

THE “ODE” TO EGYPT
P.KÖLN 354
EGYPT AS THE HOLY LAND OF MARTYRS*

BY GESA SCHENKE

After the first edition of this text, twenty years ago,¹ extensive cleaning of the papyrus and restoration of its fibres took place at the papyrus collection in Cologne.² The result of that enterprise called for a fresh look at this somewhat unusual text.³

The text relates the creation of Egypt as a country of special sacred status due to its large number of martyrs. What remains preserved on two papyrus strips was taken most likely from a larger prophetic text on the creation and destiny of the world with its seventy-two countries. The Cologne excerpt focuses on the importance of Egypt as a Christian country par excellence. God addresses Egypt directly offering an overview of how it came about and what is to happen to it in the future. Designed by the creator, it is to be elevated above all other countries in the world and to be revered by them, due to its role as a safe haven for God’s son, and due to the large number of martyrs generated through strong belief.

Each of the seventy-two countries, it is claimed, was created from a handful of earth taken by Michael out of Eden and brought up to the heavenly Father to seal it, name it, and appoint an angel over it. When it finally came to Egypt, however, it received not only one seal, like the other seventy-one countries, but three. In addition to the seal marking the appointment of the archangel Michael over Egypt, two further seals are mentioned, perhaps one for the name of Christ, and the other for martyrdom.

* Research for this article was undertaken as part of the ERC project *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity* based at the University of Oxford.

¹ Ed.pr.: Gesa Schenke, “P.Köln 354. Über Ägyptens Sonderstatus vor allen anderen Ländern.” In: *Kölner Papyri* vol. 8, edited by M. Gronewald, K. Maresch, and C. Römer. Opladen 1997, 183–200.

² For details of the restoration process see the contribution by Sophie-Elisabeth Breternitz in this volume. New colour images can be found at: <https://papyri.uni-koeln.de/stueck/tm108361>.

³ I would like to thank Wolf-Peter Funk for looking over my very special visit down memory lane.

Prior to the creation of Egypt as the last of the seventy-two countries, the creation of Adam is said to have taken place. For this, some of the earth which later would become the land of Egypt was taken to mould Adam, a process in which the son of God claims to have been involved together with his Father, because his name was to be attached to the land of Egypt. In this way, it is argued, Christians from all the other counties are linked with Egypt and would find their true inheritance there.

Christ himself, who seems to have related this entire report of his Father's creation and intention, then turns to address his audience directly, by asking his disciples whether they are prepared to accept their Christian inheritance in Egypt. They answer in the affirmative, but Matthew poses the question of what will happen to a witness for Egypt's inheritance, possibly seeking a definition of the term "martyr" and how to become one.

As the essence of Egypt is defined here by its Christian heritage, manifested in the large number of its martyrs, a question as to what will happen to the martyrs in Egypt would seem only natural. One wonders whether this excerpt ended with the question preserved, or whether more text was once extracted and copied onto similar papyrus strips now lost, or was intended to be copied, containing perhaps a discussion on the nature of Christian martyrdom and the martyr cult in Egypt.

For whom and for what reason this passage was copied and preserved remains unknown.⁴ One could imagine parts of it to be incorporated into a sermon on the archangel Michael, just as well as into one given during the commemoration of Egyptian martyrs. The text celebrates Egypt, its "achievements" and special honours, so the circumstances for employment of such a narrative would most probably have been joyous and public.

A I (Fig. 1):

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 4 ⲓ ⲉⲃⲁⲗ ⲗⲛ ⲧⲉⲐⲃ ⲛⲭⲱⲣⲁ ⲛⲧⲉⲕ ⲟⲩⲧⲱⲱ
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⁴ In his forthcoming book *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, Princeton University Press 2017, David Frankfurter briefly discusses this text in chapter 6: "Scribality and Syncretism: Traditions of Writing and the Book". He assumes that this text, along with many others, was copied by a monastic scribe and used in a monastic milieu, though there is no evidence for such a claim. I wish to thank the author for showing me his chapter prior to publication.

8 ΤΗΛΟΥ ΠΑΘΒ ΝΨΗΛΙ ΕΥΕΘΕΜ
ΠΕΚΩΙΝΙ ΖΕΝ ΑΒΑΤ ΕΥΕ<Λ>ΖΥΠΟΤΑΣ-
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ΘΒ ΝΧΩΡΑ ΝΝΤΕΝΖ ΝΝΤΗΟΥ
12 ΕΤΑΤΠ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΝΕΥΑΖΩΡ ΕΥΕ-
ΩΩΠΙ ΝΕΚ ΜΠΝΟΗ ΝΑΝΕ-
ΒΡΗΠΙ ΝΝΕΧΩΡΑ ΕΥΕΛΤΙΜΑ
ΜΜΑΚ

