The life of Christ in Coptic Psalms
Youhanna Nessim YOUSSEF

Abstract

This article overviews a genre of psalms in the Coptic liturgy that have never been studied before. We publish here three psalms that are used in the month of Kishk and during the Coptic year. We compare the episodes of the Life of Christ treated in these texts. We make a commentary on these psalms.

Introduction

The psalms are hymns recited before the Odes and Theotokias.¹ F. E. Lanne highlights the importance of a thematic study of the psalms, especially those addressed to Jesus Christ. In a previous study, I investigated the date and place of the composition of the Jesus Christ Psalms.²

In this paper, I will study psalms that narrate Christ’s life. It is important to mention that there are psalms commemorating the seven major and the seven minor Lordly feasts.³ These psalms concentrate only on the event or feast commemorated.

The first psalm under discussion here is addressed to Jesus Christ; it is the psalms Batos⁴ from the yearly psalmody and is chanted on Thursdays.⁵ The second psalm under discussion is addressed

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¹ I wish to thank my colleague Lisa Agaiby for her kind help in reviewing the English language of this article.
² In his pioneering study, Yassa'Abd al-Masih analyses the forms of the Psalms (1958, pp. 85–100). Lanne highlights the importance of a thematic study of the psalms, especially the psalms addressed to Jesus Christ. For this genre, see Lanne (1977, pp. 161–203; reprinted in 1997, 307–338). In a previous study (2009, pp. 237–245), I investigated the date and place of the composition of the Jesus Christ Psalms.
³ According to Abu al-Barakat Ibn Kabar, the seven major Lordly feasts are:
1. the Annunciation
2. the Nativity
3. the Epiphany
4. Palm Sunday
5. the Resurrection
6. the Ascension
7. Pentecost

The seven minor Lordly feasts are:
1. the Lord’s circumcision
2. Christ’s entry into the Temple
3. the flight into Egypt
4. the miracle at Cana of Galilee
5. the Transfiguration
6. Maundy Thursday
7. the Sunday of Thomas
⁴ Ishaq 1991a, pp. 2320–2321.
⁵ The psalms endeavour to document the main biblical occurrences from Adam to the Apocalypse.
to the "God of Israel"; it is the psali Adam\(^6\) and this psali is used as an introduction to the third Ode during the month of Kiahk.\(^7\) A second psali Adam (the third psali under discussion here) provides the reader with a list of all the miracles Jesus performed, as documented in the four gospels.

**Remarks on the Rite of Kiahk**

Interestingly, the first two psalis mentioned above are dedicated for the month of Kiahk (Advent fast), the month which generally commemorates the Virgin Mary and precedes the Feast of the Nativity. However, in a previous article, we demonstrated how the Ode that is chanted during Kiahk is in fact a yearly Ode.\(^8\)

There is another hymn for the month of Kiahk that praises the Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace. This hymn contains some stanzas in Greek, while others are in Bohairic and Sahidic.\(^9\) This hymn occurs rarely in the manuscripts of the Psalmodia.\(^10\) It seems that it was introduced from the Upper Egyptian rite.\(^11\) The oldest manuscript, to my knowledge, is from the White Monastery and is now preserved in the library of Leiden University, Ms Insinger No 32.\(^12\) The first stanza of this hymn is mentioned in fol. 66 and is chanted on the second Saturday of Lent, and the second stanza is in fol. 67 and is chanted on the Tuesday of the fourth week of Lent.

It may be assumed, therefore, that the actual rite of the psalmodia of Kiahk consists of earlier rites and hence our two psalis seem to be taken from a rite of another occasion.

We shall compare the two texts narrating the life of Christ in the below tabulation, whilst the psali detailing the miracles will be dealt with separately after that.

