

Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Ján Pauliny

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Bratislava, June 2016

The Editors

CONTENTS

List of Contributors	7
ZUZANA GAŽÁKOVÁ:	
<i>Ján Pauliny as a Scholar and Teacher</i>	11
ZUZANA GAŽÁKOVÁ:	
<i>A Selected Bibliography of Works by Ján Pauliny</i>	19
Part I: Arabic Popular and Modern Literature	
KATARÍNA BEŠKOVÁ:	
<i>In the Enchanted Castle with Šahrazād: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Tawfīq Al-Ḥakīm between Friendship and Rivalry</i>	33
GIOVANNI CANOVA:	
<i>Hand-mill Women's Songs from Upper Egypt</i>	49
HERBERT EISENSTEIN:	
<i>Sagenhafte Vögel in der arabischen Literatur</i>	63
ZUZANA GAŽÁKOVÁ:	
<i>Major Female Characters in the Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan</i>	87
MÁRIA LACINÁKOVÁ:	
<i>The Marvels of the World and the Otherworld in Islamic Tradition according to al-Kisā'ī (A Brief Presentation)</i>	113
FRANTIŠEK ONDRÁŠ:	
<i>The Contemporary Literary (Re)flection of Ancient Egypt</i>	133
STEPHAN PROCHÁZKA:	
<i>The Story of Sālim az-Zīr Abū Laylā al-Muhalhil in Cilician Arabic (Southern Turkey)</i>	149
Part II: Arab History and Islam	
EMANUEL BEŠKA:	
<i>The Anti-Zionist Attitudes and Activities of Rūḥī al-Khālīdī</i>	181
JAROSLAV DROBNÝ:	
<i>The Description of Hungaria in Kitāb Ġuġrāfiyā by Ibn Sa'īd al-Maġribī</i>	205

RAIF GEORGES KHOURY: <i>L'Importance de l'histoire des prophètes dans la constitution d'une histoire universelle au début de la culture islamique</i>	225
GABRIEL PIRICKÝ: <i>The Gülen (Hizmet) Community as both a Transnational Movement and a Turkish Foreign Policy Actor</i>	271
Part III: Codicology, Papyrology and Linguistics	
SLAVOMÍR ČEPLÖ: <i>On Herod and John the Baptist: An Edition and Translation of a Previously Unknown New Testament Apocryphon</i>	295
PAOLO LA SPISA: <i>The Dissolution of Libraries: Two Case Studies about Christian- Arabic Manuscript Collections</i>	321
HARRY T. NORRIS: <i>A Recent Document from the Library in the Camp of Shaykh Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Aghlālī, Abalagh, Republic of Niger, about the Early History of the Tikna and Other Tribes of the Wād Nūn and the Western Sahara</i>	337
VIERA PAWLIKOVÁ-VILHANOVÁ: <i>Kiswahili – Language and Culture, Then and Now</i>	351
LUCIAN REINFANDT: <i>Versuchte Einflussnahme auf einen behördlichen Entscheidungsträger: P.Vind.inv. A.P. 15228 aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek</i>	367

ON HEROD AND JOHN THE BAPTIST:
AN EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF A
PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN NEW TESTAMENT
APOCRYPHON

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Dedication

Professor Pauliny's deep and detailed knowledge of any subject matter he turns his attention to and the great philological skill he demonstrates every step along the way continue to inspire those of us who were fortunate enough to be his students. Hoping that it will find favor in his eyes, I offer this paper as a small contribution to the study of the subject areas where Professor Pauliny's work has particularly enriched our knowledge, namely Islamic prophetic legends, Arabic folk literature and Arabic-speaking Egypt in general.

The Life of John the Baptist

The *Life of John the Baptist* (*Life Bapt. Serap.*; CANT 183; previously also known as *Serapion's Life of John the Baptist*) is a Christian apocryphal work extant only in Arabic which recounts the life of John the Baptist (Yūḥannā) from his annunciation to his death and concludes with the history of his remains and their transfer to Egypt. Claiming to be composed by Serapion, a bishop in fourth/fifth-century Egypt, and framed as a sermon, it combines various traditions surrounding John the Baptist. These traditions fall into two major groups: the first is the actual biography of John the Baptist (chapters 1–13) which begins with a faithful retelling of the account from Luke 1:5–8, interspersed with material from Matthew 1–2. The narrative then proceeds from the events surrounding the slaughter of the innocents and John's escape to the wilderness (3–4) through to the death of Elizabeth and Jesus' miraculous flight to the wilderness to comfort John (7), ending with John's first encounter

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the help of Michael Cooperson with the edition and translation of the Arabic text as well as the assistance of Tony Burke with the final version of the paper. All errors remain mine.

with Herod and Herodias (8). After baptizing Jesus (9), John once again runs afoul of Herod and Herodias (10) only to be arrested and executed at Herodias' behest (11). His head, however, continues to preach for 15 years until it is buried (13). The second part of the text details the removal of the body of John the Baptist from his grave during the reign of Emperor Julian, and its transfer to Egypt and veneration by the patriarchs of Alexandria (14). The work concludes with the account of the consecration of a church dedicated to John's remains (15).

Life Bapt. Serap. was first published in 1927 in a critical edition and translation into English by Alphonse Mingana² using two Garšūnī manuscripts from the collections of the University in Birmingham. After the publication of his edition, Mingana noted the existence of two additional Garšūnī manuscripts,³ but little to no scholarly attention was devoted to either the manuscripts or the text itself for the next eight decades.⁴ In 2014 I prepared a new translation of the text which will appear in a collection of translations of Christian apocryphal literature titled *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*.⁵ In the process, I expanded the manuscript base to ten Garšūnī manuscript witnesses with at least three more that are known but which are inaccessible at the moment.

While I assembled the manuscripts to prepare the new translation, I came across one more manuscript that at first glance seemed to be another recension of *Life Bapt. Serap.*: Bibliothèque nationale de France Fonds Arabe 258. The manuscript contains a work written in Arabic script (*nashī*) titled – by a later hand – “A speech/sermon/report on Herod and John the Baptist”.⁶ Incomplete at the beginning, the text starts off mid-sentence and continues to recount the same events as ch. 8 of *Life Bapt. Serap.*: John begins to rebuke Herod for taking the wife of his brother, and his disembodied voice haunts

² MINGANA, Alphonse: A New Life of John the Baptist. In: MINGANA, Alphonse (ed.): *Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshūni*. Edited and Translated with Critical Apparatus. Volume I. Cambridge (W. Heffer & Sons Limited) 1927, pp. 138–45 and 234–87.

³ MINGANA, Alphonse: *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts*. Volume I. Cambridge (W. Heffer & Sons Limited) 1933, pp. 667–68 and 680.

⁴ The only notable exception is BURKE, Tony: The New Testament and Other Early Christian Traditions in Serapion's Life of John the Baptist. In: ROESSLI, Jean-Michel – NICKLAS, Tobias (eds.): *Christian Apocrypha. Receptions of the New Testament in Ancient Christian Apocrypha*. Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2014.

⁵ BURKE, Tony – LANDAU, Brent (eds.): *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI (Eerdmans) 2016.

⁶ TROPEAU, Gérard: *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes. Première partie: Manuscrits chrétiens*. Tome I, Nos 1 – 323. Paris (Bibliothèque nationale) 1972, pp. 217–222.

Herodias so much that she searches her bedroom for its origin and, having failed to find it, entices Herod to kill John. Although the content of this passage is nearly identical to *Life Bapt. Serap.*, the wording and language are quite different, leading to the conclusion that BnF Ar 258 is an independent work. This makes the text quite remarkable: as I note in my analysis of the contents of *Life Bapt. Serap.*, the entire work is a composite of various sources and ch. 8 is a major piece of evidence for this position. Chapter 8 focuses on the same events as ch. 10. – i.e. John's rebuke of Herod (cf. Matthew 14:3–5) – but while ch. 10 follows the narration in logical and chronological order (starting with Herod's betrayal of Philip and providing a detailed description of Herod's affair with Herodias), ch. 8 jumps in medias res and is one of those few parts of *Life Bapt. Serap.* which have no equivalent in the rich tradition surrounding John the Baptist. To find a nearly identical version of this story in an independent work sheds new light on the textual history of *Life Bapt. Serap.* regardless of whether it represents the ultimate source of this motif used by the compiler of *Life Bapt. Serap.* or merely another independently preserved strand of this particular tradition concerning John the Baptist. In this paper, I provide an edition and translation of the text – provisionally named *On Herod and John the Baptist (On Herod Bapt.)* – and an analysis of its relationship with *Life Bapt. Serap.*, other Christian apocrypha and related traditions.

