

Exegesis of Susanna  
by  
John the Archbishop of Constantinople

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This short text occupies pp. 46-57 of E. A. Wallis Budge *Coptic Homilies* (1910), a publication of all the texts found in what is now called Ms. Or. 5001, a handsome papyrus volume, probably written in the 8th cent., found next to the Coptic Psalter (Ms. Or. 5000), also published by Budge in 1898. According to him, they were both found in 1896 in the remains of a monastery, wrapped up as a parcel in a stone container. Since there were no graves nearby, it seems unlikely that were intended for burial with anyone. The careful construction of the container suggests to Budge that they were meant to be hidden during 'troubled times'. The fine condition of the books is due to careful wrapping and positioning. When the books were hidden in this way is not known, but it seems clear enough that the monastery itself had been abandoned and knowledge of the whereabouts of the books lost.

As is usual in Budge's publications, there is a full description of the book as a physical object. The book shows signs of heavy use. The first page of the volume is 181, which suggests that it was part of a series of volumes that were kept, if not bound, together.

The volume contains eleven texts in total, the first of which is the 'protocol'. The five lines of the 'protocol' text are reproduced in the frontispiece: at the time of publication Budge was unable to provide a translation of them (p. xvii), but this sort of information usually concerns the production of the book. The text was thought to have been written by John Chrysostom, but it is now merely associated with his name. Nevertheless, it is not entirely unimaginable that the somewhat florid language of the text may have been generated by someone with a 'golden mouth'.

The subject of the exegesis is the story of Susanna and the elders, a story of uncontrolled lust on the part of contemptible older men and their attempt to seduce, and when this fails, to traduce the beautiful Susanna, a respectable married woman. It has an element in common with the story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph in Gen. 39, which in turn has something in common with the Egyptian story of two brothers separated from each other by the slander of the wife of one of the brothers against the other.<sup>1</sup> There may originally have been a Hebrew or Aramaic version of the Susanna story, but the best known versions are those of the LXX and Theodotion, a 2nd cent. AD Hellenistic Jew of Ephesus who may have translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. The story can be found in Daniel 13, for the simple reason, I imagine, that a divinely-inspired Daniel turns out to be the hero of the story, Susanna having been relegated to a 'passive negative' (οὐχ εὐρέθη ἐν αὐτῇ ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα)<sup>2</sup>. I can say nothing of the various forms the story may have taken, but one is struck by the puns (13, 22 and 54ff.) in it. There is something of a theatrical element in the whole story, and this has been nicely observed by the exegete in the use of the term θέατρον on more than one occasion, as well of course as

1 The text of the Two Brothers can be dated to the early 12th cent. BC.

2 The Exegesis has a little more to say about her than this.

the term ἀγών.

I agree with Budge that the Exegesis of the Susanna story is an edifying work<sup>3</sup> and has its place in a volume of texts to be read to or by monks, perhaps in keeping with the opinion of the apocrypha expressed in article 6 of 39 Articles of the English Church (1562) to the effect that they might be read for the 'example of life and instruction of manners'. In any case, the subject matter gives the exegete an opportunity to let Susanna speak at length for herself (51-52).

I hope that this translation, substantially the same as Budge's but with a few more notes, will be of some help to students of Coptic and those with an interest in early Christian culture in the Eastern Mediterranean. The numbers in brackets are the page nos. of Budge's text.

