

PIETER W. VAN DER HORST

## Jews and Christians in Conflict in Ancient Himyar (Yemen)

JODEN EN CHRISTENEN IN CONFLICT IN HET ANTIEKE HIMYAR (JEMEN)

In de jaren twintig van de zesde eeuw was er gedurende enkele jaren een joods koninkrijk in Himyar (het antieke Jemen). De joodse koning, Joesoef, verklaarde de oorlog aan de christenen van de stad Najrân die gesteund werden door het christelijke koninkrijk van Ethiopië dat al lang op voet van oorlog met Himyar stond. In dit artikel worden de vier belangrijkste bronnen voor onze kennis van deze episode besproken alsmede de kwesties die speelden tussen de joden en christenen van Himyar.

We know many hundreds of stories about persecutions of Jews by Christians from the last two millennia. We never, or hardly ever, hear of the reverse, persecutions of Christians by Jews.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is a well-documented – although not well-known – instance of the latter. This paper will briefly introduce the reader to the story of the persecution of the Christians of the city of Najran by the Jewish king of Himyar in the sixth century. Himyar is the area on the Arabian peninsula that roughly coincides with present-day Yemen.

### Judaism in ancient Himyar

By the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE there already was a sizeable Jewish community in Himyar.<sup>2</sup> About its origins nothing is known with any certainty, but we do know that by the end of the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, all traces of polytheism had disappeared from the South-Arabian epigraphic evidence there. When God is referred to in those inscriptions, it is with formulae such as ‘the Lord of heaven and earth’ and similarly Jewish-sounding descriptions. In some of these inscriptions, we read that the author (or owner) belongs to ‘the

---

<sup>1</sup> Some passages in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 9:1–6; Gal. 1:13; 1 Thes. 2:14–16) seem to imply that Jews persecuted Christians, but these cannot be interpreted as implying full-scale and state-organized persecutions. These passages rather reflect the inner-Jewish conflicts in the first two decades of nascent Christianity when it still was a Jewish sect.

<sup>2</sup> See the remarks of the fifth-century historian Philostorgius in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.4–5.

people of Israel' or that God is even designated as 'the Lord of the Jews.'<sup>3</sup> However, we never find on these stones Jewish symbols such as the Menorah or the Torah chest, symbols that we find very frequently on Jewish inscriptions from the rest of the ancient world in late antiquity.<sup>4</sup> But this is at least evidence of a judaizing tendency on the Arabian peninsula as a whole. Other evidence also points to a considerable growth of Jewish communities both in and outside Himyar, even though we do not hear of any proselytizing, let alone forced conversions.<sup>5</sup>

*Joseph, the Jewish king of Himyar*

That situation changes dramatically, however, in the early sixth century. In 522 CE, a strong-willed man became the new Himyarite king, whom the sources variously name Masruq, Dhu Nuwas, and Yusuf As'ar Yath'ar, but he himself preferred the biblical name Yusuf – so we will call him Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Some late Arabic sources assert that he had a Jewish mother who originated from Nisibis, but that must remain doubtful, for other sources maintain that he converted to Judaism and demanded that his subjects take the same step.<sup>7</sup> We can only guess at the reasons for this sudden change in policy. Part of his motivation was undoubtedly of a political nature. Joseph wanted to maintain his independence from the two superpowers of this time, the Byzantine and Persian (Sassanid) empires, which continuously threatened his kingdom. And he especially wanted to shake his fist against Ethiopia, a Christian kingdom that in the past had repeatedly made inroads into his country. Even up to his own days, the Ethiopians maintained military settlements there, officially in order to protect the Christians in the country, but in fact for imperialist and expansionist purposes.<sup>8</sup> The fact that many an Ethiopian emperor called himself also 'Lord of Himyar' probably infuriated Joseph. So anti-Christian

<sup>3</sup> C.J. Robin, 'Le judaïsme de Himyar', *Arabia* 1 (2003), 97–172.

<sup>4</sup> R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 68), Leiden 2001.

<sup>5</sup> G.D. Newby, *History of the Jews of Arabia from Ancient Times to the Eclipse under Islam*, Columbia 1988, 24–48.

<sup>6</sup> Yusuf was a well-known name among Jews in the more northern part of Arabia.

<sup>7</sup> H.Z. Hirschberg, 'Yusuf 'As'ar Yath'ar Dhu Nuwas', *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 (1971), 897–900; C.J. Robin, 'Joseph, dernier roi de Himyar (de 522 à 525, ou une des années suivantes)', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2008), 1–124, gives all the details.

