beseeched him, saying, "as God has had mercy on me with you, have pity on my brother also."

And when the holy old man saw them both weeping, he was greatly saddened, and, having given them the holy mysteries, he took the cloth on which he had placed the chalice, and

wiped the man's face with it. And at the same moment the man saw as if he had not been ill at all, and threw himself on the ground, adored him and went to his house, praising God who works his wonders. There was a man living in the city of Sais named Georgios: he was a brave young man. The devil caused him to fall into a sin of which no one knew, except God, who knows what is hidden and what is apparent; and immediately God punished him, as it is written (in the Psalms) by David: "The sinner was caught in the works of his hands." And when they got up in the morning, they found the child lying like a dead man. His parents lifted him up and carried him to the dwelling of the holy bishop Abba Zacharias. When they came into his presence, they threw themselves on the ground, adored him, weeping, and saying, "We pray your holiness to implore the Lord for our son, that he may be saved." He asked them, "What has happened to him?" They said to him, "We do not know." But God had just told him before they arrived. He rose at once, and prayed over the young man, who was immediately cured, as if he had never been ill.

The bishop said to him, "Beware of the sin you have committed; do not do it again, lest this evil happen to you." When his parents heard this, they were astonished; they did not know what their child had done, and they prayed to the old man, saying, "We will observe all that you have said to us." And they left him, giving glory to God, and he was honored by everyone. He was given glory as the holy apostles of Christ. It came a month days after his father's death that he was in great sorrow about his separation from this vain world. Then the holy archbishop Abba John prayed to the Lord to show him who would be worthy after him to succeed him in shepherding the holy church. It was revealed to him in a dream, saying: "Send for Scete, in the monastery of Abba Zacharias, the ascetic monk Isaac; it is he who will be your successor." As soon as he was up in the morning, he sent for him. And after Isaac came, he did not let him go until the day when he passed away. It came to pass in those days that the king sent for the patriarch to be in his presence. And he did so a multitude of times, bringing the patriarch to him because of the affection he bore him. The name of this king was Abd-el-Aziz, and he was called El-emir.

He had two tax collectors, God-loving men, Athanasius and Isaac with their children, and the whole praetorium was filled with Christians. In the beginning when he came to Egypt, he tried to do harm to the Christians, he broke the crosses and did a host of evils to the archbishop. But God, who once punished Pharaoh, terrified him in a dream, and said to him, "Beware of touching the archbishop." And he cherished him like an angel of God. And it happened that when the archbishop was there, he became ill with the disease from which he was to die. When the nobles heard of this, they all came to him to visit him and receive his blessing; they found him in great suffering. And when the king was informed of his condition, he dismissed him. When the archbishop arrived in Alexandria, he fell asleep, and his body was placed in the church of St. Mark, which he had built, and he told them to bring Isaac in his place, as he had been told to do by the Lord. Now there was a deacon named Georgios who desired the priesthood against the will of the God who makes kings kings through him. He persuaded the hearts of the bishops, who then assembled to give him the episcopate, and immediately he received a reprimand for his impiety. When they

had made him priest, they clothed him with the stole, thinking to make him archbishop in the middle of the week, wishing to act against the cannon.

Immediately the archdeacon at the altar cried out, as if he had been moved by God, and said: "God forbid that we should thus work against the canons; but let us wait until Sunday." Thus the Lord prevented him from being made pontiff for eternity, for it is written: "The man of flesh and blood the Lord hates." And on that day the great bishops arrived at Alexandria. When they heard that the patriarch was dead, wishing to take the side of him whom Christ had chosen, that is, the holy Isaac, and finding that the others who had preceded them had agreed with Georgios, they became divided. Immediately the king's servants arrived in Alexandria, who were to bring the bishops to him, so that he might know the one who had been elected. And when they came to Babylon Fortress, Saint Isaac was serving Georgios, thinking nothing of the kind. And as they scrutinized the life of Georgios, they found a host of causes against him, especially that he was a married man with very wicked children. And so he was ridiculed and advised to make archbishop the one whom God had chosen, that is, Saint Isaac. It came to pass on Sunday that all the bishops and a multitude of people from Babylon Fortress, Alexandria, and all the lands met in the church of the holy Sergios, and behold, the Saint Isaac also entered it clothed in a humble habit. He was praying when suddenly the lamp broke on him and covered him entirely with oil.

