The Testaments of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

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Reading guide

The English text, commentary and sources are gathered in the first part. Documentary reproductions appear at the end of the volume. Historical illustrations accompany the reading.

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Appendix · Facsimiles 55

References to editions and manuscripts are retained. The contents and internal links lead to the new pagination.

THEMANUSCRIPT

Introduction to the text

Vatican Apostolic Library · Vat. copt. 61 · ff. 143v–184v in the viewer, formerly 148v–189v

The narrative

Abraham welcomes the archangel Michael to his table. The guest has come to announce his death. The patriarch wishes to see the world before leaving it. Isaac and Jacob too learn that the time is coming to join their fathers. They speak to their children and consider the fate of the living after their own death.

The witness and its transmission

The three accounts follow one another in a Bohairic Coptic manuscript dated 962. Two numberings appear on its pages. In the viewer, Abraham begins at f. 143v, Isaac at f. 159r and Jacob at f. 173r. The last account ends at f. 184v. The corresponding old numbers are 148v, 164r, 178r and 189v.

The present edition

The three French readings underlying this English version follow editions of the Coptic manuscript. For Abraham, the intermediary is Ernst Andersson’s German translation of 1903; for Isaac and Jacob, Stephen Gaselee’s English translation of 1927. The appendix presents Abraham’s short Greek recension for comparison, including the figures of the judge and witnesses in the judgement scene.

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READINGGUIDE

Contents

Numbers open the corresponding page. The manuscript column leads to the identified folio. A dash means the translation follows another witness or that the start of the passage has not been located in the images.

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Appendix · Abraham in the short Greek recension	—	44	18	19

To consult all the folios, open the start of the manuscript. The photographs retain their writing and material marks.

Manuscript begins p. 55 · Sources and images p. 54

PART TWO · ENGLISH READING

English translation

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appear in the Coptic copy's order. The accounts were translated into French from Andersson's and Gaselee's scholarly versions; this English edition follows the French. At the volume's end is a separate translation of Abraham's short Greek version after G. H. Box, for comparison.

Testament of Abraham

MS p. 55 · Contents p. 4 · History p. 18 · Choices p. 19



Gustave Doré, Abraham Receives the Three Visitors, nineteenth century.

Here is the account of the departure of our holy fathers, the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob Israel. Abraham left this earth on the twenty-eighth day of Mesore, Isaac also on the twenty-eighth day, and Jacob in turn on the twenty-eighth day of that same month of Mesore. They were taken up to heaven in splendour and honour. Our holy father Abba Athanasius, archbishop and apostle of Alexandria [this last title is uncertain],

set out these things. He had found them in the ancient collections of our holy fathers the apostles. In the peace of God. Amen.

Listen to me closely, people who love Christ. I wish to tell you of the life and departure of our holy fathers, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I, Athanasius, your father, found this account in the most ancient collections of our holy fathers the apostles, for the benefit of all who will hear it and that God may be glorified.

Our father the patriarch Abraham's days were drawing to their end. God sent the holy archangel Michael to tell him the decision concerning his departure. Abraham was outside in the fields. The archangel Michael appeared to him and said: 'Greetings, Abraham, illustrious man!' Abraham replied: 'Great greetings to you, my lord and brother!' Then he asked the archangel Michael: 'Where do you come from? Where are you going, walking alone like this? Take care, my brother, lest a wild beast frighten you in the fields.'

Abraham said to his servant Eleazar: 'Quickly, go to the town and bring me a young mule. We shall have this stranger ride it so that walking does not tire him.' Michael said: 'Do not send for a mount for me. Let us both rise and leave the fields. We shall walk with our steps keeping pace.' They rose and walked together to the foot of a tree with three tops, a tamarisk. They heard a voice come from one of its tops like a breath of wind. Three times it cried: 'Holy, holy, holy is he into whose house the messenger has entered!' Hearing this, Abraham was suddenly seized with great fear.