There are indications that the form of speech used to write the text is not 'pure' Sahidic, e.g. ΠΕΤΑΡΟΝ (what we owe) on p. 46. The conjugation prefix ΤΑΡΕ- is used several times in the text. W. Till *Koptische Grammatik* (1961) §311 calls it *Finalis* and, in a note, quotes Polotsky's elucidation of the Egyptian forerunner of this as *dj=j jr=f* 'I cause him to do' (the reference to Lefort can be ignored because his attempt to associate it with the Greek subjunctive has been successfully refuted). It is used in two different ways:

1. In the question form, asking for agreement or permission of some sort, like English 'shall'. Thus, one might translate English 'Shall I open the window ?' into Coptic as ΤΑΟΥΩΝ ΜΠΩΟΥΩΤ; When used in this way, the negative is ΤΜ-.
2. In the statement form, it is often used with an imperative as a sort of 'crypto-conditional': 'Teach me, and I will learn' (ΜΑΤΣΑΒΟΙ ΤΑΧΙΣΩ), where the second part is more a prediction or promise than an expression of purpose, though in some cases the convergence is so close that the two become practically indistinguishable from each other. When used in this way, the negative is ΑΝ.

The above is substantially a paraphrase of what Till writes in §311.

The abbreviation CD refers to W.E. Crum *Coptic Dictionary* (1939).

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3 The warning against roving eyes (p.48) might have been thought suitable for a text to be read out in a monastery, where homosexuality was always a possibility and probably often a reality, cf. C.T. Schroeder 'Prophecy and Porneia in Shenoute's Letters' *JNES* 65 (2006) pp. 81-97. I can only suggest that this text, when read aloud, might have had a considerable effect on listeners, not least with its extensive treatment of the senses.

*The Exegesis of Apa John Archbishop of Constantinople about Susanna the Blessed.*<sup>4</sup>

We come to you once again<sup>5</sup> in great gratitude, we who owe you this homily, and we will not<sup>6</sup> discharge our obligation to you in full, but only in accordance with what we have. The extent of our willingness<sup>7</sup> is clear and is expansive enough to pay more than we owe, but the poverty of our speech is a limiting factor. For this reason, having brought great things,<sup>8</sup> we will ask you to receive small things. If one receives a small thing and his heart expands with joy, we will not be wanting, for your joy will complete the part that is missing.

For the small offerings of the poor man and the extensive offerings of the rich man, when God sees them, he receives them with equal honour, or he might even honour those of the poor even more, because he sees their willingness of heart and not the amount of their expenditure.

As an example of this, think of the poor widow who threw her two small coins into the treasury chest.<sup>9</sup> The honour of her offering grew before (47) the Lord more than the gold brought by the rich man. God does not need gold but he needs a pure heart and an upright choice in favour of what is good, Come therefore and let us also expand our hearts in purity and utter the word of God and place it for ourselves and throw it in the spiritual treasury chest that we may give you what we owe you.

I will remind you of what I promised yesterday, to speak of the fortitude and modesty of Susanna

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4 Budge reads **ΤΗΑΡΓΑΡΙ**[ΤΗΣ], but from his later translation of the word (e.g. on p.47) he understands it as 'blessed' (**ΜΑΚΑΡΙΑ**). I would like to think that the two have in fact been conflated and that the reading that looks like 'pearl' is an allusion to Susanna's beauty (καλή σφόδρα).

5 It is clear from a remark on the next page ('what I promised yesterday') that this text follows on from one delivered on the previous day.

6 The conjugation prefix used here is **ΤΑΡΕ-**. See remarks above.

7 The term **ΟΥΡΟΤ** essentially means 'willingness' and 'joy'. **ΤΟΟΤῆ** : cf. CD 425b. There is a clear contrast indicated by the Gk particles **μὲν . . . δέ**. Crum uses a Greek phrase here after the Coptic (προθυμία δαυιλής), but I do not know where it comes from.

8 There no explicit conjunction 'because' or 'although', so I have used a participle for the translation.

9 Lk 21, 1ff. **ΚΑΖΟΦΥΛΑΚΙΟΝ** could refer to a treasury room or chest into which money could be thrown (as here). The money was used for the upkeep of the temple and priests.

and these will be of use to many, as the struggle of Joseph<sup>10</sup> in his self-control and tenacity has been of benefit to many.

So now, let Susanna too struggle in the theatre full of people. Let her struggle in the place where the angels, men and women see her, and she will instruct young girls to despise death for the sake of modesty.