Immediately the multitude cried out, "He is worthy, he is worthy, he is worthy, the thirteenth apostle, Isaac the archbishop." And immediately the bishops and the nobles took him and brought him into the sanctuary, saying, "this is the new David!" And on that day, Isaac the truly God-loving tax collector made a celebration for the bishops and clerics. But the bishops had him recline before them against his will, saying, "It is the Holy Spirit who invites you, it is the Holy Spirit who imposes on you, according to what is written: 'The Lord our God has anointed you with the oil of exultation in preference to all your companions.'" And the next day they told the king about it, and told him all that had happened, and he gave orders to bring them both before him. And when they stood in his presence, he saw that Georgios was clothed in the priestly habit: Isaac wore the humble habit of the monks.

to the bishops and he multitude: "Which of the two do you desire?" They all cried out, "The monk, this is our father." He said to them, "He is an abject man!" Then the bishops and the nobles cried out still more, "He is a prophet of God, since birth he has remained a pure virgin" But Georgios said to the king, "Give me the throne and I will give you riches."

And when the bishops and the crowds heard these words, they anathematized him, saying, "Let your money be with you in perdition, for you want to acquire the gift of God with riches." And so the bishops made him forever a stranger to the priesthood; what is written is fulfilled for him: "He dug a pit and made it deep, let him fall into the pit he made"; And again: "He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Thus, by the suffrage of God and the consent of the people, the holy Isaac was brought away with honor and glory, and he was ordained archbishop by the laying on of hands. O how great was the joy and gladness that there was in all the land of Egypt: the crowds formed dancing

choirs to celebrate it: to the east and west of the river the villages were transformed from Babylon Fortress to Alexandria. The crowds of bishops who had gathered to enthrone him in the churches marched with him: among them were John, the bishop of Pschati, who was patrician over the episcopate of the high country, a man consummate in the wisdom of God and men, and Gregory, the bishop of Cais, who was also patrician over the bishops of the lower country, with all the bishops. And when they had reached the city of Alexandria, it came to pass that the whole crowd went out: the clerics carried the gospels, crosses and lit candles.

And they sang in his honor until they had brought him into the city. And so their hands were laid upon him as archbishop on the eighth day of Koiak, a Sunday. And he was seated on the apostolic throne of the holy evangelist Mark, a light that enlightens us And the service of the archpriesthood was performed according to the apostolic canons. And when he had received the power of God to bind and loose, he shone in all the world; To those who were in the archiepiscopal palace he gave orders that the brethren should rest in their dwellings, meditating on the Holy Scriptures, and making a synaxis with one another; he often spoke to them, provoking them to imitate the life of the men of Skete. When the rest of the bishops and the monks of the monasteries heard that Saint Isaac was a bishop, they came to him and adored him, for they knew his great wisdom and asceticism. He was a model for them in good works. God granted this saint, my beloved, graces of healing a multitude of times. Every time he entered the altar to make the oblation, as soon as he began the holy offering, his eyes shed tears until he had finished the service. And when he arrived at the hour, the Holy Spirit descended on the altar, he saw the Holy Spirit coming upon the sacrificial offering, changing the bread and wine into the divine body of Christ.

When this saint saw this great revelation, he was seized with fear and joy. And at that moment, his face would shine brightly, so much so that everyone was in awe and said, “God has made us worthy of such a saint.” And his mind was enlightened for the guard of the holy dogmas, after the manner of the great Athanasius and the wise Cyril, whose successor he had become. And when Saint Isaac went out into Egypt, he converted many of them from their heresy, he brought them the orthodox faith of our Lord Jesus the Christ. To some he gave baptism, he received others by having them anathematize their own heresies, by the grace that God had granted him and by his words that saved souls. When God had led him to a village called Psanascho, he baptized a multitude there, whether men or women, whether tall or short. And it happened that at mealtime, while he was reclining together with the bishops with him, a very sick man was brought to him; his interior was so inflamed that, if he had drunk a lake of water, he would have been as if he had drunk nothing at all, because of the great inflammation of his interior. When he was brought to him, he raised his eyes to heaven, sighed, and said, “Thou art just, O Lord, and thy judgments are right.” And when the holy patriarch had taken a cup of wine, he made the sign of the cross in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and he gave it to the man who drank it.

