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Encomium on Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels, attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria

Title.

0 An encomium which the son of the Apostles, the holy Apa Athanasius, the archbishop of Alexandria, delivered for the glory of the two great archangels Michael and Gabriel, arguing that great is the reward of all people who will purify themselves on their feast, take their offerings, and go to their shrines. In the peace of God. Amen.

Prologue.

1 Listen to me, O my beloved children, and I will tell you the marvels of God, and the works which He accomplished with us, taking care of His image,¹ raising for us the flood of the Nile each year, doing for us ... of the year that passed concerning the flood of the river for a full six months, while none of them ate bread or drank water, imploring God for his image. And they withered away, their heart broke and they died.

Warnings against fornication.

2 A Christian who takes from the body and the blood of the Lord while he fornicates, in particular when he swears upon his fornication, what is the benefit of such a man? For he walks like a sheep. This is the person about whom it was said: "O man, who are you to argue with God? Shall then the creature be able to tell the one who created him: Why did you create me like this? And has not the potter the authority to produce from clay one vessel for honour and another one for contempt?"²

¹ Cf. Gen. 1: 27.

² Cf. Rom. 9: 20-21.

3 Our Lord Jesus, however, He who created man, did not give a greater portion to the righteous than to the impious and even the sun and the moon shine upon both.³ Probably someone from among those who love to quarrel will tell me that the righteous are those whom God has chosen. I, for my part, will tell him that that is true. Yet at the time when man grows up, it is he who chooses for himself the works of the devil, so that he becomes a transgressor against God and men.

4 Woe to every man who fornicates with a woman who is not his wife! Woe to a trespassing woman who defiles herself with a man who is not her husband! God has ordered that both must be killed.⁴ I, for my part, say to you: "Keep away from these evil things and these scandals". Therefore, if God wants the salvation of somebody who commits fornication, he will take his children from him when they are still young and leave him in sorrow and groaning, so that he repents and escapes the punishments that know no mercy.

5 When someone who has turned extremely impious, God takes revenge of him through the punishments that torture him on the way even before he goes to God. As for his children, He will let them be tested to see whether they will fear God who created them or not, and will progress and destroy what was entrusted to them.

Examples from Holy Scripture.

6 I will tell you what happened in the Old Testament since the beginning. Twenty-four thousand of men died from the people of Israel because they sinned and fornicated with a woman of Balak.⁵ Twenty-five thousand died in Gibeah of Benjamin.

³ Cf. Mat. 5: 45.

⁴ Lev. 20: 10.

⁵ Num. 25: 9.

Indeed, all these people died because of a single woman because they had fornicated with her.⁶

7 Three thousand men died because of fornication.⁷ Samson killed one thousand in a single stroke with the jawbone of a donkey,⁸ yet a single wicked woman thwarted his power.⁹ Amnon was killed because of fornication, for he trespassed and sinned with his sister.¹⁰ The power of Holofernes was thwarted because of the beauty of the face of Judith, the wise woman.¹¹ Because of a single woman the death of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, came about ... the Word.¹²

8 And also now I tell you that you will hardly find one out of thousand who committed adultery with the wife of his neighbour, to whom the same was not done with his sister or his daughter. Briefly, the transgression which he committed will happen to him for up to three or four generations,¹³ if he has not repented and retracted before he died.

Michael and Gabriel bless the pure ones.

9 When we hear these things, O my beloved, let everyone steer away from fornication and follow the right way to purity. For the Apostle said: "He who joins himself to a prostitute is one body (with her). ... then to me ... the profit of ... he does ... really ... He who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit (with him)".¹⁴

10 For if you purify your bed, the Father and the Son will bless you because you purified the honourable marriage,¹⁵ so that you

⁶ Judg. 20: 35.

⁷ Cf. Judg. 16: 27-30.

⁸ Judg. 15: 15.

⁹ Judg. 16: 4-22.

¹⁰ 2 Sam. 13: 28.

¹¹ Jth. 13: 10.

¹² Mat. 14: 10.

¹³ Cf. Ex. 20:5, 34: 7; Num. 14: 18; Deut. 5: 9.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 6:16-17.

¹⁵ Heb. 13: 4.

receive the mystery and you will freely converse with Michael and Gabriel at the time when you present yourself at the altar. For a man and his wife are one body¹⁶ and we are ordered to remain pure on Saturday¹⁷ and Sunday and every public festival in order not to be found fault with¹⁸ on the day of the great judgment. Do you want to be blessed by God, man and the archangel Michael and Gabriel? Purify your body and your spirit, for purity is the pride of the angels. When Michael and Gabriel see that you have purified yourself, then they will find the means to entreat for you and they will make you a child of peace before the true judge, in particular at the moment of your agony, when you come out of the body, before you meet the true judge, on the day of your agony, until everyone finds rest. When you make peace with the one whose enemy you are before you enter the church, Michael and Gabriel will entreat for you and make you a child of peace.

