

The Prayer of Athanasius

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This translation has been made from the text printed in E.A. Wallis Budge *Miscellaneous Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (1915). I wanted to present the Coptic text with it, but unfortunately in the downloaded copy I have the beginning and end of many of the lines are obscured by partially overlapping pages, so it is not possible to read them. From time to time it has been necessary to consult Budge's translation to verify what I suspect to be the reading. The numbers in square brackets are the page numbers of the manuscript. I have tried to consistently write 'He' when the pronoun refers to God in order to distinguish it from 'he' when it refers to humans.

Budge says (p. clvii) that the prayer was included in the preceding Life of Apa Aaron because the commemoration of both saints fell on the same day (May 2nd). The Prayer concludes with a statement of Timothy the attendant deacon to the effect that the soul of Athanasius was taken up to heaven by the Archangel Michael. Apart from the date of death there is only one indirect reference to Athanasius' life at the end of the text on p.134.

The prayer of Saint Athanasius, which he spoke at the time when he was about to lay aside his body, that is today the seventh of Pashons, in a peace of God. Bless us. Amen.

I am going into the hands of God, not the hands of man. For this reason, Lord God of powers, listen to the prayer of your servant Athanasius and do not send for my soul¹ [123], for I am a man of blood and flesh. You know the weakness of the children of Adam. Even if one of them is wounded in a small way, he is wounded and in danger. What a fearful thing

¹ Later on (p.124) Athanasius says: 'send for my soul'. He seems to be asking God not send for his soul until the prayer has been spoken.

it is to fall into the hands of God,² for there are punishments of retribution which you have made for sinners, of fire, frost and the worm that never sleeps, as well as Gehenna.³ If I say that I am just and have suffered for your name, you will find that I have sinned in this too.⁴ The angels too thought of a perversion⁵: they were created from a holy spirit and fire, so what about me, of earth and ashes and flesh that decays, you created me from the womb of a woman and planted me like an egg that is cooked in the fire. You gave me bones. You bound me together with sinews and flesh. You wrapped me in skin. You gave me breath and a holy spirit and [...] The spirit leaves them and returns to [...] [124] and the earth trembles to its foundations. He who sits upon the Cherubim of light, thousands and tens of thousands of lights attend Him, glorifying His greatness, the one who created seven heavens⁶ and seven firmaments through the word of his power. The one who puts a boundary to the sea that cannot be crossed. The one who loosens every soul to awaken them and is merciful to them. The one to whom none of the angels can reply, only His good Son and his Holy Spirit. Or my wretched and sinning soul will not be revealed before your Lordship, except with your mercy. Lord of my soul and my body, listen to me, God of my life and receive this confession from me and be merciful to my soul as I come to you, Lord and Master of all.

The one who received the prayer of the first man, Adam who repented to you, will you receive my prayer from me and send for my soul now, with kindness and merciful heart ?
The one who heard the prayer of Abel, will you hear my prayer and send the angel of justice (125) for my soul ?

The one who heard the prayer of Abraham our father, when he was in Canaan and killed

² Repeated on the last page of the prayer.

³ See note 9

⁴ Athanasius seems to be saying that even in suffering he has sinned.

⁵ Budge: 'the angels ... are considered to be perverse.' Grammatically improbable.

⁶ Relatively unorthodox cf., for example, the Berlin Gnostic Pap. 8502 41. Orthodox Christianity is normally content with three cf. 2 Cor. 12,2.

mighty kings who had larger armies than his, will you hear me this day ?

The one who heard the prayer of Isaac and saved him from the Philistines, will you hear me also this day and grant me a good reception .

The one who heard the prayer of Jacob as he went to Mesopotamia in Syria and appeared to him and gave him the wealth of Laban, will you hear me also this day ?

The one who heard Joseph in Egypt, will you hear me also this day when I am coming to you ?

The one who heard the prayer of the great prophet Moses after he had brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, will you hear also me this day, I your servant Athanasius ?

You heard the prayer of Jesse the son of Naue⁷ as he fought with his enemies. You sent him the commander-in-chief of the powers of heaven to take vengeance on his enemies, will you hear me also this day when I come to you, my Lord ?