Susanna, this blessed one, was of a good family and attractive and had been confined to her chamber since she was a child, growing up in modesty, When Satan turned his attention to her youth, she was joined in matrimony according to the Law.<sup>11</sup> She kept to the bed of her husband, incorruptibly in accordance with the requirements of marriage. Her eye never wandered in search of a young man and she never let her ear succumb to the sweet song of seduction or her nostrils to know pleasure<sup>12</sup> in the perfume in which garments are smoked.<sup>13</sup>

In short, she did not permit any of her senses to become loose<sup>14</sup> lest the self-control (**48**) that was safeguarded<sup>15</sup> in her heart might be lost and her soul slip into lewd pleasure through the enticement<sup>16</sup> of deceit. Now, most of the sins happen to the soul through the senses, for the soul is in the heart like a virgin quietly living in her chamber, the five senses being her servants: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. If the senses do not err or are corrupted, the soul will remain untouched, whole and without loss.<sup>17</sup>

If it happens that the eye falls upon the beauty of a young man and the wave of desire begins to well

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10 The story of Joseph (Gen. 39), who had to fend off the unwanted attentions of Potiphar's wife. Both women, victim and perpetrator, cry out, of course for different reasons, in 'a loud voice'. (Dan. 13, 24 and Gen. 39,14, respectively).

11 The sentence suggests that as Satan turns his attention to Susanna, she is temporarily removed from his clutches by matrimony.

12 I take this to be ἡδομαι, which when constructed with an object mostly takes the dative. The Coptic preposition **ΝΑ** may reflect this.

13 **καπνίζω**. Presumably in incense burning.

14 CD 46b

15 There is clearly a typographical error here: **Ν < ΤΕ > ΤΕΣΦΧΗ ΝῆΣΛΛΑΤΕ**

16 CD 142b: **ΛΟΟΜΕ**.

17 This translates: **ΦΑΡΕΤΕΦΧΗ ΘΩ ΖΑΡΙΖΑΡΟΣ ΕΣΟΥΧ ΕΤΟΣΕ**

up,<sup>18</sup> the stormy winds of pleasure beat against it<sup>19</sup> and self-control is dissipated and sinfully descends into the depths and is submerged like David,<sup>20</sup> who cried out: *I am sinking into the depths of the sea and am submerged by the flood*. The same is true of hearing: if it admits sweet voices and deceitful lewd songs and the heart inclines towards them, they will drag him down. And again, if taste persuades him to indulge in copious amounts of food and wine,<sup>21</sup> it will draw him into darkness and drunkenness. The sense of smell, if it takes pleasure in the fragrant perfume of ointments and incense, is deceived and binds the soul to that deceit with it. If therefore the modest soul becomes the captive of these things, it is like a virgin who has been handed over by them to her servants and slipped into the sin of lack of self-control.

(49) Now, when lack of self-control intrudes itself into the soul, it does so like a thief and enters the chamber of the heart and lays it waste and strips it of modesty. This blessed woman, Susanna, safeguarded her eyes, hands, feet, tongue, nose, the whole set of senses. She was truly, according to the word of the wise man, like a closed garden and sealed spring,<sup>22</sup> so that nobody was able to rob it or destroy the dwelling place of its incense and modesty and lay waste that place of the beauty of the spring of modesty.

Such was the woman after whom the two elders lusted, those who were thought of as men who guide<sup>23</sup> the people. They, who were in the fire of passion, tried to tell each other of the fire that was burning in their heart.

One day, it happened that each of them went to a secret place to spy on<sup>24</sup> Susanna and they found each other. When they asked each other, they admitted the reason why they were. They made a pact with each other to perpetrate the sin, an alliance of evil: they would<sup>25</sup> wait until they found her alone.

