


An Old Nubian Curse from the Faras Cathedral

VINCENT W.J. VAN GERVEN OEI

Abstract: The present paper analyses an Old Nubian inscription from the Faras Cathedral, containing a curse with a reference to Col 1:13. The publication gives a description of the inscription, a transcription with critical apparatus, and a grammatical and general commentary on the text.

Keywords: Christian Nubia, Faras, wall inscriptions, Old Nubian, curse, Biblical citations

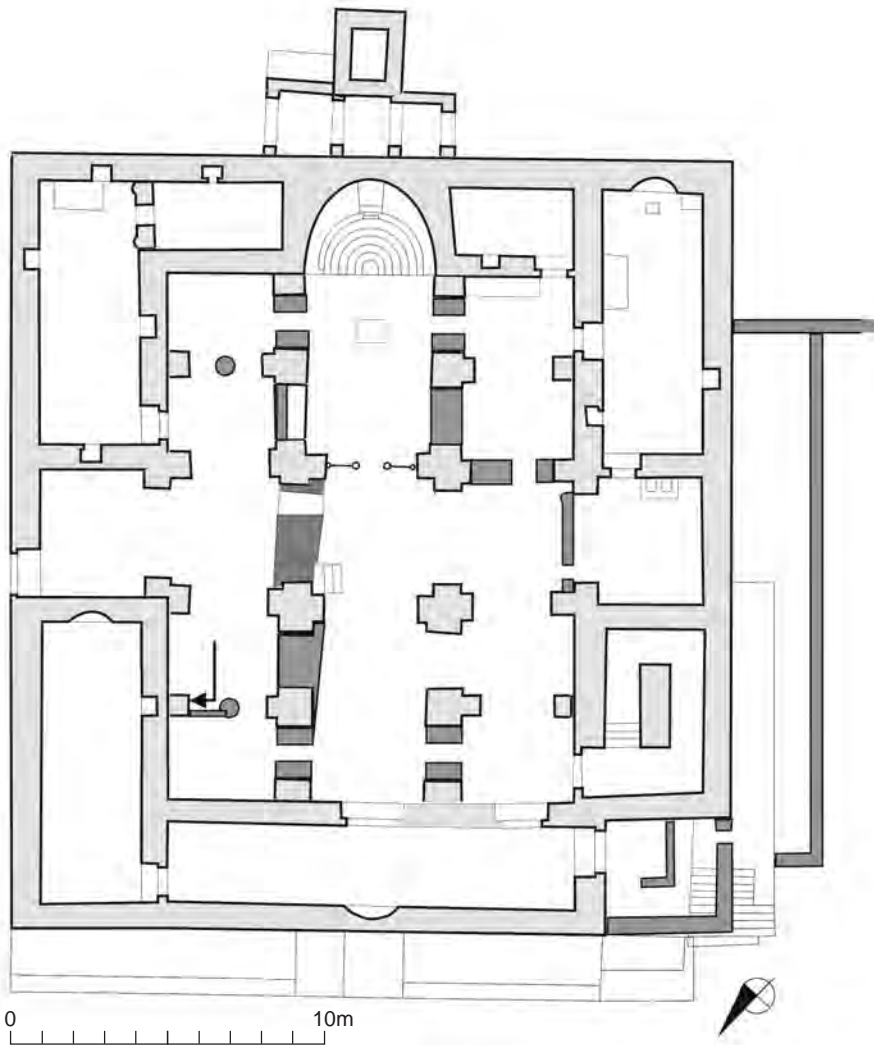
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The following text from the Cathedral in Faras (field inv. no. B 34 a.3; National Museum in Warsaw inventory nos 234007 MN; *DBMNT* 2804) was first published by Stefan Jakobielski as Inscription 53.¹ It was found on the first west pilaster in the North Aisle of the Cathedral, south face (**Fig. 1**). Only the end of the inscription, which Jakobielski correctly identified as Old Nubian,² was preserved, but the ink drops splattered across the text from the first legible line downward suggest that the text extended an unknown number of lines upward. The inscription measures 34 x 46cm, with Nubian-type majuscules of an average height of 4.5cm (**Fig. 2**). Based on the layer of plaster, Jakobielski dates the text between the beginning of the eleventh and the fifteenth century. The following transcription and translation are based on the photograph, transcription, and analysis provided by Jakobielski and autoptic examination by the author at the National Museum in Warsaw, where the inscription is on display.

