

**Anonymous**  
**Nicholas of Myra's Miracle of the Generals**  
**(Praxis de Stratelatis),**  
**Recension 1<sup>1</sup>**  
**BHG 1349z**

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<sup>1</sup> This translation was commissioned by Roger Pearse in 2016 and the text was kindly translated for us by David J. D. Miller. Christopher Francis contributed some explanatory notes.. The translation is placed in the public domain. The critical edition used is that of G. Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos*, vol 1, 1913, pp.67-77. Two recensions are given by Anrich: this is a translation of Recension 1, based on two manuscripts. This text is not listed in the CPG. Anrich dates the Praxis to 460-580 (vol. II, p.370). Karl Meisen to the sixth century (*Nikolauskult und Nikolausbrauch im Abendlande*, 1981, p.219).

# The deed of our holy father Nicholas, archbishop of Myra of Lycia.

Translated by David J. D. Miller

**1** In the time of the Sovereign Constantine, there was unrest in Phrygia, caused by the Taiphali.<sup>2</sup> As soon as this was reported to the most pious Sovereign, he despatched three generals, named Nepotianus, Ursus and Herpylion,<sup>3</sup> together with the forces under their command. Setting course from the all-fortunate city of Constantinople towards the province of Lycia, they put in at the harbour of Andriake, the port of the metropolis of Myra, three miles from it; their passage had been an uncomfortable one, so they went ashore in search of relaxation. **2** Some of the troops went ashore as well, wanting to arrange for provisions to be laid in, both for present consumption and as future stocks, and also wanting to enjoy themselves. However, they met with abusive remarks, and, as soldiers will, returned them. Noisy rioting ensued, in what is called the Pavement,<sup>4</sup> such that even the city of Myra heard of it, and feeling ran high against the soldiers as being undisciplined, and responsible for the rioting.

**3** At this the holy man of God, bishop Nicholas, calmed the population down, and exhorted them not to do anything precipitate or rash. He then went straight to Andriake; on seeing him, the people there greeted him with due respect, **4** and the generals, observing that, also greeted him respectfully. He then asked them who they were, where they had come from, and what their purpose was in coming.

“We are peacekeepers,” they replied; “we have been sent by our most pious Sovereign on a mission to Phrygia, to fight against some insurgents. Please would your Holiness pray on our behalf for the success of our mission?”

The holy bishop then invited the generals to come up to the city, and receive gifts from him. Awed at the saint’s presence, and at his kindness, they gave orders that their men were all to stop fighting, and none of them was to dare to insult anyone, or to commit any act of indiscipline.

**5** Some people then came out from the city, made their obeisance to the saint, and told him: “My lord, had you been in the city, there would not have been three undeserved deaths like this. You see, the governor has seized the opportunity to order three men to be put to death by the sword. The whole city was deeply saddened that you were not there.”

**6** Grieved to hear this, the most holy bishop at once asked the generals to come, and started off to the city together with them. On reaching the place called the Lion, he asked the bystanders whether the condemned men were still alive; they said they were, and were at the square named after the Dioscuri. Going on to the shrine of the martyrs Crescens and Dioscorides, he asked again, and was told they were then just about to go out of the gate. He reached the gate; the people there told him that they were on the way to Byrra, that being the place where the death-penalty was carried out. **7** He ran there at once, and found a large crowd, with the executioner, sword in hand for the beheading, just waiting for the saint to come. Going to the three condemned men, this holy man found them on their knees, blindfolded with face-cloths, and with their necks outstretched for the blow. He instantly ran up to the executioner, snatched the sword, and threw it right away. He then undid their bonds, and took them to the city, saying: “These men are innocent; I am prepared to be put to

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<sup>2</sup> The Taiphali, Taifals or Tayfals were a section of the Goths. They were defeated by Constantine the Great in 328, who resettled numbers of them in Phrygia. In 336 they revolted, but this revolt was put down by the generals Herpylion, Virius Neptianus, and Ursus. [RP]

<sup>3</sup> A Nepotianus was consul in 336, and an Ursus in 338.