11 When this virtue becomes yours, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit will bless you, and you will be blessed together with everything that is yours and He will bless your offspring and you will enjoy the blessing of these great holy archangels, Michael and Gabriel. If you see someone who is hungry and you receive him in your house and feed him, the Lord himself will defend you and feed you, saying: "It was me whom you fed when I was hungry. I will grant you all what your body needs".¹⁹ If you give someone who is thirsty only a little bit of water to drink in the name of a disciple, truly, you will not lose your reward.²⁰ ... the man ... and those who belong to the night.

12 For did you sin in the body? The soul that sinned will be punished and the body itself will return to the earth according to what is written: "Adam, you are dust and to the dust you will

¹⁶ Gen. 2: 24; 1Cor. 6: 16.

¹⁷ Ex. 20: 8.

¹⁸ Lit. find a word (of complaint). Cf. Crum, *Dictionary*, p. 614a-b.

¹⁹ Cf. Mat. 25: 34-35.

²⁰ Cf. Mat. 10: 42.

return again".²¹ Did you abstain from your wife on the official days, Wednesday and Friday, Saturday and Sunday and the celebration of the public festivals? You will enjoy the blessings of these great holy patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Michael and Gabriel will bless you. If you turn away from those abominable practices and choose for yourself what is good ... anew in ... and Michael and Gabriel ... joy ... repentance.

The Arian George.

13 There was an Arian man in this city who belonged to the sect of the Arians and whose name was George. He became a persecutor, who fomented rebellion with his blasphemous words. He dared to say in his heresy: "If God had not allowed these demons to fight against us, we all together would become righteous". Hearing him, a *protector* said: "Definitely, will you not desist from your madness, O George?" But he defended himself wildly before the *protector* and ordered the standard-bearers to watch his safety.

14 Now that day was the eleventh, the eve of the twelfth, which is the feast of the holy archangel Michael, the commander-in-chief of the host of heavens,²² and the holy archangel Gabriel. The man went to bed in great distress, pondering upon great deeds of evil, and he tried to invoke the name of the demons: he mastered that abominable art. After midnight had passed, the demon came and spoke with him saying: "Leave me alone today, for it is the day of the archangel Michael, so that no evil befalls me because of you!"

15 The man said: "Michael is merciful, he will not destroy us". The devil said: "But Gabriel is a fiery flame: he will strike both of us". While they were saying these things to each other, the judgment of God came upon that miserable man and he rendered his spirit in a dreadful way before dawn rose. A great fear of God

²¹ Gen. 3: 19.

²² About this title, see C. D. G. Müller, *Die Engellehre der Koptischen Kirche*, Wiesbaden, 1959, p. 19, 169-173.

overcame all those who heard this and everyone spoke about the glory of the archangel Michael and Gabriel.

The son of the rich man from Pentapolis.

16 Also, a man from Pentapolis²³ had a young son and possessed a great fortune. It happened after a few days that his son fell ill and became crippled. The man, for his part, went to rest in these days, according to what is destined for everyman. They brought his offering to the sanctuaries of our city and he gave a hundred *holokotinoi*²⁴ to the Episcopal see and also to ... sanctuary ... of the ... And within three days, he left behind his son and went to rest according to what is destined for everyman.

17 A pious man spoke with his little son saying: "If you wish, give me a hundred *holokotinoi*, so that I will work with them and both of us have a living." The boy rejoiced. He rose immediately and brought him the hundred *holokotinoi*, considering that he was a dignitary who was reliable, as they even called him in the whole city 'the guardian of the poor.' The one who tempts everybody, tempted also this man ... work with It happened that ... the crippled boy and he found the surety in which the hundred *holokotinoi* were recorded. He hid it until the moment that he would go home and he took it on the sly when he left.

18 Further, after some days, the man denied saying to the crippled boy: "I owe you nothing". Since the young boy was a stranger and that man was glorified, moreover, by everyone, claiming that no

²³ This region in Libya traditionally belongs to the Alexandrian patriarchate; see H. Heinen, "Pentapolis", in: A. S. Atiya, *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. VI, New York, 1991, p. 1933-1935.