¹ Jakobielski 1974: 278, 308, Pl. 70.

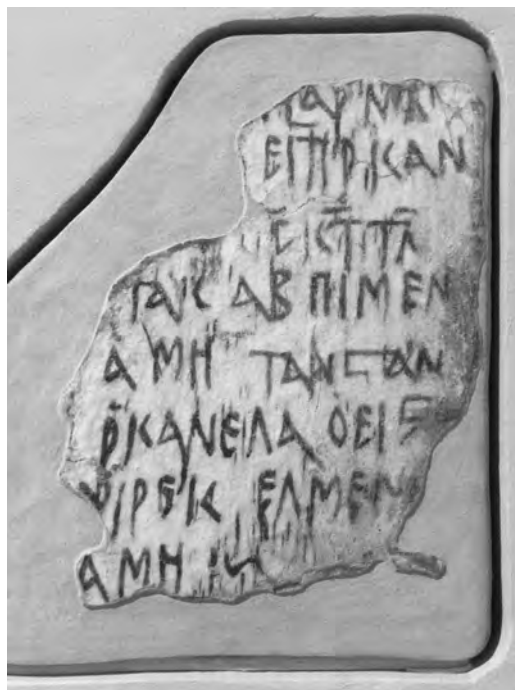
² Recently, three other Old Nubian inscriptions from the Faras Cathedral were published. See: Makowski, Van Gerven Oei 2016; Łajtar, Ochała 2017.



1. Plan of the Faras Cathedral with location of the inscription marked with an arrow; latter additions marked with darker shades (Digitising: D. Zielińska; based on: Godlewski 2006: Fig. 5).

[unknown number of lines missing]

- 1 [3-4] . αρηλ
 [3-4] ειτιρκαν
 [no] ck̄t̄tl̄
- 4 τακ αβ πιμεν
 δμη ταν εαν
 ρκανελα οει ς
 ψιρεκ ελμεν
- 8 αμη : ~



2. The inscription on display at the National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. 234007 MN (Phot. V.W.J. van Gerven Oei).

1. ɣṛṗṗλ Jakobielski || 2. eṗḥṛkaṣṗ Jakobielski || 5. ɔmḥ tanɛɔan Jakobielski || 6. ɔeiṗ Jakobielski || 8. ɔmḥ Jakobielski

(...)

If he sends (...), may the earth not make and produce it, may he not find 6 foot to take in the kingdom of his son.

GRAMMATICAL COMMENTARY

1. . ɔṗṗλ: Jakobielski transcribes ɣṛṗṗλ. The supralinear stroke over the ɗ is unlikely, as would be expected over the λ. A ɣ or perhaps even a τ seems possible before the ɔ, with the latter giving us the pronomial form τṗṗλ, which has been attested for example in *P.QI* II 13.i.4 τṗṗṗλ.³

2. eṗḥṛkaṣṗ[no]: eṗḥ, ‘to send’.⁴ The supralinear stroke over the τ is unexpected and phonologically unnecessary (see the General Commentary). The ending -kaṣṗ may be amended into the conditional ending -kaṣṗ[no] continuing on the next line, which has been

³ Browne 1989: 11.

⁴ Browne 1996: 79.

attested for example in K 20.3 τῤῥῃενκᾶννο, ‘if he doesn’t give’.⁵ A form ending in -κᾶν, without the locative suffix but with the same meaning, is also possible, but this would leave an awkward gap at the beginning of line 3, where the subject ḥkṯṯḥ clearly marks the beginning of a new clause.

