

Leslie S. B. MacCoull

## Coptic Wisdom Poetry: The Solomon Complex Redux

In recent decades, wisdom poetry from mediaeval European traditions has become the object of scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> Refashionings in didactic verse of the Old Testament wisdom writings attributed to King Solomon have played a role in many societies: including, as we will see here, that of Christian Egypt. Incorporating both learned and popular elements, these texts embody a tradition of versifying biblical passages – pericopae if not books – in a memorable, memorizable, transmittable form. What Shippey designated their “didactic strategy” (*Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, 3) was to inculcate biblical wisdom and thereby the meaning of the passages for people’s lives. Most recently it has been stated that “wisdom poems encode essential knowledge of social life ... and transmit information about cultural norms and expectations. ... Poems that transmit knowledge of what must be done in certain circumstances make culture.”<sup>2</sup> Just over a century after the initial publication of the Coptic poems transmitted in Berlin MS. 9287,<sup>3</sup> and ninety-six years after they were discussed by Hermann Junker in articles later collected into a monograph,<sup>4</sup> it is time to consider these texts as cultural productions of their era and investigate their didactic strategy and intent.

The paper manuscript was bought from a dealer in Giza in 1899 by Adolf Erman.<sup>5</sup> As it is, it consists of eleven leaves, twenty-two pages numbered in Coptic from “2” (Ⲅ) through “23” (ⲕⲓ). Thus a first page, page 1 or ⲁ, has been lost. (So the Berlin catalogue’s numbering of strophes beginning arbitrarily with “No. 1” does not indicate where the actual text began.) It is uncertain how much text might have still existed beyond the end of what we have. The

1 T. A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge 1976), esp. 1-47; E. T. Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto 1988), esp. 3-11; C. Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford 1993), esp. 1-13.

2 M. Drout, *How Tradition Works* (Tempe, AZ, forthcoming).

3 *Ägyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin: Koptische Urkunden I* (Berlin 1902) 45-66 (no. 32): first discussed before the volume appeared by G. Möller, “Eine neue koptische Liederhandschrift,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache* 39 (1901) 104-113.

4 *Koptische Poesie des 10. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 1908; repr. Hildesheim 1977).

5 Möller, “Liederhandschrift,” 104 n. 2. I am grateful to G. Poethke of the Berlin Museum for updating my information.



present manuscript contains 101 mostly four-line (a few eight-line)<sup>6</sup> strophes, distributed over an average of five strophes per page (two have six, six have four; page 20 [κ] has three long strophes, while the last page [κΓ] has three as well). Two hands are discernible.<sup>7</sup> One main hand has written nearly all the text, but a second, smaller and more compressed hand has written in six strophes at the bottoms of pages 9 (Θ), 11 (ΙΑ), 15 (ΙΕ), 16 (ΙΖ), 18 (ΙΗ), and 19 (ΙΘ). A century ago the manuscript was dated by palaeographic comparison to ca. A. D. 1000,<sup>8</sup> but it transmits material doubtless considerably older than that.<sup>9</sup>

The base text for these versifications is, explicitly, the three biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, the three wisdom texts (apart from the “deuterocanonical” Wisdom) ascribed to Solomon.<sup>10</sup> Strophe 29 on page 7 (z) mentions Proverbs (ΠΑΡΟΙΜΙΑΙ), while page 12 (ΙΒ) lines 22-23 has the inset notice “The Sayings of Ecclesiastes Solomon are finished” and page 13 (ΙΓ) is headed “With God: The Song of Songs of Solomon the King”.<sup>11</sup> This triad embodies the traditional exegetical grouping going back to Origen<sup>12</sup> according to which the three books reflect the three main fields of Aristotelian-style human learning: ethics (Proverbs), physics (Ecclesiastes), and what we might term “metaphysics” and Origen in late antiquity designated ἐποπτική (sc. ἐπιστήμη), considered in that significant order, embodying a hierarchy of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Thus the Coptic literary composition aimed to survey these fields for the audience and perform the operation C. S. Lewis once termed “boil[ing] them down into poems and wisdom.” This would seem to manifest the continuing weight of Origenian exegesis<sup>14</sup> in post-Chalcedon Egypt.<sup>15</sup>