The manuscript

On Herod Bapt. occupies folios 218^r–223^v in manuscript No. 258 of the Fonds Arabe collection in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (henceforth BnF Ar 258).⁷ This manuscript, written by a single hand, contains 280 folios numbered in Coptic numerals. It bears no copyist's name or date but has been provisionally dated to the fifteenth century. *On Herod Bapt.* is the twentieth of 25 distinct works (predominantly lives of prophets and martyrdom narratives) and is incomplete at the beginning with some minor lacunae on ff. 218^r and 221^v and slight damage to the first five lines of both sides of folio 221. Like the rest of the manuscript, it is written in careless *nashī* which often fails to distinguish between *rā'*, *dāl* and *waw*, and displays some idiosyncrasies, such as the shape of the final *kāf* which freely alternates between the standard final form and a final form resembling the unconnected middle form.

⁷ See TROPEAU, *Catalogue*, pp. 221–222 for physical description and details.

Orthography and language

The orthography of BnF Ar 258 generally follows the usual conventions with the following exceptions: *hamza* is not written in any position, the dagger *alif* is replaced by a regular *alif* (with the exception of the close deixis demonstrative), the placing of the two dots above a *tā'* *marbūṭa* is inconsistent and the letter is occasionally replaced by a *tā'* in status constructus; the final *alif* in the third person imperfect plural is often missing, and the *shadda* is applied inconsistently.

One notable feature of the orthography of BnF Ar 258 is the way the word *šayṭān* ("Satan") is written: in both its occurrences (f. 221^v, line 17 and f. 221^r, line 2), the final *nūn* is inverted and written above the rest of the word. This is undoubtedly a variation on the practice of writing the names of hated persons upside down, common in Syriac script (in both Syriac and Garšūnī texts) and also attested in Arabic texts in Arabic script.⁸

In terms of language, the Arabic of the text for the most part follows the conventions of Christian Arabic (whether in Arabic script or Garšūnī) in the variety usually referred to as Middle Arabic.⁹ Some lexical choices (such as the term *qayṭūn* for "small room"¹⁰ or *ḥšr* meaning "to stuff"¹¹) and some morphological elements (such as the doubled consonant in *minnu[h]* "from him") compound the external evidence (e.g. the use of Coptic numerals and Coptic names of months) that the Arabic text handed down to us in BnF Ar 258 was composed in Egypt. In fact, as with *Life Bapt. Serap.*, the spelling of some words (such as Arabia as 'arābyā with an initial *alif* in section X5) and the wording of certain passages suggests that *On Herod Bapt.* may also be a translation into Arabic. If this is indeed so, then considering the Egyptian origin of the work and its ties to Coptic literature (elaborated on below), Coptic is the most likely source language.

Text and translation

This section provides an edition and translation of the Arabic text of *On Herod Bapt.* with philological and critical notes. For the purposes of comparison with *Life Bapt. Serap.* and further analysis, I have divided the work into six sections

⁸ <https://hmmmlorientalia.wordpress.com/2014/01/02/satan-upside-down-in-an-arabic-manuscript/> retrieved on October 4th, 2015.

⁹ While I have my reservations regarding the appropriateness and indeed the ultimate utility of this label, this is not the place to engage in that discussion.

¹⁰ DOZY, Reinhart: *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes. Tome second.* Leiden (Brill) 1881, p. 378.

¹¹ BADAWI, El-Said – HINDS, Martin: *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic.* Beirut (Librarie du Liban) 1986, p. 207.

marked /X1/ to /X6/. Additionally, the following abbreviations and symbols are used:

/218r/ lorem ipsum	start of manuscript folio
[...]	illegible text
[lorem ipsum]	restored text
(lorem ipsum)	(translation) text added to provide a fluent translation
lorem ipsum	(translation) homiletic material
lorem ipsum	(translation) direct quotations from other works
(lorem ipsum)	(translation) source of quotations and references
lorem ipsum (?)	uncertain reading or translation

Arabic text with notes

218r

واتخذ امرات اخيه له زوجه في السر. وكان اذا وجد خلوه اختلا بها في المقبره المنتنه. اعني بيته المملوا نتن. ليتم خطيته معها. وكان اذا اختلا بها. ينادي عليهم جبرائيل الملاك. بصوت انسان. عن لسان يوحنا المعمدان. قايل لا يجب لك ان تاخذ امراة اخيك. كما يقول يوحنا بن زكريا. ما تحل لك ان تاخذ امراة اخوك وهو في الحياه. وكان اذا كانوا في الليل. ويسمعوا فيه الصوت فيسرجوا المصابيح ويطلبوه. يظنوا انه معهم في قبطونهم فلا يجدوا شيئا غير الصوت المسموع. وكانوا في قلق عظيم اذ لا يجدوه. واما هي فكانت تقول له. ارسل فرسانك الي البريه. بنطورينا ليقتلوه قبل ان يعلم احدا. وكان الملك اذا اراد يفعل هذا. لا يجد اليه سبيل لان الله مخلصه. ثم انها قالت اذا ما سمعنا صوته دفعة اخرى. احضرنا السحره ليمسكوه ويقتلوه. ونستريح منه اعني هذا يوحنا الذي في البريه هايم. الذي ما يستحق جسده لباسا [...] الا [و]بر الابل. حتي ييكت ملك. قد [...] ساير الكور و تحزمها. وانها قالت لهيودس. [ال]ذي تريد ان تفعله معي افعلها ضاهر¹². فليس حذا يقدر ينطق في هذه البلاد. حتي تجد السبيل الي قتل يوحنا. فاستمالت الزنيه قلب هيرودس

218v

وطاعها فيما التمتست. حتي عمل علي انه يقتل اخيه سزا. واتخذها لنفسه ظاهر. حتي تكمل شهادة يوحنا. كما قال متي الانجيلي لما كان في تلك الايام. اقبل يوحنا المعمدان. يكرز في البريه قايل. توبوا فقد اقترب ملكوة السموات. وكان يخرج اليه كل من في بيت المقدس. ويعتمدون منه. معترفين بخطاياهم. فلما سمعت هيروديا بقدمه فرحت جدا قايله قد قرب الي عذري وكانت لا تتمكن منه. لان يوحنا كان عند الكافه كالنبي. فلما سمع اخيه فيلبس. بظهور يوحنا. جا اليه واعلمه كل شي. حينئذ ارسل يوحنا تلميذه ونهاه. فلم ينتهي ذلك الطاعي بل كان يستهزي بيوحنا. اما تلك النجسة غضبت جدا. وقالت للملك حذه واسجنه حتي تجد السبيل الي قتله. قال اخاف الشعب يتظاهر علي من اجله. فقالت له اذا سالوك عنه. فقول لهم ان الملك قبصر امرني بذلك. فحسن خالك¹³ عنده. وارسل للوقت واخذه

