

The Twenty Four Elders

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In 1912 Stephen Gaselee published a short volume in Latin, 42 pages in length, called *Parerga Coptica* (Cambridge U.P.), containing various texts devoted to the subject of the twenty-four elders¹

The following is a translation of most of these texts and a summary of the notes on them made by Gaselee, who first made his text public in 1910.²

The elders were often invoked as intercessors in funerary stelae, such as the one from Memphis that had recently been published when Gaselee wrote his text.³ They were also cited in magical texts.⁴ Their feast day, as can be seen in the Coptic Synaxary,⁵ fell on the twenty-fourth of Hathor. Here, as elsewhere, they are described as incorporeal priests,⁶ who intercede on behalf of humans by offering their prayers to God like the incense in the censers they hold. The number twenty-four was related by Egyptian Christians to the number of letters in the alphabet they took over from Greek in order to write their own language. This latter was an ordered sequence of the sort that in the earlier scripts used to write Egyptian was not possible.

The first two texts⁷ are hymns in the Batos and Adam modes, respectively: Batos hymns to be sung on the first three days of the week, Adam on the other four. I have translated the first but not the second. Both texts are in the John Rylands Library at Manchester and have been summarized in the catalogue made by W.E. Crum in *Catalogue of Coptic Mss. in the Rylands Library* 1909, in

1 Rev. 4, 10; 5, 8; 7, 11; 11,16

2 He writes that he read out (*praelegi*) this paper to the Cambridge Antiquarian Society !

3 W.M.F Petrie *Memphis I* 1909

4 W.E. Crum *Catalogue of Coptic Mss. in the BM* (1905) no. 1223

5 Extant in Arabic cf. R. Basset 'Le synaxaire arabe' *Patrologia Orientalis* 3 1909 pp. 335ff.

6 There are two Arabic words for 'priest', as there are two in Coptic

7 They are, like so many other Coptic hymns, in the form of an alphabetic acrostic hymn. Gaselee draws attention to the popularity of this rhetorical device in Coptic literature, including the 12th cent. Sahidic text known as the 'Mysteries of the Greek letters'. An outstanding example of the genre is the 'Excellent Wife' paeon of praise in Proverbs 31, 10-31, in which the qualities of the wife as a worker, wife and mother, a sort of perfect combination, are praised using words at the beginning of every quatrain or line, as the case may be, starting with a letter of the alphabet in 'perfect' sequence.

which he writes on p. 208:

433 [69] Paper; 217 foll., paged on *versos*, in a restored native binding etc.
followed by details of size and age.

Gaselee uses the folio numbers 69 for the Batos mode and 73 for the Adam mode.

Among the differences between the two texts the following may be referred to:

- i. the first hymn does not have a stanza beginning with **τ**;
- ii. the second hymn uses **ζ** in place of **εκκ** at the beginning of stanza 5;
- iii. there is one abbreviation that concludes the Batos hymn (**εφωπ**) and another that concludes the Adam (**λοιπον ανωανθωου†**), the doxology in both written in Greek. The expanded version of the Batos abbreviation is: *When we sing, let us sing sweetly: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on our soul. Glory to the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.* The expanded version of the Adam abbreviation is: *So when we gather to pray, let us bless the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. For we will bless you, Lord Jesus. Save us in your name, for we have put our hope in you that we might praise you and your good Father and the Holy Spirit, because you came and saved us. Glory to the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.*

W.E. Crum *Rylands Catalogue* no. 433 [69] (Batos)

α

I have put my hope in you, my God.
Forgive me, Jesus Christ,
Through the intercession of the Mother of God
And the twenty-four elders.

β

Help me, o help
Of those who have no helpers,
Through the prayer and the intercession
Of the twenty-four elders.

γ

For you are the Son of God.
We are sending this hymn to you

And the twenty-four elders,
'Holy, holy, holy'.

Δ

David, come into our midst today
With your cithara, o hymnodist,
That you may sing the praises of
The twenty-four elders.

ϸ

Have mercy on us, Emmanuel
Through the intercession of the Virgin
And Michael and Gabriel
And the chorus of the incorporeal.