6 Möller, “Liederhandschrift,” 108-109, 111.

7 See Junker, *Poesie*, Tafel 1.

8 Möller, “Liederhandschrift,” 104-105.

9 H. Junker in *Oriens Christianus* 6 (1906) 319f.

10 For western comparanda cf. M. Bose, “From Exegesis to Appropriation: The Medieval Solomon,” *Medium Ævum* 65 (1996) 187-210, esp. 190-191, 198-200.

11 Correcting the mistranslation by L. S. B. MacCoull in *Sobornost* 25 (2003) 65. See Junker, *Poesie*, 1:4-5, discerning the sections (strs. 1-32 being by and large Proverbs, 33-55 Ecclesiastes, 56-101 Song). There are a number of overlaps (e. g. dicta from Proverbs show up in the Ecclesiastes section and at the end), probably owed to confusions in copying.

12 Origène: *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, v. 1, ed./trans. L. Brésard et al., SC 375 (Paris 1991), Prol. § 3 (128-143).

13 “Solomon” in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 3:1925; *Commentaire*, ed. Brésard, Prol. 3.1-3 (128). I am grateful to Arthur Shippee for helpful discussion. See now N. Constatas, “‘Vanity of vanities’? Solomon’s Trilogy and the Patristic Subversion of Scripture,” in *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism*, ed. J. L. Kugel (Leiden 2002) 241-259 esp. 246-250, with n. 11 on 247-248.

14 While the first and second sections can be seen to follow Origen’s take on Proverbs as teaching self-mastery through understanding hidden meanings and on Ecclesiastes as teaching about worldly things as transitory (*Commentaire*, ed. Brésard, Prol. 3.8-15 [132-139]), the



The method throughout is typological.<sup>16</sup> Earlier critics (and they have not been many) have found fault with this, not seeing the typologies and calling the juxtapositions “sinnlose Einschiebungen.”<sup>17</sup> While copying mistakes may well have occurred in this unique manuscript, if one reads through the text the typologies will come out as on the whole clear<sup>18</sup> rather than “senseless” – bearing in mind that the poems were doubtless meant to be heard from being sung aloud to their designated melodies (heightening memorability).<sup>19</sup>

The principal typological figure running through the entire work is that of the Church, **ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ**. Strophe 4 enjoins quiet attentiveness to the three liturgical readings preceding the Pax in the eucharist, in a context that praises humility and repentance. The Queen of Sheba praises the “beautiful house” Solomon has built for God (str. 16; cf. str. 32, asking a blessing on Solomon for building it, and str. 94), a type of the Christian Church made explicit in the pairing of strs. 22 and 23. There Solomon’s prayer in his temple for understanding (1 Kings 3:4; repeated later in str. 66) is juxtaposed with a prayer that the incarnate and crucified Christ may bless the congregation (**ΣΩΟΥΛΕ ΕΒΟΥΝ**) of the Christian people. After a long section denouncing the vanity of worldly riches and status, the listener is summoned to communion in str. 45: “Come, let us go to the house of prayer, the **ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ** of Christ, and receive his body and his blood: they will take away our sins.” Then the discourse returns to the ultimate futility (we are now in the Ecclesiastes section) of riches even if they enable their possessor to attain fleeting dominance: this frames the central Church image with two sets of reminders to those with power not to abuse it. Finally, in the Song of Songs section, the Church is explicitly the Queen Bride of that text: for example, strs. 61-62 (paired) in which **ΤΡΠΩ ΝΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ** speaks in the first person are framed by a liturgical reference to the Virgin Mary imaged as the censer (str. 60), as in the Coptic

third section follows the Canticle interpretation of Bridegroom and bride as Christ and Church rather than as the Word and Soul of *Commentaire* 3.16 (139).