18 The word division **Ν̄ΒΕΕΒΕ ΕΤΠΕ** makes the text slightly clearer.

19 The soul.

20 Ps. 69, 2

21 **ΟΥΛΩΗ̄ Ν̄ΒΙΝΟΥΩΜ Μ̄ΝΗΡΠ ΕΙΩΩ**

22 Song of Songs 4, 2

23 Budge: **ΕΤ̄ΩΗΜΕ**. Probably a typographical error for **ΕΤ̄ΩΗΜΕ**.

24 Coptic: **Ν̄ΣΕ†ΖΤΗΥ Ε-**

25 The use of the Imperfect here may signal indirect speech.

One day, Susanna went into her husband's garden to bathe, as was her custom in the heat of the day. She told her servants to bring her natron and lotion.<sup>26</sup> The elders then descended upon her suddenly like wolves on a flock of sheep. They overpowered her with the intention of committing **(50)** the defiled act of their lust with her. Susanna found herself between the two elders, who were worse than the lions in whose midst Daniel had found himself.<sup>27</sup>

There were no servants nearby or neighbours or kinsmen or young people or anyone to help her, except God alone who was looking down on her from heaven. It was possible for God to prevent them, but he let the struggle take place so that their secret plan might be revealed, the modesty of Susanna exposing the lack of self-control of the elders. In this way, women will learn a useful lesson from Susanna's fortitude.

There was a great battle and struggle unfolding<sup>28</sup> and a heavy burden on Susanna, heavier than on Joseph, who had only to contend with a woman. But Susanna was a woman contending with two men of great power. It was a wonder that she was fighting against them in the garden, the place where the serpent was able to deceive Eve. It was great theatre and very sweet, for the elders involved in the struggle were nobles.

It was also sweet because of the modesty of a weak woman who was able to contend with these nobles. When they were ready to fight together, the heavens opened up and a trumpet sounded: they were ready: the contest could begin and the true arbiter looked down from heaven, with a host of angels **(51)** as onlookers from on high. The serpent was active in these wrongdoer elders and faith was strong in this modest woman.

The elders became very anxious, lest they be bested by a woman and that Susanna would not lapse from her modesty. The demons were preparing their wages for these wrongdoers,<sup>29</sup> while the angels were preparing their honour for Susanna from heaven. The wrongdoers seized her and struggled with her, their first thought being: 'We are elders of the people. We have been entrusted with the

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26 CD 781b

27 This early introduction of a figure who is to play a major role in the rest of the story indicates some sort of compositional artistry.

28 ἐπιπορευόμενοι ἐβόλῃ

29 Perhaps an allusion to Rom. 6, 23.

Law and the authority to bind and loose everything. There is nobody here who can see us.' Believe us therefore and be with us,<sup>30</sup> for we desire you. If you do not believe with us,<sup>31</sup> we will bear false witness against you and say that there was a young man with you. and that is why you sent away your servants.'

See therefore what a difficulty Susanna was in, this woman quite alone, slander, defilement, a threat of death<sup>32</sup> and an object of contempt, so that everyone would scorn her and her husband and his family would hate her, and she would be a source of grief to her neighbours and family.<sup>33</sup> In a word, the dissolution of her entire household. But this modest woman submitted to none of these thoughts, for she hoped and believed in God above.

Susanna sighed and said: 'I am oppressed on all sides: if I do this, I will die and if I do not, I will not escape your clutches. **(52)** But it is better for me not to do this and to fall into your hands rather than sin before the Lord.<sup>34</sup> Woe is me ! The shepherds I thought would look after me, I now see that they are wolves around me. The harbours that I thought would provide safety for the ship of my soul, I find myself at risk of drowning in them more than in a violent storm. Do not think that I will fear and trust you and defile my modesty. I will not cause my parents shame. I will not disgrace my birth. I will not cause grief to my husband. I will not destroy the bonds of my marriage, by which I am firmly held.<sup>35</sup> I will not listen to your undisciplined words. I prefer a violent death to a defiled couch. My husband is with me, perhaps not bodily but in the love of my heart. The face of my parents is with me at all times. So, you be fearful of God who sees you.'