²⁴ The *holokotinos* is also known as *solidus* and *nomisma* (see §28). It was a valuable golden coin, for which see R. S. Bagnall, *Currency and Inflation in Fourth Century Egypt*, Supplement of the Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists, Atlanta, 1985, p. 15-16; T. G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt*, Michigan, 2002, p. XXVI; C. Morrison, "Byzantine Money: Its Production and Circulation", in A. E. Laiou (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, vol. 3, Washington D.C., 2002, p. 919.

lie ever came out of his mouth, the young boy asked the man to swear to him in the sanctuary of Michael, the archangel. So, it was decided that they go to the sanctuary of Michael, the archangel, and swear to each other.

19 It happened on the eleventh of Hathor, on the eve of the twelfth, which is the festival of the archangel Michael, that they should make the declaration. The man had spent the whole night begging the archangels Michael and Gabriel, as he knew that the matter would be revealed, saying: "My lords, give us a good settlement so that we will be saved through it or kill us together because of my failure". He also begged the boy, saying: "Please, have patience with me". But he did not want to.

20 In the middle of the night, the boy saw a vision. "I saw two angels, he said, in the likeness of clergymen, while one said to the other: 'My heart is sad because of this young man, who will die tomorrow while he is still young'. The other said: 'For what will you take revenge on him? The borrowed sum is his and that other man will swear a false oath'. He said to him: 'The father of this crippled young man swore great false oaths and (committed) innumerable sins, provoking God's anger"²⁵ The young man awoke from the vision, he told the man what he had seen and fear got hold of both of them. Then, on account of the fear of God that had come upon them, the man confessed what he had done, and gave him his deposit. As they had made peace between each other, God did not take revenge on either of them.

The importance of repentance.

21 You have seen, O my brethren, ... the archangel ... who of (all) men ever have sinned like those who crucified Christ? Yet, if some of those would have gone to our fathers, the Apostles, and confessed their sins, they would receive absolution for the forgiveness of their sins.

²⁵ Cf. Ex. 20: 5, 34: 7; Num. 14: 18; Deut. 5: 9.

22 For we are told in the beginning of the Histories that God suffered them (the Jews) for forty years,²⁶ being patient with them, (hoping) that perhaps they might return and repent, before He brought the plague upon them and exterminated them. For they kept firmly together with the four hundred thousand of the crowd who had died,²⁷ and also the hundred and forty thousand who had been taken as hostage to Egypt²⁸ ... he has ... let them die ... for our fathers, the Apostles, have ... for us the remembrance of what happened to the miserable Jews, giving us the truth, in confirmation of the story of the Histories about the famine under Claudius.²⁹

23 To all the pagans who were coming to us to question me, saying: "We see God once a year!" - this they said to us about the flood - I, for my part, used to say: "We see Him once every day". When they heard these things from me, they would be amazed about what they had heard and they would inquire after the truth of my word. And I would say to them: "It is the communion of the holy mysteries, the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, from which we receive in order that grace be with us so that we rejoice with his angels".

24 When they hear these things from us, they raise their hands and cry out: "Lord, have mercy!" And they appeal to Christ to help them and confess him, saying: "If this storm has passed us, we will come secretly, together with our wives and our children, and come to this place, in order that you administer us holy baptism, and perhaps the grace of God will befall us too".

The pagan student.

25 At the time God took revenge on George the Arian, I returned to Alexandria, thanks to God's help, and we celebrated the

²⁶ Ex. 16: 35; Deut. 2: 7, 8; 4, 29: 5.

²⁷ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, VII. 13.

²⁸ This episode is not attested in the Bible nor in the *Antiquities of the Jews*.

²⁹ Act. 11: 28.

pontifical mass.³⁰ A boy from the heathen country was living with us, who went to school in the city of Alexandria. Perhaps he had heard his father telling the story to the members of his household and his relatives, saying: "Pope³¹ Athanasius told me:³² 'We see God once every day'".

26 The boy was fifteen years old. He spoke with a young student, who was with him in school, saying: "Do me a favour and take me with you to the church that I see Christ!" He took him with him when he went to the evening service. From time to time he urged him, saying: "Teacher, show me too Christ for I wish to see him". The other said to him: "Look, he is ... of his ... as he is depicted on the wall while he is in the lap of his virgin mother".

27 The boy asked him again, saying: "Will he then come down now and bless us?" He said to him: "Be silent in order that you will not be beaten!" While they were still speaking with each other, the guardian deacon came and beat them, saying: "Be quiet!" And when he recognized the Syrian boy, he upbraided him, saying: "Get up and disappear from the church". But he took courage ... his faith ... hand ... love ... down.