¹² A scribal error for ظاهر

¹³ Most likely a scribal error for حالك

219r

وسجنه. حتي تجد السبيل لقتله. وانها امرت السجان ان يعذبّه ليمينته. فلما كان يوم ولادت هيرودس. اتفقت معه علي موت يوحنا. بعلّة قيصصر. وامر فاجتمع اليه وجوه المدينة. ليصلح لهم في يوم ولاده. وان تلك النجسه. انفذت اليه ابنتها الفاسقه. مزينه باللباس الحسن. والروايح الذكيّه. ورقصت في مجلسه بالملك. وحيث السكر والغنا والشهوات. فليس هناك شيا من الخيرات. اسمعوا يا احباي المناظر القبيحه. من الرقص والغنا. الذي يهلك كل شي. لتعلموا سبب القتل كثرت الرقص فعلت ذلك كما وصّتها امها. قال فاعجب الملك حسننها. وقال لها اطلبي منّي ما تريدي الي نصف مُلكي. وانها خرجت الي امها تشاورها. فقالت اساليه ان يعطيك راس يوحنا المعمدان في طبق. وللوقت عادت الي الملك. وطلبت راس يوحنا. ولو انها طلبت منه¹⁴ جوايز كثيره. لكان اصلح لها من طلب راس يوحنا. يا لشقوة الجاريه. ويا للوالده الشر لم تطلبي ذهب ولا فضه ولا جواهر

219v

ولكن طلبتي راس يوحنا. فلما سمع الملك خزن واغتم بالحال. منجل اليمين التي حلف بها. فهو لم يكن منجل قتل يوحنا. بل من اجل فزع من الشعب. لآته كانوا يروه مثل نبي. ولو انه حزن من اجل الزكي. لم يكن بدّيًا بلقيه في السجن وكان نفس هيرودس مثل السفينه في البحر والامواج الهايجه تضربها. منجل فزع من الشعب. فلما اشدت علي المجنون كثرت الامواج منجل الشهوة¹⁵ المرّه. وانه سبق اليها بالايمان¹⁶ حينئذا عزم علي القتل. فبعث سيافه الي يحنّا¹⁷ وهو في السجن. فلما علم النبي بذلك اخرج راسه من السجن. فقطع راسه لكي لا يخيب الملك في يمينه. اذكرو انتم واعرفوا من الايمان. لان سيدنا قال لا تحلفو البتّه. لو لا يمين ذلك المجنون لما امر بقتل النبي. فلما حلف لم يرمي ان يكذب في وسط المتكبين. وكان يمينه لكمال ودي ولذلك بعث قطع¹⁸ راس يوحنا. ليت شعري يا اخوه ايّ يد استجرت وامتدّت الي راس يوحنا. ذلك الذي انست اليه سباع البريه. وارتعدت

220r

منه الاسود الضاريه ذلك الذي اراتبت منه الحيات والافاعي والتنانين. ذلك الذي انجل البرّ لكرامته. ذلك الذي يسعا اليه. زهر البراري. والعشب والعقاقير. ليثمر له العسل من نقط الطل والندا. ايّ يد¹⁹ سبقت وقطعت الراس. ولم ترتعد. ولا هالها ذلك المنظر الالهي. هيرودس لمّا سكر لبث²⁰ بعث²¹ سيافه بسيف. ولم يكن ينظره. فقطع راس يوحنا. ولم ينقط منه دم. لانه لم يشرب خمر قط. وصير راسه في قصعة العشا. وفيما هم يحملوه كان الراس يصيح قايلًا ليس يجوز ان تاخذ امرات اخيك. يا لهذا العجب. ذلك الصديق بعد موته كان حيّ يا للقساوه. رجل لا عقل له في القصعه الذي كان ياكل اللحم فيها.

¹⁴ Note the shadda, which would indicate the actual pronunciation as [minnuh] or similar.

¹⁵ The superficial definite article is most likely a scribal error.

¹⁶ Most likely a scribal error for يمين

¹⁷ A scribal error for يوحنا

¹⁸ Most likely a scribal error for the imperfect.

¹⁹ Note the shadda, which indicates the actual pronunciation of the word is [yVdd] and typical of modern dialects cf. BEHNSTEDT, Peter – WOIDICH, Manfred: *Wortatlas der arabischen Dialekte. Band I: Mensch, Natur, Fauna und Flora*. Leiden (E.J. Brill) 2011, p. 140.

²⁰ This was crossed out in the manuscript.

²¹ Sup. lin. in the manuscript.

وضع راس يوحنا القديس. ما كفاك يا هيرودس. ما فعله سميك هيرودس في بيت لحم. ما افزعك ما كان من صراخ الابا والامهات. ووجه علي بنهم. حتي ان الارض انتضت²² من لبن ثدايا امهاتهم. اي سبع او بهيمه راي مثل هذه الاطفال يهرق دماهم. ولا يبكي ولا يحزن. اذ يرا صبيان اطفال انقبا الانفس اطهار بغير عيب يقتلون

220v

ما كفاك يا وقح فعل ذلك بالمباركين. حتي انك ايضا قتلت يوحنا. ذلك الذي ما تستحق شعرة واحده من راسه تسقطه هيرودس ذاك قتل بني راحيل وانت قتلت يوحنا الذي هو فحن البيعه. بأي معنا اغفر لكم. قال الرب او من مدينة الدم. الذي ملك فيها هيرودس. الويل له ان ذلك الذي ترجأ ان يملك يحسن تدبير من يحب لرياسه. ومنه تعلمت اليهود القتل وعلي قتل ربنا استجروا ذلك الاطفال قتل وبعد الراس يوحنا قطع. واليهود لاشعيا نشروا. وارميا في الجب رموا. والانبيا رجما. وزكريا في الهيكل قتلوا. ولربنا والاهنا يسوع المسيح صلبوا. نقول هذا كله منجل شرهم. فيا للشر الذي جلب الخير. والان فلنرجع الي كمال الشرح. ونذكر خبر الراس الطاهره. قال فارسل سيف وجاها²³ براس يوحنا في صحن وسط المجلس. وعيناه مفتوحتان ووجهه يزهر. كالانسان الشارب الخمر. يفوح منه رائحة ذكيه. بمنظر احسن يشاهده كل احدا. وتركوا اجثته مطروحه. يريدوا يفعلوا فيها ما يختاروا. وكان هناك امراة صالحه لخوزي خازن هيرودس يدعا يونا. حرس الجسد حتي اخذوه تلاميذه

221r

في الليل من الحفر ف فتركوه في قبرا اليسع النبي. واعلموا [سيدنا] يسوع المسيح تلاميذه بذلك فاما راس يوحنا فامر الملك ان يدفعوها للابنه. وان الصنيه ودعتها لأمها. ومعها الاستادين. فلما نظرت اليها الملك الوقحه. وعينيها مفتوحه وسمعتها وشبهه كانه في الحياه اشارت بيدها. [...] للراس هذه العيون الوقحه الذي لم [...] من ملك لارض الذي له الحكم. انا اعميهم بيدي وهذه اللسان الذي نطق وقال لا تحل لك ان تاخذ امرات اجيك و هو في الحياه. انا اقطعه واحلق شعر هذه الراس والحيه. اجعلهم حشر لمرقدي. ورفعت بيدها تريد تضرب [وجهه]. وللوقت افترش شعره علي الصحن وطارت الراس وانتشق البيت وخرجت منه. فانقطعت يدي هيروديا للوقت وسقطوا علي الارض. وفتحت الارض فاها. وابتلعت جسدها الي رقبتها وهي في الحياه. ونزلت الي الهاويه لاجل اتامها. فاما ابنتها فدخل الشيطان²⁴ فيها. وكانت تقطع كلما في البيت من الانيه. حينئذ اخذ واحدا من الاستادين يدي هيروديا. وكانهم قد احترقوا بالنار وذهب بهم الي الملك في المجلس. فقال له الملك ما حلك وما يبكيك. فقال لع الويل لنا الذي دخلنا براس النبي الي منزلنا.

221v

وكانت لنا حزن وهلاك. واخبره الاستاد قضيّة هيروديا. والشيطان²⁵ الذي دخل في بنتها. فلم يصدقها الملك. واخرج الايديين المفطوعتين. وطرحهم في وسط المجلس. وهم مخضبين بالحمرة. مع الخواتم والاسواره الذهب. عند قلم الملك²⁶ قام الملك بفضيحة عظيمة واتي الي المنزل. فنظر راسها ظاهر من الارض. فامر ان يحفروا لجسدها ويصعدوا به فلم يجد لها جسد. ولا عضوا منه. لانه هبط الي اسفل

²² Most likely a scribal error for ابيضت

²³ Possibly a scribal error for جاء, where the copyist mistook the original hamza for a hā'.