<sup>4</sup> The *Plakoma* was the site of the weekly market. [RP]

death instead of them”. None of the officials, who knew his devotion to God and his fearlessness in speaking out, dared to oppose or contradict him. Truly, as the scripture says, ‘An upright man is as confident as a lion’.

**8** On reaching the governor’s headquarters, he broke the doors open. When Eustathius, the governor, heard from his guard that the saint was there, he came out in a hurry, and greeted him respectfully; but the saint thrust him away, calling him – deservedly – a bloodthirsty, sacrilegious criminal, and an enemy of God.

“You had no fear of God!” he said. “You were going to put innocent men to death – and you have actually come into my sight! Your crimes are so many and so serious that I shall most certainly not spare you, because ‘to the crooked, God sends crooked ways’. The most pious Sovereign is not unaware of your behaviour: how you govern this province, or rather plunder it, lawlessly slaughtering people without trial, out of arrogant, punishable greed.”

**9** The governor fell at his knees and started imploring him. “Do not be angry with *me*, venerable father!” he said. “Please realise that it is not I who am to blame, but Eudoxius and Simonides, the city’s leading men, who gave evidence against them in a criminal case.”

“No,” replied the bishop, “truth to tell, it is Goldie and Silverman,<sup>5</sup> not Eudoxius and Simonides. They brought a charge, and bribed you to take this step.” This was because he had found out that the governor had taken a bribe of 200 pounds of gold to put the men to death, wrongfully.

After much intercession from the generals, the holy man forgave the governor for his sin, after cancelling his unjust proceedings against the aforesaid three men.

**10** The generals enjoyed the most holy bishop’s hospitality, after which they asked him to offer prayers for them, and received his gifts. They then bade him farewell, and sailed on to Phrygia. There they pacified the country, clearing it of all those who were in armed revolt, and left it under peaceful administration. On their return to all-fortunate Constantinople, there was a great reception for them from all those in the services, armed and otherwise, and almost the whole senate, in celebration of the trophies of victory they brought. Saluting the Sovereign, they reported the pacification, and were highly honoured at the Palace.

**11** Jealousy, the Devil’s doing,<sup>6</sup> then arose against them from the home-based generals, who convinced the eparch, Ablabius,<sup>6</sup> that the three generals were conspiring against the Sovereign, and that their talk of peace was hypocritical deceit.

“Once they get an opportunity,” they said, “their treachery will be out in the open; so it would be better to get rid of the intrigue now, while we have a peaceful state of affairs. We have let you know this so that you can attend to the situation wisely, and report it to the Sovereign of the world in secret, before the conspirators realise; thus he can put them to death quickly, and with no outcry.” With that, they promised him a bribe of 1,700 pounds of gold.

**12** On hearing this, and receiving their oath for the agreed bribe, the eparch went to see the Sovereign. “My lord Emperor,” he said, “because you govern the realm piously, in the love of Christ, and the whole world is at peace in the days of your mild rule, the Devil is jealous of such wellbeing, and has stirred up enemies against you among our own people. He has made his way into the hearts of the generals who have returned from the Phrygia expedition, and they are conspiring against your Majesty to cause a revolution in your peaceful realm, with promises of promotion to honours, and of donatives and unlimited wealth, to those who are eagerly flocking to them for that reason. This is what the Devil, the enemy who hates our peace, is always trying

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<sup>5</sup> Eustathius defends himself by saying that he has been misinformed by the eminent citizens Simonides and Eudoxius; but Nicholas says that it was not Mr Simonides and Mr Eudoxius, but Messrs Chrysaphios (=gold) and Argyros (=silver) who have led him astray. [RP]

<sup>6</sup> Consul in 331, died 338. [RP]

to bring about, through his servants; however, the loving God, who presides over your pious reign and cares for the whole human race, has not allowed this matter to remain concealed for long, but has put it into the hearts of some of those involved in the conspiracy to come to me and apprise me of the facts of what is going on. With God's retribution in mind, and the menace of your wrath, I could not withhold this information, but have reported it to your most divine Excellency, for you to deal with it as you see fit."