3. ḥkṯṯḥ: ḥkṯ, ‘earth’,⁶ followed by determiner -ḥ. The geminated spelling with ṯṯ has not been attested before. The two black traces before ḥkṯṯḥ appear to be ink splatters, not traces of letters. ḥkṯṯḥ is the subject of the verb 4. πῃενᾶμη.

4. τᾶκ: Accusative of the third person singular pronoun, object of 4. πῃενᾶμη.

ᾶβ: There is no attested Old Nubian word with this form, nor does it appear to follow Old Nubian phonological conventions. However, there is one other attested occurrence of the letter β being used to transcribe the semivowel /w/, namely in an unpublished bilingual Greek-Old Nubian version of Psalm 127 found in Old Dongola, where we find the variant εοᾶεγβḗ for εοᾶεγούγḗ, ‘god-fearing’. If we adopt a similar reading here, ᾶβ could be the root ᾶ(γ)ούγ, ‘to make’,⁷ dependent on the verb 4. πῃενᾶμη.

πῃενᾶμη: Jakobielski⁸ suggests a relation to the verb πῃ, ‘to be, lie, remain’,⁹ but since it is a transitive verb with an object, a relation to πᾶει, ‘to grow, produce’ or πῃλ, ‘to come out’¹⁰ seems more likely. Such a meaning seems to be reinforced by the preceding verbal root ᾶβ. The verb itself has a negative suffix -μεν, predicate marker -ᾶ, and jussive -μη.

5. τᾶν: Genitive of the third person singular pronoun.

εᾶν: Genitive of εᾶ(ᾶ), ‘son’.¹¹

6. ῤᾶνεᾶ: ῤᾶνε, ‘kingdom’¹² with dative -ᾶ. The phrase τᾶν εᾶν ῤᾶνεᾶ probably refers to Col 1:13 τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ, ‘in the kingdom of his son’ (see the General Commentary).

ᾶει ς: Possibly ᾶει, ‘foot’,¹³ followed by a *stigma*, the Copto-Greek number 6, ς. It seems unlikely that the letter should be read as ς, considering the fact that the scribe wrote this

⁵ Browne 1983: 11.

⁶ Browne 1996: 77.

⁷ Browne 1996: 13.

⁸ Jakobielski 1974: 308.

⁹ Browne 1996: 150.

¹⁰ Browne 1996: 148.

¹¹ Browne 1996: 196.

¹² Browne 1996: 140.

¹³ Browne 1996: 123.

letter correctly on the previous line. Measurements in feet have been previously attested, e.g. *P.QI* III 38 τρᾶπησῆ δει ᾧλα, ‘4 feet from the altar’.¹⁴ δει ζ is the object of φῖρεκ, but the accusative case appears to have been dropped, cf. *SC* 23.14 ḥkṯ kṯpamna.¹⁵ Perhaps ‘6 foot in the kingdom of his son’ here refers metaphorically to the place of man in the Christian world.

7. φῖρεκ: Unknown nominal form ending in accusative marker -κ, which marks the object of 7. ελμεναμη, δει ζ φῖρεκ. The final λ is dropped, as usual, before the initial vowel of the subsequent word. As Old Nubian does not allow word-initial φ, perhaps we should assume a sublinear stroke that was either omitted or lost in the damage above the letter. In that we may be dealing with a verbal root φ̄, followed by transitive marker -ιρ, and present tense -ελ-κ > -εκ, cf. *P.QI* I 4.i.26 δωρεκα.¹⁶ The verbal root φ̄ may be related to φφ ‘to take, suffer’¹⁷ and Mattokki *iny* ‘aufheben, fortnehmen, tragen, eine religiöse Pflicht erfüllen’.¹⁸

ελμεναμη: Correctly identified by Jakobielski¹⁹ as a form of ελ, ‘to find’.²⁰ The form is parallel to 4. πιμεναμη. A supralinear stroke over the λ may have been lost and is no longer readable. A similar negative jussive is found in *P.QI* III 30 34 ελ’μεναμη (see the General Commentary).²¹

GENERAL COMMENTARY

Although the ink splatters in line 1 suggest that the text extended upward for an unknown number of lines, the end of the text has been nearly fully preserved. It also appears that at least for the last 5 lines, both the left- and right-hand margins have been fully preserved. This state of preservation allows us to arrive at a partial translation.

