

# A Fourth Century Coptic Version of the Joseph Story

Fragments of a 4th Century Coptic manuscript in the University Library of Utrecht

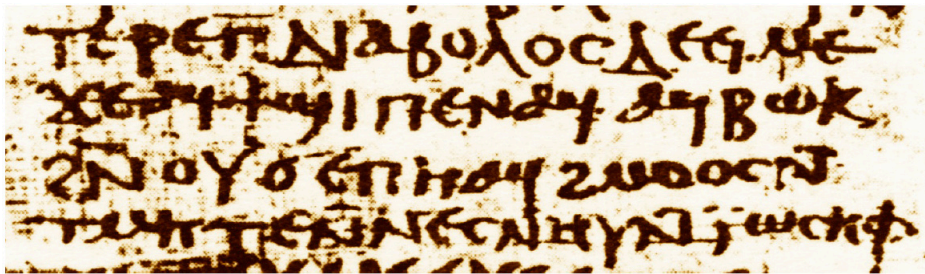
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... of Joseph.  
But once upon a day it happened  
(that) Joseph (went to his brothers).  
(The devil appeared) before him in the likeness  
of an old man. He said to him,  
"Joseph, whither shall you go?"  
He answered and said to him, "I shall  
go to my brothers." The devil said  
to him, "Follow me, in order that I  
may lead you unto them, because it is I who know  
where they are." Joseph said to him,  
"Remove yourself from me. I  
know who you are. It is you  
who leads astray since the fathers  
of my fathers. I shall not follow  
you." The devil however,  
was shamed by Joseph.  
He removed himself from him.  
But when the devil came to know  
that he put him to shame, he went away  
immediately. He sat down  
amidst Joseph's brothers.  
He caused them to think on that which was evil  
with respect to their brother. But when his brothers  
saw him, they did not  
wish to come to him. They said to each  
other, "Lo, that dreamer of dreams  
came to us." Rise,  
come, and let us kill him and  
let us see what his dreams  
will do to us." ...

From an article in *Vigilae Christianae* by J. Zandee, “Iosephus contra Apionem, An Apocryphal Story of Joseph in Coptic,” 1961, XV, pp. 193-195.

“Among the collection of Coptic manuscripts bought by Prof. Dr. G. Quispel at Berlin the 7th January, 1956, from the inheritance of the late Prof. Carl Schmidt on behalf of the University Library at Utrecht, there are some papyrus sheets from a miscellaneous codex. The handwriting may date from the 4th century. The dialect is Sahidic. The quire contained 8 sheets. The first part was an apocryphal act of Andrew. It is followed by an apocryphal story of Joseph in Dothan. The outer 4 sheets are lost. The act of Andrew begins on page 9. Also the next sheet is lost It encompassed the pages 11 and 12 of the act of Andrew and pages 19 and 20 of the story of Joseph. ...” (p.193.)

Of particular interest for this study are lines 19 - 22 in which the unidentified man in Genesis 37:15, **וְיִשׁ** (*ish*), has become ΠΑΙΔΒΟΛΟΣ *p'diabolos* (definite article Π plus ΔΙΑΒΟΛΟΣ from the Greek διαβολος *diabolos*), the “devil” in the disguise of an “old man.”



ΠΕΡΕ ΠΑΙΔΒΟΛΟΣ ΔΕ ΕΙΜΕ  
 ΧΕ ΔΑΤΩ ΠΕ ΝΑΔ. ΔΑΒΩΚ  
 ΖΝ ΟΥ Ο ΕΠΗΘΑ ΖΩΟΟΣ Ν  
 ΤΜΗΤΕ ΠΝΕCΝΗΥ ΠΐΩCΕΦ

But when the **devil** came to know  
 that he put him to shame, he went away  
 immediately. He sat down  
 amidst Joseph’s brothers.

Zandee refers to this embellishment as evidence that the writer of this Coptic version of the Joseph story, interprets Joseph as if he were like the Egyptian anchorites who were often said to be able to recognize Satan’s disguises. To quote from Zandee: “In the apophthegmata it occurs more than once that an anchorite is tempted by the devil in disguise. The saint has entered the desert to combat the devil in his own territory. Like in our story the demons come back the more exasperated and their attacks become repeatedly heavier as the ascetics warded them off again and again. Satan changes himself into an angel of light but a brother in his humility esteems it too great an honour that Gabriel comes to see him and says, “Thou hast been sent to another, more worthy than I am.”

(ΠΑΙΔΒΟΛΟΣ) ΖΑΤΕCΕΖΗ ΜΠCΜΟΤ  
 Π[Ο]ΥΖΛΑC ΠΡΩΜΕ ΠCΧΑΔ

(The devil appeared) before him  
 in the likeness of an old man.

In lines 4-5 above Zandee first notes the similarity of the interpretation of the person who directs Joseph in his search for his brothers (Gen. 37:15) as being Π (the) ΔΙΑΒΟΛΟΣ (devil) disguised Π ΐ Ν; (in) Π (the) CΜΟΤ (likeness) Ν; (of) ΟΥ (an) ΖΛΛΟ (old) Ν; (of) ΡΩΜΕ (man) and the many stories of the desert fathers who battle with the devil who comes to them in different disguises. In the original text the person is simply referred to as **וְיִשׁ** (*ish*) (a “man”). The usual interpretation of this “man” is that it is an angel in disguise. (compare to the Ethiopian handout on Zenahu laYosef)