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Sahidic Coptic Fragment

Egypt

9th to 10th Century A.D.

Ink & Papyrus

H:24cm W:24cm

A papyrus fragment featuring a previously unknown apocryphal narrative written in Sahidic Coptic. The fragment features two partial columns of text, with 18 and 21 lines of clear script in black ink. While the fragment itself has been dated to 9th-10th Century, the text itself is probably much earlier, dating to not long after the Council of Calcedon (451 A.D.). The contents of the text are based mainly on the story of the crucifixion and death of Christ, as told in the Gospel of John. Although there are several similar apocryphal texts in Coptic, this fragment seems to be unique and, therefore, the only record of a lost text from a formative period of Christian dogma.

The text reads as follows:

'[...] they also sought to kill Lazarus⁹ because of what Pilate said.¹⁰ And amidst all these things, they came from the governor (ῥηγμῶν), each one telling his lie. When they came to the place where they were hanged, the sun rose again, so that they might pursue¹¹ (διώκω) the body (σῶμα). He ordered (κελεύω) the four assassins [...5-6 lines damaged...] eat [them] [...] unless (εἰ μὴ π) [...] holy, so that they should put him in the tomb (τάφος). The other thing they had done was not out of compassion, but (ἀλλά) because they did not think that he would rise. When they broke the legs of the thieves (λησπῆς) who were hanging on the wood with him [...] the [hammer], thinking to break his legs like (ὡς) a robber,

and they found out that he gave his (last) breath. They were full of anger (θυμός) against him, because he had escaped from their hands and from the pain of the hammers. But (δέ) one of those standing by had a spear (λόγχη) in his hand, and he thrust it into his (col. 2) [side]. Immediately, water and blood came out and flowed over his garment and upon the wood. And (δέ) those who were standing by were astonished at what had happened to him, saying to one another, “This man is indeed (ἀληθής) a divine son! Surely, it never happened that blood came out of the dead [...].”

Sahidic was the primary dialect of the Coptic language in the pre-Islamic period. Books of the Old Testament were translated into Egyptian dialects from the Alexandrian Greek version – the complete Sahidic texts of some of the books survive today, as well as a large number of fragments representing most of the canonical books and some of the deuterocanonical books also. The first translation of the New Testament into Sahidic took place at the end of the second century in Upper Egypt, where Greek was less widely understood. Some notable Sahidic Bible manuscripts include the Crosby-Schøyen Codex, British Library MS. Oriental 7594, and Michigan MS. Inv 3992.

Papyrus plants (*Cyperus papyrus*) grew abundantly in the marshes of the Nile Delta and low-lying areas of the Nile valley during Ancient Egyptian times. It had both symbolic and practical import, with amulets of the tjufy hieroglyph (representing the papyrus plant) worn for protection and health. The papyrus was also the heraldic plant of Lower Egypt. Papyrus stalks were used to craft boats, boxes, baskets, sandals, and ropes, and the lower part of the plant could be roasted and eaten. Strips of the pith found inside the stalk were used as the material for writing papyri. The pith was laid down in layers and dried under pressure, before being shaped into rolls that could be left intact or cut into sheets. The strips, generally arranged in two perpendicular layers, are what gives papyrus its distinctive striped appearance. Many documents written of papyrus have been recovered from ancient Egypt, due to preservative qualities of the dry, arid climate of the deserts.