The general meaning of the text hinges on the interpretation of the two main verbs, 4. πιμεναμη and 7. ελμεναμη. As both are formulated as negative jussives (‘may not ...’), we concur with Jakobielski that it should not be identified as a prayer. However, the same forms also make it difficult to identify the text as an ‘instruction’ or ‘canon’, as Jakobielski suggests, which usually end in either an imperative or vetitive form (‘do ...’ or ‘do not ...’). However, if our emendation and interpretation of 2. ειτῖρκαν[νο] as a conditional is correct, we do find the syntactic structure ‘if ..., may not ...’. This does not resemble so much of an instruction or rule, but rather the form of a curse.

¹⁴ Browne 1991: 16.

¹⁵ Browne 1984: 71.

¹⁶ Browne 1989: 19.

¹⁷ Browne 1996: 62.

¹⁸ von Massenbach 1933: 177.

¹⁹ Jakobielski 1974: 308.

²⁰ Browne 1996: 56.

²¹ Browne 1991: 4.

There is one other attested curse in Old Nubian, at the end of the royal proclamation *P.QI* III 30,²² which follows the same structure and indeed contains the same verbal form $\epsilon\lambda\mu\epsilon\lambda\alpha\mu\eta$, ‘may he not find’.²³

P.QI III 30 30–35

- 30 $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\sigma\bar{\eta}$ $\alpha\eta$ $\sigma\alpha\lambda\kappa\alpha$ · $\omicron\gamma\sigma\kappa\alpha$ · $\Gamma\alpha\gamma\Gamma\alpha\Delta\Delta\lambda\lambda\omicron$ $\epsilon\pi\mu\alpha\chi\omicron\varsigma\bar{\lambda}$
 $\tau\alpha\eta$ $\omega\pi\bar{\rho}\rho\omicron\kappa\omicron$ $\tau\alpha\kappa\kappa\alpha$ $\omega\alpha\gamma\iota\delta\alpha\mu\eta$ · $\bar{\nu}$ $\lambda\omicron\lambda\omicron$ · $\omicron\gamma\bar{\rho}\omicron\gamma\omicron\eta$ $\kappa\alpha\Delta\Delta\iota\omicron$ $\Delta\iota\alpha$ · $\eta\eta$ ·
 $\bar{\Gamma}$ $\alpha\epsilon\bar{\eta}$ $\mu\alpha\iota\kappa\bar{\tau}\tau\alpha$ $\tau\omicron\gamma\lambda\omicron$ · $\delta\omicron\gamma\eta\tau\iota\epsilon\alpha\mu\eta$ · $\Delta\lambda\omicron$ · $\iota\omicron\gamma\Delta\alpha$ $\epsilon\iota\sigma\kappa\alpha\bar{\rho}\iota\alpha\eta\eta\gamma\omicron\eta$
 $\epsilon\iota\tau\iota\omicron\gamma\kappa\varsigma$ $\sigma\omicron\lambda\alpha$ $\Delta\omicron\gamma$ · η · $\bar{\tau}$ · $\delta\delta\omicron\lambda\Delta\lambda$ $\pi\eta\bar{\Gamma}\tau\alpha$ $\epsilon\tau\alpha\mu\eta\eta$ · $\bar{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron$ · $\kappa\bar{\iota}\tau\omicron\gamma$ $\tau\bar{\eta}\mu\omicron\lambda\lambda\alpha$
- 34 $\tau\alpha\kappa\kappa\alpha$ · $\epsilon\iota\epsilon\lambda\kappa\alpha$ $\epsilon\lambda\mu\epsilon\lambda\alpha\mu\eta$ · $\bar{\varsigma}$ $\epsilon\pi\mu\alpha\chi\omicron\varsigma\bar{\lambda}$ · $\alpha\mu\sigma\bar{\eta}$ $\omicron\gamma\kappa\bar{\rho}\rho\omicron$ $\pi\bar{\eta}\eta\Gamma\iota$ $\Delta\alpha\gamma\omicron\gamma\lambda$
 $\tau\alpha\Delta\Delta\alpha\lambda$ · $\tau\alpha\bar{\rho}\alpha\mu\eta$ ··