²⁴ Note that the final letter is inverted and placed above the rest of the text.

²⁵ See the previous note.

²⁶ The text is corrected in the manuscript.

الهاويه. فغضبُ الملك. وامر يقطع راس الاستاد لموقته²⁷ في المجلس. بحظرت الاكابر. واما ابنتها. فكانت تتخبط وتوهم علي الناس وتقع شعر راسها. من كثرت تخبطها. فقطع الملك راسها. وتقدم الي صحابه ان لا يعلمو احد بهذه السر. وظهرت فضيحة هيروديا لسائر الجموع. وفاحت رايحة بنتها. فاما راس يوحنا فكانت تحوم كالنسر باجنحه تظهر الخطيه الذي كانت وهي طابره علي المدينه نهار ذلك اليوم جميعه قايله. لا تحل لك ان تاخذ امرات اخيك. فسمعا كل احد تصرخ في الهوي وكانو الناس سجدوا لله سبحانه قايلين. كيف يكون راس ينطق بلا جسد. فاما هيرودس فلم يظهر في

222r

تلك الايام. لاجل الصوت الذي كان يبكته . فاما الراس فذهبت الي سيدنا يسوع المسيح. علي جبل الزيتون وسجدت امامه. وانه قبلها. فاما مريم الطاهره فانها بكت وقالت. اين عيني زكريا. واليشع ابويك ينظروا اليك. فاشار اليها سيدنا يسوع²⁸ المسيح. وقال لها لا تبكي. وكما انه قتل يوحنا. كذلك انا ايضا اقتل. وليس مثله. لكن اصلب واطعن بحربه في جنبي الايمن. فينبع منه مار ودم. ثم قال السيد لراس يوحنا. اذهب واكرز في جميع العالم بخطية هيرودس. فقد جعلت لك راسك كاجنحه النسر يطير بك. قد جعلت روحك في راسك خمسة عشر سنه. الي ان تكمل مشيت ابي الذي في السموات. وامر الملايكه ان يحملوا راسك الي عند ابيك زكريا. مع الاطفال الصغار لانه الكاهن معهم. ولتكن في وسطهم ايضا. لانك صاحب المعموديه. ولم يعتمدوا الا بدمائهم. قد جعلت [ك]²⁹ مع جسد اليشع النبي. ونفسك عن يميني الذي في السموات. وروحك في راسك خمسة عشر سنه. واذا كملت مشيتي بعد ثلاث سنين اخري. اقيمها بعدك تكمل المواعيد. وامر السيد المسيح الراس قطارت في الهوا. وسمع صوتها في ساير المدن والقرا والقفار

222v

والذين في البحار سمعوا صوتها ونظرو اليها. بما تبكت هيرودس الطاعي. وبعد ذلك ذهب الي المشرق في ديار ارايبيا³⁰. وقدم تجار سمعوا صوتها. وهم مسافرين ببضايهم. وارادوا اخذها. واتبعوا نفوسهم في اخذها. حتي جاهم الصوت قابلا لهم لا تتعبوا نفوسكم. لم يات الزمان فخرجوا عن طلبها. فلما كملت الخمسه عشر سنه. اسلمت الروح في الخامس عشر من شهر برموده. فحضره الرسل الطهار عندها فسبحوا لله وتباركوا من الراس. حتي وصلت الي السماوات. وسلمت لاييه زكريا. وكان استشهاده في اليوم الثاني من شهر توت. وراسه في الخامس عشر من برموده. فجميع ايام حيات يوحنا. خمسة واربعين سنه. لانه اقام سنه شهر قبل ملاد السيد المسيح. وستين قبل ان يطلب. واقامت امه معه بريه خمس سنين قبل وفات. واقام ثلاثه وعشرين سنه في البريه. قبل خروجه وظهوره. واقام ثمانية شهور. قبل ان يقطع راسه هيرودس الكافر. ثاني يوم من شهر توت. واقامت الروح

223r

في الراس خمسة عشر سنه. وراسه باقيه الي يومنا هذا. وابيه زكريا كانت شهادته . في ثمانية من شهر توت. واما اليشع في الخامس عشر يوما من شهرامشير. من مملكة طيباريوس قيصر. والسيد والمخلص مالك في السما ولارض. فهذا ما شرحنا لمحبتكم من اجل الراس الطاهره. التي للسلامتي يوحنا المعمداني. والان يا احباي فلنقدم قربان في يوم عيد القديس يوحنا السابق. النبي يوحنا المعمداني او نكتب سيرته المقدسه وسعيه. ونصنع قدرتنا من الخير بالصدقه. ومحبة الاخوه وكلمه صالحه.

²⁷ A scribal error or a hypercorrection.

²⁸ Note the variant spelling.

²⁹ The word is written in the margin as a correction.

³⁰ Note the spelling, which indicates this is a transliteration of a Greek or Coptic word.

تقولوها لآخيك. وان ترا احدا جيعان اطعمه. او عريان فاكسيه. ولو انه كاس ما فقط. فان الرب لا يضيع اخره. بسوال القديس يوحنا. والرب يسوع المسيح يحرس جميعنا. وبخلصنا من فخاخ العدو الرديه. ويحفظنا في الامانة الارثوذكسيه التي للثالوث المقدس الي النفس الاخير. والله الذي جمعنا في هذه الموضع. باسم القديس يوحنا المعمدان. يجمعنا ايضا في ملكوت الابد. نعمة³¹ ورافة ومحبة. البشر الذي لربنا والاهنا ومخلصنا يسوع المسيح. الذي له المجد والاحرام مع ابيه و روح القدس. الي الابد امين.

Translation with commentary

On Herod and John the Baptist

/X1/ /218r/ ... and he took his wife's brother for his own in secret, and he found an opportunity to be alone with her in a stinking tomb – that is, his room filled with stench – to commit his sin with her. When he was alone with her, Gabriel the archangel would call out to them with a human voice through John the Baptist, saying “You cannot take the wife of your brother! As John the son of Zechariah said, it is not lawful for you to take the wife of your brother while he is still alive.” Whenever they laid down at night, they would hear the voice and so they would light the lamps and look for it (because) they thought it was with them in the room. They could not find anything except the voice that they heard. They were greatly distressed because they could not find it. She then said to him: “Send your riders into the wilderness with our guards to kill him before anyone learns (of this).” But whenever the king wanted to do this, he could not find a way because God delivered him.³² Then (one day) she said: “If we hear his voice one more time, let's call some sorcerers to capture him and kill him, and we can have peace from him – that is, this John who is wandering in the desert and whose body is not worthy of wearing [...] camel's hair (Mark 1:6) to rebuke a king [...] rules provinces.” She pressed the matter and said to Herod “Whatever you want to do with me, do it openly and no one will be able to say a word in this country until you can find a way to kill John.” And the whore won Herod's heart /218v/, and he obeyed her in what she asked for in that he strove to kill his brother in secret. And he took her for himself openly so that the martyrdom of John would be fulfilled.

/X2/ As the evangelist says, “*In those days John the Baptist began to preach in the wilderness proclaiming ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matt 3:1–2). Then the people of Jerusalem were going out*

³¹ A scribal error for نعمة

³² Here “him” refers to John.

³³ The corresponding passage in *Life Bapt. Serap.* has “whose body is not worthy of wearing the clothes of people, but has to dress in camel's hair”.