Reaching the town, they entered Abraham's house. Abraham said to his son Isaac: 'Isaac, my son, quickly bring the basin. Let us wash the feet of this stranger who has entered our home. My heart tells me this is

the last time your father will pour water into a basin to wash the feet of a stranger visiting him. I tell you, Isaac, my beloved son, this is the last time you will see your good old father.' Isaac began to weep: 'My father Abraham, what words full of grief and tears have I heard from your mouth? You say this is the last time, my good father!' Abraham answered: 'I myself, my son Isaac, do not know what has happened to me. From the moment this man entered my home, my heart has expanded within me.'

Then he told his servant: 'Hurry to the sheep and all the livestock. Take three beasts of each kind for us: sheep, goats and calves. Slaughter and prepare them, so that I may rejoice with this stranger who has come to our home before I depart to dwell there for ever.' Abraham's servant hurried off and did as he had been ordered.

While the meal was being prepared, Michael left Abraham's house on some pretext. He flew up to heaven, prostrated himself before God and prayed: 'I invoke your goodness and praise your mercy. Let the thought of death take hold in Abraham's heart, so that he may know for himself that he must leave this earth. Show it also to his son Isaac in a vision. I cannot tell him this bitter word, full of tears and sorrow, that he is going to die. He is your good friend. I visited him with you and Gabriel, and he showed us great kindness. To strangers and saints he is hospitality itself. That is why I cannot tell him this bitter word. It is too hard.'

The Lord of the universe said to Michael: 'Michael, my faithful servant, rise and fly to Abraham. Act as if you were eating with him whatever he eats, and sleep where he sleeps. Disobey him in nothing. He is my good friend, and I was his guest at the grove of Mamre.' After the

Saviour had spoken thus to Michael, he reappeared as though he had merely attended to some business. He entered Abraham's house and began to eat. Abraham ate with Michael and his son Isaac.

During the meal Abraham said to his son: 'Quickly, my son, prepare the bed so that this stranger who has entered our home may rest.' Isaac told his father: 'Father, I too shall come and sleep with you tonight.' Abraham said: 'Let us not inconvenience this stranger. Go back to your room and sleep there, do you hear?' Abraham slept beside Michael, and his son Isaac in his own room.

At midnight Isaac awoke with a start, terrified. He ran to his father's bedroom door, knocking, crying out and weeping: 'My father Abraham, rise! Open the door to your son Isaac. Let me come in and bid you farewell with all my heart. Let me feast my eyes on you once more before you leave me!' Abraham rose at once, greatly frightened, and opened the door to his son. Isaac rushed to his father and kissed him on the mouth. They embraced, weeping so violently that Michael himself, seeing their deep affliction, wept with them.

When Rebecca heard of it with her maidservants, she rose and went to the door of the room where Abraham slept. She heard them weeping bitterly. Distraught, she opened the door, entered and said to Abraham: 'My lord and father Abraham, has my lord Isaac died, that you weep like this?' Then, seeing Michael weep, she corrected herself: 'No, Isaac has not died. Now I see Isaac sharing his father's grief!' She turned to Michael, who had human form: 'It is you I ask, O man, where you come from and where you are going. Have you asked my lord Abraham about his brother Lot? He and his sons were taken captive.' Michael answered Rebecca: 'Rebecca, nurturer of the righteous, I have asked nothing about Lot or any of his sons. The

Lord watches over him wherever he finds refuge. No harm will come to him, for his lineage is honourable.'

Rebecca replied: 'Blessed be you in your coming and going!' She had recognised his voice, which she knew from the time of her fathers and the men of her family. She said to Abraham: 'Why do you weep when the holy one is beside you?' Abraham said: 'How do you know, my daughter, that this man is holy?' Rebecca answered: 'If my heart is not mistaken, father, he is one of the three men who visited you beneath the tree at Mamre, those to whom you served a feast.' Abraham said: 'You are right, my daughter. From the moment I washed his feet, I recognised him as one of those hastening towards Sodom. But let us ask what brings him here.'

So Abraham asked the archangel Michael in human form: 'What business brings you here, my brother?' Michael said: 'Your son Isaac will tell you what he saw.' Abraham said to Isaac: 'What did you see, my dear Isaac?' Rebecca, weeping, grasped Isaac and implored him: 'My lord Isaac, tell us what you saw. Tell us; hide nothing from us.'