28 The deacon did not bear with him, but beat him and wanted to throw him out of the church. But the eyes of the boy were looking at the depicted Saviour, saying: "Master, my Lord, by your beauty, your power and your glory, if you save me, I will give two *nomismata* to your lordship,³³ and when my father comes to this place, I will verse one pound of gold to the account of the altar, for its treasury and everything that is needed for its vessels".

³⁰ ΤΚΑΘΟΛΙΚΗ ΣΥΝΑΞΙΣ is a particular type of the holy mass in which a bishop should lead the prayers, see H. Brakmann, "Σύναξις καθολική in Alexandria: Zur Verbreitung des christlichen Stationsgottesdienstes", *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 30, 1987, p. 74-89.

³¹ For this title see, T. Derda and E. Wipszucka, "L'emploi des titres Abba, Apa et Papas dans l'Égypte Byzantine", *JJP* 24, 1994, p. 45-56.

³² Lit. asked me.

³³ For the *nomisma*, see note 24 above.

29 While the boy said these things, his eyes were looking at the image of the depicted Saviour. And the Lord, who was in the lap of his virgin mother, rose and took the likeness of the son of the eparch of the city. He said to the deacon: "Leave him for my sake, for he is my friend and I am in school with him". The deacon threw himself down at his feet and said: "Lord, he waffles inside the church, but even our body is yours". The Saviour answered and said: "I already told you that he is my friend". The deacon did not notice anything and said to him: "I am leaving to my place and thank you!"

30 The boy threw himself down at the feet of the Saviour and stayed kissing them without daring to speak, but he was confessing in his heart and with his lips, saying: "My Lord, on this very day I found belief and trust that my soul and my spirit have come to live and that my body and my house were saved today". The Saviour spoke to the boy: "Have confidence and courage, I am your Lord. See, after a few days your father and your mother will come to you and you (plural) will be baptized in my name and receive forgiveness of your sins. Tell Athanasius everything that you have seen". When the Saviour had told him these things, while he was lying down upon his face, He went to his place.

31 When dawn had risen, the boy came to me, Athanasius, and he told me the things he had seen ... pray ... and his father and his mother and his relatives, amounting to about one hundred and twenty souls, and the boy told them the things he had seen. They were became confident and received baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁴

32 You have learned, O listeners, that He listens to everyone who seeks Him, for He is not far from us (but near) as the dress that we wear. For I, O my beloved sons, I had much to suffer from the schismatic Arians, yet I prayed to God and He heard me and

³⁴ Mat. 28: 19.

saved me from all my trials. You all know what has happened to me in exile ... for twenty-seven years ... God and the love of his holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel.

33 And the most important thing: Let us celebrate our Holy Masses in the church and complete them in all purity. Let us become pure in our bodies when we are going to receive from the body and the blood of the Lord. But probably someone will say: "If I do not keep myself pure, I will not even come to the church". O what evil death and what great loss without equal! Really, this is a great sin. I tell you that the demons will get hold of the man who stops attending Holy Mass on Saturday and Sunday.

The fornicator who fell down in the church.

34 I will tell you what I heard from a faithful, reliable father and Christ-loving clergyman, who has become a monk in the end. He said: "I was still living in the house of my parents and I daily went to church in the evening to sing. Once, a youth of about thirty years old made his way up to the altar, beautifully dressed in white. Perhaps he was a kind of general. When he entered the door of the *tabir*,³⁵ that is the sanctuary, he said to the clergymen: "Hail, bless (me)", thanking them, meaning: "Rejoice and bless us". Immediately he fell down upon his face. All the clergymen stood around him and said to him: "What happened to you?" Yet he was unable to speak, for the power of the altar had struck him dumb.

35 Then they put him on a mattress and laid him on a bed in the church. He remained for twenty-one days prostrated in the church without speaking to anybody. Thereafter the priest sat down at his side and addressed him, saying: "For how long will you remain in this powerless state? Do you not expect that, unless you confess your sins, this (healing) will not happen and that, when you

³⁵ 'A sacred place' or 'holy of holies', probably of Hebrew origin. Cf. Crum, *Dictionary*, p. 400b; D. J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. II, Sheffield, 1995, p. 384.

confess your sins and obtain forgiveness from the clergy, you will recover?" And forthwith the man spoke and said to the priest: "Forgive me, my father, I fell with a woman ...". "Did you see anything at all at the moment you fell?" He said: "I did not see anything but for a hand palm that slapped my face".

36 The young man confessed and said: "My lord and father, listen to me and I will tell you what I have done out of ignorance.

