AN “HERETICAL” USE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:  
A MANICHAEAN ADAPTATION OF MATT 6:19–20 
IN P. KELL. COPT. 32

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ABSTRACT

P. Kell. Copt. 32 is a 4th century CE Manichaean personal letter to a woman catechumen belonging to the community at ancient Roman Kellis in the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt. The letter incorporates Matt 6:19–20 within various descriptions of the catechumen as a person of high spiritual standing. The paper presents an analysis of the letter writer’s adaptation of this passage as well as other less obvious passages from the Gospel of Matthew, together with Manichaean sources that may have influenced the choice of images of the “good tree” and spiritual stewardship. This use of the Gospel of Matthew will be set within the broader context of the Manichaean use of Christian canonical scriptures.

P. Kell. Copt. 32 is one of the many letters written in Greek or Coptic found at ancient Roman Kellis (or Ismant el-Kharab) in the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt, and dating from the 4th century CE (Gardner 1999, 213–217). The Kellis letters written in Greek are business or legal documents for the most part, while the Coptic letters tend to be personal letters, although sometimes connected with aspects of the business life of the community as well. Unlike the Greek letters, many of the personal letters in Coptic are by and to women, some of whom can be identified as members of the small Manichaean community at Kellis. This community lives among townsfolk who are presumably developing into a distinctly Christian community, having abandoned the temple of their local Egyptian deity Tutu for their new Christian churches (Bowen 2000; 2002; 2003). Iain Gardner (1996, xii) estimates that Manichaeans were in Kellis by the early 4th century CE, and remained until about the 390s when the site was abandoned.
P. Kell. Copt. 32 is a personal letter written by a Manichaean spiritual father to his spiritual daughter, probably named Eirene (Gardner 1999, 24). For the purposes of this paper, we shall name her as such. Whilst the letter is important within the group of letters connected with women for what it can tell us about the spiritual life of women believers and their importance to the community, this paper will focus on another issue, namely the use of Christian canonical scripture by the letter writer and its function within the letter and what that implies for the relationship of Manichaeism to Christianity as the latter developed in 4th century Egypt. The use of a Matthean text in the letter has importance both for the description of Eirene’s role as catechumen, and for our understanding of how the Manichaeans viewed and used at least one text from the canonical Christian scriptures.

There are a number of possibilities for the identity of the letter writer. Apart from the Manichaean family that appears in many documents and letters from Kellis, there may have been a monastery of Elect somewhere very close to the town, as Gardner (2000, 247–257) has postulated. There was certainly a high-ranking Elect, known simply as “the Teacher” in Kellis documents, who travelled in the Nile Valley and corresponded with the community from time to time. Perhaps it is he, or one of the Elect in the monastery, who is the author of the letter.

In the opening verses of the letter, Eirene is described as a catechumen (τκνήχογοεμεν; vv. 3), which term identifies her official standing within the community. Her good standing spiritually is clear from the various titles and images used of her—she is a “daughter of the holy church” (θεοτεκνος εΤογαρε; vv. 1–2), “God-loving, good-loving” (πνιονογεται πνισαγαθων; vv. 18–19). Above all, what is of particular interest here for understanding the person of Eirene is the image used of her as a good steward or careful householder (vv. 7–13), as well as the associated image of the good tree—“the good tree whose fruit never withers, which is your love that emits radiance every day” (vv. 4–5).

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2 Gardner does question whether this is an actual name or whether it is the salutation “peace”. The name is not significant for this paper. If it is not Eirene, what is said here refers to a female believer of the community.

3 Gardner (1999, 213–4) postulates Theognostos as author of both letters 32 and 33, but admits there is not enough evidence to make any firm judgment about the authorship.