Isaac told them: 'My tongue will poorly recount what I saw, but listen. I wish to tell you everything. I was alone in my room, asleep. At midnight I had a vision. The sun, moon and stars formed a crown upon my head. Then I saw a radiant man come from heaven. He was called the Father of all lights. He took the sun from my head. The moon turned to him weeping and said: "The light in my house has been taken from me. When my strength fails, the sun restores my vigour and renews me." The stars mingled their tears with her lament. The sun in turn protested to the radiant

man: “If you take me away, wait until I take my rays with me. I do not wish to leave them behind.”

‘Then, my sister Rebecca, I looked to my right. There the sun had the features of my father Abraham, and the moon those of my mother Sarah. The stars resembled all my servants, and all were weeping. I too wept with them over my father Abraham, fearing he would be taken from me. The radiant man answered: “Isaac, do not weep over your father Abraham or fear his departure. He will be taken from distress into wide spaces, delivered from poverty into wealth, removed from servitude to receive freedom.” After this vision I came to the bedroom door with trembling heart. There, I have told you what I saw.’

The archangel Michael answered: ‘What you saw, my son, you have made known in your words, and they will be fulfilled.’ Then all understood that Abraham must leave his body. They wept abundantly. The patriarch said to Michael: ‘If this is God’s will and his purpose for me, I shall raise no objection. I only ask you, my lord, to restore your servant’s courage and take him up to heaven before he leaves his body.’ Michael replied: ‘That is not for me to decide. The decision belongs to my Lord. For my part, I shall pray to God for you. If he commands me, I shall take you up with joy and gladness.’

Michael left Abraham’s house and flew to heaven. He prayed to the Father for Abraham and asked for the mission of leading him into heaven. The Father answered the archangel Michael: ‘Obey Abraham in everything he tells you. Bring him up to heaven in his own body, just as he is. Explain whatever he wishes to know. Take care to satisfy his requests fully, for he is my good friend.’ The archangel

left the Lord and took his place with Abraham upon a cloud. It bore them to the regions of the Ocean, then raised them in glory to heaven.

'I, Abraham, saw there a passage with two gates, one large and one small. Between them sat a man dressed in white. He wept, but sometimes laughed. Yet his weeping far exceeded his laughter, by about eleven times. I said to Michael: "What are these two gates, the large and the small?" Michael answered: "They are the gates leading to life and death. The great wide gate you see leads to death; the small one leads to life. The man sitting between them is Adam, the first man. God placed him there to see all the souls leaving earth pass by. You see his weeping outweighs his laughter. He sees the evil deeds of all the souls that leave earth and present themselves to pass through. Thousands rush through the gate of perdition, while few cross the gate of life."

'I raised my eyes and saw crowds of souls, tens of thousands in number. Their angels walked behind them, and they entered through the gate of perdition. Michael said to me: "Come, let us search among these souls. Perhaps we shall find one deserving to be led by me into the Lord's life."' Abraham and Michael both searched and found none worthy except one soul whose sins exactly balanced its good deeds. They led it into life. All the others were taken together through the gate of perdition. Michael said: 'Woe to them! Woe to them! They are sinners; they could not hasten towards life.'

'I, Abraham, answered him: "I am a man still living the life of this age in a heavy body. I know that no one is granted passage through this narrow gate, the gate of life, except a

few: those who are twelve years old and those who have kept themselves from sin." The archangel Michael told me: "Fear nothing, Abraham, neither you nor those who come after you and resemble you. You will enter eternal life." I said to the holy archangel Michael: "My lord, all these souls leaving the body—is it Death who brings them out, or their angel?" He answered: "Fear nothing, Abraham, neither you nor those who resemble you. It is Death who brings them out of the body." I asked again: "How many souls depart each day throughout the world, and how many are born?" The archangel Michael said: "Do you think, Abraham, these are the only souls that leave their bodies each day throughout the world?" I replied: "Teach me, for I do not know." He said: "Listen. I shall tell you how many souls leave the earth each day throughout the world, by day and by night. They number ninety-nine thousand and ninety-nine hundreds."