Whoever will speak against and deny my statement, let Epimachus stab him multiple times with his spear; 2. may he die from the king’s curse; 3. may he begin to bear an affliction of the heart inside; 4. may he receive a share with Judas Iscariot,²⁴ man-wounder and betrayer; 5. may he not find anyone who knows him among the assembled people; 6. may Epimachus on the Day of Judgment come (in) great battle against him.

The curse in *P.QI* III 30 follows the same construction as the one from the Faras Cathedral, starting with a conditional $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\sigma\bar{\eta}$... $\Gamma\alpha\gamma\Gamma\alpha\Delta\Delta\lambda\lambda\omicron$, followed by six jussive forms ending in $-\alpha\mu\eta$.

Elsewhere in the Faras Cathedral, there is another bilingual Greek-Old Nubian inscription mentioning a curse, this time explicitly.²⁵ I give here a transcription and translation of the Old Nubian part of the inscription that varies slightly from theirs:

$\tau\bar{\lambda}\lambda\bar{\iota}$ $\alpha\bar{\iota}\kappa\alpha$ $\bar{\alpha}\rho\omicron\gamma\bar{\alpha}\Gamma\alpha\bar{\rho}\alpha\mu\eta$ $\kappa\bar{\omega}\kappa\alpha\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\iota}$ ²⁶ $\tau\omicron\gamma\sigma\Gamma\alpha$
 $\alpha\bar{\iota}\Delta\omicron$ $\kappa\bar{\rho}\bar{\gamma}\bar{\gamma}$ $\mu\epsilon\eta\alpha\mu\eta$ $\tau\bar{\lambda}\lambda\omicron$ $\omega\bar{\rho}\kappa\alpha$ $\pi\alpha[\omicron\gamma]\omicron\gamma\eta\alpha$
 $\sigma\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\iota}\bar{\tau}\bar{\epsilon}\kappa\alpha$ $\Delta\epsilon\eta\alpha\mu\eta$ $\bar{\alpha}\mu\eta\eta$

May God protect me. May the jealous ones not cause a curse to come up on me. May God give me²⁷ the book of the inheritance of power. Amen.

²² Browne 1991: 4.

²³ A similar verbal form is found in another curse: *P.QI* III 41.18 $\mu\bar{\kappa}\kappa\bar{\tau}\tau\alpha\epsilon\alpha\mu\eta$ (Browne 1991: 22). See: Van Gerven Oei, Tsakos 2018 for discussion.

²⁴ Note that the Old Nubian form of Iscariot is $\epsilon\iota\sigma\kappa\alpha\bar{\rho}\iota\alpha\eta\eta\gamma\omicron\eta$, a genitive plural. This suggests that the Nubian scribe interpreted Iscariot in the tradition that etymologically derives it from the Latin *sicarius*, ‘dagger man.’

²⁵ Łajtar, Ochała 2017: 307–312, no. 2.

²⁶ Łajtar and Ochała suggest $\kappa\bar{\omega}<\kappa\bar{\omega}>\kappa\alpha\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\iota}$. I do not think the reduplication needs to be introduced to render the same meaning.

²⁷ The benefactive verb $\Delta\epsilon\eta$ implies a first person recipient.