For this is the path of everyone. But I am to go on a path which I have not known before, today, yesterday or the day before yesterday, this path which has ... [1 line] ... [126]

difficult for my soul like a round cake ⁸before a fire and like something before the furnace.

For this reason I will confess to you, God, my life and I also know that you have heard the voice of your servants. Listen also to mine, Lord. My God who brought me from the darkness of ignorance, will you bring forth my soul from my body quickly and without pain ? For you are a good God. You are also the one who heard the prayer of the Judges Barak, Samson, Jephthah, Gideon and Deborah, Gothoniel and Aoth until they judged your people and guided them in the desert, will you also hear me me in my prayer in which I pray to you, will you also hear me in my prayer as I pray to your goodness. Lord God of Israel, you heard the prayer of Jeremiah the prophet in the muddy pit, will you also hear

⁷ Joshua, the attendant of Moses who is said to have destroyed the Canaanite city of Jericho, which probably fell during a campaign of Thutmose I (c. 1506-1493 BC)

⁸ τροχός. Has many meanings (all involving circularity), but this is the one that seems to fit best here.

me in the prayer which I make to you. Listening God, you also heard Isaiah the great prophet, as he called up to you, praying for your people and saved them from destruction, will you also hear me and save my soul from destruction. You heard the prayer of Ezekiel the prophet ... You raised for him ... [127] They were of the breath of life once again, will you hear my prayer and pity my soul, Lord God of my life ? You heard Daniel the prophet when he was in the lions' den and sent Habbakuk to him with a meal, [will you hear me this day ?]. You are the one who heard Jonah when he was in the whale for three days and three nights, with no means of eating. You caused him to be cast on to dry land, will you hear me this day ? You who have delivered me from every trial, deliver me also today. Lord of heaven and earth, who listened to Elijah, who raised the son of the Shunamite woman, listen as I cry out, in my coming forth from my body, God of my salvation. You who hear the prayer of David fleeing from his enemies, save my soul too from the hand of the accuser. You were also with our fathers the prophets and the apostles until they completed all their works of strength and wonder [... 1 line ...], will you be with the me too, [128] God of my life. I am your servant Athanasius. I know that you heard when I called out to you in great pain, will you hear me now ? Send Michael your great archangel to me in mercy⁹ and receive my soul to rest and let him render useless the clever wiles of the accuser who plans to accuse us before you. and do not accept the charge against your servant. Crush those to the left of me and do not let the spark of fire to go out and allow me to stand in your presence. The one who judges the entire world with a face in which there is no shame. Let those to the left of me feel shame and those to the right of me stand with me. Let the unquenchable fire be extinguished. May you humiliate with flame the shameless one and his powers. Give me the means to entreat, without shame and fear, for

⁹ I Thess. 4,16 says that Jesus will descend with an archangel's voice and trumpet of God to raise the dead. Michael seems to have been regarded as an advocate of the people, as in the Midrash collection known as Rabbah (Exodus).

you alone are truly God, in whose presence there is fear and trembling and terror,¹⁰ God alone in whose hands my soul and my spirit are. I beg you my Lord, as I come into your hands, before whose word there is fear and trembling, heaven and earth dissolve and hills shake to their foundation and [...] the abyss trembles and [129] Tartaros¹¹ shakes, for this is the Invisible God. The soul of Athanasius is nothing before these great fearful ones. If I say that I am just or I am a sinner, who will be able to persuade Him not to cast my soul into Tartaros ? Who can resist Him with his power ? If He raises them again, His is the power, and there is nothing concealed from Him of the things concealed in the heart of man. He examines the hearts and reins,¹² knowing the good and the wicked in the heart of man, for He is God, the Lord of virtue while I am in this flesh. You have let me do my will on earth to curse and bless. When I leave the body, it is your power that is lord over me to speak and not to speak. For this reason, while I am in this body, I will not stop singing, blessing and giving glory to you. I am counted worthy to worship your law and stand before your people to whom I have ministered from my youth to the present. I will be confident under his wing and will not feary any evil or any demon of the midday hour.¹³ (2 lines missing) ... [130] those who boast on earth, just saying: *This is the world we know. Let us enjoy luxury, in food and drink¹⁴ and empty pleasure, for we know not when we will die;¹⁵ those who nourish their souls on the day of their slaughter; those who set their hopes in their vast wealth, which will not help them on their day of sorrow or relieve them if*

¹⁰ **ΝΕΖΨΕΛϞ**: CD 562b Combination of the construct form **ΝΕΖ** 'to throw' and **ΨΛϞ** (**ΨΛΛΖ**) 'fear': 'fear emitting'.