**Text**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday Batos Psali(^13)</th>
<th>Psali Adam for the third Ode of Kiahk(^14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ηενηνοθ ίηοτκ Φτ ιηεξ ιε ικ'ιρι ηεμαν κατα πεκνιηγ ιηαι</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You did with us according to Your great mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ηοινον Γαρ Ὺο ηαμενατ ηαπενυου ι εβολ ζαρον ηηενουαι ιηερη ετζουοει</td>
<td>Once more my beloved, let us reject the evil desire of our hearts that lead us to sin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^6\) Ishaq 1991b, p. 61.
\(^7\) Zanetti 1995, pp. 89-90.
\(^8\) Youssef 2007, pp. 169–203.
\(^9\) Labib 1908, pp. 65-66.
\(^12\) Pleyte and Boeser 1897, p. 138.
\(^13\) Tukhi 1764, pp. 106–108; Mina el-Baramusi 1908, pp. 207–209.
\(^15\) Heb. 12:1.
\(^16\) James 1:14.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday Batos Psali</th>
<th>Psal Adam for the third Ode of Kiahk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><code>'ntenchoy epipan </code>nouxi <code>nte benen </code>hnc pxc ben oumwi <code>hmetaomoungk enew ebal enxw  </code>mmoc</td>
<td>And to praise without ceasing the name of Salvation [that is] of our Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming and saying:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xe pade icp pxc pimici ebalen fiaat paseow <code>nniweon tpojy  </code>nai NaN kata pekiwi  `nna!</td>
<td><code>tpenmot </code>nnotk f<code>n </code>mpiel xe akouwpi <code>mpekwpri </code>ja <code>ntekcw </code>mon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You sent Your Son until You save us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><code>tpenmot </code>nnotk f<code>n </code>mpiel xe akbicere ebal <code>eneby </code>maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You were incarnated of Saint Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><code>tpenmot </code>nnotk f<code>n </code>mpiel xe aynay epeskou `nxe nimapewcwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for the shepherds saw Your glory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pade icp pxc fhetenachacs ben bhalcm <code>nte touxda swt </code>monoy <code>yox </code>nai nan</td>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin in Bethlehem in Judea, save us and have mercy upon us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pade icp pxc fhetenachacs ben bhalcm <code>nte touxda swt </code>monoy <code>yox </code>nai nan</td>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin in Bethlehem of Judea, save us and have mercy upon us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pade icp pxc fhetenachacs ben bhalcm <code>nte touxda swt </code>monoy <code>yox </code>nai nan</td>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who was baptised in the Jordan, purify our souls from the defilement of sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><code>tpenmot </code>nnotk f<code>n </code>mpiel xe akwai `nai ben tekmecaci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You showed us Your beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><code>tpenmot </code>nnotk f<code>n </code>mpiel xe ak<code>ipi </code>nzanuphri eyow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You performed many miracles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18 Mt 20:31, Mk 10:48, Lk 18:39.
19 Lk 2:8-13.
20 Mt 1:13, Lk 1:27-34.
21 Lk 1:1-3.
23 Jn 1:7.
24 See the following psali.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday Batos Psal</th>
<th>Psal Adam for the third Ode of Kiahk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who fasted on our behalf, forty days and forty nights, save us and have mercy upon us</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for the Jews conspired against You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified upon the Cross, crush Satan down under our feet</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You were crucified upon the Cross at Golgotha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who was placed in the grave, break in us the thorn of death</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You were placed in the grave like the dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead, and ascended to the heavens; raise us with Your power</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You arose from the dead on the third day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You Descended by Providence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You delivered Adam and his race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel for You agreed with Your Apostles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35 Mt 4:3, Lk 4:12.
38 Rom 16:20.
41 1 Pt 4:6.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday Batos Psali</th>
<th>Psali Adam for the third Ode of Kiahk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ΤΩ ΕΠΩΝΟΜΑΤ ΝΟΤΩΚ</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You ascended to the heavens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φτ ΜΠΙΧΛ ΧΕ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΑΚΕΝΑΝ ΕΡΗΝΗ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΕΠΩΝΙ ΕΝ ΘΗΝΟΥ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>πάς ιης ης</td>
<td>My Lord Jesus Christ, who will come in His second Appearance, treat us lovingly as we stand before Your fearful judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φιεννουμη ης</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΤΕΩΜΑΣ ΣΝΟΥ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΜΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑ</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You sat on the right of the Almighty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔΡΟΥ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΝΑΓΑΠΗ ΝΕΜΑΝ ης</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΠΕΚΑΜΗ ΕΤΟΙ</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, for You will come to judge the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΝΩΤ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΤΩ ΕΠΩΝΟΜΑΤ ΝΟΤΩΚ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φτ ΜΠΙΧΛ ΧΕ ΕΚΕΙ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΕΔΩΝ ΕΝ ΘΗΝΟΥ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΝΗ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>πας ιης ης</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, grant me mercy and pardon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φιεννουμη ης</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>αποκριναι α γ ο</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>γνωρίζοντας ημο</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΝΗ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΝΩΤ</td>
<td>I thank you, God of Israel, I glorify Your name and we worship You according to Your great mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΤΩ ΕΠΩΝΟΜΑΤ ΝΟΤΩΚ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φτ ΜΠΙΧΛ ΤΤΟΥΟΥ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΑΝΕΚΡΑΝ ΟΟΟ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΕΝ ΘΗΝΟΥΜΗ ηνον</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΜΗ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΚΑΤΑ ΠΕΚΑΜΗ ης</td>
<td>For by Your own will and the consent of Your Father and the Holy Spirit, You came and saved us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΝΗναι</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Commentary