Having said this, she cried out for witnesses to come and testify to their disgraceful behaviour. The elders also cried out. Susanna's servants and handmaids ran to see the elders conversing<sup>36</sup> with her. When the elders said what they said, the servants were deeply ashamed. They had never before heard such words against Susanna. On the following day, a great crowd **(53)** assembled, for there was still

30 Dan. 13, 20

31 . . . believe (and be) with us . . .

32 **εγαγιαε**: the verb is either *ἀγγελω* or *ἀπειλῶ*

33 The style is probably meant to reflect the threats and wheedling of the elders and thoughts going through Susanna's mind.

34 Dan. 13, 22-23. It is verse 22 that contains one of the puns I alluded to earlier.

35 Lit. 'planted'

36 Coptic **εγτονε** can also mean 'entangled with' cf. CD 421b

a struggle for victory and judgement for the crown, a crowd of men, women and children. It was very great sight to see.<sup>37</sup> The men below did not know what they were about to see,<sup>38</sup> but those above knew everything.

The presbyters, full of wickedness, came in and called to Susanna: in the same way that they thought of her as one who had been called to shame and death, so also the true judge thought of her as one who had been called to life and glory everlasting. They said before the people: 'Send for Susanna the daughter of Khelkias.' They did so, and she came with her parents, all her relatives and children.<sup>39</sup> Susanna came as one deserving to die, such was her considerable modesty. She sighed, not because she was being constrained<sup>40</sup> to die but because she would leave behind her a bad reputation for her parents and a source of reproach for her whole family. For she had no witnesses to the matter imputed to her in the garden. There was much sighing for her: parents, companions, family and neighbours. Her husband and her whole household were mourning and grieving for her. Her own heart was full of gloom as she wept in distress and in great humility. She came and stood in the midst of everyone. The entire multitude of angels and people stood looking at her. The two elders arose, wolves in shepherd's clothing, the sycophant (54) serpent speaking through them. They placed their hands upon her and said: 'Yesterday, as we were walking alone in the garden, a young man, who had been hiding, came to her and had intercourse with her. When we saw this, from the concealment of a corner of the garden, we ran up to them, but were unable to seize him because he overpowered us, opened the gate and ran away. But we seized her and asked her who the young man was. She refused to tell us. We are witness to what we saw.' The entire synagogue believed them because they were presbyters and lawgivers and they condemned her to death. They started to take her to execute her, and there was no-one to provide true justice except only God, the one who allowed this to happen so that, through them both, the deed of each one would be revealed completely, the wickedness, lack of self-control and slander of the lawless ones and the steadfastness of Susanna even unto death.

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37 The 'crown' probably suggests no more than victory, but of course to Christians this was a crucial term in the discourse of martyrdom.

38 The reading is probably: **ΕΥΝΑΝΑΥ ΕΟΥ**

39 If this means that she is a mother, it is a detail that is not in the Daniel account.

40 The same word **ζωω** is used by Susanna when she is being attacked by the two lechers, where it clearly translates the Greek of Dan. 13, 22



Do you<sup>41</sup> see how God forgets the faithful and abandons them to test them like gold in a foundry, subjecting the righteous to various trials ? This is what he did with Abraham . He took Isaac to offer a sacrifice and built an altar, but there was no sheep. He piled wood on it, but there was no ram. He took the sword in his hands (55) and turned his attention to the slaughter of Isaac. At that moment God spoke to him and made him draw aside his hand.