- 15 A post-451 dating clue is given by strophe 48 which asks for blessings on Egypt («this people») «by the mouth of the four wise men», Athanasius, Shenoute, Cyril, and Dioscorus. (For more on Athanasius and Cyril see below.)
- 16 Throughout I take the manuscript divisions – singletons, paired or tripled strophes grouped together and divided from those before and after by a horizontal line across the page – as intentional. Also, throughout this study I shall assume the scriptural references provided in the B KU volume as given, and not recapitulate every single scriptural citation.
- 17 Junker, *Poesie*, 1:5. E. g. for strophe 2: Junker (1:79 n. 3) thought the last four lines were from another poem, not seeing the typology of David/Saviour (Son of David).
- 18 A good example is strophe 56, the opening of the Song of Songs section: it juxtaposes Song 2:11-12, the coming of spring, with Psalm 97:1, an antiphon for Easter Day; this is followed by the equally Paschal str. 58, coupling Psalm 148:1 with Exodus 15:1, also Easter antiphons.
- 19 Möller, “Liederhandschrift,” 108-109 lists the melody names.



eucharist,<sup>20</sup> and a reference to the Last Supper (str. 63). The finale of this hymnlike passage, str. 64, explicitly interprets the garden, bread and wine of Song 5:1 as “the Church, ... the body of the Saviour and his true blood.”

Several strophes speak in the first person (representing Christ the Bridegroom) addressing “my bride, my dove, my perfect Church in truth” (ΤΑΕΚ-ΚΛΗCΙΑ ΜΜΕ ΕCΧΗΚ ΕΒΟΛ) (strs. 76, 77, 81, 82, 88). He says in str. 76, “Arise and follow me [repeated in str. 82], ... for I am Christ: the one who will pray in you [sc. the Church], I will take away his sins”; and in strs. 77, 80-81, and 88 he calls the Church “the place of forgiveness for all people”, repeating a promise of forgiveness for “those who will obey you [sc. the Church]” (strs. 77, 81, 82). These strophes frame a first-person address to Peter, keeper of the keys, to “shepherd, teach, and gather my sheep” (as in John 21:16-17) (str. 78) and a eucharistic-style acclamation to the God enthroned with cherubim and seraphim (str. 79). Strophes 84, 86, and 88 explicitly allegorize Song 1:13, 3:1-3, 4:16, 5:5, and 1:7 as the Sister/Bride’s love for the Brother/Bridegroom, and this is stated in so many words in str. 85; “The brother is Christ, his sister the true Church.”

Strophe 70 is interesting for its exegetical comment on the eucharist, a comment that may contain a dating clue. The lines read: “‘Do not go to church wishing to offer sacrifice in it if you are angry with your neighbor,’ says the wise Athanasius; ‘Go and make peace with him and be reconciled with him with your whole heart, and then give your gift, and the Saviour [will forgive you your sins].’” This is intended to record exegesis by Athanasius of Matthew 5:23-24. The closest identifiable passage<sup>21</sup> seems to be that in the pseudo-Athanasian *Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem* (CPG 2257),<sup>22</sup> qu. 74 (PG 28.645AB). In a context of enquiries about sin – do the sins of the fathers descend to later generations?, what about unrepented sins in cases of sudden death?, what is the sin against the Holy Ghost?, and so on – the questioner asks: “What sin causes a person’s prayer to be rejected (ἀπρόσδεκτον, ‘not accepted’) by God?” The “Athanasius” figure replies, “Μνησικακία (‘remembering wrongs’),<sup>23</sup> according to the Lord’s dictum saying, [quotation of Matthew 5:23-24]. So it is clear that μνησικακία makes the gift of prayer rejected.” If

20 Cf. *The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil* (Cairo 1998) 99-100. Junker (1:59 n. 2) again thought this was from another poem, not seeing the typology.

