

The Arabic Homily of Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria

Unknown author

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown, perhaps 7th c.
PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown, presumably Egypt
DATE OF DEATH Unknown, perhaps early 8th c.
PLACE OF DEATH Unknown, presumably Egypt

BIOGRAPHY

Nothing is known of the author of this pseudonymous prophetic text beyond what can be gathered from the text itself.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary —

Secondary —

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Maymar qālahu al-ab al-mukarram bi-kull naw' abīnā anbā Tā' uḥīlus baṭriyark al-madīna l-'azīma l-Iskandariyya min ajl al-kawkabayn al-munīrayn Buṭrus wa-Būlus wa-min ajl al-tawba wa-aydan min ajl anbā Atanāsīyūs al-lābis al-rūḥ, 'A sermon delivered by the father honored in every way, our father Abba Theophilus, patriarch of the great city of Alexandria, about the two brilliant stars Peter and Paul, about repentance, and also about Abba Athanasius, the Spirit-bearer (*pneumatophoros*)'. Modern titles: 'Arabic homily in honor of Peter and Paul', 'The Arabic homily of Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria'

DATE Unknown, perhaps late 7th c. or early 8th c.

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Coptic or Greek

DESCRIPTION

Probably composed for the occasion of the feast of SS Peter and Paul, this sermon contains eulogies of these saints as well as some miracle stories located in Rome and involving the corpses of Peter and Paul speaking. The most important of these stories, a revelatory dialogue between St Peter and Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373), is set during the latter's exile in Rome. It deals with the future fate of Egypt and its inhabitants and includes passages on Arab rule and Islam.

This dialogue begins with a short prophecy *ex eventu* in which St Peter relates how Athanasius' see will be the only one to remain firm in the true faith, and how God will then remove the Byzantines from the land of Egypt and establish 'a strong nation that will have care for the churches of Christ and will not sin against the faith in any way'. Rather ambivalently, this nation, in which we recognize the Arabs, will at the same time serve as God's instrument for chastising the people of Egypt on account of their sins; but this chastisement will be short and those who remain steadfast in the faith will receive eternal salvation.

The work continues with a series of questions and answers between Peter and Athanasius about those who will be excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven. The first group alluded to are the Muslims, described as 'the nations', who serve God but not the Son and the Holy Spirit and who are not baptized and do not receive communion. They will be excluded even if they fast 'every two days or each year' (*yawmayn yawmayn aw sanata sanata*), and pray day and night without interruption. Special attention is given to the many Christians who renounce their faith in Christ and mix with the Muslims, claiming thus to serve God, as well as those who still recognize Christ but only silently in their thoughts, out of fear of 'the people'. The main message of the work is thus clear: do not assimilate to Islam but remain true to the chosen anti-Chalcedonian Coptic Church and its teachings. In addition, the special interest in baptism demonstrated throughout the sermon may suggest that the work was written against a background of some conflict over this Christian sacrament.

There are hardly any historical references that help date the sermon; suggested dates, varying from the 7th to the 9th century, are based on supposition. Perhaps the likeliest date, first proposed by Frend but without explanation (*Rise*, p. 355; 'Nationalism', p. 21), is the late 7th or early 8th century. Some considerations are:

The ambivalent description of Arab rule, as both respectful of Christianity and oppressive, fits particularly well in this period, when

Egyptian Christians could look back on a relatively calm first 50 years of Muslim domination, but also saw the first effects of a changing attitude of Muslim rulers towards their Christian subjects, manifest in the fierce tax measures and heightened religious assertiveness documented for the period. The repeated emphasis on the brevity of the 'chastisement' may exclude the possibility that the text was written much later (unless the author wanted to express hope that the remaining chastisement would be short).

A date of composition halfway through the first century of Muslim rule in Egypt would also explain the text's slightly 'nationalistic' or chauvinistic flavor (sensed in the recurring glorification of the land of Egypt and its anti-Chalcedonian orthodox inhabitants and also in St Peter's praise of Athanasius and his see), given that, in this century of immense political change the Church of Alexandria appears to have been concerned with the definition of a particularly Egyptian anti-Chalcedonian (miaphysite) Christian identity (see A. Papaconstantinou, 'Historiography, hagiography, and the making of the Coptic "Church of the martyrs" in early Islamic Egypt', *DOP* 60 (2006) 65-86).