Immediately the fire that was in the man's interior was extinguished, and he was immediately rested, and went to his house to give glory to God and to the saint.

Life of Isaac of Alexandria - part 3

But Athanasius, the tax collector we spoke of previously, caused trouble for this saint, for indeed he had power; and the old man (Isaac) set his care in God. Immediately he received from God a rebuke for his unbelief. God sent a sickness to his eldest son, so that he was near death. His father brought a crowd of physicians, the cure did not come. But the child grew worse and worse and came near death. Athanasius became discouraged, seeking rest for his son and not finding it. And in the midst of all this, he was unfocused, and all the rulers of the city were sitting by him. And it came to pass that night that the Lord sent a vision to the archbishop, saying to him: "Send tomorrow to Athanasius the collector and say to him: If you believe in Christ who made me sit on his holy Church, the Lord will certainly grant your son the grace of healing."

And when the saint had reflected on the vision, he called his disciple and said: "Is there a bishop here?" The disciple said: "Yes, there is here Abba Georgios, Abba Gregorios and Abba Piamot, the bishop of Damietta." The patriarch having called the bishop, he announced to them what he had seen in the vision. Abba Gregorios answered him saying: "You know that this man is angry with your holiness; perhaps this manifestation is a deceptive vision, that the words are not true and will do us harm." The archbishop answered and said to him as one who knew what was between God and him: "What I have said to you, I have spoken truthfully in the presence of each one; it is the holy evangelist Mark who commands you." When they had gone they came to the house of Athanasius, and found him weeping for his son, and they reported to him the words of the archbishop. Athanasius answered: "Truly, if healing comes to my son through the archbishop, I will believe in him as I did in Athanasius, Cyril, Ignatius, and Severus." And Athanasius and his wife fell at the feet of the bishops, saying: "We beg you, exhort the archbishop to implore God to save him; for we certainly cannot look upon the (saint) because of the evils we have done him." When the bishops had gone, they reported to the holy patriarch what Athanasius had said.

Then the archbishop went to the child; he stood over him, prayed over him, and signed him with his holy hand. At once the child jumped out of his bed, as if he had not been sick at all; The archbishop ordered something to be brought to him, for since the day he had become sick he had not tasted anything. And when Athanasius and his wife saw the healing that had taken place in their child, they prostrated their faces at the feet of the patriarch, asking

his forgiveness. The archbishop said to Athanasius: “My son, from this day take good care and do not grieve the Church any more; for he who fights against the Church fights against Christ.” And from that day the archbishop was honored by Athanasius who gave him glory as to an angel of God. And the archbishop, when the frequentation was established between them, spoke with Athanasius about the Evangelium of Alexandria so that he would make it beautiful*, because due to the length of time this Evangelium was leaning ready to fall, and with the grace of God Athanasius raised it up and adorned it with beauty. And during the days of his (patriarchate) a council was assembled in Alexandria, which his predecessors the archbishops had not been able to do because of the enemies of our faith. And God made him find favor with the king of the Saracens who honored him greatly, giving him glory a multitude of times until his death, so much so that they sat together, that they had interviews, because the king saw the multitude of cures (operated) by him.

It happened that once, as our father was making the synaxis, the king happened to pass by with all the crowd that followed him; he came outside the door of the church and he looked inside. He then saw the archbishop standing at the altar surrounded by fire; a luminous virtue gave him courage. When the king saw this great vision, he was amazed and said to one of those who accompanied him: “Go, call the archbishop”; for he wanted to know why this virtue surrounded him and who it was that spoke to him in the place and stood above him. And when he wanted to send the man into the church, he saw virtue coming to him, fear seized him, he fled in haste with those who accompanied him. No one except the king alone saw the vision. When he had returned to his house, he lay down for fear: he looked like a dead man, he could not speak all day. The collectors came to him, they entered near him to visit him, they found him lying in fear. As they questioned him about the cause of his illness, he revealed to them what his eyes had seen, and when they had heard it they were amazed and gave glory to God. Having sent one of them, the king sent for the archbishop, and when he arrived, he questioned him, saying: “At the time when you stood at the altar, with whom were you then speaking? And who was he who stood (all) luminous (and as if) on fire?”