The psali of Thursday may be dated to the seventh or eighth century.34 It is attested in the book Lamp of Darkness, authored by Ibn Kabar (1324).35 The earliest manuscripts, surviving from St Macarius and kept in Hamburg, dating to the 14th century, attest to this psali.36

The second psali occurs in the manuscripts of the 17th century,37 and was printed for the first time by Tukhi in 1764.38

Neither psali is acrostic. An acrostic psali may have 24 or 32 stanzas, while the psali for Thursday has only 12 stanzas and the psali of Kiahk has 20 stanzas. This indicates that both authors intended to stress the message, regardless of the consistency of the number of stanzas.

33 Acts 11:11.
34 Mt 16:17, Acts 11:10.
36 Villegard 1924, p. 228; for the author, see Khalil 2000, pp. 629–655.
38 See Streit 2003, pp. 50, 97, 115.
39 See above.
As we can see from the references from both the Old and New Testaments, the authors of these psalms were familiar with the Bible. As a literary structure, both psalms start with one stanza as an introduction, and the last stanzas serve as the conclusion. We may note that there are some episodes missing from each of the psalms. It is remarkable that the event of Pentecost is mentioned in neither psalm. In the second psalm, while the first part of the stanza is addressed to God the Father: "I thank you, God of Israel, for You sent Your Son...", the second part is addressed to God the Son: "You saved us...".

The Greek loan words are among the most common words in Coptic liturgical texts. There is another psalm Adam for the third ode, also for the month of Kiahk, that narrates the miracles of Jesus Christ. 39 This Psalms is acrostic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>άργηματίς ἡμῶν πενήνθη: μὴ οὐκαὶ ἡμῶν ὄγνων: ω μαρτάν ἐρωτάς: ω πένθες Ἰησοῦς πέτα</td>
<td>Grant us, our Master, intelligence and mind. O holy Leader, O our Lord Jesus Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>βοήθησαι ἐλαμπάσσω: μὴ ὁμαλομοσία: μὴ ὄνος ἡμῶν: μὴ ὄγνωστο ἡμῶν</td>
<td>Help my weakness by Your divine power, give us calmness and divine grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>γε γὰρ ἡμῖν πενήνθη: άκήρες πενήνθη: ω πρεσβύταροι: 'ναός 'τοῦ ναοῦ</td>
<td>For with Your mercy, You came for our salvation, O Saviour, the Word of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>λαοί λαχνην: μὴ πιθανωθην: ἢ πνεύμονα: ἐν οἴνῳ</td>
<td>David testified in the psalm: &quot;The King of Heaven is revealed in Zechariah.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>εἰς χειρὶς ματικοὶ: αὐξάνει σωματικός: χάρις: νῦν ψυχός: πνεύματι</td>
<td>For the salvation of Adam, He shone in the flesh, the Lord of Hosts, the incomprehensible [One]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>λάος λαχνης: λαοί μὴ πνεύματι: της αἰείπεν της πνευματικῆς:</td>
<td>Truly numerous are the miracles and the wonders that He did in the world through His humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>άλασχα λαχνης: λαοί μὴ τεχνη: Δαρεία θεόνομος: καταθέσαι</td>
<td>So He truly raised Lazarus from the grave after four days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>οἵτα ἔδωκαν τὸν θάνατον: δαρείις: της πνευματικῆς:</td>
<td>He walked on the sea by His power and He ceased the violence of the waves of the sea.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