¹¹ Tartaros is of course a place in Greek mythology where the Titans were sent. The noun does not occur in the NT, it occurs as an aorist participle of the denominal verb form in 2 Pet. 2,4, which the Coptic translates as **ΛϞΝΟΧΟΥ ΕΠΝΟΥΝ** 'he cast them (sinning angels) into the abyss'. The 18th cent. British Methodist Adam Clarke wished to distinguish between Tartaros (for fallen angels) and Gehenna for (fallen humans). The Arabic NT uses *gahannama* (جَهَنَّمَ). The combination **ΠΙΤΑΡΤΑΡΟΣ ΝΤΕΑΜΕΝΤ** is used in the Martyrdom of Apa Noub (I. Balestri and H. Hyvernat ed. *Acta Martyrum Scriptorum Coptici Textus* 1907: 229)

¹² Rev. 2, 23

¹³ Ps. 91, 6. The midday hour has a particular resonance in the pharaonic solar journey, where it is a critical time of conflict between Re (good) and Apophis (evil) cf. J. Assmann *Egyptian Solar Religion* (1995): 51

¹⁴ The word that follows is obscured in my copy.

¹⁵ For example, Lk. 12,19

overcome by fever, who do not say a word before the tribunal of Christ. For this reason theirs is a diminished portion and theirs a visitation of anger and wrath.

I have been a servant of Christ from my youth to old age. I will not stop blessing him and his beloved Son, whose successor¹⁶ I have been all my life, who is as glorious as you, Christ, whom everyone wishes to see. You are Jesus. the mighty power of the Father, the child conceived by the Virgin from no man. I will never stop blessing you, Holy Pearl, you who will endure forever.

You are Jesus the Son of the Father. Yea. Amen.

You are the one who commands the Cherubim and Seraphim. Yea. Amen.

You have existed with the true Father, at all times [131]. Yea. Amen.

You rule the angels. Yea. Amen.

You are the power of the heavens. Yea. Amen.

You are the crown of the martyrs. Yea. Amen.

You are the counsel of all the saints. Yea. Amen.

You are He in whom the counsel of the Father is concealed. Yea. Amen.

You are the mouth of the prophet. Yea. Amen.

You are the tongue of the angels. Yea. Amen.

You are Jesus my life. Yea. Amen.

You are Jesus, the pride of the world. Yea. Amen.

Jesus Christ, the hope of everyone who sets his mind on you.

Who is as glorious as you or can be compared with you ? You are the king who sits on the Cherubim, while the Seraphim stand before you.¹⁷ Heaven and earth await your mercy.

¹⁶ ΔΙΑΔΟΧΟΣ

¹⁷ In Ez. 10, 20 the Cherubim are beneath God, while in Is 6, 1ff. the Seraphim are above God, perhaps reflecting their position in the celestial hierarchy

You give life to men and cattle, wild beasts and birds and feed them all. You are the one named Emmanouel, meaning 'God is with us'. You are called Raboune, ¹⁸ God and Master, of low birth¹⁹ but great in divinity. It I were to ascribe blessing to you, blessing is your attribute or glory to you, glory is your attribute ... mercy ... [1 line missing] ... Your holy blood [132] gathered them into one flock. You have gathered them into one fold, which the wolf will never find. You have appointed faithful shepherds over them, who will care for them justly. Do not be distant from me, Christ. for you are a merciful lover of souls. You saved me from neglect²⁰ and made me the shepherd of your people, and I have shepherded them according to your will.

I will bless you, my Saviour.

I will bless you, of whom the saints are proud, Jesus the power of the Cherubim and Seraphim.

I will bless you who make fat the earth, which increases, Jesus the wise one of the strong.

I will bless you, sceptre of just kings, crown that never fades, the life of everyone.

I will bless you, the resurrection of everyone and the light that comes from light.