1 For this construction cf. part B, line 7. $\mu\epsilon\eta\nu\nu\sigma\omega\varsigma$ $\alpha\gamma\omega\epsilon\chi\iota$ ‘Afterwards, he spoke’ ed.pr. 7 $\pi\alpha\iota\upsilon\beta$ $\nu\omega\eta\lambda\iota$ ‘my twelve sons’ ed.pr. 8 Perhaps one could consider reading $\epsilon\tau(\epsilon)\nu$ $\langle\zeta\epsilon\nu\rangle\alpha\beta\alpha\tau$. 8/9 $\zeta\eta\upsilon\tau\omicron\tau\alpha\varsigma\varsigma\iota\nu$ ed.pr. 11 $\epsilon\tau\alpha\tau\pi$ ed.pr. Perhaps even $\epsilon\tau\varsigma\alpha\tau\pi$ could be considered, ‘The wings of the chosen winds in their storerooms’

When he had addressed the land of Egypt, (2) he blessed it and said: (3) “You yourself, land of Egypt, you are the last to come forth (4) from among the seventy-two countries. You are destined (5) through what the Father wants. (6) You shall be under the blessing of all those who are mine. (7) My seventy-two sons shall visit you (8) in a few months. (9) The fathers of the seventy-two countries shall all be subordinate to you. (10) The wings of the winds, (11) which are locked in their storerooms, (12) shall be breath for you. Those of the (13) countries’ sceptres shall honour you.

A II (Fig. 1):

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in any country, his place of receiving an inheritance is the land of Egypt, **(9)** as an eternal inheritance.

We answered in front of the Father, saying: Amen, after he said [to us concerning it] **(10)** in front of the Father from the beginning: “Will you accept your inheritance on it (the land of Egypt) in this manner in which I have [spoken about it]?”

(11) Matthew answered, saying to the Saviour: “Lord, what is it that will happen to a witness [at your footstool (i.e. in Egypt)?] **(12)** and to everything which exists in the land of Egypt?”

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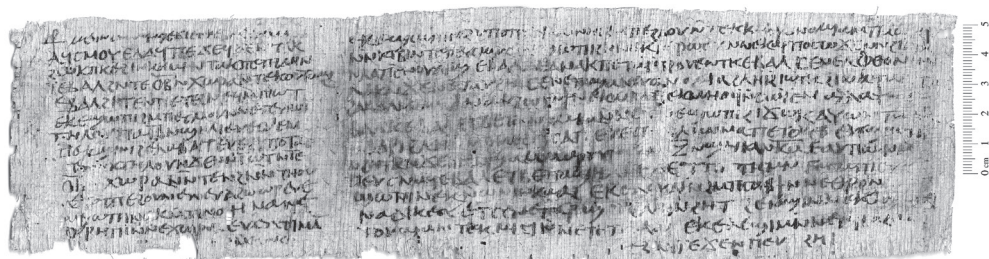


Fig. 1. P.Köln 354 — Text A-B

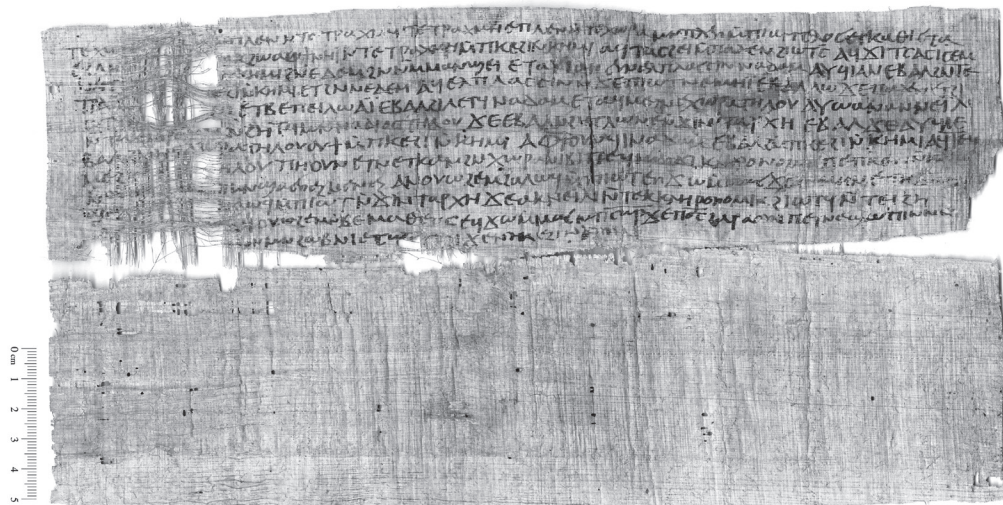


Fig. 2. P.Köln 354 — Text C