21 For this I am most grateful to Dr James Ernest, who out of his encyclopedic knowledge of Athanasiana promptly replied to my query by e-mail.

22 See J. Haldon, “The Works of Anastasius of Sinai,” in *The Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East 1: Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad (Princeton 1992) 107-147, esp. 118, 120-121, 125, suggesting a possible late seventh-century date. See also Bandini, cited below.

23 Often a term in monastic contexts such as the *Apophthegmata* and Moschus (Lampe s. v.).



this indeed was the source of our unknown composer's knowledge of "Athanasius", it might suggest a date for the composition of the Coptic work. Recent study of the allied pseudo-Athanasian *Doctrina ad Athanasium ducem* (CPG 2255)<sup>24</sup> has suggested a date for that work of before the first half of the eighth century, and an origin in Chalcedonian Palestine; as for the *Quaestiones*, the first half of the seventh century is mooted. However, this seems too early, given the Q.'s discourse about plagues, Jews, pagans who may very well be the Muslims, and especially images. We may be discerning here a Coptic (Miaphysite) composer writing in Egypt<sup>25</sup> in Umayyad times (the first half of the eighth century) and using an originally Chalcedonian work for his own purposes.<sup>26</sup> This of course was culturally a time in which the Church itself – what was coming to be the "Coptic Orthodox Church" – was being emphasized as what constituted and defined Egyptian Christian identity.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, Christological typology also obtains throughout the composition. As we have seen, already strophe 2 parallels the humility of David and that of his descendant Christ. Strophe 18 links the three wicked betrayals of salvation history: Cain's first murder, Joseph's brothers' sale of him, and Judas's betrayal of Christ. Solomon the proverb-writer prefigures the golden rule of the gospels (str. 21) and prophesies the Saviour (strs. 24, 27); Ecclesiastes the Preacher quotes, in anticipation, the parable of Dives and Lazarus (str. 44). And as we have just seen, the garden of the Song of Songs is an ecclesiastical garden for Christ and his spouse.

There are two or three seemingly inserted folk-song-like compositions that appear in the work. Strophes 68–69 (paired), the "Riddle of the Bird and the Word", seems to have been misplaced by the scribe from the Proverbs section as it explicitly mentions *COXOMON ΠΑΡΕΥΜΙΑΣΤΗΣ*. Then the "Riddles of

24 M. Bandini, "La *Doctrina ad Antiochum ducem* pseudo-athanasiana: tradizione diretta, struttura, datazione," *Prometheus* 23 (1997) 171–187, esp. 185–187.

25 Qu. 109 (PG 28.664D–665A) asks if it is true that the Antichrist will come from Egypt and have a mark on one hand and in one eye. Professor David Cook of Rice University informs me that the *Kitāb al-Fitan* (ca. 844) of Nu'aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī, 329–330, says that the Muslim Antichrist will come from Egypt, specifically from a village near Qaws. This tradition may have originated before the 9<sup>th</sup> c. I thank Prof. Cook for replying to my query by e-mail.

26 Another bit of Athanasiana: str. 92, in a Lenten context (str. 91 has just spoken of 40 days' fasting and continence), has Athanasius speaking in the first person about his exiles, saying that Liberius of Rome shared his exile (at the hands of the Arians). Pope Liberius indeed came to be commemorated in the Coptic calendar, on 9 Phaophi (M. de Fenoyl, *Le sanctoral copte* [Beirut 1960] 74–75), but this seems also to have been a late development.