Heaven and earth hang upon his word, as a drop of water hangs from a jar. You are the Father of the universe, who ruined Amente and destroyed Edom²¹ and brought up Adam and his sons, crushed the enemy and all his power, gave light to the sun and ordained the the revolutions of the moon. He named the multitude of the stars [133] . He established the seven heavens and seven firmaments and laid the foundations of the earth upon the

¹⁸ Syriac: ܪܒܘܢܝ. The Coptic form 𐪄𐪗𐪁𐪏𐪛𐪏 reflects the rough breathing of the Greek form.

¹⁹ I imagine that this refers to the humble occupation of Jesus' earthly father.

²⁰ The word is partially obscured, but the index confirms that it is in fact 𐤀𐤌𐤂𐤓𐤁. Not a character trait one would immediately attribute to Athanasius, especially in view of his childhood enthusiasm for 'playing' Christian games, which is what attracted the attention of the Patriarch Alexander to him.

²¹ An area that runs south from the Dea Sea to the Gulf Aqaba. The word means 'red', and this gave rise to an association with Esau, whose descendants were known Edomites. It is well attested in Semitic and non-Semitic (where it appears in the form of 'Idumean') sources. I Sam. 14, 47 states that Saul confirmed his kingship in Israel by punishing, among others, Edomites.

water. He put water on earth and the abyss under the earth.

I will bless you who made all creation by your word and rested on the seventh day. I will bless you the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will not stop blessing you, Jesus, into whose hands I am about to come, for you are my helper and the strength of my salvation, do not shame me, for I trust you. Listen to my prayer this day and send me to Michael your archangel that he may receive my soul in rest, and may you establish it in the city of your love, for yours is the glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen.

After Apa Athanasius had finished, he gave up his spirit, like one who falls asleep, on the seventh of Pashons. I, Timothy the deacon, was standing at the side of Saint Athanasius as he was about lay aside his body and I bear witness to you before God ... [3 lines] ... [134] as snow, I saw Michael take the soul of Athanasius and ascend to heaven with it, and it was just like Athanasius. I saw the choirs of angels blessing God, saying: *Let us give glory to God, for he has glorified his saints.* We too, the beloved, let us pursue the teachings of our father Athanasius. Even if we are unable to reach the level of our fathers, let us nevertheless just try and God will give us a hand that we may achieve it.

You have seen, my beloved, this great champion, how he has fought until he is about to meet and receive the crown of life. God has spoken with him face to face,²² this one who has been raised above the Cherubim many times, he having shamed kings and heretics²³

²² As with Moses cf. Ex. 33,11

²³ Athanasius had an eventful life from the Council of Nicaea (325) to his death in 373. The kings he 'shamed' were Constantine, Constantine II, Constantius, Julian (briefly) and Valens. The most intransigent 'heretic' was undoubtedly Arius. Julian the Apostate occupied the Imperial throne for such a short time (361 to 363) that he was probably not a major source of grief to Athanasius, not least because he was not a Christian. Athanasius also had to deal with Meletians. Meletius, the bishop of Assiut in Upper Egypt, was hardline opponent of re-admitting Christians who had lapsed during the persecutions and gave rise to the group known as Meletians in about 305. There was a temporary reconciliation Meletius and the main body of the Egyptian Church that did not survive his death (somewhere after 325). For some of the 'shenanigans' (a more suitable word hardly suggests itself) involving the Meletians and the expression of their opposition to Athanasius at the Council of

through the power of God who was with him. See what sort of thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God.²⁴ For this reason, if you sin, He will punish you, but if you do good, He will rejoice with you and arrange for you to meet Him in a good meeting. He will give you the [...] and eternal life through Christ Our Lord who is from Him. All glory and honour is fitting to him and his good Father and the holy life-giving and consubstantial Spirit,²⁵ now and all times, forever.

Tyre in 335 cf. the account in Theodoret *Ecclesiastical History* Bk. chap. 30. The pro-Athanasius party was not entirely blameless, as can be seen in the Meletian correspondence published by WE Crum in H. Idris Bell *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (1924). I cite this work from memory only, not having seen a copy of the book for over 40 years.

²⁴ Heb. 10, 31

²⁵ ζῳοποιός (ⲛⲣ̅ⲓⲧⲁⲛⲓⲟⲩ) is used of the Holy Spirit in the creed formulated in 381 at Constantinople but not at Nicaea. ὁμοούσιος is used in both.