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Further Notes on P. Vindob. K8355v: A Coptic Lament

In memory of Kenneth Snipes

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Dr. M. Hasitzka of the Papyrussammlung, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Vienna), has done the world of Coptic literary studies a great service by publishing the complete text of the Vienna Coptic MS. P. Vindob. K8355.[1] However, her notes (p. 300) are limited to points of linguistics and dialect: the literary aspects of the text are not taken into account or discussed.[2] The present paper is concerned with the poem preserved on the verso or horizontal-fibred side of the papyrus, styled "a song of lament for the deceased" (pp. 298-299). First, I present a translation of the text The underlined elements are the repetitive formulaic phrases derived from Scripture, as explained below.

> A good, blameless man is he.
> Blameless is he. <u>O God (of) my salvation.</u>
> <u>O God of my salvati]on, I cry out to you.</u>
> A good, blameless man is he.
>
> Blameless is he, <u>day and night.</u>
> Blameless is he, <u>may his prayer go out.</u>
> <u>May his prayer go out before you:</u>
> A good, blameless man is he.
>
> Blameless is he: <u>incline your ear,</u>
> <u>Incline your ear, O Lord, to his supplication:</u>
> A good, blameless man is he.
>
> Blameless is he, <u>to those who know him.</u>
> Blameless is he, <u>his prayer goes to you,</u>
> <u>His prayer goes to you at time of morning.</u>
> A good, blameless man is he.
>
> Blameless is he. <u>Why, O Lord,</u>
> <u>Why, O Lord, would you abandon his soul?</u>
> A good, blameless man is he.
>
> Blameless is he. <u>Turn not your face,</u>
> <u>Turn not your face from him.</u>
> A man of help and blameless is he.

This poem is put together in an extremely sophisticated, tightly constructed lyric form, closely comparable to the Renaissance triolet or villanelle in the West, which also use recurring lines to determine the structure. It goes beyond the simpler refrain form, often used in Coptic hymnody,[3] here using the device of repeating the second half of a line to turn it into the first half of the next line (e.g. lines 2-3, 6-7, 9-10, 13-14, 16-17, 19-20); line 1 is also repeated as a kind of refrain, reappearing as lines 4, 8, 11, 15, 18 (with a twist in the last line). This repetitive device is similar to one used in folk ballads and other oral compositions, encouraging singers/hearers to join in on the next line which contains material

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[1] M. Hasitzka, "Koptische Totenklagen auf Papyrus," in M. Capasso, G. Messeri Savorelli, R. Pintaudi, edd., *Miscellanea Papyrologica in occasione del bicentenario dell'edizione della Charta Borgiana* (Pap. Flor. XIX; Florence 1990), vol. I, 297-300: "Gebet und Klagelied".

[2] Nor are they in W.C. Till's partial study in *Le Muséon* 64 (1951) 253-255, cited by Hasitzka on p. 297.

[3] Bohairic examples abound in Del. O'Leary, ed., *The Difnar* (*Antiphonarium*) *of the Coptic Church* (London 1927-1930).

they already know. Thus the poem partakes of two qualities at once: folk-like and learned. The learned element is in fact biblical: the repetition-containing elements are more or less free quotations from a single Psalm, quoted (with one exception) in the order found in the Psalm text. The introductory half-line element is repeated and continued to form the entire Psalm quotation.

All the quotations in this poem, indicated in the translation by underlining, are from Psalm 87 (LXX).[4] Individually they are:[5]

2-3: Ps 87:1a, (ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ) ⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲙ̅ⲡⲁⲟⲩⲭⲁⲓ ⲁⲓⲱϣ ⲉϩⲣⲁⲓ ⲙ̅ⲡⲉⲕⲙ̅ⲧⲟ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ. This enables line 3 of the Coptic text to be restored as ⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲡⲁⲟⲩϫⲁⲓ [ⲁⲓ]ⲱϣ ⲉϩⲣⲁⲓ [ⲉⲣⲟⲕ vel sim. (After the omega and shai, the ⲉϩⲣⲁⲓ is in fact visible on the plate.)

5: Ps 87:1b, ⲙ̅ⲡⲉϩⲟⲟⲩ ⲙⲛ̅ ⲧⲉⲩϣⲏ.

6-7: Ps 87:2a, ⲙⲁⲣⲉ ⲡⲁϣⲗⲏⲗ ⲉⲓ ⲉϩⲟⲩⲛ ⲙ̅ⲡⲉⲕⲙ̅ⲧⲟ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ, with change from first to third person.