'While the archangel Michael spoke to me, a soul was brought in, surrounded as a robber would be. They said: "Let the judge pronounce sentence on this soul." The judge said: "Let its deeds be read to it. Here they are in writing." At once an old man came from behind the veil of the Holy of Holies, a book in his hand. He began reading all this soul's sins, down to the evil it had done. Trembling before the judge, the soul said: "None of this ever came from me!" It had persuaded itself that not everything it had done would be remembered. God, the equitable judge, said: "Is it customary to utter false words here, where there is no falsehood?" The soul repeated: "My lord, none of this was ever done by me." The judge said: "Then you wish each deed you committed to accuse you itself now, and all of them to be brought back to your memory."

‘The judge signalled with his eyes. At once witnesses rose against it. The first said: “Look at me, O soul. Did you not exalt yourself in pride? You approached your daughter’s husband with evil intent, saying: ‘Come, lie with me and take my husband’s place.’ You persisted, even rising against your own daughter, killing her and taking her husband from her.” At these words the wretched soul burst into sobs. “Woe to me, woe to me for my transgressions! Where can I flee? I thought no one knew what I had done. Here I stand accused.”

‘The second witness rose and accused it: “Look at me, soul. Was I not standing while the inhabitants of heaven and earth sang praise? Instead of stretching out your hands to pray to God, you did not even think of his name. You spent your time eating and drinking to excess and gratifying your worst desires.” The third witness rose: “Look at me, soul, and try to recognise me. Am I not the one charged with watching over the heart’s gratitude?” All wept over the human race: angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim. The witness said: “You used to go out at night to commit shameful acts.” Hearing him, the soul dissolved in tears: “Let that suffice, O just judge! Let their accusations against me end here. I know I have nothing left to plead.” At once its mouth fell silent, and it was cast into the abyss of the abode of the dead.

‘I asked the holy archangel Michael: “My lord, who is this imposing old man holding the book and handing the judge the record of these souls?” The archangel said: “It is Enoch, the scribe of righteousness. God saw that he was trustworthy and appointed him to record all people’s good and evil deeds.”’

After Abraham had seen these things, the holy archangel Michael brought him home. He lay on his bed to finish his days like all people, according to what God had arranged for him. Abraham called all his male and female servants. He handed them their deeds of emancipation and that day gave the poor a great feast. As his departure approached, God told Michael: 'My chosen one, I do not wish Death to frighten Abraham when he leaves his body. He is my good friend. Adorn her, then, when she enters his home, so that his soul may not be terrified within him.'

Michael adorned Death according to Abraham's deeds, then sent her to him. She entered and lay beside the sleeping Abraham. When she touched his body, he was afraid. His flesh shuddered, his soul expanded within him, eager to escape his body. Abraham said: 'Who are you whom I see here? The moment I saw you, my body, my soul and all my limbs were struck with terror. My soul stirred within me and burns to flee. Yet I do not know who you are. Could you be a mighty angel of the Father, with such great beauty and dignity? Then I could not have endured your radiance. Yet the coming of angels usually gives me strength, my body grows firm and my soul rejoices within me. But when you entered, my strength deserted me and my soul took fright.

'I implore you, tell me who you are. But speak little by little. See, my eyes are darkening; I no longer recognise those around me. Little by little my senses seem to reject the strength they held from God. Their divine vigour has left them. Speak little by little, for my mind is darkened. My tongue is powerless; it has lost its strength and grew numb when you entered. Little by little my breath has weakened within me; it

is close to dying away. My soul is beginning to stir within me, seeking to escape my limbs.'

Abraham wept abundantly. In a loud voice full of fear he called his son Isaac: 'Come near, my son! See whether you can recognise the person beside my bed who causes me this terror. I am an old man, my eyes have darkened and I have not recognised her.' Isaac approached his father, kissed him on the mouth and said: 'Abraham, my father, I see no one around you. Why do you weep? Why are you afraid? Tell me your thoughts, father.' Abraham said: 'Isaac, my son, your father is going to leave the earth like everyone else. He will depart and never return.' Isaac burst into sobs: 'Woe to me if you go and leave me an orphan! Where shall I find another father like you?' Abraham told him: 'Do not weep, Isaac, my son; do not worry. You have the Lord. He will protect you too until the day you depart.'