39 Labib 1908, pp. 484–489.
40 Meaning uncertain.
41 This is a free quotation, the meaning may refer to Ps 110:2, 132:13, 146:10.
42 Jn 10:40–11:44.
43 Read 'νικόλα.
44 Mt 14:25.
45 Mt 8:24.
Behold, [for] the one born blind, He created His eyes by His sublime power, and He placed it [the clay] so he [who was born blind] could see.\(^{47}\)

Also the daughter of the Canaanite woman, Christ our God healed her.\(^{48}\)

Hence, the Holy Himself, healed both the lame and the deaf\(^{49}\)

[He] raise[d] the son of the widow, because He was compassionate to her weeping, [that is] Jesus the Son of God.\(^{49}\)

The lepers also He cleansed them\(^{50}\) and He cast out the legion.\(^{51}\)

Blessed are You O Christ, for You healed the sorrows (concerning) the daughter of Jairus through Your goodness.\(^{52}\)

Glory be to You O God, for You are the Saviour, You had compassion on humankind and You became Man.\(^{53}\)

You blessed the five loaves and the two fish, and the five thousand were satisfied.\(^{54}\)

[He] bless[ed] the children that came to Him, [and] they received joy according to what pleased Him.\(^{55}\)

He gave light\(^{55}\) to the eyes of Timi son of Timi and He had compassion on him\(^{56}\)

For behold, with the word of His mouth [and] by His authority, He also cast out demons.\(^{57}\)

The God of glory, in Cana of Galilee, revealed His glory and His authority.\(^{57}\)

Without illusion, through His wisdom, He changed the pots of water into wine\(^{58}\)

The Saviour of the world, who is before eternity, had mercy upon His people and freed them\(^{59}\)

O Christ our Master, forgive us our sins and have mercy upon our weakness, we [who] are poor\(^{60}\)

46 It should be "You".
47 Jn 9:12.
48 Mt 15:22.
49 Lk 7:12.
50 Lk 7:21, 17:12.
51 Mk 5:35.
52 Lk 8:41, Mk 5:21–43.
53 Read '\(\text{παρά τὸν οἶκον} \text{αὐτοῦ} \text{κυρίως} \text{ἐπέρριψεν}'\).
54 Lk 9:13, Mt 14:17, Mk 6:38.
55 Referring to sight.
56 Mk 10:46.
57 Jn 21:1.
Commentary

The psali is rhythmic. We note the change of the person and number; for example, in the second stanza we find both the first person singular and first person plural:

-boion étametxwv: (sing.)
- mé n tekkom `nhnyt:
- mhán `noybxov: (plur.)
- néh oymhot `nhnyt

Help my weakness by Your divine power,
give us calmness and divine grace

The author of this psali uses Greek loan words more than the previous two psalis.

In the first stanza the author confuses the fact that the loan word araçh in Greek is feminine, whereas in this psali it is used in the masculine form instead of the common word araçón.

In the third stanza, we find a neologism peqoyxai designated for Saviour.8 This word is used to rhyme nai with oyxal.

In the fourth stanza, the psalm is not a direct quotation but its meaning can be found in more than one place. With the intention of keeping the rhythm, the author of this psali chose of Psalm of David because it is quite hard to find a Coptic word starting with the letter delta.

