

# Christian Inheritance in the Abbasid Era (Palm Sunday “Al-Shaeayanayn” as an Example)<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Palm Sunday “Al-Shaeayanayn” is one of the most important Christian heritages that dates back to the era of Christ (peace be upon him), and it has continued to be celebrated to this day. This work will be divided into two sections. The first section deals with the definition of Palm Sunday and its mention in the Bible, and its status among the church fathers. Also, the second topic, reference will be made to the ceremonies of celebrating this feast and the references to it in the poems of poets and the doctrinal and repentant practices associated with it throughout the ages, due to the spirituality and holiness of this feast among the various sects in the Christian churches.

## INTRODUCTION

The first topic deals with the definition of Palm Sunday and its mention in the Bible, and its status among the church fathers.

## DEFINITION OF PALM SUNDAY

In the historical sources, there are several names for the most important Christian legacies that are linked to Christ, including Palm Sunday<sup>(1)</sup>, Or Al-Sana'in from Asaan took Sa'ana, meaning umbrella<sup>(2)</sup>, and it is Syriac Arabized, and it was said that it is the plural of one Sa'noun<sup>(3)</sup>, or Al-Sabasab<sup>(4)</sup>. Al-Sabaasab is the branches, they mean palm branches<sup>(5)</sup>, and the Copts of Egypt call it (Olive) Al-Zaytouna, and it is their custom on this day to take out palm branches from the church<sup>(6)</sup>. It is also called Al-Shaanina<sup>(7)</sup>, and this name is circulating in Lebanon, and it is called the Sunday of Forgiveness, and one of the palm fronds<sup>(8)</sup>, that is, the palm fronds that the Jews cut off on the day they welcomed Christ as he entered Jerusalem<sup>(9)</sup>. These designations are derived from the Syriac (Oshaana), and they are derived from the Hebrew (Hosanna), which the Jews rejoiced in the days of the Messiah<sup>(10)</sup>, and it means “save us,” which means we are saved, and it is a day of praise<sup>(11)</sup>.

Palm Sunday is the common name in the Arab and Islamic heritage, and it is a feast for the Christians that falls on the seventh Sunday of the Great Fast, i.e. the Sunday preceding the Feast of Resurrection, and it always falls in the spring<sup>(12)</sup>, regardless of whether the fast is advanced or delayed<sup>(13)</sup>.

## Palm Sunday in the Bible

On the Palm Sunday, the Lord Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) rode the donkey in Jerusalem, and entered Zion while riding, and the people were praising him in front of him, while he enjoined the good and forbade the evil. This story was mentioned in the Bible in the four Gospels, Matthew (21: 1-9), Luke (19: 28-38), Mark (11: 1-11), and John (12: 12-16), the evangelists mention that Jesus set out from the Mount of Olives, and that people cut tree branches and

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waved them as an expression of their joy, and the Fourth Evangelist John is unique in mentioning palm branches (John 12: 13).

It was mentioned about this occasion in the Gospels, "...Jesus rode, and many people spread their clothes on the road, and others cut down tree branches and spread them on the road, and the crowds that preceded Jesus and that followed him shouted glory to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, glory in the highest" (Matthew 21:8-9), And in the Book of Psalms, "Grant salvation, O Lord, grant, grant victory, O Lord, grant." "Oh, Lord, save! Oh, Lord, be good to us" (Psalms 118: 25). It was also mentioned that Christ entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the Book of Zechariah (9: 9-12).

### **The Status of Palm Sunday When the Church Fathers**

The church fathers were interested in writing books that explain their rituals to them, including what was written by Babai the Great (d. 628 AD) on Palm Sunday, when he wrote a book in which he explained to the believers the reason for which the feast of Palm Sunday was made <sup>(14)</sup>. Babai al-Jibli, a musician (7-8 AD) was interested in church hymns, and added, "He has twenty-two translations arranged on the letters of the alphabet that the boys say on the feast of the Sa'anin" <sup>(15)</sup>.

## **CELEBRATION OF PALM SUNDAY**

### **Celebration Ceremonies**

Palm Sunday is one of the most famous Christian holidays that is still practiced to this day, and there is a lot of information documenting the ceremonies of celebrating this holiday and the religious rituals that are practiced in it from the beginning of Christianity until now. Whoever browses the books of the parishes (Al-diyarat), and the books of Christian and Arab-Islamic history will find a lot of information about Palm Sunday and the Christians' celebration of it. Among these indications is what Mari mentioned about the Palm Sunday celebration that took place in Al-Madaen, the center of the Church of the East, in its early inception during the reign of Mar Babai the Catholic, who died in the year (503 AD) when he celebrated Palm Sunday in Nusaybin and Al-Madaen <sup>(16)</sup>.