Then Abraham turned to the person lying beside him: 'Tell me distinctly and clearly who you are and what your name is.' Death said: 'Hear the bitterness of my name! I am the source of mourning. Whoever I carry away never returns. I am she who strikes terror in all, who plunges a mother into mourning by taking the sons around her. I am Death, Abraham, who carries away all people.' Abraham said: 'You are Death, you who are so beautiful? How could anyone be frightened if you come for them in such beauty?' Death answered: 'Do you think I come for everyone in this form? Not at all, Abraham. I come in this beauty only to the righteous. To sinners I fly in all my ugliness, striking them with terror when I come to draw them from their bodies.' Abraham asked Death: 'Is this extraordinary beauty, then, your

adornment?' Death said: 'This beauty belongs to you. I clothe myself according to each person's deeds, and that is how I come for them.'

Abraham told Death: 'Show yourself now with your true features and in your own form, so that I may see you.' Death answered: 'Then let your servants remain outside, behind the bedroom door. They must not see me and all die together. No one has ever beheld my true form and lived.' Abraham asked: 'Can one truly die before the appointed age, before one's hour?' Death said: 'Yes, during the great trials and plagues God raises in countries and towns because of their sins. When he is angry with them, he sends us, saying: "Take their souls as you see fit." We go out together: I, Death, and my son, whom I begot from the defilement of matter. I named him Prilimos, because he is made of everyone's defilement. We both go out full of wrath and strike from beginning to end. On the way we spare neither small nor great. No regard for the white-haired elder, no consideration for young boys, no pity for the child sucking its mother's milk. We spare neither bride nor bridegroom. We take them from their bridal chamber. My son Prilimos brings sickness. My office is to bring souls out of their bodies.'

Having spoken thus, Death began to reveal her true form. She stripped away all beauty. She had a multitude of heads, some with hideous faces, others vomiting fire. Eighteen of Abraham's servants fell to the ground and died from this terrifying sight. The others fell face down. The shadow of death covered them until Michael came to awaken Abraham's servants and set them on their feet. Then Death withdrew with her own to return to her dwelling places.

The archangel Michael took Abraham's soul and wrapped it in linen shrouds. He placed it on a radiant chariot. Companies of angels walked before it. Abraham's soul was admitted to the dwellings of rest in the third heaven, and he rejoiced with all the righteous.

The patriarch Abraham died on the twenty-eighth day of the month of Mesore, aged one hundred and seventy. Isaac wept for his father. He embalmed him with great honours, took him and buried him in his mother Sarah's tomb, which Abraham had bought from the sons of Heth. They mourned Abraham for sixty days. When the mourning ended, Isaac returned home and told his servants: 'Behold, my father has freed you. Rise, you too; perform the works of freedom, and you will share in freedom!'

As for Isaac, he devoted himself above all to the things belonging to the service of his God. He believed in the God of his father Abraham and honoured the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who is through him. All glory, honour and worship be given to the Father with him and with the Holy Spirit who gives life and is with him, now, always and for ever and ever. Amen.

Thus ends the life of our father the patriarch Abraham. May his holy blessing remain always with all our people. Amen.

HISTORICALCOMMENTARY

Testament of Abraham

One title for three departures

Vat. copt. 61, digital f. 143v, formerly 148v.

The rubric brings together Abraham, Isaac and Jacob Israel, placing their departure on the twenty-eighth day of Mesore. The heading reads ‘the three patriarchs’.

Enoch, the scribe of righteousness

Testament of Abraham, vision of the tribunal. Compare the Greek appendix where Abraham asks who judges souls.

In the Coptic reading, an old man holding a book records deeds and gives them to the judge. Michael identifies him as Enoch. In the Greek appendix, Michael names the judge Abel.

Death comes to Abraham

Testament of Abraham, return home and encounter at the patriarch’s bedside.

The text makes Death a character. God asks Michael to adorn her so that her arrival will not terrify Abraham. She comes to lie beside him and speaks.

TRANSLATIONCHOICES

Testament of Abraham

One title for three departures

Vat. copt. 61, digital f. 143v, formerly 148v.

The title follows the customary ‘Testaments’. The first sentence translates the Coptic motif of departure, also found in the openings of Isaac’s and Jacob’s accounts.

Enoch, the scribe of righteousness

Testament of Abraham, vision of the tribunal. Compare the Greek appendix where Abraham asks who judges souls.