The holy archbishop answered and said to the king: “I was speaking with my God.” For the archbishop was not ignorant of what power stood near him whenever he went up to the altar, as on this occasion. The king said to him: “Whenever you go up to the altar, do you see your God?” The archbishop said to him: “Yes.” Then the king was filled with astonishment and said to the archbishop: “Your faith is great, you Christians! I had thought until today that Abba Jean, your predecessor, was very close to God, but I know now that you are his father and that you are more exalted than he near God.” 61 now that you are his father and that you are more exalted than he near God.” And from that day on he was a prophet in the eyes of the king who called him patriarch at every moment and took him with him wherever he went. And the saint was sad because the king would not let him remain in his bishopric, for at all times he had loved the quiet life. It happened one day that the king was in the city of Helwan which he had recently built in the days of his kingship: he sent for the archbishop,

took him by the hand, brought him into his house, and did not let in any of those who were waiting for him. He led him into one of his rooms and left him alone.

The king went to his place. And the king's wife saw great multitudes of angels who were with the archbishop in the room, she also saw a great light like burning lamps: the angels were dressed in white garments given to them. In their midst was the holy patriarch Isaac who sang the praises of God all night, according to the custom of Christians. And when the hour of light had arrived, the woman informed the king of what she had seen and said to him: "A little more and I was near death because of the fear of what I saw and heard." Then the king said: "I brought him, him alone, into the room, that he might pray for us and our children." But she swore to him, saying: "I saw a great multitude surrounding this old man, speaking to their God in their prayers." And the next day the king dismissed him, gave him glory. And the king built churches and monasteries of monks around his city, because he loved the Christians. It happened at that time that there came (to Babylon) a famous man from the country of the Saracens; he was a Christian by religion. He had two sons: one was possessed by the devil, the other had fled to Egypt wanting to deny the faith of Christ, because he had not been able to do so in his country for fear of his father who was a perfect Christian.

His father having sought him and not having found him, he arose, he came to Egypt to take him; he found him a denier of his faith, having chosen the part of Judas rather than that of Christ. And the father of the young man had brought into Egypt his youngest son in whom was a demonic spirit, so that the bishops of Egypt might pray over him and heal him, because he had heard that they were saints of God. And when this Christian man arrived in Egypt, 'Abd-el-'Aziz received him with great joy because he was one of his relatives, and when he had questioned him about (the cause of) his arrival to him, (the other) told him everything for which he had come, and (the king) received him with great joy and great honor. Then the man having seen that his son did not listen to him in order to convert, he wept in affliction and said: "Let your blood be upon you my son; from this moment you are a stranger to me in this world and in the next." And as he was looking for a holy bishop so that he could pray over the child, he happened upon a pseudo-bishop of the heresy of the acephalous. When he was told that this (man) was a bishop, not knowing that he was a heretic, he brought his son to the bishop, that he might pray over him, and that the child might be healed. And when that wicked bishop had done so, he was unable to heal him; but the evil spirit troubled the child without giving him rest, and the man was very sad at heart.

When the king saw that he was sad, he asked him: "What has happened to you?" Then the man told him the cause (of his sadness). The king asked: "Who is this bishop?" They answered: "It is the one from Niuberschenouf." The man was saddened when he was informed that he was a heretical bishop. Then the king ordered that the holy patriarch Isaac be brought to him immediately. When he arrived, the king informed him of the sick child and of the great affliction in which the father was in this matter. The patriarch took a little

oil, prayed over her, and anointed the child, saying, "In the name of my God Jesus Christ, grant your servant the grace of healing." Immediately the demon came out of the child in the form of a flame of fire: whoever saw it was amazed and gave glory to God. The man immediately got up, fell to the ground at our feet before the archbishop, worshiped him, and presented him with perfumes that had been chosen from his country. The patriarch spoke to him many times, to strengthen him in the faith of Jesus Christ and the salvation of his soul. And the man, a lover of God, asked the archbishop to write him the Gospel according to John, and he prayed over the bread of eulogy, asking the archbishop's blessing, so that it would protect him all his life. And he left him giving glory to God, according to what our good Savior said: "He who loves me, my Father will love him and I also will dwell in him."

