An Old Nubian Curse from the Faras Cathedral

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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

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, Ochala 2017.

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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] ἀρχά
 [3–4] εἰτίρκαν
 [NO] ἐκτιτά

4 τάκ αβ πίμην
 ἄμη ταν εαν
 ξάνελα ὅει σ
 ψήφεκ ἐλμεν

8 ἄμη : ~
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. ⲁⲣⲛⲗ: Jakobielski transcribes ⲁⲣⲛⲗ. The supralinear stroke over the ⲙ is unlikely, as would be expected over the ⲧ. A ⲧ or perhaps even a ⲧ seems possible before the ⲧ, with the latter giving us the pronomial form ⲧⲁⲣⲛⲗ̄, which has been attested for example in *P.QI* II 13.1.4 ⲧⲁⲣⲛⲗ̄.³

2. ⲥⲁⲕⲟⲝⲓⲓ: ⲁⲟⲩ, ‘to send’.⁴ The supralinear stroke over the ⲧ is unexpected and phonologically unnecessary (see the General Commentary). The ending -ⲡⲁⲧ probably may be amended into the conditional ending -ⲡⲁⲧⲓ[ⲧ] continuing on the next line, which has been...

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³ Browne 1989: 11.
⁴ Browne 1996: 79.
attested for example in K 20.3 ṭⲣⲥⲥⲕⲥⲏⲥ, ‘if he doesn’t give’.\(^5\) A form ending in -καν, 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 ṽκⲕⲯⲧⲥ is clearly marks the beginning of a new clause.

3. ṽκⲯⲧⲥ: ṽκⲯ, ‘earth’,\(^6\) followed by determiner -₤. The geminated spelling with ⲧⲧ has not been attested before. The two black traces before ṽκⲯⲧⲥ appear to be ink splatters, not traces of letters. ṽκⲯⲧⲥ is the subject of the verb 4. Ⲫⲏⲓⲓⲓⲓⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲟⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓ𝗿ⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓ работник

4. ṭⲁⲕ: Accusative of the third person singular pronoun, object of 4. Ⲫⲏⲓⲓⲓⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲣⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓⲓⲓⲉⲓ⋯\(^5\) 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: 123.
letter correctly on the previous line. Measurements in feet have been previously attested, e.g. \(P.QI\) 38 τραπεζί, δεί \(\sim\) αλα, ‘4 feet from the altar’.\(^{14}\) δεί \(\gamma\) is the object of \(\pi\rho\epsilon\kappa,\) but the accusative case appears to have been dropped, cf. SC 23.14 κτί \(\kappa\tau\alpha\nu\alpha\).\(^{15}\) Perhaps ‘6 foot in the kingdom of his son’ here refers metaphorically to the place of man in the Christian world.

7. \(\pi\rho\epsilon\kappa\): Unknown nominal form ending in accusative marker \(-\kappa\), which marks the object of 7. \(\epsilon\lambda\nu\epsilon\nu\lambda\nu\), δεί \(\gamma\) \(\pi\rho\epsilon\kappa\). The final \(\lambda\) is dropped, as usual, before the initial vowel of the subsequent word. As Old Nubian does not allow word-initial \(\psi\), 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 \(\psi\), followed by transitive marker \(-\varphi\), and present tense \(-\epsilon\lambda\kappa > -\epsilon\kappa\), cf. \(P.QI\) 4.i.26 ὅρεκα.\(^{16}\) The verbal root \(\psi\) may be related to \(\psi\) ρ ‘to take, suffer’\(^{17}\) and Mattokki iny ‘aufheben, fortnehmen, tragen, eine religiöse Pflicht erfüllen’\(^{18}\).

\(\epsilon\lambda\nu\epsilon\nu\lambda\nu\): Correctly identified by Jakobielski\(^{19}\) as a form of \(\epsilon\lambda\), ‘to find’.\(^{20}\) The form is parallel to 4. \(\pi\nu\epsilon\nu\lambda\nu\). A supralinear stroke over the \(\lambda\) may have been lost and is no longer readable. A similar negative jussive is found in \(P.QI\) 30 34 ε\(\lambda\\)\(\epsilon\nu\epsilon\nu\epsilon\nu\) (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. \(\pi\nu\epsilon\nu\lambda\nu\) and 7. \(\epsilon\lambda\nu\epsilon\nu\lambda\nu\). 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. \(\epsilon\tau\rho\kappa\alpha\nu[\varrho]\) 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 ḫⲉⲥⲛ̄, ‘may he not find’.23

P.QI III 30 30–35

30 ḫⲉⲥⲛ̄ ⲁⲥⲛ̄ ⲇⲟⲥⲕⲁ ⲇⲟⲩⲕⲣ̄ ⲇⲕⲙⲁⲭⲟⲥ ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ ⲇⲕⲙⲁⲭⲟⲥ ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ

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 ḫⲉⲥⲛ̄ … ⲇⲕⲙⲁⲭⲟⲥ, followed by six jussive forms ending in -ⲉⲥⲛ̄.

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:

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 ⲇⲕⲙⲁⲭⲟⲥ (Browne 1991: 22). See: Van Gerven Oei, Tsakos 2018 for discussion.
24 Note that the Old Nubian form of Iscariot is ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ, 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, Ochala 2017: 307–312, no. 2.
26 Łajtar and Ochala suggest ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ. I do not think the reduplication needs to be introduced to render the same meaning.
27 The benefactive verb ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲁ implies a first person recipient.
Interestingly, the prayer from the Faras Cathedral contains the word τοῦς for ‘curse’, whereas P.QI III 30 has the word κᾶσσα. The former is related to Andaandi τūs, ‘curse’\(^{28}\) and Mattokki τūs, ‘fluchen, verwünschen, hassend’\(^{29}\) while the latter is related to Nobin 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 Ochala.\(^{32}\)

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. ἐὑρίκαν[νο] and 2. ἐχεῖ̂πχ, 4. ἅβ, 4. πινελῆν, and 7. ῥμεκ 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 ἐχεῖ̂πχ, ‘earth’ that will no longer produce crops is combined with a second element, which refers to τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ, a reference to Paul’s letter to the Col 1:13, 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.

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\(^{28}\) Armbruster 1965: 206.

\(^{29}\) von Massenbach 1933: 220.

\(^{30}\) Khalil 1996: 30.

\(^{31}\) von Massenbach 1933: 166.

\(^{32}\) Łajtar, Ochala 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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