³⁴ The corresponding passage in *Life Bapt. Serap.* has “who is he to chide the king of a province and the ruler of a region?”

to him and they were baptized by him, confessing their sins.” (Matt 3:5–6). When Herodias heard of his coming, she rejoiced greatly, saying “My enemy has come near me,” but she could not seize him because ***the people considered John a prophet*** (Matt 14:5). When his brother Philip heard of (John’s) appearance, he came to John and told him of everything. John then sent his disciple and forbade (it), yet this tyrant did not stop, but only mocked John. As for the perverted woman, she became very angry and said to the king: “Take him and put him in prison until you find a way to kill him.” He said: “I’m afraid the people will rise up against me because of him.” She said to him: “If they ask about him, tell them ‘King Caesar ordered me to do this’ and your standing with him will improve.” And he sent (for him) and arrested him /219r/ and put him in prison until he could find a way to kill him. She then ordered the prison guards to torture him to kill him.

/X3/ When Herod’s birthday came, she conspired with him to kill John on the pretext of (doing it for) Caesar. So (Herod) ordered and assembled the prominent men of the city to feast them on his birthday. The perverted woman sent her lascivious daughter all dressed up in beautiful clothes and wearing fragrant perfumes, and she danced in front of the gathering for the king. *And where there’s drink and song and carnal desires, there is not a single good thing. Listen, oh loved ones, to the disgusting spectacle of dance and song which destroys everything, so you can know that the reason for the murder was the excess of dancing.* She did as her mother advised. (The evangelist) says: “And the king was amazed by her beauty and said to her: ‘**Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom**’ (Mark 6:22). *She went out to her mother to ask for advice and (her mother said): ‘Ask him to give you the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ She immediately went back to the king and asked for John’s head”* (Mark 6:24–25). *Had she asked him for many rewards, it would have been better for her (than to ask) for John’s head. Woe unto the wretched girl! And woe unto you the evil mother (because) you did not ask for gold or silver or jewels, /219v/ but you asked for John’s head.* And when the king heard (this), he became sad and was distressed by the situation because of the oath he had sworn. It was not because (he did not want to) kill John, but because of his fear of the people who considered John a prophet. *Had he spared a thought for the innocent, he wouldn’t have thrown him in prison in the first place. Herod’s soul was like a ship on the sea hit by the violent surges of the sea because of his fear of the people. And the surges became unbearable to the madman because of (his) desire for a woman, and because he had already made an oath to her, he had decided to kill.* And so he sent his executioner to John while he was in prison. When the prophet learned of this, he stuck his head out of the prison. And (the executioner) cut off his head so that the king would not ignore his oath. *Know that our faith*

teaches that our Lord said “**make no oath at all**” (**Matt 5: 34**). Had this madman not made an oath, he wouldn’t have ordered the prophet to be killed. After he swore, he could not lie in front of the guests. His oath served to complete (his) ruin and that is why he sent (his men) to cut off John’s head. Oh brothers, what hand would dare to reach for John’s head, (the head) that was so familiar to the wild animals of the wilderness, (the head) that hungry lions /220r/ trembled before, (the head) that instilled fear in all the vipers and snakes and dragons, (the head) whose dignity exalted the wilderness, (the head) that the flowers of the wilderness headed to, as did plants and the beaks of birds to bring him honey from drops of light rain and dew? What hand rushed forward and cut off the head without trembling or being awestruck by that godly sight? When Herod got drunk and sent his executioner with a sword, he did not see it. (The executioner) cut off John’s head, yet not a drop of blood fell from it because he had never drunk wine (**Luke 1:15**). And he placed his head in a wooden bowl and as they carried it, the head was screaming, saying “It is not lawful for you to take the wife of your brother!” Oh what a miracle, the just man even after his death like when he was alive! Oh what an atrocity, a mindless man who (put) the head of Saint John in the wooden vessel he had eaten meat from! Wasn’t it enough, Herod, what your namesake Herod did in Bethlehem? Weren’t you scared? What cries for help were there from fathers and mothers as they looked upon their children until the earth turned white from the milk of the breasts of their mothers? What wild or domestic animal saw the like of these children whose blood was spilled and would not cry or become sad upon seeing them killed, pure young children with unblemished souls and blameless? /220v/ Wasn’t it enough, you wretch, to do this with the blessed, that you too also (had to) kill John, one whose single hair from his head you are not worthy of removing? That Herod killed the children of Rachel (**Matt 2:18**) and you killed John, who is the pride of church. In what way could I ever forgive them? The Lord said “Woe to the bloody city (**Ezk 24:6**) where Herod rules.” Woe to him! He who wishes to rule by shrewd manipulation is one who loves to rule.³⁵ It is from him that the Jews learned how to kill and they caused the killing of our Lord. Those children were murdered and this John was beheaded. And the Jews sawed Isaiah in half (**MartIs**), threw Jeremiah into a cistern (**Jer 38:6**), stoned prophets and killed Zechariah in the temple (**ProtJas**). We say all of this to demonstrate their evil. Oh what evil it was that brought forth the good!

/X4/ But now let us return to the rest of our explanation and talk about what became of the illustrious head. (The evangelist) says: So (Herod) sent his executioner and he came with John’s head on a plate in the middle of the

³⁵ The translation is an approximation as the quote is garbled in the original.

gathering (**Mark 6:27–28**). His eyes were still open, his face was glowing like a person who had drunk wine, and a sweet smell emanated from it, offering the most beautiful sight to all. And they threw away his remains and left them (because) they wanted to do with them as they pleased. There was a righteous woman, (the wife) of Herod's steward Chuza, called Johanna (**Luke 8:3**), who watched over the body until his disciples took it /221r/ at night from the hole, and they left it in the tomb of Elisha the prophet. His disciples notified our Lord Jesus Christ of this. As for John's head, the king ordered it to be delivered to the girl and the whore gave it to her mother and (Herod's) officials. When [...] ³⁶ saw it with its eyes open and its hearing and its form the same as if it were alive, she pointed to it with her hand and [...] to the head: "These are the insolent eyes that would not [...] ³⁷ from the king of the land who has the power. I will blind them with my hand. And this tongue that spoke out and said 'It is not lawful for you to take the wife of your brother while he is still alive,' I will cut it off. And I will take the hair from this head and from the beard and I will stuff my bed with it." She raised her hand wanting to strike his face, but his hair spread on the plate and the head flew while the room split in two and the head flew out of it. Herodias' hands were cut off and fell to the ground. The ground opened its mouth under her, swallowed her body up to her neck while she was still alive, and she descended into hell because of her desire. As for her daughter, the devil entered her and she broke all the vessels in the house. Then one of the officials took Herodias' hands, and they were hot as if they had caught on fire. He went with them to the king in the gathering. The king said to him: "What is wrong with you and what is all this crying about?" He said to the king: "Woe to us who came to this dwelling with the head of the prophet. /221v/ It only brought us sadness and ruin." The official told him of Herodias' fate and of the devil who entered her daughter. The king did not believe him and took the severed hands and threw them in the middle of the gathering, (still adorned) with golden rings and bracelets, but their fingers stained red. The king was greatly shamed and came to his dwelling and he saw her head sticking out from the ground. He ordered to dig and bring out her body, but they did not find her body, nor a single limb, because she had sunk to the depths of hell. The king became angry and ordered the official to be beheaded right then in the gathering in the presence of the dignitaries. As for her daughter, she was mindlessly running around and hallucinating, and her hair fell from her head from all the running around, so the king cut her head off and ordered his companions not to tell anyone of this

³⁶ Meaning Herodias (cf. the corresponding passage in *Life Bapt. Serap.*).

³⁷ The corresponding passage in *Life Bapt. Serap.* has "Here is the eye that was not ashamed to look into the eyes of the king and answer him."

secret. But Herodias' shame became known to everyone and the smell of her daughter spread. As for John's head, it soared like an eagle on a wing, bearing witness to the sin that had transpired, flying over the city all day and saying "It is not lawful for you to take the wife of your brother!" Everyone heard it screaming through the air and the people praised almighty God, saying "How can a head be speaking without a body?" As for Herod, he did not appear (in public) /222r/ in those days because of the voice that was rebuking him.