**13** The sovereign was enraged at this report, especially as the conspiracy was aimed at himself and his throne. By God's providence, he happened at the time to be busy on essential affairs; so forthwith, without investigation, in the belief that the eparch was telling the truth, he ordered the generals to be arrested immediately and imprisoned in chains.

**14** Some time later the lying accusers, enemies of the truth, went to the eparch with the money they had promised him, and urged him to hasten the death sentence for those three. "Why," they asked, "are you letting them stay alive all this time, instead of having them executed, now that they have been arrested? If they stay in prison like this, their chains may be undone through a ruse on the part of some friends of theirs, and they may be freed – then our efforts for peace prove futile."

**15** Under this pressure from them, the eparch went to the Sovereign and said: "Sire, we have allowed those criminals who have conspired against your Majesty to stay alive. I tell you, they have not stopped this plotting; I have been quite reliably informed that they have accomplices outside."

On hearing that they were still hatching plots against him even while they were in prison, he gave orders for them to be beheaded overnight. Given this instruction, the eparch sent the prison governor the message: "Get those three men you have in your prison ready for me: they are to be executed tonight."

**16** The prison governor, Hilarius, was most distressed to hear this. "Honourable sirs," he said to them, in tears, "I am in craven fear and trembling about your situation. I am embarrassed to say this to you, but I cannot help it, I must tell you. How I wish I had never known you! That makes it all the more painful and distressing for me to be talking to you, because we are now parting from each other. If you have any decisions to make about your affairs, think about it, and get ready, because the order has been given for you to be executed tonight. What I have told you is what I have been told by the eparch."

**17** That message set them weeping bitterly, ripping their clothes, and tearing their hair; sprinkling dust on it, they howled with grief, in dismay at their unexpected death. "Why," they said, "what have we done wrong that we are being put to death so suddenly, with no trial, and being treated like criminals, without even having been summoned for fact-finding or questioning?"

**18** But one of them, Nepotianus, remembered what Saint Nicholas, the bishop of the city of Myra, had done, and how he had saved the three men who were on the point of being put to death. With groans of lamentation and in floods of tears, "O Lord, God of your servant Nicholas," he prayed, "in your mercy, and by intercession from Nicholas, your worthy devotee, have pity on us! Just as, through him, you had mercy on those three men who had been condemned without cause, and rescued them from death, even so, now, yield to the intercessions of this holy priest of yours, and recall us, too, to life. It is our faith that even though he is not here in person, he is nevertheless present in the spirit, and seeing what torment and agony of soul we are in, he will himself invoke your beneficence on our behalf."

**19** Together, they cried out: "Saint Nicholas, even though you are far from us, may our prayer still come near you; cry out for us to the loving God! He will bring about the desire of those that fear him, and will hear their prayer, so that we may be saved by your intercession from our imminent peril, and be found worthy to come and show our reverence face to face with your

holiness, venerable father.” In those words, as from a single mouth, the three made their supplication to God; they did not lose hope of obtaining help and succour from heaven.

**20** By the grace of God, Who pities everyone and is quick to support those who seek Him wholeheartedly, for ever raising to glory those who glorify Him, and saving the poor in spirit, saint Nicholas appeared to the Sovereign that night, saying: “Get up, Constantine! Release those three men, the generals whom you have in prison, because they have been unjustly calumniated. If you disregard me, I shall petition the great Sovereign, Christ, against you, and I shall make war break out against you in Dyrhachium, and give your flesh for the birds and beasts to feed on.”

“Who are you?” said the Sovereign, “and how did you get into my palace like this, at this hour?”