For since two years I have given myself to fornication. When it happens to me on Saturday and Sunday, I do not go to church out of fear. Then also my body remains heavy the entire Sunday, once because of a scorpion's sting, once pain ravaged my head, at times I was weak while my mind went astray, as I was totally in disorder and ... Then I said: 'When it happens that I die, I will go to church today to attend the holy mass'. Behold, now you see what happened to me". The priest told him: "Did you not hear then and know that it is the body and the blood of Christ which protect and save us from the demons?" From that day, the man diligently strove after his salvation until the day of his death.

Since two years I have given myself to fornication. When it happens to me on Saturday and Sunday, fear forbids me to go to church. Then I also do not go out for fear that some evil befalls me during the entire week. Once a scorpion stung me, once pain ravaged my head, at times my mind went astray because of weakness, as I was totally in disorder, feeling uncomfortable in all my members. Then I said this time: 'When it happens that I die, I will go to church this time to attend the holy mass and enjoy (the blessing)'. Behold, I have told your fatherhood what happened". The priest told him: "Do you not know that these are the things that please the Lord? It is they that protect man and it is they that save us from the demons". From that day, the man diligently strove after his salvation, keeping his body pure until the day of his visitation.

The pious builder.

37 We heard yet another miracle that is too good to be skipped. There was a workman who was a builder by profession. He was wont to get up daily at dawn and go to the house of God and pray three times, saying: "God, preserve me from the evil one". It happened after three years while he did like this and God protected him, that one day at dawn he was earlier and went to the church before they had opened the door. He hurried and went home as he was afraid of the guardians.

We heard yet another miracle, o my beloved, that has happened and is too good to be skipped. There was a workman, a builder of his job, who was wont to get up early every day and go to the house of God and pray three times, saying: "God, protect me today against the evil one". It happened after three years while he did this and God protected him and shielded him, that he rose on that day and went to the gate of the church and found that the door of the church had not been opened. He quickly ran away as he was afraid that the guardians might overtake him.

38 Then, when dawn had come, he left for the place of his work. The man looked upon the construction and saw a demon coming in the likeness

Then, when dawn had come, he went to the place of his work. He looked upon the construction and saw a demon in the likeness

of a big Nubian about five or six cubits tall. When he had arrived at the height of the man who was on the construction, he told him: "You fell in my hands today. For since three years I have been lying in wait for you. These three prayers were like three fiery lamps and they remained protecting you. I was even not able to come into your neighbourhood at all. Lo and behold, you fell in my hands today and I will repay you". And the demon blew into his face, whereupon he dragged him down from the building and wounded his entire body.

39 Behold, I have told you what happened to negligent people who did not go to church. For the man who goes to church daily

is, by his prayer that he recites, being protected against the demons that waylay him.

40 See also what happened in this world to the one who defiled himself. He did not even reach the door of the church ... the angels ... the Lord of the angels and the archangels, Jesus Christ, is staying in its midst, together with Michael, the archangel, who begs the Saviour, saying: "Have mercy upon your image!"³⁶ Also Gabriel, the messenger of charity and offerings, directs them towards God.

Final praise of Michael and Gabriel.

41 Michael and Gabriel are angels. It is they who entreat in the presence of God the Word for the sake of all sinners. It was Michael who went to Adam at the waters of the Jordan and gave him the seed of life. It was also he who was with Enoch, the scribe of righteousness, until ... and told him the interpretation of the king's dreams. It was Gabriel who went to the Virgin Mary and announced her the joy of the eons of light, saying: "Hail, you who found grace, the Lord is with you."³⁷ Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel, that is 'God with us'.³⁸

42 The glory of the holy archangel Gabriel is greater than all angels, as he is called with this name. For the interpretation of "Gabri" is man whereas "El" is God. Great is also the glory of Michael. The name "Micha" means man whereas "El" is God. Both these great archangels are praying for the flood of the river and the dew of heaven and the growth of the crops, the establishment of the orthodox faith and the safety of men and cattle. When you invoke God with the whole of your heart, speaking thus: "O God of the archangel Michael and Gabriel, save me from all attacks of men and the plotting of the demons", I tell

³⁶ Cf. Gen. 1: 26.

³⁷ Lk. 1: 28.

³⁸ Mat. 1: 23 quoted from Isa. 7: 14.

you that salvation and holy power will shield you by day and by night.

Conclusion.

43 Now then, O my beloved, may it happen to all of us that we obtain rest at the tribunal of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and be worthy to hear the voice full of joy, delight and all gladness that says: "Come, blessed ones of my Father, and inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world",³⁹ through the grace and the love of mankind of our Lord, Jesus Christ, He to whom belongs the glory together with his good Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

³⁹ Mat. 25: 34.