So,<sup>42</sup> these things happen so that each one of us can be tested and come near to death without losing hope in the help of God but that he might look forward to that help until it comes to him. Finally, they took Susanna to execute her and there was no help nearby. When she saw that there was no help from people, she turned to the helper in heaven, the faithful witness, the eye that does not sleep, and she said: 'Eternal God, the one who is aware of the secrets of the heart and knows everything before it happens, you alone know that they are bearing false witness against me, and I will die without having done any of the thing about which they are lying.' She was heard by the one who said: 'While you are still speaking, I will say: *Behold, I am here*,<sup>43</sup> As she was being taken to be executed, behold God aroused the spirit of a young man named Daniel. He called out in a loud voice: 'I am pure of the blood of this woman.' The people turned to him and said: 'What do you mean ?' He stood up in their midst. He said to them: 'Are you so stupid, house of Israel ? Go back to the place of judgement, for these have borne false witness against her.' The people returned hastily, Daniel said: 'Separate them that I might question them.' And he said to each of them: 'After a long life of wickedness, (56) your sins have caught up with you.<sup>44</sup> Tell me, under which tree did you see them talking to each other ?' He replied: 'Under a mastic tree.' Daniel said: 'Upon your head be your lies. The angel of God is standing with a sword in his hand<sup>45</sup> about to cleave you into two.' He let him go his way. He called the other one and said to him: 'Seed of Canaan and not of Judah, you have been deceived by beauty and confounded by lust. Tell me, under which tree did you see them talking to each other ?' He said: 'Under a holm oak.' Daniel said: 'Upon your head be your lies.' The angel of God is waiting with sword in hand to saw you into two.<sup>46</sup>

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41 From time to time the exegete addresses the congregation, here in the 2nd person sing.

42 CD 360a: **NTAI**.

43 Is. 58, 9. The previous sentence is a direct quotation of Dan. 13, 42, but God's reply is the invention of the exegete.

44 Not in the Biblical story.

45 Slightly different from Dan. 13, 55

46 The Greek puns of Daniel do not work in Coptic, but there is clearly an attempt to use two Coptic verbs to translate the two Greek verbs

The whole crowd cried aloud: 'Blessed is the Lord God who saves everyone who hopes in him.'

An innocent life was spared that day and the saying of David was fulfilled by Susanna: *My soul has cleaved to you and your right hand has received me to it.*<sup>47</sup> The wicked presbyters who sought after the soul of Susanna, *they will go down to the depths of the earth and be put to the sword and they will become*<sup>48</sup> *portions for the foxes*, that is the demons. The king will rejoice over God, that is Susanna. Everyone who swears by him, that is everyone who believes in him, will be honoured, for the mouth of those who speak in violence has been closed, that is the wicked presbyters.

(57) The grief of Susanna's parents then turned to happiness. Her husband rejoiced and glorified God. The family, neighbours and her household all rejoiced too. In a word, there was universal joy before God, angels and people.

You have seen the strength of the soul of Susanna. You have seen the self-control of this weak vessel. The modest soul endures victoriously in immortality. It endures in fruitfulness that does not wither. It endures in the indestructibility of resilient virtue with the help of God. This woman was therefore glorified by people, being honoured<sup>49</sup> by the angels. It happened that she was crowned<sup>50</sup> by God. Make yourselves like this woman. Emulate her behaviour. so that you too may become worthy of obtaining<sup>51</sup> the honour assigned to this woman by God in Jesus Christ Our Lord. Glory to him forever. Amen.

Apa John the Archbishop<sup>52</sup>

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47 Ps. 63, 8 and 10ff.

48 Typographical error: read **σενλωπτε**.

49 **ααι**: better **εαι**, a circumstantial with qualitative (CD 1b), like **εχραειτ** several lines earlier.

50 **αωπτε εσσεφανογ**: **ωπτε** can be followed by a circumstantial with qualitative (Till *Grammatik* §332), but qualitative forms of Greek verbs are simply not recognizable as such, and I do not think that **σσεφανογ** can be treated as qualitative. It might be easier to understand the prefix conjugation of the Gk verb as Perfect 1 and the verb itself as passive.

51 CD 189a

52 The title is written in what looks like and probably is the Greek genitive (in this case indicating authorship).