<sup>8</sup> A.H.M. Jones, E. Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia*, Safety Harbor CA 2001 (orig. 1935), ch. 3. A.J. Drewes, 'Ethiopië en Zuid-Arabië tussen 450 en 550 na het begin van onze jaartelling', *Phoenix* 33/1 (1987), 55–71. J. Ryckmans, *La persécution des chrétiens Himyarites au sixième siècle*, Istanbul 1956. G.W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*, Oxford 2013.

sentiments of a political nature certainly played a significant role in his decision to create a Jewish kingdom.

*The persecution of the Christians of Najrân*

The Christians in Joseph's kingdom – and there were many of them – were shocked.<sup>9</sup> Those in the city of Najrân, who formed a majority there, flatly refused to obey the king's commandment. They felt secure because there was an Ethiopian army unit detached there for their protection. The king succeeded, however, by means of a ruse to have them open the gates of their city for him and the result, after having tried in vain to persuade the Christians to become Jewish, was a massacre of thousands of Christians in the city and its surroundings.

For this part of the story we have four major sources.<sup>10</sup> In chronological order these are: The two Syriac *Letters of Simeon of Beth Arsham*; the anonymous *Book of the Himyarites* in Syriac (and a later Arabic version); and the Greek *Martyrium of Arethas and his companions in Najrân* (with later versions in Latin, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Arabic).<sup>11</sup> All four sources were written by Christians. The background of the *Letters of Simeon of Beth Arsham* is as follows. Late in the year 523, the Byzantine Emperor Justin (518–527) sent his special ambassador for Arab affairs, the high diplomat Abraham, to the Arabian Lakhmid king, or sheikh, al-Mundhir (in Greek sources Alamoundaros) in order to negotiate a peace treaty. Al-Mundhir had successfully fought against the Byzantines and even taken captive two of the most important generals of the Christian army. In February 524, a peace conference was held in Ramla (in the North-East of the Arabian peninsula), in

<sup>9</sup> On Christianity in Arabia in general see J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London 1979. On Himyarite Christianity D.S. Attema, *Het oudste christendom in Zuid-Arabië*, Amsterdam 1949; W.W. Müller, 'Himyar', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 15 (1991), 303–331; C.J. Robin, 'Nagrân vers l'époque du massacre: notes sur l'histoire politique, économique et institutionnelle et sur l'introduction du christianisme (avec un réexamen du *Martyr d'Azqir*)', in J. Beaucamp, F. Briquel-Chatonnet, C.-J. Robin (eds.), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VIe siècles: Regards croisés sur les sources*, Paris 2010, 39–106.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the sources to be mentioned now we also have a number of shorter remarks on the events in some Christian and (later) Muslim authors: the Christian authors Procopius, Cosmas Indicopleustes, and John Malalas (all of them writing in Greek); the Syriac author John of Ephesus; and the Arabic Islamic authors Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham, Ibn al-Kalbi, and Tabari. For our purposes they can be left out of account here. The four major sources discussed in the main text are dealt with at greater length in my book *Het joodse koninkrijk van Himyar en de christelijke martelaars van Nadjran*, Amsterdam 2015. This book contains, *inter alia*, a translation of the Greek *Martyrium of Arethas and his companions in Najrân*.

<sup>11</sup> The name Arethas (Arabic Harith) in the title refers to the leading aristocrat of the city's Christian community (not the bishop) who is one of the first to die for his faith.

Al-Mundhir's territory, where an agreement was signed and the two generals were released.<sup>12</sup> But then something completely unexpected took place. Unannounced a messenger turned up with a letter of the Himyarite King Joseph to Al-Mundhir. In it, this Jewish king told about the successful persecution of the Christians in his country, he even proudly detailed his atrocities, and he urged not only Al-Mundhir, but also the Persian king, who was the second addressee of the letter, to do the same and destroy the Christian communities in their territories.