9-10: Ps 87:2b, ⲣⲓⲕⲉ ⲙ̅ⲡⲉⲕⲙⲁⲁϫⲉ ⲡϫⲟⲉⲓⲥ ⲉⲡⲁⲥⲟⲡⲥ̅, with change from first to third person.

12: the ⲉⲛⲉⲧⲥⲟⲟⲩⲛ ⲉⲙⲟϥ of the poem is from Ps 87:18b, (ⲁⲕⲧⲣⲉ…) ⲛⲉⲧⲥⲟⲟⲩⲛ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲓ (ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϩⲛ̅ ⲧⲁⲧⲁⲗⲁⲓⲡⲱⲣⲓⲁ), changed from first to third person.

13-14: Ps 87:13b, ⲡⲁϣⲗⲏⲗ ⲛⲁⲧⲁϩⲟⲕ ⲙ̅ⲡⲛⲟⲩ ⲛ̅ϣⲱⲣⲡ̅, with change from first to third person.

16-17: Ps 87:14a, ⲉⲧⲃⲉ ⲟⲩ ⲡϫⲟⲉⲓⲥ ⲕⲛⲁⲕⲱ ⲛ̅ⲥⲱⲕ ⲛ̅ⲧⲁϯⲯⲩⲭⲏ, with change from first to third person.

19-20: Ps 87:14b, ⲙ̅ⲡⲣ̅ⲕⲱⲧⲉ ⲙ̅ⲡⲉⲕϩⲟ ⲛ̅ⲥⲁⲃⲟⲗ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲓ, with change from first to third person.

21: adapted from Ps 87:4b-5a, ⲁⲓⲣ̅ ⲑⲉ ⲛ̅ⲟⲩⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲉⲙⲛ̅ⲧϥ̅ⲃⲟⲏⲑⲟⲥ ⲛ̅ⲉⲗⲉⲩⲑⲉⲣⲟⲥ ϩⲛ̅ⲛⲉⲧⲙⲟⲟⲩⲧ clearly translated from the LXX Greek that has ἀβοήθητος…ἐλεύθερος. The Coptic poet has turned the negative to a positive, to express the thought that the deceased does have a helper in the next life.

Neither Till nor Hasitzka noticed thesescriptural quotations, taken appropriately from a Psalm that describes the soul's descent to Amente (cf. verse 5b in the Sahidic Psalm text). It is relevant to note that also the text on the recto (across the vertical fibres) side of this papyrus, a prayer for the deceased, also alludes to Psalm 87. Lines 15 and 18-19 of the prayer text quote verse 5a, ⲉⲩⲛⲏϫ ⲉⲩⲛ̅ⲕⲟⲧⲕ̅ ϩ ⲛ̅ ⲛ̅ⲧⲁⲫⲟⲥ, "those who, cast down, sleep in the tombs."

The Vienna papyrus is dated by its editor palaeographically to the seventh to eighth century. The text, however, may have been composed earlier, or it even may have been an oral composition taken down in written form by the writer of the post-conquest papyrus. In either case, the poem may contain (in addition to the scriptural quotations) material older than its transcription.

I have not attempted to work out a scansion or to arrange the elements and sub-elements according to any kind of colometry. So little is known about Coptic-language versification that to do so seems premature at present. Perhaps an analysis of the Vienna poem by a specialist in the contemporary discipline of Coptic linguistics will at last give us the metrical key to understanding what Coptic poetry can be shown to go back to Late Antiquity.

This poem, a cross between an antiphonal lament and a farced Psalm chant, makes an extraordinary aesthetic impression. One is reminded of the vivid scene of Coptic mourning at the end of Lawrence Durrell's *Mountolive*, which the twentieth-century writer took largely from Lane's nineteenth-century *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. Perhaps the Vienna poem actually does reflect the oral compositions of the professional mourners that were such a feature of Coptic funerals,[6] with the leader interlarding his or her recitation with scriptural tags that the congregation would have known by heart and been able to join in singing. In any case, it shows forth the biblical sensibility that so totally informed Coptic culture from Late Antiquity through the Middle Ages.

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[4] Apparently it is not read in the Coptic funeral service: see O.H.E. Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church* (Cairo 1967) 201-219.

[5] Psalm verses in Sahidic are taken from E. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Earliest Known Coptic Psalter* (London 1898).

[6] Cf. M. Cramer, *Die Totenklage bei den Kopten* (Vienna 1941) 78-95; and the remarks of M. Krause in *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten* (Mainz 1983) 88.