27 The Miaphysite church, of course, as opposed to the minority Chalcedonian church which had no patriarch between 641 and the 740s (cf. L. MacCoull in *Byzantinoslavica* 60 [1999] 17–18). See T. Wilfong, "The Non-Muslim Communities: Christian Communities," in *Cambridge History of Egypt* 1, ed. C. Petry (Cambridge 1998) 175–197, esp. 184–186, 188–191.



the Queen of Sheba", str. 71-74 and 89-90, pose three questions (what are a tree, a spring, and another tree), but at first only one is answered, that of the first tree being the sun: this is repeated in str. 90 which replies to the three further questions in str. 89. The "spring of water" (str. 72) in Ethiopia finds its answer below in str. 90 which interprets the "messenger" as the water of the Nile that comes in flood from Ethiopia every year; likewise the "stars" are in their turn the solution to the "precious stones" in the later riddle. The "spring of water" in str. 72 also appears to echo the Church/Christological/incarnational typology motif: "My eyes," says the queen, "have seen the sun and the moon when they came down and washed in it [the spring/Nile] on the seventh of the month of Pharmouthi [Julian 2.iv], when all the trees burst into leaf." There appears to be a Christological type-reference in play here. The late pseudo-Cyrillian homily on the Virgin Mary (CPG 5274)<sup>28</sup> preserved in the late tenth-century B. L. Ms. Or. 6782,<sup>29</sup> seemingly addressed to a congregation of nuns, states (fol. 36a20), "On the seventh of the new month according to the reckoning of the Romans, which is the seventh of the month of Pharmouthi, our Lord came down from heaven; he took flesh in this Virgin" (Coptic text in Budge, 1:145; this translation by the present writer). This does not correspond to the usual date for the Annunciation, namely 29 Phamenoth (Julian 25.iii), a week earlier. Did 7 Pharmouthi, in usual Coptic calendars a feast of St. Joachim, Mary's father,<sup>30</sup> become a kind of "octave of the Annunciation" that later took on greater festal value? Perhaps by the time of composition of both Coptic works, the ps.-Cyril encomium and the Solomon verses, 7 Pharmouthi had become linked by virtue of its date in spring to the beginning of the harvest,<sup>31</sup> hence also acquiring Christological-incarnational symbolic weight.

So this work, combining biblical versification with a creative deployment of traditional typology, may well have been composed by an Egyptian Christian in the early eighth century for a monastic audience. It is transmitted in Sahidic, not Bohairic, so it comes from a place and time where Bohairic had not become the universal vehicular language of the Coptic church and its congregations. It was copied, at an unknown but Sahidic-using location, probably in early Fatimid times. As to how wide an audience – monastic and/or lay – it might have reached, one cannot speculate.

28 S. Wessel, "Nestorius, Mary, and Controversy in Cyril of Alexandria's Homily IV (CPG 5248)," *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 31 (1999) 1-49, here 1 n. 2, does not believe it is by Cyril. Cf. CPG IIIA (p. 8).

29 E. A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London 1915), 1:139-146, 2:717-724.

30 De Fenoyl, *Sanctoral*, 138.

31 R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) 20-23, here 22.



As wisdom poetry, the Berlin composition functions above all as a transmitter of identity: Coptic Christian identity. Its author sought to embody that identity in a memorable and singable mode, by using ancient techniques of scriptural discipline and interpretation, interwoven with folk elements. Reciting the work, in whole or parts, would have preserved stability in the community by passing on to a new generation what was needed to educate and civilize them as minority Christians. The figure of Solomon was also appropriated by Muslim thought, and Egyptian Christians would have encountered Muslims named "Suleiman". This work helped reclaim the biblical king-writer for the Christians and promote their perception of a sacred community of their own – what has been termed making a "usable past". If history is identity, the Coptic poems of the wisdom of Solomon sought "the latter in the former by constructing the former from the latter."<sup>32</sup> The verses designated what was important for the culture – a church-centered culture – and provided a view of what was acceptable in the orthodox community. Traditions were adapted to local needs in order to transmit norms for a society that looked to its past for the needs of its present.<sup>33</sup>

32 J. P. Byrne in *Church History* 72 (2003) 879.

33 In loving memory, as always, of Mirrit Boutros Ghali (Maximian, *Elegy* 1.127-128).