For reasons unknown to us, one of those present was the energetic Christian scholar Simeon of Beth Arsham, a Monophysite priest from Mesopotamia. This man immediately took notes of what he heard and swiftly sent a detailed letter about the events in Himyar to the patriarch of Alexandria with the request to come to the rescue of the Himyarite Christians. The Byzantine Emperor Justin also received a copy. This marked the beginning of the Byzantine intervention in Himyarite affairs. We have this important letter in two versions, the first of which we know already since 1881<sup>13</sup> and the second since 1971.<sup>14</sup> It is still unclear why a second version of this letter was made, for the first version is for the greater part incorporated in it, the most important difference being that the second version adds some details not present in the first. Whether the second version is also from the hand of Simeon of Beth Arsham, as has long been believed, is increasingly considered to be improbable. Indeed, this version definitely makes the impression of having been composed by a later hand. What is certain, however, is that it is due to this letter that the Ethiopian Emperor (the *negus*), spurred on by the Alexandrian patriarch and the Byzantine Emperor, soon launched a major attack on Himyar, which meant the end of King Joseph and his Jewish kingdom.

It is important to notice that this letter, our oldest document concerning this persecution, was written very soon after the events, within a couple of months. For that reason, it is all the more regrettable that this text has not been preserved in intact form, far from it. From the only manuscript that is extant many leaves are missing. In addition, for understandable reasons, the author focuses mainly on the cruel acts of King Joseph but hardly at all on

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed reconstruction see I. Shahid, 'Byzantino-Arabica: The Conference at Ramla, A.D. 524', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 23 (1964), 115–131.

<sup>13</sup> I. Guidi, 'La lettera di Simeone vescovo di Beth-Arsâm sopra i martiri omeriti', *Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei III: Memorie della classe dei scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 7 (1881), 471–515; reprinted in his *Raccolta degli scritti I: Oriente cristiano*, Roma 1945, 1–60.

<sup>14</sup> I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents*, Brussel 1971.

what went on before, let alone on what happened after the persecution, because those events would take place only after he had written his letter. Even though the second version of the letter has more details and was handed down in a somewhat less incomplete form than the first, the same problems apply. For information about matters not mentioned in Simeon's letter(s) we will have to turn to the next (in chronological sequence) major source.

The anonymous *Book of the Himyarites*<sup>15</sup> by and large contains the same information as the *Letter(s)*, but it also provides us with data not found there. The most important are undoubtedly the passages in which the counter-attack by the Ethiopian *negus*, Elesbaäs (the Greek form of Ella 'Asbeha), against Joseph is described: the preparations for the war, the combat between the two armies, the death of the Himyarite king, and the installation of a Christian king by the Ethiopians. Most probably this document, too, was written shortly after the events in the years 523–525, although it already has some more hagiographical traits than the *Letters*. Some scholars have argued that this work, too, was written by Simeon of Beth Arsham, but that has now become untenable. Others argue that the *Book of the Himyarites* was written completely independently from the *Letters*, but that is not probable either. That debate, however, is irrelevant for our purposes. Most unfortunately, this document – again – has been handed down to us in a very incomplete form. We have only one manuscript, and it is very lacunose at that; large stretches of text are lacking (although we do have a sort of table of contents), so that again we are robbed of important information. For a more complete picture we have to turn to our fourth source.

The Greek *Martyrium of Arethas and his Companions in Najran*<sup>16</sup> is of a somewhat later date than the Syriac documents just discussed, but according to most researchers it was written within a few decades after the events of 523–525, probably about 550 CE or even earlier. This anonymous text, written by a Monophysite Christian, has been known for a long time already (its first edition appeared almost two centuries ago), but it was only recently that the first critical edition of the text came out, based upon the full manuscript dossier (see the previous note). There are almost 40 manuscripts, most of them complete. This is the fullest document we have about the dramatic events in Himyar. In spite of its title, the document offers much more than just

<sup>15</sup> A. Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites*, Lund 1924, is still the only edition.

<sup>16</sup> M. Detoraki, J. Beaucamp, *Le martyre de Saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons (BHG 166): édition critique, étude et annotation*, Paris 2007.

the martyr stories (which the document has in common with the other sources); it also presents an elaborate and well-informed account of the toilsome struggle between the Ethiopian and the Himyarite armies and its outcome and aftermath. The book is composed as a diptych with a hinge, and a prologue and epilogue. Chapters 1–2 form the historical and geographical prologue; chapters 3–23 contain the story of the persecution and thus are the *martyrium* in the proper sense (this first part of the diptych is clearly based upon the first *Letter of Simeon of Beth Arsham*); chapter 24, the hinge, is a song of praise for the city of Najrân; chapters 25–37, the second part of the diptych, describe the events of the war; and chapters 38–39 form the epilogue.