Ϩ⁸

Six archangels
And the twenty-four bodiless creatures
And the ranks who are in heaven
Give praise to the presbyters.

Η

Behold John the Theologian
The beloved of Jesus Christ,

He saw the glory of the presbyters
The twenty-four and his throne

8 Both hymns use this letter to indicate the number 6. Like other languages Coptic uses both letters of the alphabet and words to indicate numbers, but the sign normally used for 6 is in fact not the letter of the alphabet (Ϩ) but a version of the early Greek letter called the 'digamma', which looks like a final sigma Ϛ, but in early Greek texts represented the glide sound 'w'.

ⲉ

Yours is the power and the glory
From now to the creation.
You are the king of kings
We sing to you: Amen. Alleluia

ⲓ

Jesus Christ the Demiurge
Has established Himself before Hi throne
Begging⁹ on behalf of the Christians
That he may save them from temptation.

ⲕ

You are blessed, our Lord¹⁰ Christ
We sing to you and Your angels
And the twenty-four elders,
Trisagion, Son of God.

ⲗ

Sing, elders
The servants of the altar
On the feast of the elders,
The twenty-four offering incense.

ⲙ

Give me, Lord, a portion
With the twenty-four elders
In your kingdom, Good One,
That we may sing hymns with them

9 The Coptic Circumstantial, often translated by an English Present Participle, uses both person and number: here the 3rd p. pl. has to be changed to 3rd p. sg.

10 The word for 'Lord' is the Ancient Eg. word *nb* that survives only in Bohairic and the oldest attested forms of Coptic.

N

Have mercy on us and hear us
Because of the prayer of the elders
Take your anger from us,
Death, famine and pestilence.

Ξ

You are sublime,
you twenty-four elders.
Have mercy on us, Our Lord. because of the plea
And their prayer for us, Good One.

Ο

Glory to you, God, till the completion.
We sing to you with our small boys.
Glory to you. Amen. Alleluia,
Jesus Christ Who loves man.

Π

The 4 bodiless creatures
Who support the chariot of God
And the twenty-four elders
Seated on thrones.

P

100,000 and 44,000
Chiliads and myriads
And the rest of all the ranks
Singing to God: Alleluia

C

Bless the water of the rivers
And seeds and fruits
Because of the twenty-four priests
And have mercy on us, Good One.

Υ

Son of God the Demiurge,
Give us our Christian end
Through the intercession of the Virgin
And the twenty-four elders.

Φ

The Lord God our Helper
Save us from temptation.
Forgive us, Your people
Because of the twenty-four elders

Χ

Hail to you, Virgin
Hail, choruses of the the incorporeal
Hail, priests of the Lord,
Twenty-four elders

Φ

Every soul, give them relief
In the bosom of our just fathers,
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
Because of the twenty-four elders

Ⲫ

O Lord, remember me,

I who am ashes, Nicodemus¹¹

Because of Your mother, the new heaven

And the twenty-four elders

When

¹¹ Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19, 41-42), at the burial of Christ, are believed by Egyptian Christians to have recited various hymns.

The Asiatic Museum¹² of St Petersburg III, 5 fol. 136: doxologies

For the honour is great
Of those incorporeal saints,
The priests of truth
The twenty-four elders

Because they are near God
And have been placed before his throne,
Singing to him incessantly
Day and night.

They sit on twenty-four thrones,
Crowns on their heads
And phials of gold in their hands,
Full of choice incense.

These are the prayers
Of the saints on earth,
Who worship them
Until the Lamb of Truth.

Those (of us) who will reveal their names
While still on earth
They will pray to the Lord for us
Because they are near to God.

Intercede for us,¹³
Priests of truth,
The twenty-four elders,
That he may forgive us our sins.¹⁴

12 Gaselee was given copies by Oscar von Lemm, who became curator of the museum in 1883. In 1930 the museum became the Institute of Oriental Studies, located in Moscow. In 2007 the St Petersburg division was re-organized as the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, and it is possible that the texts are housed there.