There is a lot of information that deals with the ceremonies of celebrating Palm Sunday in the Abbasid era, from which we draw some references to give a brief picture of the importance of this holiday and its status among Christians. That is why they used to go out to the dome of Al-Shattieq, which is one of the old buildings in Al-Hirah, in their best clothes, crosses, and censers in their hands, and with them were deacons <sup>(17)</sup>, monks <sup>(18)</sup> and priests <sup>(19)</sup>, singing to one tune, agreeing in melodies and with them large numbers of Muslims <sup>(20)</sup>.

In the Monastery of Al-Askoun, from the promenade of Diyarat Al-Hirah, if it is Palm Sunday, they come from every direction, with their deacons with their crosses and flags, and when they complete it, and in the White Palace and the condemned cells, their bishop <sup>(21)</sup> takes them out to a place known as the cupolas of Palm Sunday <sup>(22)</sup>.

The headquarters of the Abbasid caliphate rejoices in these celebrations, wherefore it was found that Mrs. Zubaydah Umm Al-Amin (193-198 AH / 809-813 AD) laying flags for Palm Sunday and crosses of gold and silver. Every year clothes and gifts are worth ten thousand dirhams <sup>(23)</sup>.

As for Caliph al-Ma'mun (198-218 AH / 813-833 AD), he himself attended the celebration of Palm Sunday in the Upper Monastery in Mosul. He decorated the monastery on that day with the best clothes, and its monks and priests went out to the altar, and their boys turned them with their censers in their hands. They imitated crosses and wore patterned handkerchiefs <sup>(24)</sup>. So he approved it, then the people went back to their cells and their offerings, and he sentimentalize with al-Ma'mun those who were with them from among the maidservants and boys, but each one of them had a gift of fragrant herbs, and in the hands of a group of them were cups containing all kinds of drinks. Then he ordered the removal of those with him from his belted maidservants <sup>(25)</sup>, and twenty bridesmaids were brought out to him as if they were in the full moon, wearing brocade, with crosses of gold around their necks, and in their hands were wickerwork and olive branches <sup>(26)</sup>.

Despite these bright pictures of the participation of the Abbasid caliphs in the feasts of their non-Muslim subjects who were Christians in their feasts, there were some caliphs who were strict in their decisions, which were reflected in the freedom of Christians to celebrate their feasts, including Palm Sunday. In the year (235 AH / 849 AD), Caliph al-Mutawakkil (232-247 AH / 847-861 AD) forbade Christians to display a cross on their palms and to light candles

<sup>(27)</sup> on the road <sup>(28)</sup>. He also forbade them from setting fire on the road <sup>(29)</sup>, that is, carrying burning candles. He also demolished the Monastery of St. Quriakos in Anbar, which was well-known, and Palm Sunday is celebrated in it <sup>(30)</sup>.

As for the Christians' celebration of Palm Sunday in Basra, they used to go out to the Al-Abla River, and people who were singing, playing, and drinking would come out after them, and they would see the Christians, drink, and watch <sup>(31)</sup>, and Dawood of Antioch mentions his witnessing of Palm Sunday in Basra: "I saw people passing by with all kinds of decorations, so I asked about that, and it was said that the Christians celebrate Palm Sunday, and people go out to watch" <sup>(32)</sup>.

In the year (776 AH / 1274 AD) the Christians of Erbil celebrated Palm Sunday, so some neighboring Christian Tartars came and put crosses on the heads of spears, and the Nestorian bishop and all the people came out, preceded by those Tatar's riding <sup>(33)</sup>.

Likewise, among the events that were associated with Palm Sunday, the Christians' support for the Muslims in times of hardship reached such a degree that they refrained from doing Palm Sunday, which is for the sake of their holidays. Palm Sunday was a kind of protest against this act, and it was not satisfied with that, but the Muslims went out carrying the Qur'an and with them the priests and Christians carrying the Bible <sup>(34)</sup>.

As for the anecdotes that the books of Arab and Islamic history have preserved for us about Palm Sunday, what happened between the two doctors, Sahl al-Kusuj, who was known for his many jokes about his grandfather, and the other doctor, Yohanna bin Masawayh. In one year, quite a few doctors gathered in the Monastery of Al-Jathiliq (Deir Kilishou) on the western side of Baghdad on Palm Sunday, and Al-Kusaj saw his colleague John Bin Masawiya in a better appearance than his, and on a mount more furious than his own, and with him were two boys who liked him, so he envied him outwardly. From his blessing, he went to the owner of the armed area, and he said to him: My son licks me and he admired himself, and perhaps the wonder of himself and his grace drove him to the ingratitude of my father, and if you cut him and hit him twenty painful pearls, I will give you twenty dinars. Then he took out the dinars and gave them to a man whom the owner of the armed forces trusted, and then withdrew to a district until John reached the place where he was. The owner of the armed forces did not speak to him until he flattened John and beat him twenty times with severe hunger <sup>(35)</sup>.