/X5/ As for the head, it went to our Lord Jesus Christ to the Mount of Olives and bowed before him and he kissed it. As for the Virgin Mary, she cried and said "Where are the eyes of Zechariah and Elisha, your forefathers, that watch you?" Our Lord Jesus Christ pointed to it and said to her "Do not cry, for just as he killed John, so will I be killed. Not like him, but I will be crucified and my right side will be pierced with a lance, and myrrh and blood will flow out of it." Then the Lord said to John's head: "Go and spread the word about Herod's sin to the entire world. I have made you a head like wings of an eagle which you can fly with. I have put your soul in your head for fifteen years until it fulfills the will of my father who is in Heaven. I will order the angels to carry your head to be with your father Zechariah and the little children because he is their priest. You will also be among them because you are the baptizer and they were not baptized except with their own blood. I have placed you with the body of Elisha the prophet, and your spirit will be on my right which is in Heaven. And your soul will be in your head for fifteen years, and when you fulfill my will after three more years I will raise it from the dead after you." Then Christ commanded the head and it flew into the air. Its voice was heard in all cities and settlements and deserts. /222v/ And those on the seas heard its voice and looked upon it as it rebuked Herod the tyrant. And after that it went to the East to the land of Arabia, and some merchants happened to hear its voice while they were travelling with their wares. They wanted to take it, but as they did their souls grew weary until a voice came upon them saying "Do not weary your souls, the time has not come yet," and they left the head alone.

/X6/ When fifteen years had passed, his soul was freed on the fifteenth day of the month Baramūda. Righteous prophets attended to the head and they praised God and were blessed by the head until it arrived in Heaven and greeted its father Zechariah. His martyrdom took place on the second day of the month Tūt and (that of) his head on the fifteenth day of the month Baramūda. And all the days of John's life (number) 45 years because he was brought to life six months before the birth of our Lord Christ and two years before they searched for him. His mother escaped with him to the wilderness five years before she passed away, and he spent 23 years in the wilderness before he left and was revealed (to the world). Eight months passed before

Herod the unbeliever cut his head off on the second day of the month Tūt. And his soul /223r/ inhabited his head for fifteen years and his head has been like this to this day. His father Zechariah suffered martyrdom on the eighth day of the month Tūt and his mother Elizabeth on the fifteenth day of the month Amšīr from the kingdom of Caesar Tiberius and (our) Lord and Savior who reigns over Heaven and Earth. This is what we've explained concerning the matter of the pure head that (is) for the salvation of John the Baptist. And now, my beloved ones, let us offer sacrifice on this feast day of Saint John the Forerunner, the prophet John the Baptist, or write his holy biography³⁸ and his ministry. Let us use our full abilities to do good with justice and love for (our) brothers. And speak a good word to your brother, and if you see someone go hungry, feed them, if naked, clothe them, even if (all you have) is a cup of water. Verily, the Lord does not abandon the least of his (creation) through the intercession of Saint John. And (our) Lord Jesus Christ watches over us all and saves us from the traps of the enemy that (seek to) ruin us, and he preserves us in the orthodox faith – which is of the Holy Trinity – until the last breath. And the God who brought us all together in this place in the name of Saint John the Baptist will also bring us together in the eternal kingdom. With kindness, affection and love for humankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose glory and holiness is with his father and the Holy Spirit forever, amen.

Analysis

Table 1 summarizes and compares the contents of *Life Bapt. Serap.* and *On Herod Bapt.*

Until a more complete version of *On Herod Bapt.* is found, nothing can be said of its relationship to the first half of *Life Bapt. Serap.* There is, however, a cursory reference to the events of *Life Bapt. Serap.* ch. 4 in the final section of *On Herod Bapt.*: “And all the days of John’s life (number) 45 years because he was brought to life six months before the birth of our Lord Christ and two years before they searched for him.” This is most likely a reference to the events which *Life Bapt. Serap.* describes as taking part during the Slaughter of the Innocents when Satan entices Herod’s soldiers to kill John.

They search for him in the Temple, attempting to force Zechariah to reveal his whereabouts, but Zechariah insists – truthfully – that his son has left for the wilderness and he does not know where he is. Chapter 4 abruptly ends here, and the narrative of *Life Bapt. Serap.* turns to the story of Elizabeth and John in the wilderness (ch. 5) and proceeds to describe Zechariah’s death in the Temple (ch. 6).

³⁸ *sīra*

<i>Life Bapt. Serap.</i>			<i>On Herod Bapt.</i>
	Chapter	Summary	
John's biography	1	John's birth is foretold	missing
	2	Jesus' birth is foretold, John is born	missing
	3	John and his mother escape from Herod	missing
	4	Herod's soldiers look for John	missing
	5	Flashback to Elizabeth	missing
	6	Death of Zechariah	missing
	7	Death and burial of Elizabeth	missing
	8	John rebukes Herod for the first time and his voice haunts Herodias	X1 John's voice haunts Herodias
	9	John baptizes Jesus	-
	10	Herod imprisons John	X2 Herod imprisons John
	11	John is beheaded	X3 John is beheaded
	12	John's last words	-
	13	History of John's head	X4 Story of John's head
n/a	n/a	n/a	X5 Jesus' blessing
	n/a	n/a	X6 Summary and dates
John's remains	14	John's body is smuggled out of Sebaste and brought to Alexandria	-
	15	Theophilus builds a church to house John's remains	-

Table 1

This discontinuous progression of events shows very well the composite nature of *Life Bapt. Serap.* and the same is true of ch. 8 and ch. 9 as well: these chapters essentially recount the same incident, but while ch. 8 of *Life Bapt.*

Serap. has a counterpart in *On Herod Bapt.*, ch. 9 does not. Since *Life Bapt. Serap.* ch. 4 contains the only reference to Herod's soldiers searching for John, and given the obvious break in the narrative which makes both ch. 4 and ch. 8 stand out, one could speculate that the complete version of *On Herod Bapt.* contains a section which describes the same events as ch. 4 of *Life Bapt. Serap.*

This raises the question of the relationship between *Life Bapt. Serap.* and *On Herod Bapt.* The first of the latter's six sections is very closely related to the text of *Life Bapt. Serap.* – in fact, all the major and minor motifs are nearly identical in both works:

- Herod and Herodias have begun a secret affair
- A reference to a room filled with stench
- A reference to Gabriel inspiring John's rebuke of Herod
- Herod and Herodias hear a voice and search for it, but cannot find it
- Herodias entices Herod to have John killed
- When this fails, Herodias intends to enlist the help of sorcerers
- Herodias encourages Herod to kill his brother and take her for his wife

However, a closer look reveals several substantial differences: first, there is the different role Gabriel plays in both narratives – in *Life Bapt. Serap.* he merely instructs John to rebuke Herod, whereas in *On Herod Bapt.* it is Gabriel himself who speaks through John. Then there are details which can only be found in *Life Bapt. Serap.*, such as John's exact location in ʿAyn Kārim, which is consistent with events described earlier in the work's narrative. And finally, there are differences in the language used – for example, where *On Herod Bapt.* uses the terms *maqbara* (lit. "tomb") and *baytuhu* ("his room") to refer to the room where Herod and Herodias meet, *Life Bapt. Serap.* has *ḥidr* ("private room, boudoir"); and where *On Herod Bapt.* has *ṭalaba* for "search", *Life Bapt. Serap.* uses *iftaqada*. These differences are enough to conclude (as I have in the introduction to this paper) that *On Herod Bapt.* is not a recension of *Life Bapt. Serap.* This determination becomes clearer as the narrative in *On Herod Bapt.* progresses. In *Life Bapt. Serap.*, ch. 8 (which contains the story of John's voice haunting Herodias) is followed by ch. 9, which recounts the baptism of Jesus Christ as found in the canonical gospels. The narrative of *Life Bapt. Serap.* then continues with a description of John's imprisonment and death in ch. 10. But here the story essentially begins anew by offering a different version of previously described events. Also, in ch. 10 Herod first betrays Philip and only then does he begin a relationship with Herodias who initiates the affair. In contrast, *On Herod Bapt.* continues the narrative in section X2 organically by first describing

Herod's betrayal of his brother and then proceeding directly to the events surrounding John's death.