13 Abbreviated form that has to be understood in this way.

14 Also abbreviated. After the text Gaselee points out that the name and knowledge of the name were important to

In a footnote on p. 11 Gaselee cites a Greek text, a 'white magic' spell of the 6th cent. AD for a child to learn his letters, in which the names of the twenty-four are written out in full. This is followed by a fragmentary Coptic text. Gaselee also claims to have seen what he took to be the names of the twenty-four in the church of Simeon's monastery at Aswan in 1906, confirmed by Sir Herbert Thompson a year later, essentially in the form of letter of the alphabet, followed by the 'divine suffix' -ⲏⲗ. It may be pointed out that the list of names in the Greek text published here bears no resemblance to the names in the Coptic text below: III (d) Clarendon Press 42 b. 4, 4

The following texts are parts encomia on the twenty-four elders and Michael the Archangel. The fragments are to be found in London, Naples and Oxford. The London fragment is from an encomium, by Proclus bishop of Cyzicus, but one that is different from the other two texts, which in turn seem to be different copies of the same text:

B.M. Or. 3581 A fol. 189 cf. *W.E. Crum Catalogue of Coptic Mss in BM* (1905) p. 409

Georg Zoega *Catalogus Codicum Coptiorum* 1810 CCLXVI,1

Clarendon Press (a-d) 42. b. 4 1-4 Unpublished texts in Bodleian Library, Oxford. The catalogue, made by Henri Hyvernat, is still in manuscript form.

Georg Zoega *Catalogus Codicum Coptiorum* 1810 CCLXVI, 2

'orientals and pagans'. If westerners never seemed to attach as much importance to these things as the 'oriental' in the past, many of us are acutely aware of the social phenomenon known as 'identity theft' and how much havoc it can create !

(*recto*) An encomium delivered by Saint Proclus the bishop of Cyzicus¹⁵ revealing for us the commemoration of the twenty-four holy elders and Michael the Archangel on the day of their commemoration. twenty-fourth Hathor. In a peac of God. Amen.

Many times my reason moves me and provides me with a feeling of solidarity from the holy feast that is today celebrated all over the world and my thought prevents me from speaking, so that my reason, my thought and my word are in conflict with each other. Reason is God, making the hearts of men understand reason that they may know what is good; but thought itself is the devil, preventing what is good. And if he (devil) finds a place in them (men), he boasts all the more. You then find their thoughts discordant to the point where reason prevails in the heart of the faithful and the fulfilment of the word is completed. But since reason and thought are at one

(*verso*) for the holy feast for the sake of establishing the twenty-four holy elders, these who are with the Father at all times, as for me,¹⁶ the insignificant bishop Proclus, God put it into my heart to go to Tripolis to Saint Leontius¹⁷ the martyr of Christ, because God had granted him the gift of healing many of the sick each day, and he heals them all. I left Cyzicus and went to the island of Patmos, From there I went to Hierapolis, and the name of the Lord was glorified there. I went further, God willing, and came to a city called Aristophoros, that is Thrace. I entered it and found an old man sitting with a crowd around him. When I passed by him, he stood up, received my blessing and said to me: 'It is you who have given this great blessing this entire city through Christ.' I have known fom his ...

15 Several homilies delivered by Proclus survive in Coptic. This one is thought to be a fusion of a homily on the elders and one on John Chrysostom cf. Michael van Esbroek "Proclus" *Claremont Coptic Encyclpaedia* (CE 2016b-2019b), the web-based continuation of the *Coptic Encyclopaedia* ed. A.S. Atiya. For a note on the journey outlined in this passage cf. Crum *Catalogue* p. 409 n.1

16 I have joined up these two clauses ('Since' and 'as for me) in the interests of syntactic coherence. Whther it is legitimate to perpetrate this sort of violence on another language is highly questionable.

17 Martyrdom commemorated in the Arabic version of the Coptic synaxary 22nd Epip. Copies of his martyrdom and panegyric survive in several languages, of which Coptic is one.

(*recto*) cherubim and seraphim and the whole army of heaven. Another thing is the glory of these great blessed priests, because they are ministers of the great King of Truth and Lord of All, the Almighty standing before God at all times and interceding for all mankind and the dew, rain and fruits of the earth.¹⁸

The twenty-four elders are seated on twenty-four glorious thrones of ineffable honour. The saints are all gathered, standing and clothed in white, while the twenty-four elders are seated, prepared to give judgement and judge angels, though they themselves are ministers, as Paul, of the divine voice and perfumed tongue, said¹⁹: 'We will judge angels though we have not yet reached the things of the world.'