After this some of the Saracens who hated the faith came in to the king and accused the archbishop, saying: "Behold, you honor Isaac and receive him into your presence, and he hates us and our religion." The king said: "I love him because I know by his works that he is a man of God and that he is subject to us. What you say is a lie." They said to them: "If you want to convince yourself that he hates us and our religion, and that what we say is true, then you will make him eat with you on the (same) platter of the food that is on the platter, and that without his making (the sign of) the cross: if he does not make this sign, know that all that we have said is a lie." The king answered them and said: "I will follow your advice in this. "And immediately he called the collectors and said to them: "I desire that the patriarch consent to eat with me, if he loves me, without making the sign of the cross." The two collectors answered and said to the king: "We are Christians, we cannot eat without first making the sign of the cross: if you let the archbishop first make the sign of the cross on the food, he will consent to eat with you: if you do not allow him, we do not think that he will eat with you." The king answered angrily: "I will make him eat with me and will not let him make the sign of the cross: if he does, I will kill him."

And they could not answer him because of the anger that possessed him, they were silent. Now it happened one day that the patriarch came to visit the king according to his custom: he sat down with the king and the whole crowd, the leaders of the Saracens, many magistrates of Egypt. The archbishop was still seated when a basket of magnificent dates was brought into the king's presence. The king ordered the archbishop to eat first. But the saint, experienced in divine and human matters and on whom the Holy Spirit had rested as on the prophet Daniel, stretched out his right hand, took with finesse the basket containing the dates and said to the king: "From which side do you want me to eat, from this side or from that side? From here or there." The king did not know what the archbishop had done; but the collectors and the (Christian) leaders understood what he had done, they admired his great prudence and the astonishing graces that God had given him. The king answered: "Eat where you wish." And when the archbishop had finished eating the dates, the king dismissed him. And the king said to the collectors and leaders, as if congratulating himself: "I made him eat without the sign of the cross." They said to him with joy: "He did not eat until he had traced the cross." The king said to them: "How did he trace the cross?" They said to him: "At the moment when he put his fingers on the four sides of the basket, saying:

'Do you want me to eat from this side or from that side? Here or there?' It was then that he traced the cross on the dates."

Then the king was filled with admiration and said: "Truly I have not found a wise man as this one." But God, who had given glory and grace to the prophet Daniel in the presence of the Chaldean and Persian kings, also gave glory to this saint in the presence of the kings of the Saracens. And the king honored him, called him patriarch at every moment because of the grace of God which was in him. Listen, let me tell you also this wonderful thing. It happened at that time that the king of Makouria sent some of his servants to the archbishop with letters, announcing to him how the bishops of his country had become few in number because of the length of the journey and the time it took on the way, because one could not pass because of the king of Maurotania, until peace had been made with him. For there were two kings established over that country and both were Christians; but they were not at peace with each other, because one of them had made peace with the king of the Saracens, that was the king of Maurotania; but the other, the king of Makuria, had not made peace with the king of the Saracens.

When the archbishop had read the king's letters and had learned what they contained, he was greatly saddened at heart, because of the churches; and immediately he wrote letters to the king of Maurotania, giving him advice and instructions with words from holy Scripture, and saying to him: "You are both Christians." When he had written a multitude of words to strengthen his soul in the orthodox faith in the Son of God, he then wrote to him not to prevent the men of the king of the high country from passing through his territory, when they came about their bishops, so as not to leave the churches deserted, "so that you do not receive a great reprobation from God." When the enemies of our faith learned this, they slandered the archbishop near the king, saying: "We warn you, O king, that the king of Makouria has sent servants with letters to Abba Isaac the archbishop, so that he may establish a bishop over them and send him to their country. Not only that, but he has also sent (someone) to the king of Maurotania, advising him to make peace with the king of Makouria our enemy. If it happens thus, O king, they will become one heart, they will rise up against us to make war on us. "When the king heard these words, he became very angry, and immediately he sent servants to Alexandria with letters from him for the Augustal, having written to him thus: "As soon as my messengers have arrived near you with these letters, seize the patriarch, send him to me quickly."