What ties the two narratives together is John's role in the conflict between Herod and Philip, and the resulting continuity errors. In both works, Philip appeals to John, who then proceeds to rebuke Herod. Consequently, both works completely ignore Gabriel's role in John's mission, and while the continuity in *Life Bapt. Serap.* is already broken, this is the first time it becomes obvious in *On Herod Bapt.* The conclusion to be drawn here is that while the narration in *On Herod Bapt.* has been edited to flow better, it combines (just like *Life Bapt. Serap.*) two different strands of tradition into one.

While the exact composition of these strands cannot be determined, the one involving Philip contains motifs found in a number of Coptic works devoted to John the Baptist. The most relevant for our purposes are two works titled *Panegyric on John the Baptist*, one anonymous in Bohairic³⁹ and one in Sahidic (CANT 185, Clavis Coptica 0513), attributed to Patriarch Theodosius of Alexandria (d. 567).⁴⁰ While these works differ from each other in some parts, in others they speak with one voice and those parts include the description of Philip's appeal to John the Baptist, who then takes Philip's case to Herod. Both *Life Bapt. Serap.* and *On Herod Bapt.* borrow freely from the *Panegyric* tradition, but to varying extent and degree. And so in *Life Bapt. Serap.*, John writes a letter to Herod, whereas in *On Herod Bapt.*, John sends a disciple to rebuke Herod. The latter element is found also in the Sahidic *Panegyric*,⁴¹ with some recensions referring to two disciples and others to just "disciples". On the other hand, both the Sahidic *Panegyric* and *Life Bapt. Serap.* describe in detail Herod's unwillingness to take steps against John, which Herod only does after having been reassured (and urged on) by Herodias. By contrast, *On Herod Bapt.* offers a short version of the story and only mentions John's imprisonment. And as the ultimate evidence on how this particular tradition is reshaped and woven into the narrative of all three works, both the *Panegyric* and *On Herod Bapt.* conclude the episode with John's imprisonment. However, *Life Bapt. Serap.* adds an epilogue in which

³⁹ DE VIS, Henri: *Homélies coptes de la Vaticane*. Copenhagen (Gyldendalske Boghandel) 1922, pp. 1–51. The Sahidic fragments were published by ROSSI, Francesco: *Trascrizione di tre manoscritti copti del Museo Egizio di Torino con traduzione italiana*. Turin (Ermanno Loescher) 1885, pp. 101–110.

⁴⁰ KUHN, Karl H.: *A Panegyric on John the Baptist Attributed to Theodosius Archbishop of Alexandria*. (CSCO 269, *Scriptores Coptici* 34). Louvain (Secrétariat du CorpusSCO) 1966. See also *ibid.*, viii n. 27 for more on the complicated relationship between the two works.

⁴¹ Ch. XIX, cf. KUHN, *Panegyric*, 46.

Herodias tries to bribe John into leaving them alone, and when that fails she threatens to kill him.

In section X3, *On Herod Bapt.* describes John's death in terms familiar to any reader of the Gospels: the birthday party, Herodias' daughter, Herod's oath, and finally John's head on a platter. In contrast to *Life Bapt. Serap.*, which firmly lays the blame for John's fate at Herodias' feet (even to the point of arguing that Herod had been tricked by Herodias), *On Herod Bapt.* points to Herod as the main villain of the story. And while the narrative portions of section X3 only portray Herod as weak and concerned with saving face, the homiletic portions of the text describe him as a madman and connect his actions to those of Herod the Great (who was Herod's father, but to whom the text of *On Herod Bapt.* merely refers as "your namesake") and, ultimately, the Jewish nation as a whole. It is in this context that we find two references to apocryphal traditions about prophetic figures mistreated by the Jewish people. First, the homiletic portion of the text refers to Isaiah being sawed in half, a motif known from the Christian *Martyrdom of Isaiah* (MartIs)⁴² which can also be found in Islamic works collecting *isrā'īliyyāt*, such as *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*.⁴³ Second, there is the death of John's father Zechariah, which *On Herod Bapt.* describes as "[the Jews] killed him in the temple." This motif can be found in both *Life Bapt. Serap.* as well as the Sahidic *Panegyric*, but it is ultimately traceable to the *Protoevangelium of James* (ProtJas).⁴⁴ The actual narrative part of *On Herod Bapt.* section X3 concludes with the description of John's head still speaking after being cut off. This teaser to events of the next section contains one additional piece of apocryphal trivia, this time one not recorded elsewhere, describing the beheading as bloodless due to John's abstinence from alcohol.

The following section contains the most striking element of this strand of the tradition surrounding John the Baptist: even after being cut off, John's head continues to decry Herod's sin. Interestingly, while *On Herod Bapt.* proceeds directly from John's execution to the story of his head (albeit with a homiletic detour), *Life Bapt. Serap.* adds a short speech by John to his disciples. However, both resume the narrative by having the narrator address the audience with "now let us return to [the story of John's head]". And this is far from the only common element to this part of both texts – in fact, they

⁴² CHARLES, Robert Henry (ed.): *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English. Volume 2*. Oxford (The Clarendon Press) 1913, pp. 155–162.

⁴³ For example, AL-ṬA'LABĪ, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm: 'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' or 'Lives of the Prophets'. William M. Brinner (trans.), Leiden (E. J. Brill) 2002.

⁴⁴ EHRMAN, Bart and PLEŠE, Zlatko (eds.): *The Apocryphal Gospels*. Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2011, pp. 67–69.

share all the broad strokes. The head is brought to the party where Herodias promises to exact her revenge on John's eyes, tongue and hair. Before she can do that, the head rises into the air (here both works agree even on the small details) and flies away to continue its mission; at the same time, all the major players involved in John's death meet a horrible end of their own. In other aspects, however, the two texts differ substantially. This is especially true of the ultimate fate of Herod, Herodias and Herodias' daughter.

Table 2 summarizes the differences between the portrayals of these events in *Life Bapt. Serap.* and in *On Herod Bapt.*

It is notable that the description of the fates of Herodias and her daughter in *Life Bapt. Serap.* have parallels in other literature:⁴⁵ for example, Solomon of Basra's *Book of the Bee* describes Herodias as going blind⁴⁶ while also describing her right hand as shriveling or drying up.⁴⁷

The parallels here are obvious, but it is remarkable that only the former motif made it into *Life Bapt. Serap.* while only the latter ended up in *On Herod Bapt.* As for Herodias' daughter and her fate, this is described in *Book of the Bee*⁴⁸ and its older parallels – such as in the apocryphal story titled the *Decapitation of John the Forerunner*, attributed to John's disciple Euriptus (CANT 180.2)⁴⁹ – in nearly the same way as *Life Bapt. Serap.*, but leaving out the whale and leaving the parties responsible for her decapitation unnamed. *On Herod Bapt.*, on the other hand, lays the responsibility firmly at Herod's feet. Despite this, Herod is spared death.

In both works, the story continues with John's head rebuking Herod after being cut off. This motif is known from the Coptic Synaxarium (the calendar of saints), which took its final shape before the fourteenth century,⁵⁰ but it can also be found in Islamic literature much earlier.

⁴⁵ BURKE, Serapion's Life of John the Baptist, p. 291.

⁴⁶ See Chapter XLI in BUDGE, E. A. Wallis: *The Book of the Bee*. Oxford (The Clarendon Press) 1886.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See VASSILIEV, Athanasius: *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina, Pars Prior*. Moscow (Imperial University) 1893, pp. 1–4, for a critical edition and www.tonyburke.ca/the-beheading-of-john-by-euriptus-the-disciple-of-john (retrieved on October 4th, 2015) for a preliminary English translation.

⁵⁰ BURMESTER, Oswald H. E.: On the Date and Authorship of the Arabic Synaxarium of the Coptic Church. In: *Journal of Theological Studies* 155/1938, p. 253.