This great ineffable glory which the incorporeal priests have achieved. This great honour and this great matter at which they wonder and about which they enquire, my beloved, and you see Michael and Gabriel and all the ranks standing before the true Judge, who repays everyone according to his deeds,

(*verso*) while the twenty-four elders are seated on the twenty-four thrones of glory, swathed in garments of light gleaming like the rays of the sun, the twenty-four crowns of their heads, phials in their hands from which they poured before the true Judge, calling upon his goodness that he might have mercy on His image and forgive them their sins.

O this great ineffable glory that you find the prophets and martyrs who have shed their blood and the righteous standing in fear and trembling, prepared and looking for the judgement that comes from the mouth of the true Judge, while the twenty-four elders are seated on their glorious thrones in great fearfulness as they pass judgement on sinners like me.

O this great fearful matter that you find the cherubim and seraphim standing and spreading their wings before him who lives for ages ...

¹⁸ Praying for good cultivation conditions is known in other cultures, e.g. Rogation in the Anglican Church

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 6, 3

Clarendon Press 42 b. 4, 1

[9]

(*recto*) ... they and a great glory and disturbance, saying in his revelation:²⁰ 'I saw thrones placed in heaven and another great throne, the one seated on it like a jewel of jasper and sardonyx' and 'I saw in the middle of the throne, with the four creatures, a lamb standing pierced, with a glorious name.

And there were twenty-four thrones around the throne and the One seated on it. twenty-four elders were sitting on them, wearing glorious robes of light, the name of God written on them. There were twenty-four crowns on their heads and twenty-four phials in their hands, from which they poured before the One who was sitting on the throne. In truth these are the priests of the God on high, those about whom Isaiah the prophet

10

(*verso*) prophesied, saying: 'You will be called priests of God on high.' Let the elders of the whole earth, from end to end, gather together and utter the blessing and song for these elders on this day of rejoicing, for they are the ones who receive their offerings from them and bring them to Christ the King.

Truly my beloved today is a day of great joy in the whole world, especially the sacred metropolis of heavenly Jerusalem.²¹ Because they have gathered today at the holy Christ-loving city, this multitude of holy bishops who see your joy towards the incorporeal revered twenty-four elders. They are overjoyed with them in III

Clarendon Press 42 b. 4, 2

11

(*recto*) our great feast which we celebrate today for them in accordance with what has been revealed to us by bishops of old, in whom the Holy Spirit dwelled, for it is the day of their worship, the twenty-fourth of Hathor.

I will also speak of your love for this great and wonderful²² matter that is before us concerning the twenty-four revered elders. A God-loving bishop named Perumentius²³ from Constantinople said this to me. He has come to this city today to worship the Holy Cross and the grave of Our life-giving Saviour, because it has been customary from the beginning for many

20 Rev. 20,4

21 The actual city of Jerusalem, to which the adjective 'heavenly' has been attached.

22 The combination of a Greek word and a Coptic word meaning the same thing is not uncommon in Coptic.

23 One thinks of Frumentius, the apostle of the Ethiopians, but the initial 'pe' could be the Coptic article, which leaves Rumentius, an otherwise unattested name.

bishops to come every year and joyfully celebrate the Holy True Cross, especially in outlying places.

12

(*verso*) By the grace²⁴ of God they meet on the twenty-fourth of Hathor, the day of remembrance of the blessed and revered forefathers.