The king had resolved in his heart to take off the archbishop's head with his sword, as soon as he should have come near him. And when the king's letters had arrived, they found the holy archbishop assembled (with the people) in the church; for it was the week of the salutary Passover of Christ. O how great was the mourning and desolation that there was on that day, not only among those of our faith, but for everyone who knew the great favor he enjoyed with God: all were in mourning for their pastor, not knowing what he was accused of with the king. And when he had been seized in haste, he was led away to Babylon Fortress as if to kill him. And as the holy archbishop rode on his donkey, passing through the streets

of Babylon, it came to pass that all the multitude followed him according to their custom, in order to know what would come to their shepherd. He was still walking, praying, towards the king, when he saw two tall men walking wearing white garments - no tongue of flesh could speak of their glory and honor! And he saw them walking with him, one on his right, the other on his left, and they said to him: "Fear not, O faithful patriarch, for here we go with you; no harm will come to you." He asked them, saying: "And you, who are you in the midst of this great glory?" The one on his right hand, who had the appearance of an old man, answered and said: "I am Cephas, who is called Peter; this other is Mark, my legitimate son.

Since the day you were seated on the priestly throne, we have been with you in every way that you go. Take courage, do not fear, for in this year you will fulfill your life and you will be laid down in peace with your fathers. Since you have perfected the work of monasticism and the work of the pastor, the Lord desires that you endure that of the confessor, O holy shepherd." And some of the monk fathers saw him as if he had spoken to others; but they were not certain of the thing. When he approached the praetorium, the king was informed about him: "The archbishop has arrived," they said. The king ordered him to be brought in alone before him, thinking to do him some harm. But it happened that when he saw the saint of God in the midst of the great glory that surrounded him, he was filled with astonishment and with his (own) eyes he saw the two luminous apostles entering with him. He was in great amazement, fear seized him, and, when his heart had strengthened, he said gently to the archbishop: "Is what I have been told about you true?" So he justified himself before the king with great frankness, and when he had convinced the king's heart, he sat down near him, as it is written: "I will give you a spirit of wisdom against which no one can contend"; and also: "If you are brought before kings and rulers for my sake, do not worry about what you will say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you should say."

Then the king questioned the archbishop and said to him: "Swear to me by God and by the glory that surrounds you that you will not hide from me what I ask you." And the saint answered: "I will not hide from you anything that I know." The king answered him: "At the hour that you came to me, who were those two men who were walking with you? (For) I saw two men accompanying you, and a great light surrounded you and them? I have never seen anything like them, and if they had not made themselves invisible, I would have died of fright." Then the holy archbishop said to the king: "These two men that you have seen are disciples of Christ, the King of kings, by whom kings are kings; for those whom you have seen accompany me at all times. Therefore, O king, beware of (touching) the Church, do not grieve it; for he who grieves the Church grieves God. "And when the king heard these words of the archbishop, he was filled with great fear. After the king gave orders to the holy archbishop to build a church in Helouan, the city which he had founded. And when he had finished the church in all its beauty, the archbishop became ill and suffered greatly. The king was informed of this, who was saddened and dismissed him. He was brought up, he

was taken to Alexandria, he worshiped in the church of Saint Mark. And he was ill and suffering.

When his spiritual brothers who were in the desert of Scete heard of it, they came to him, they cared for him until the Lord visited him. And when the holy and glorious archbishop was about to rest, it happened that crowds of blessed saints, bishops, clerics, monks, were sitting near him. And so he gave up his soul into the hands of God, the faithful and confessor archbishop, on the ninth day of Athor. And Abba John, Bishop of Terenuti, his spiritual brother, was worthy to place his hands on the eyes (of the saint), as Joseph had placed his hands on the eyes of his father Jacob. He was buried in all glory and honor; the bishops and all the clerics spent the whole night singing psalms around him. When morning appeared, a great crowd gathered, they celebrated for him the holy service; all the people received the body and blood of God. Then his body was laid near (that of) his colleague, the patriarch John, in the church of St. Mark. And his body is near us on earth, and his spirit near God in heaven watching over us. And we believe that all the saints went to meet him, patriarchs and prophets, apostles and all saints. May it be granted to all of us to obtain mercy through his holy prayers in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory with his good Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever! Amen.

Source. The Coptic text was edited and translated by the Coptic SCRIPTORIUM project and is published in its open corpora (https://github.com/CopticScriptorium/corpora). English translation credited in the corpus to: Émile Amélineau, Amir Zeldes. SermonIndex has joined the project's sentence-by-sentence translations into paragraphs, divided them into short sections and numbered them; the wording is the translators' own. Square brackets and dots mark damaged or missing places in the manuscript. The Coptic text itself is not shown here; documents of the corpus that have no named English translation are not included.

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