In the fifth stanza, we find the change of the person from the second person "You"—as in the previous stanzas—to the third person "He".

The sixth stanza seems to be a misreading, it should be read thus to keep the rhythm:

zeow láhnoç: nixon ném níyphri:
etqatóy nh pékocmoc: qiten
temetxwri

Truly, many are the miracles and wonders He did in the world through His might

From the seventh stanza onwards is a list of the miracles. While according to the Gospel of John, the miracle at Cana is the first miracle and that of Lazarus is the last, it seems the authors of this psali wanted to highlight the most spectacular miracle first.

In the eighth stanza, the author mentions two miracles of Jesus in one sentence.

In the ninth stanza, it seems that the author learnt Coptic from the Mukadimát,9 as he did not use the causative for aqápqagay eboá but instead used aqhar aqagay `mboá which is a literal translation from the Arabic colloquial idiom.

In the tenth stanza, we note the omission of the definite article before wepi `ntqami.

The eleventh stanza does not refer to a particular miracle. We note that the independent subject pronoun is placed before the verb and another subject introduced by `nxé is placed after the verb. This is not grammatically correct.

The twelfth stanza starts with an imperative mood in order to begin with a "m." The subject ihe níyphri `mft is not introduced by `nxé.

In the thirteenth stanza, the author mentions two miracles of Jesus in one sentence.

In the fourteenth stanza, the definite article before náthoc is omitted without any grammatical or even rhythmic reason. The name of Jairus occurs in the New Testament as iaipec.

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The Life of Christ in Coptic Psalms

The fifteenth stanza does not narrate any miracle; it is a contemplation on Christ’s incarnation.

In the sixteenth stanza, we note that the definite article is not omitted before ἡ θεόπο. The subject for the verb εἶ is not introduced with ἦν. As this psali is acrostic, hence we find that the seventeenth stanza starts with an imperative mood in order to begin with a “κ”.

In the eighteenth stanza, the name of the blind man in the Gospel of Mark is θεόποσις. The author of our psali refers to an Arabic version. We may note that the possessive adjective is not omitted before θαλέως.

The twentieth stanza, in order to respect the grammar and semantics should be read thus:

φιλήντε χνορν: οινος τεπέζοντος: άπογοννω yen περιογνυ: yen τκανα ἂντε τε 

The twenty-first stanza refers to the same miracle of Cana in Galilee.

The last two stanzas serve as a conclusion to the list of miracles. Hence, the second last stanza should be read thus:

Ψυχρή Ῥενικοσις: φερετω τιξεν ἰη: ἀγάνι βά περιλαος: ἀγατοῦ 

The author of the psali did not mention his name in the last stanza, being consistent with the manner of other authors such as Sarkis, Nicodemous Christodolus, Hermina and Gabriel. Instead, he used the first person plural: “we, us, our.”

Conclusion

The three psalms are unique in the Coptic liturgical corpus. They reflect a familiarity and perfect knowledge of biblical texts by their authors, which may indicate that one or more of them were among the clergy or the learned notables (Archons).

These psalms for a long time served as a pedagogical tool to instruct the congregation. The first two seem to have been composed when Coptic was still understood, and hence the grammatical structures are correct. Both are neither acrostic nor rhythmic. Greek loan words are rarely used and, where they are, they are among the most common in Coptic texts. This indicates that Greek had ceased to be used as a spoken language by the time of composition. It is difficult to date these psalms. Most of the liturgical works appeared at a relatively late date, as they are used more frequently than other literary texts. The psali of Thursday is attested in the manuscripts of the 14th century but the Kiahk psali is not attested before the 17th century. However, the texts should be earlier.

The third psali is a late composition. It is acrostic and follows a particular rhythm. The grammatical structure of the stanza is not correct and the meaning in many places is uncertain.

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Stürk, L.

Tukhi, R.
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Villecourt, L.

Yassa ‘Abd al-Masih

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