Interestingly, the prayer from the Faras Cathedral contains the word $\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ for ‘curse’, whereas *P.QI* III 30 has the word $\kappa\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha$. The former is related to Andaandi *tūs*, ‘curse’²⁸ and Mattokki *tūs*, ‘fluchen, verwünschen, hassen’,²⁹ while the latter is related to Nobiin *gar(i)*, ‘schlecht, häßlich, böse, unglücklich’,³⁰ which has perhaps been loaned into Mattokki *garri*, ‘schlecht, häßlich, Unglück bringend’.³¹ This distinction may represent a dialectal variation that has already been suggested by Adam Łajtar and Grzegorz Ochała.³²

Our inscription also contains several interesting variants that may offer us a clue as to its relative dating and use. The spellings found in 1. $\epsilon\tau\tau\iota\rho\kappa\alpha\lambda\lambda[\eta\omicron]$ and 2. $\check{\kappa}\check{\kappa}\check{\tau}\check{\tau}\check{\lambda}$, 4. $\alpha\upsilon$, 4. $\pi\mu\epsilon\eta\delta\mu\eta$, and 7. $\psi\pi\epsilon\kappa$ have not been attested as such before. In general, the spelling is atypical and suggests that the scribe may not have been fully familiar with the literary language – because the text is of an unofficial nature, or is produced at a later stage of language development or during a period of decline in literacy. None of these explanations, which are moreover not mutually exclusive, can be preferred with any measure of certainty.

Thus, there seems to be a certain tension between the form and the content of this particular text. On the one hand, the execution in ‘carefully written [...] large letters’, which, as Jakobielski remarks, ‘are well visible,’ indeed suggests some type of officially sanctioned text, rather than a private prayer or visitor’s *graffito*. This seems to be confirmed also by our analysis of the text, which identifies it as a curse. On the other hand, the multiple, previously unattested spelling variants suggest that the scribe was not educated in the tradition that has produced literary texts such as the pseudo-Nicene Canons.³³ This would exclude a liturgical aim. Does this text therefore bear witness to a period in which the official use of Old Nubian was already in decline and the Cathedral in Faras past the heyday of the Makuritan state and church?

The curse appears to invoke both a worldly and a religious context. The first element of the curse, which threatens the reader an infertile $\check{\kappa}\check{\kappa}\check{\tau}\check{\tau}\check{\lambda}$, ‘earth’ that will no longer produce crops is combined with a second element, which refers to $\tau\alpha\eta\ \epsilon\lambda\eta\ \bar{\rho}\kappa\alpha\eta\epsilon\lambda\lambda$, a reference to Paul’s letter to the Col 1:13 $\tau\eta\eta\ \beta\alpha\sigma\iota\lambda\epsilon\iota\alpha\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \upsilon\iota\omicron\upsilon$, a Christian life redeemed of sin and death. The curse therefore appears to be addressed to a reader that is both Christian and familiar with the Scripture, but also part of an agrarian community. In other words, it does not seem to be directed to invading outsiders. This is also confirmed by the language in which the curse is written, Old Nubian. This does not only assume the Old Nubian literacy of the scribe, but also that those who were addressed by the curse were able to read it and understand its meaning.

²⁸ Armbruster 1965: 206.

²⁹ von Massenbach 1933: 220.

³⁰ Khalil 1996: 30.

³¹ von Massenbach 1933: 166.

³² Łajtar, Ochała 2017: 309.

³³ Browne 1983.

The fact that such a curse is written in large letters at a visible location in the church – otherwise a unique phenomenon in the context of Nubian church *graffiti* and *dipinti* – suggests that it may have been placed there after the regular use of the church had ceased. For such a curse would be unnecessary if at that point the church had still been in function, and vandalism or intruders not a reasonable threat. Perhaps the meaning of this inscription should be sought in this direction: a relic from a period, perhaps around the thirteenth century, in which Nubian-speaking Christians came under increased pressure from Muslim incursions from Egypt, and the Cathedral of Faras slowly vanished underneath the desert sand.³⁴

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³⁴ Jakobielski 1972: 167.

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