These four literary sources were all written very soon or rather shortly after the events took place and are based upon first-hand knowledge of the affairs. Nevertheless, all of them have their hidden (or not so hidden) Christian agenda and for that reason one cannot simply take what they present for historical truth. So, for instance, in the Christian martyr stories, the suffering of the completely innocent martyrs of Najrân is certainly exaggerated, as much as the purely villainous nature of the Jewish king. The picture is too black-and-white. What is passed over in silence, for instance, is the fact that the Jewish king had good reasons to believe that the Christians of Najrân would support the Ethiopians, his archenemies, in case of an attack on his kingdom. That they were a ‘Trojan horse’ in his perception (especially because there were already Ethiopian troops in the city) certainly played a major role in his decision to persecute them. Also the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries play a much larger role in the dialogues in the documents than one could reasonably expect. They suggest that the king was only interested in religious convictions, not in political issues, although these went hand in hand. But in broad outlines the stories in the four literary sources agree to such a degree that they certainly enable us to reconstruct the main historical events with a certain degree of probability.

It is still a matter of debate why these events are never mentioned in any Jewish source, ancient or medieval. It is hard to say with any certainty what could be the reason for that neglect. Some are inclined to attribute this silence to the fact that since the rise of rabbinic Judaism, Jewish historiography has suddenly come to a standstill. At the end of the first century CE, Josephus was the last Jew to write historical works; after him, we have to wait many centuries before Jewish historiography makes a hesitant restart. A fully satisfactory explanation for this curious phenomenon has still to be found, but the phenomenon in itself could explain the silence about the Jewish kingdom of Himyar. Furthermore, the fact that this kingdom was so short-lived and

actually turned out to be a fiasco could have played a role, since probably very few would want to be reminded of it. It is also possible that Himyarite Judaism was not very rabbinical in nature and that for that reason it was not regarded as full-blown Judaism and hence did not deserve to get a place in the annals of Jewish history. Still another explanation is that the story of Joseph's Jewish kingdom did not fit in with the Jewish self-image of that period and later. Stories of Christian persecution of Jews are very numerous, but stories of Jewish persecution of Christians are extremely rare, if existent at all. Jews tended to see themselves as the persecuted ones (first by Christians, then by Muslims), and Jews as the persecutors did not fit that self-image: they were victims, not perpetrators. The discrepancy between this self-image as victims of persecution on the one hand and the stories about Jews as persecutors on the other was too great to cope with. That might have been a reason to forget the entire Himyarite episode and not to write about it. Of course, this theory is speculative as well and cannot be proven, but it opens an intriguing perspective. It is telling indeed that the first modern Jewish scholar to delve into this subject, Joseph Halévy, most emphatically denied that Joseph could ever have been a Jew!<sup>17</sup> It has to be added, however, that almost no contemporaneous Jewish sources for this time and place in history exist at all. For instance, no Jewish sources mention any of the Jewish tribes that lived in and around Medina and Mecca before and during Muhammad's lifetime.

*The main issue between Himyarite Jews and Christians*

There is an element that catches the eye in these four sources. The very first time King Joseph addresses the Christians of Najrân, he says that he will spare them only if they abjure the Trinity which he regards as a tritheistic (read: polytheistic) form of belief (*Martyrium* 3). Apparently, in Joseph's eyes the doctrine of the Trinity is a denial of the Shema's *Adonai echad* (the Lord is One). The Najrânites refuse to obey him, arguing in accordance with their Monophysitic faith that the Trinity is one Godhead in three manifestations, not a plurality of gods. Later, when he has succeeded in entering the city and is interrogating Arethas, the aristocratic leader of the Christians (after whom the *Martyrium* is named), Joseph speaks as follows:

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Halévy, 'Examen critique des sources relatives à la persécution de Nedjran par le roi juif des Himyarites', *Revue des études juives* 18 (1889) 16–42 and 161–178. For quite a different view see S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 3, New York 1957, 63–72 (text), 257–261 (notes); and C.J. Robin, 'Himyar et Israël', *Comptes rendues de l'Académie des Inscription et Belles Lettres* 148 (2004) 831–890.

The Romans understood that he whom our forefathers, the priests and legal experts in Jerusalem, have crucified as a human being because he had blasphemed God (...) was not a God but a human being. (...) Do you think you are better than the Romans who are called Nestorians and who teach us, ‘We do not regard him as God but as a prophet of God?’ (...) I don’t ask you to abjure the Lord of heaven and earth (...), I only want you to say that the crucified one was just a human being, not a God (*Martyrium* 6).