And we gathered at the place of the holy and blessed church called Zion, celebrating the twenty-four incorporeal elders of the great king of truth, God Almighty. We then began the service, and the holy bishop was requested to ascend the bishop's throne and preach to the people. He came down and sat on the throne, thinking of the great fear he saw. I made my way to him and spoke with him, saying: 'My holy father, I marvel and wonder about the twenty-four elders,

Clarendon Press 42 b. 4, 3

13

(*recto*) incorporeal and revered, that they are famed in heaven and upon earth and their remembrance is spread everywhere, whose name is not revealed and whose honour is endless. The holy bishop, whom I have mentioned, spoke with me: 'The completion of their honour and glory, no human will be able to know it, because they are above the angels and more reverend than the cherubim and seraphim. We have got to know their name and we know it as it was told to an elder who saw a wonderful vision in the holy church of Constantinople, who told it to your humble servant. He said: "I had taken care of the lamp on the evening of the birth of the salvation of the whole world and gone to bed in

14

(*verso*) the church of Constantinople. I nodded off and went to sleep because I was tired from the vigil. At that point a bright light shone in the place where I was²⁵ and my mind was taken up to heaven, where I was told about the other aeon of light that was in that place. I saw twenty-four faces with lightning coming from them and their forms emitting joy at all times. They were clothed in white garments of light with twenty-four crowns on their heads, each of them clutching a phial. In short, it was very frightening and terrifying to see them. When I looked at their ineffable glory, I was afraid and became like a corpse. One of those walking with me gave me a hand and raised me up. he said to me: 'Do not be afraid.' he made the

24 Lit. 'good opportunity'

25 Gaseles translates 'in loco interiori'. It seems to me to refer to the place where the speaker was, and this requires an emendation something εἰς τὸν ἔσω.

15

(*recto*) sign of the cross over me. I regained my senses when I saw those faces on one side and on the other side the great throne they had told me about. When I had regained my composure, I asked those walking with me who these quite glorious figures were, crown of gold on their heads and phials in their arms. he told me that they were the ministers in the kingdom of the Lamb at all times, who do not leave the throne day or night and call on God the Almighty to be merciful to man.' I answered, 'I swear to you by the great fearful name of the true Lamb, the pure Christ to tell me their names, who they are.' he said to me, 'Truly,

16

(*verso*) you dare to ask a great thing which no created being has ever asked, nor has it been given to us that we may reveal it. But because you have dared about the name of the true and undefiled Lamb, listen and I will tell you the name of the incorporeal and revered ones, twenty four words revealed in the alphabet, in accordance with the explanation of the name of the Lamb. This is the way of the incorporeal elders: come from the alpha until you get to the omega, as we have heard them called and as we have heard from the Lamb, who calls them as follows: Achaël, Banouël, Ganaël, Dathiël, Ebdeël, Zardiël, Êelêel, Thidaël, Iôchaël, Kardiël, Labdaël ... "²⁶

²⁶ A magical text in Crum's *Catalogue (BM)* no. 1007 has a full list of the names

15

(*recto*) revered. After he had told me these great wonderful names, he turned to me and said: 'you see these names, they are of this sort that they should not be spoken, for the Lamb has made them clear,²⁷ but they are to be amulets for everyone who is ill with various illnesses that the Lord may cure them, not only man but also beasts. Blessed is the one who will celebrate the feast in the kingdom of the Lamb. These twenty-four elders rejoice in the heavens and enjoy great freedom of speech.'

When he said, he made the sign of the Cross over me with his hand full of light and brought my soul and restored it to my body. I then awoke and stopped looking at him. This is the revelation I saw about the twenty-four holy elders. Behold, I explained to you that that this was the firstborn written in the heavens. It is not possible for a human to find the completion of their honour

16

(*verso*) or their names, but what I was told I have told you, that there is no-one so honoured in heaven or on earth like them. This is what the saint told me, the one who came from Constantinople. And I have revealed it for love of you, Christ-loving people gathered at this holy place on the feast day of the twenty-four incorporeal revered elders. For this reason. let us offer up to peace offerings to God with all our heart and celebrate with the incorporeal with love, faith and purity of body and remove ourselves from our former habits, namely the wicked desires by which the devil has led us astray and turn to the Lord in repentance and that he may not think of our former sins, for he is merciful and his love consists of mercy. Let us listen to God who calls us to turn to him...

²⁷ The word to be understood here is not in any of the major dictionaries of classical or patristic Greek, nor is it in the Greek index to Crum's dictionary, but interestingly enough it occurs in Coptic legal texts cf. H. Förster *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten* (2002): 770. It seems to be a formation from συμφανής