“I am the sinner, bishop Nicholas,” came the reply; “I am in Myra, metropolis of Lycia.” And with that, he left,

**21** He made his way to the eparch, and appeared to him. “Ablabius,” he said, “your mind and wits are disabled.<sup>7</sup> Get up! Release those three men, the generals whom you have in prison and are wanting to put to death, out of avarice. If you refuse to release them, I shall petition against you before the great Sovereign, Christ: you will contract a severe illness and be eaten by worms, and your whole household will come to a bad end.”

“So who are you, talking to me like this?” said the eparch.

“I am the sinner Nicholas, bishop of the metropolis of Myra”, he replied.” And with that, he left.

**22** The Sovereign woke up, and called for his chief runner. “Go and tell the eparch what I have seen,” he said, and told him the details of his dream. Similarly, the eparch sent his own runner to report what he had seen to the Sovereign; so in the morning the Sovereign ordered the three to be brought before him, in the presence of the senate and the eparch.

**23** “Tell me,” said the Sovereign when they appeared, “What sort of magic did you use to send us such dreams?”

They were silent; but when the question was repeated, Nepotianus, as their spokesman, replied: “My lord Emperor, we know nothing of magic. If we are found to have done any such thing, or to have had any thought of any other evil deed against your Majesty, may we be subject to the death penalty, my lord!”

**24** “Do you know anyone by the name of Nicholas?”, the Sovereign asked them.

At hearing the name Nicholas, they were emboldened. “Lord God,” they prayed, “the God of saint Nicholas, through whom You saved those men at the time when they were going to be put to death unjustly; at this time too, extricate us from the perils that confront us; we are innocent!”

“Tell me,” resumed the Sovereign, “Who is this Nicholas? Is he a relation of yours?”

In reply, Nepotianus told him who Nicholas was, the nature of his achievements, and all that he had done before their eyes, including how he had rescued the three men from death. “My lord,” he went on, “in this hour of our pressing need, we recollected his holy prayers, and invoked him to speak for us to the loving God.”

**25** “All right, then”, said the Sovereign, “be free! and be grateful to him, because it is not I who give you your lives, but God, and Nicholas, whom you invoked. Accordingly, go to Myra, and have the hair you grew in prison cut; thank him, and say to him, in my name: “Look! I have

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<sup>7</sup> “Ablabius ... disabled” is an attempt to render the pun: Ἀβλάβιος “harmless” with βεβλαμμένος “harmed” (root βλαβ-, as in the noun βλάβη “harm”). [DJM]

carried out your bidding. Threaten me no longer, but pray for me and my realm, and also make intercession with God, the Lord and Governor of all, for the peace of the world.” He also gave them treasures to take to that sainted man, consisting of a gilt evangeliary,<sup>8</sup> two gold candle-lighters<sup>9</sup> and, also of gold, a vessel set with precious stones, with a letter in addition.

**26** Taking these with them, the men travelled to Lycia, where they paid due reverence to Nicholas; they told him what had happened to them, and delivered to him the Sovereign’s letter and the treasures. Then they had their hair cut, and made payments to the poor out of their own money. The most holy bishop Nicholas was glad for their sakes as well; he blessed them, and sent them on their way with letters and gifts. Thus, after prayer, the three of them took their leave of him and returned home in great joy, glorifying the loving God for their unexpected salvation. To Him be glory and might for ever and ever. Amen

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<sup>8</sup> The 'golden gospel' [literal translation] is certainly an Evangeliary, or book of the Gospels. Among all the various liturgical books, this was the one that had the highest importance and was the most beautifully written, illuminated and externally decorated. To protect it from injury it was commonly placed in a clasp or sealed 'capsa' when not in use. For this, or the actual binding of the book, to be of gold would be impressive, but not entirely unusual. [Christopher Francis]

<sup>9</sup> The candle-lighters are much more problematic, though not as to what they are, which is a wooden pole with at the top end, a fixture for a taper, and a pointed cap-shaped extinguisher. There are many different names for the lights themselves, but nowhere can I find a proper name for the things with which you light them! There may just not be a special name. [Christopher Francis]