While the Islam-related passages may at first glance suggest a later period when the Islamization of Egyptian society was well advanced, they are not at all out of place in the late 7th or early 8th century, as apostasy to Islam then became, for the first time, a serious issue in Eastern Christian writings; for Egypt, see e.g. the apocalypse in the Arabic *Life of Shenute* (q.v.). This early period would also be a fitting context for the rather simplistic characterization of Islamic doctrine and practice, which implies that Islam is merely a Christian heresy or, rather, a variant of Judaism, indicating perhaps a still superficial knowledge of Islam or else a subtle polemic against the politico-religious propaganda of Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) and his son al-Walid I (r. 710-15), which asserted Islam's superiority over Christianity.

Although the text itself attributes the sermon to Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria (r. 385-412), the real author must have been later. This applies not only to the passages related to Arab rule and Islam but also to the rest of the sermon, given that the former are clearly integral to and amount to almost half of the text, thus suggesting that the sermon was written at one time, and dates in its entirety from the Islamic period. Even if older textual material was used, it is doubtful that it came from Theophilus' pen (*pace* Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 172), since the narrative framework of the sermon contains an

important chronological error (Athanasius' stay in Rome during the papacy of Liberius; see Fleisch, 'Homily', p. 375) that is unlikely to have been made by Theophilus, who was Athanasius' pupil. It may well be, therefore, that this sermon was ascribed to Theophilus only because his name lent credibility and authority to stories involving his master Athanasius.

It has recently been argued that the Arabic text of the sermon was translated from Coptic (Groddek et al., *Ein wildes Volk*, pp. 23, n. 52, 206-7). This may well have been the original language of the work, although, in view of the early date of composition suggested above, one cannot exclude the possibility of a Greek original. However, the arguments in favor of the Greek put forward by Fleisch ('Homélie', 375) are weak.

SIGNIFICANCE

This little-known sermon may be one of the oldest writings of the Coptic Orthodox community to contain information on Islamic doctrine and to describe, and respond to, the religious challenge of Islam. The sermon is also important as a witness to the early Coptic tradition which has a positive attitude towards the initial period of Muslim rule, for which see also, e.g., the biography of Benjamin I, in the *History of the patriarchs of Alexandria*, which was perhaps originally written in the same period (probably by George the Archdeacon [q.v.]), as well as later Coptic apocalyptic writings such as the *Apocalypse of Samuel* and the *Letter of Pisentius*.

MANUSCRIPTS

MS BNF – ar. 4771, fols 200v-225r (19th c)

MS Aleppo, Naṣrī Wakīl Collection – 276 (inaccessible MS in a private collection; Sbath, *Fihris*, i, p. 39)

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

H. Fleisch, 'Une homélie de Théophile d'Alexandrie en l'honneur de St Pierre et de St Paul', *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 30 (1935-36) 371-419 (edition and trans.; errata in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* 28 (1948-50) 351-52)

STUDIES

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- D. Groddek et al., *Ein wildes Volk ist es. . . . Predigt (Ps.-Athanasius) über Lev 21,9, Ex 19, 22, den Erzengel Michael und das Weltende unter arabischer Herrschaft*, Altenberge, 2004 (Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Coptica 1), pp. 23-26, 206-7
- S.J. Davis, *The early Coptic papacy. The Egyptian Church and its leadership in Late Antiquity*, Cairo, 2004, pp. 120-21
- E.J. Martinez, 'La literatura apocalíptica y las primeras reacciones cristianas a la conquista islámica en Oriente', in G. Anes y Álvarez de Castrillón (ed.), *Europa y el Islam*, Madrid, 2003, 143-222, pp. 172-73, n. 63
- H. Suermann, 'Koptische Texte zur arabischen Eroberung Ägyptens und der Umayyadenherrschaft', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 4 (2002) 167-86, pp. 182-83
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- E. Wipszycka, 'Le nationalisme a-t-il existé dans l'Égypte byzantine?', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 22 (1992) 83-128, pp. 92-93
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- Graf, *GCAL* i, p. 317
- Fleisch, 'Homélie de Théophile', pp. 374-75

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