	<i>Life Bapt. Serap.</i>	<i>On Herod Bapt.</i>
Herod	Has a stroke	Lives
Herodias	- Her eyes fall out - Is swallowed by the ground up to her neck - Her body sinks into hell	- Her hands fall off - Is swallowed by the ground up to her neck - Her body sinks into hell - Her head remains above the ground
Herodias' daughter	- Goes insane - Breaks all the vessels in the house - Dances on a frozen lake and falls into the water (in one manuscript only) - Soldiers cut off her head (in one manuscript only) - A whale tosses her out of the lake (in one manuscript only)	- Goes insane - Breaks all the vessels in the house - Runs around hallucinating - Herod cuts off her head

Table 2

The most prominent example is al-Ta^clabī's (d. 1035) *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, which recounts the story of a king of the Israelites named Hīradūs who had a wife named Hiradawūya, the former wife of his brother Fīlīqūs. John forbade their relationship, and Hiradawūya exacts her revenge by having her daughter seduce Hīradūs and then ask for John's head. He first refuses, but ultimately gives in:

“... he sent for John and had his head brought. Now the head was still speaking when it was placed before him and it said, ‘She is not lawful for you’.”⁵¹

Al-Ṭaʿlabī cites Ismāʿīl as-Suddī (d. 745) as his source for this story,⁵² but this motif can be found in earlier texts, such as in the work of Ibn Masʿūd (d. ca. 652).⁵³ Al-Ṭaʿlabī is most interesting, however, because he appends a commentary to the end of the story, giving the names of the characters and clarifying some of the details. This commentary is introduced by “Christian scholars have said”,⁵⁴ indicating that al-Ṭaʿlabī is quoting from a Christian tradition, a tradition that the Arabic-speaking Christian world has preserved only in the Synaxarium, *Life Bapt. Serap.* and *On Herod Bapt.*

Both works describe the head as first announcing Herod’s sin to Jerusalem and then going out to the world to do the same. The episode repeats motifs common to the tradition surrounding John the Baptist, such as his connection to the slaughtered children and the prophet Elisha. Both texts also largely agree in dividing the ministry of John’s head into two periods: three years in Jerusalem and 15 years in the world. *On Herod Bapt.* does not indicate how long the head flew over Jerusalem, but in section X5, Jesus sends it out to the world for 15 years. Unique to *On Herod Bapt.* is an insertion – section X5 – where John’s head flies to the Mount of Olives to meet Jesus, and its conclusion taking place in Arabia.

The final chapters of *Life Bapt. Serap.* devote a significant amount of attention to the fate of John’s remains and their veneration. This is not the case for *On Herod Bapt.*, which neither describes the final resting place of John’s head nor concerns itself with his body. A solitary reference to John’s remains is found in section X4, where after John’s execution his body is thrown away; a character from Luke named Johanna (Luke 8:3) watches over the body until John’s disciples come to claim it and bury it with the prophet Elisha. As for John’s head, the final section of *On Herod Bapt.* merely mentions its final repose in heaven before proceeding to outline the chronology of John’s life and that of his parents. Like *Life Bapt. Serap.*, *On Herod Bapt.* contains a number of key dates in John’s and his parents’ lives given in the Coptic calendar. Table 3 provides an overview and comparison of those dates with those provided by the Coptic Synaxarium:

⁵¹ AL-ṬAʿLABĪ, *Lives of the Prophets*, p. 636.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ WHEELER, Brandon: *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis*. London (Continuum) 2002, p. 295.

⁵⁴ AL-ṬAʿLABĪ, *Lives of the Prophets*, p. 636.

Event	<i>Life Bapt. Serap.</i>	<i>On Herod Bapt.</i>	Synaxarium
Slaughter of the Innocents / Zechariah's death	7th of Tūt	8th of Tūt	8th of Tūt
Death of Elizabeth	15th of Amšīr	15th of Amšīr	16th of Amšīr
John's beheading	2nd of Tūt	2nd of Tūt	2nd of Tūt
Revelation of John's body	2nd of Ba'ūna	-	2nd of Ba'ūna
John's death (his soul leaving his head)	-	15th of Baramūda	-

Table 3

It is interesting to note that *Life Bapt. Serap.* and *On Herod Bapt.* each differ on one date when compared to the Synaxarium, though not the same one. This is yet more proof that the two texts ultimately derive from different strands of the apocryphal tradition surrounding John the Baptist. This discrepancy also shows that both works (in the form known to us) were composed before the stabilization of the Coptic Synaxarium (i.e. before the fourteenth century), thus providing us with a terminus ante quem for both textual traditions.

This chronology serves not only to give both works a narrative frame, but it also ostensibly provides their Sitz im Leben: both *Life Bapt. Serap.* and *On Herod Bapt.* are embedded within a homily read on the saint's feast day. But while both texts contain homiletic elements (*On Herod Bapt.* to a larger extent than *Life Bapt. Serap.*), their structure and very nature suggest that this not their true purpose: first, they are too long to be read in church – in fact, this is the purpose of similar texts in the Synaxarium, which are rarely longer than a few hundred words.⁵⁵ Second, and more importantly, both texts combine unrelated and often contradictory bits of tradition trying to expand the narrative to provide as much information (and perhaps entertainment) as possible. Their very length – together with their focus on a single person – disqualifies them from membership in the *qiṣṣa* category of religious narratives, nor do they entirely qualify as hagiographies due to, say, their lack of interest in the saint's miracles and standard descriptions of the saint's

⁵⁵ See for example ABDEL-MALEK, Kamal: Popular Religious Narratives. In: ALLEN, Roger – RICHARDS D. S. (eds.): *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Volume 6. Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2008, p. 340.

rejection of the world.⁵⁶ In the introduction to my translation of *Life Bapt. Serap.*, I hypothesized that the label *sīra* would fit *Life Bapt. Serap.* perfectly due to the work's combination of various traditions of different degree of canonicity (from the Gospels through patristic material all the way to folk legends) into a coherent narrative. This subtype of the genre naturally stands apart from its Islamic models – it largely fulfills the same purpose as *al-sīra al-nabawiyya* (the prophetic biography) in that it provides a biography of a (if not the) prophet. On the other hand, it displays some characteristic elements of *al-sīra al-šaʿbiyya* (popular epics or romances) such as its originally oral nature, realized here as a homily.⁵⁷ The fact that *On Herod Bapt.* refers to itself as a *sīra* of John the Baptist would certainly support this hypothesis, but there still remains a lot to be done in the study of popular Arabic Christian literature to provide a definite answer.

Conclusion

The large number of surviving manuscript witnesses speak to the great popularity of *Life Bapt. Serap.* among Arabic-speaking Christians. The existence of *On Herod Bapt.* shows that there were at least two major strands of this particular tradition surrounding John the Baptist, a tradition which I have shown to have deep roots in the cultural history of Arabic Christianity, especially that of Coptic Egypt. It is remarkable that little to no attention has been devoted to these texts and traditions in the past few decades, whether by scholars working with Christian apocrypha (where the lack of attention could be explained by the shift in focus to Coptic documents after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library) or scholars of Arabic literature. It is my hope that the recently renewed interest in Christian apocrypha, along with the better availability of primary sources thanks to the tireless work of such institutions as the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, will increase Arabists' engagement with these two works and with Christian apocrypha preserved in Arabic in general. This paper is a small contribution to that end, and at the same time, it aims to serve as a reminder that the study of Christian apocrypha in Arabic

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 341–342. It is interesting to note that in most manuscripts of *Life Bapt. Serap.*, the work is followed by an account of his miracle which I provisionally titled *Five Miracles of John the Baptist (Miracles Bapt.)* and which is markedly different in language and style from *Life Bapt. Serap. Miracles Bapt.* thus fits the definition of a hagiography as laid out by Abdel-Malek (op. cit.) much better.

⁵⁷ Cf. HEATH, Peter: Other *Sīras* and Popular Narratives. In: ALLEN, Roger - RICHARDS D. S. (eds.): *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Volume 6. Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2008, p. 319.

requires a dialogue with Islamic prophetic and historical literature as well as a more profound engagement with Arabic literature.

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