In the Feast of Palm Sunday, some paradoxes occur through different periods, including that in one of the years, a great rain fell on the night of Palm Sunday, which hindered the feast and distressed the people. Mar Sprisho' I the Catholic (d. 604 AD) came out in prayer and raised his hand, and the rain and thunder ceased, and the feast passed well <sup>(36)</sup>.

In some cases, the holidays of non-Muslims coincided with each other on one day. In the year (239 AH / 853 AD) the Christian Sha'anin and the day of Nowruz coincided on one day, but in the year (244 AH / 858 AD) the Jews' feast of unleavened bread <sup>(37)</sup>, the Christian Sha'anin feast <sup>(38)</sup>, and the Eid al-Adha coincided in Same day <sup>(39)</sup>.

### **Palm Sunday in Poetry**

Palm Sunday is a social phenomenon known to everyone, Christians, and Muslims, and the location of monasteries, especially in picnic places, encourages many Muslims, including poets, to come to them and participate in their celebrations. As the books of Arabic literature include many poems in which their owners glorify this feast, including the words of al-Tharwani Muhammad bin Abd al-Rahman, one of the great Abbasid poets (d. 211 AH / 826 CE) <sup>(40)</sup>:

We came out of Palm Sunday  
 And we spread the cross of the Catholics  
 I have never seen a better sight with my own eyes  
 of the righteous on the road  
 They even carried wicker and olives  
 They reported it to the burning monastery <sup>(41)</sup>.

Likewise, what was reported from Caliph al-Ma'mun, who sang when attending Palm Sunday in the Upper Monastery:

Antelopes like dinars	Navigator in cabins
Palm Sunday	We are in sashes
They have bruises	Like the tails of starlings
And they came in circles	Like the middle of the sashes <sup>(42)</sup>

And the well-known poet said:

Slipper chips ok their reservations

They live with basil on the day of Sabbath <sup>(43)</sup>

And one of the poets said:

Balat monastery and its monks Palm Sunday to Dana <sup>(44)</sup>

In the distant past, poets sang of the beauty and magnificence of celebrating Palm Sunday, so they recorded their observations with their poems that history books preserved for us. Today, with the diversity of religious rituals of various Christian denominations, there are some famous religious hymns that are dedicated to Palm Sunday, including the hymn (The People of Christ), which is from Iraqi Christian folklore written in classical Arabic. From (20) verses that were spread in Baghdad and Mosul and are considered traditional (popular) hymns, not ritual ones. On the Lord Christ and the signs of the prophets about him and the verses contained therein:

The people of Christ on this day are happy

We came to give you good tidings of Easter and light

Palm Sunday has increased its virtues

About every feast that came in the books written

Arise, all Christians, and rise with joy

Carry your branches and proceed to the mount

Palm trees and olive trees are sacred

Myrtle bars, veins, and spreads...<sup>(45)</sup>

### **Palm Sunday and Olive Branches**

It is customary in the celebration of Palm Sunday to carry olive branches, and with the passage of time, these branches have become sacred, as they are prayed upon before the celebration of the feast and after its end. The priest wears sackcloth and prays over it, and since the ninth century, priests began to sprinkle ashes on the repentant and then put a cover on their heads. During the forty-day period, the priest says: "Remember, O man, that you are dust and to dust, you will return" or "Repent and believe in the Gospel" (46).

As part of the social environment, including its effect and influence, the Chaldean Church in Aleppo puts on Ash Wednesday ashes of olive branches with holy olive oil, and a cross is drawn on the person's forehead, during the era of Bishop Antoine Audo (47).

And due to the status of Palm Sunday for Christians, they called the Friday of the Confessors, which is the Friday following the Feast of Resurrection, and in which the honorable martyrs are commemorated, the name of the little Palms (48), and they began to count every major religious occasion throughout the year as Palm Sunday (49).

### **Conclusion**

Among the most important results that we reached in the subject of our research on "Christian Inheritance in the Abbasid Era (Palm Sunday as a model)":

1. Palm Sunday is one of the most important Christian inheritances dating back to the time of Christ (peace be upon him), according to what was documented in their religious books (the Bible) and the writings of the early church fathers.
2. Despite the scarcity of information about this feast in historical and even Christian sources, it conveyed to us important material about it, including the motives for celebrating it and the rituals of the Christians and their rituals in it, which reached a level of splendor and joy, which prompted their Muslim neighbors in the Islamic ages to share their joy in this. The feast, especially the poets among them, who frequented their monasteries of a kind nature and sang about this feast in their poems.
3. The celebration of Palm Sunday continued to this day, with slight differences between the various Christian denominations in some religious rituals and customs, but they all agree on the status of this holiday and its spiritual impact for them.

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