This passage suggests that the early Jewish objection against the deification of Jesus, already voiced in the New Testament (John 5:18), was still a major issue in the conflict in Himyar. The fact that Joseph here mentions Nestorians in a positive sense seems stranger than it is. The Nestorians believed that Jesus Christ in fact consisted of two persons, the human Jesus and the divine Logos.<sup>18</sup> That is what Joseph implies when he says that the Nestorians regard Jesus as no more than a prophet of God. This is a somewhat sloppy formulation, but it is quite well imaginable that for him the non-deification of Jesus by the Nestorians, even though they were Christians as well, sufficed to enable him to try to entice the Christian Najrânites to deny Jesus’ divinity by putting up the Nestorians as a good example. It is noteworthy that after the persecution, when we hear again about Christians in Najrân in later sources, these are Nestorians. So he may indeed have spared these Christians because they did not deify Jesus in the way the other Christians did. However, it is impossible to be certain that this speech of Joseph is an exact rendering of his words, or even his intentions. It may well be that our Monophysite author, by putting these words into the mouth of the Jewish Joseph, tried to discredit the Nestorian Christians whom he apparently hated (the Nestorians crop up as the bad guys in other passages as well). It should be kept in mind that orthodox Christians often accused Nestorians of ‘Judaism’! The fact that the Christological debates of the fifth and sixth centuries play such a large role in the dialogues between Joseph and the Najrânite Christians leads one to doubt their historical veracity anyway. But that is not to deny that the doctrine of the divine nature of Jesus was in reality a major issue between Jews and Christians in Himyar. After all, it is a perennial issue between the two faiths.

Further on, Joseph calls the stubborn Christians fools if they are willing ‘to die for a man who was a magician and an impostor’ (*Martyrium* 8). Here we find a motif (Jesus as *goês kai planos*) that is familiar from Jewish (but

---

<sup>18</sup> See A. Grillmeier, *Jesus Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, Band 1: Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451), Freiburg 1979, 642–660.

also pagan Greek) polemics against Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Later (in §10), Joseph tries to persuade a very prominent and beautiful Christian woman from the city to live with him in his palace, but she reacts by saying that she does not want to have anything to do with someone who calls her God a magician and impostor. According to the Jewish king, Jesus was an impostor because, as he repeatedly says, he made himself equal to God (cf., again, John 5:18). Again we see here that an early Jewish objection against Christology is put into the mouth of King Joseph, and it probably was one of the real problems he had with Christianity.<sup>20</sup> However much his persecution of the Christians in his country may also have been motivated by political motives, one should not deny this king a sincere religious conviction.

#### *Final remarks*

For further research we need in-depth analysis of, and a full-scale commentary on, all four documents briefly discussed here in the light of recent research, especially in the light of the excellent work done by a team of scholars in Paris, both Arabists and Byzantinologists, directed by Christian Julien Robin. These documents highlight one of the most striking and curious episodes in the history of Jewish-Christian relations that I know of. In addition, these documents are important also because they shed light on the religious landscape of ancient Arabia in general in the century preceding the life of Muhammad. In his days, there were still many polytheistic tribes, but they had become a minority. The ever-growing Jewish and Christian communities of the Arabian peninsula in which Muhammad grew up, shaped his ideas in many respects. His very strict stance on monotheism certainly should be viewed in light of the struggles reflected in the stories about Najrân, stories which Muhammad would undoubtedly have known.

*Pieter W. van der Horst is emeritus hoogleraar in het vroege jodendom en christendom van de Universiteit Utrecht, Comeniuslaan 53, 3706XB Zeist. E-mail: pwvdh@xs4all.nl*

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton 2009. For the pagan accusations see, e.g., J.G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 3), Tübingen 2000.

<sup>20</sup> See I. Gajda, *Le royaume de Himyar à l'époque monothéiste: L'histoire de l'Arabie du sud ancienne de la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 2009. A brief summary of this book can be found in I. Gajda, 'Quel monothéisme en Arabie du Sud ancienne?', in J. Beaucamp, F. Briquel-Chatonnet, C.-J. Robin (eds.), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VI<sup>e</sup> siècles: Regards croisés sur les sources*, Paris 2010, 107–120.