The functions of judge, scribe and witness are distinguished. The name given by a version remains attached to the scene in which it appears.

Death comes to Abraham

Testament of Abraham, return home and encounter at the patriarch’s bedside.

Capitalising ‘Death’ marks this personification. Passages referring simply to dying retain the lower case.

ENGLISHTRANSLATION

Testament of Isaac

MS p. 86 · Contents p. 4 · History p. 32 · Choices p. 33



Gustave Doré, Isaac Blesses Jacob, nineteenth century.

Here is how the soul of the patriarch Isaac, son of Abraham, left his body on the twenty-eighth day of the month of Mesore, in the peace of God. Amen.

The patriarch Isaac wrote his testament and spoke these words to instruct his son Jacob and all who had gathered around him. Thus the patriarch's blessing would rest upon his hearers and those who came after them.

Hear these words of instruction. Like remedies, they restore strength. May God's will always be fulfilled in whoever hears them with the ears and from the depths of the heart, and remains in faith without doubting. It is written: 'If you hear a word, let it remain with you.' Whoever hears it must therefore persevere in their effort. God will give them

the blessing they sought. It is also written that he will refuse the sons of men nothing they have asked on earth. If God has given us power over everything on earth, how much more to the one whose faith makes him firm in the words of God and the saints, whose heart all these words have set right! With the saints he will share the inheritance of God's kingdom. For God is compassionate and merciful. In past generations he welcomed robbers and tax collectors because of their simplicity and upright faith firmly established in him. So it will be for every generation to come.

When the time drew near for our father the patriarch Isaac to leave his body, the God of mercy sent him the great and holy archangel Michael, the very one he had sent to his father Abraham. At dawn on the twenty-second day of Mesore, he said: 'Greetings, my son, God's chosen one and beloved son.' Our father Isaac, that righteous old man who loved God, was accustomed to speaking daily with the holy angels. He lowered his eyes. The one he saw resembled his father Abraham. He opened his mouth and cried loudly, transported with joy: 'I behold your face like a man who has beheld God!'

The angel said: 'Prepare yourself, my beloved Isaac. The living God has sent me to fetch you and lead you to heaven, to your father Abraham. You will celebrate the feast with all the saints. Your father Abraham watches over you and comes himself to meet you. See your throne, set up for you in heaven beside your father. With your beloved son Jacob you will share the great inheritance of all the inhabitants of heaven's kingdom, in the glory of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through all generations you will be called patriarch and father of the whole earth.' Our father Isaac, the old man who loved God, answered the angel: 'How you astonish me! Are you not Abraham, my father?' The angel replied:

‘Beloved Isaac, I am the angel who serves your father Abraham. Rejoice, then, be glad and do not be troubled. You will depart without pain, in joy, to eternal honour and rest. You will be led from your prison into wide spaces, to unfailing joy, gladness, light, delights, festivity and lasting coolness. Put your testament in order and instruct your household so that you may enter rest. Blessed be the father who begot you. Blessed be you. Blessed be Jacob your son, and blessed your descendants after you.’

Jacob heard them speaking. He came near and listened without saying a word. His heart moved, our father Isaac asked the angel: ‘What shall I do with the light of my eyes, Jacob, my beloved son? I fear for him because of Esau. You know the whole matter.’ The angel replied: ‘My beloved Isaac, even if all the nations on earth assembled, they could not undo the blessing you pronounced over Jacob. The Father blessed him. Michael, the angels, heaven’s inhabitants, the spirits of all the righteous and your father Abraham all answered “Amen”. Iron will not approach him. He will be raised very high and his descendants will spread. He will become a mighty nation, and twelve tribes will come from him.’

Our father Isaac told the angel: ‘You have greatly comforted me. But let Jacob not learn of it, lest he be troubled and weep. I have never caused him grief.’ The Lord’s angel said: ‘My beloved Isaac, happy is every righteous person who leaves the body. Happy are the righteous when they meet God! Woe, woe, three times woe to the sinner for being born into this world! The trial must be crossed, my beloved. Instruct your sons yourself according to your conduct and the commandments your father gave you. Hide nothing from Jacob. Then he can write these things for every generation to come. Those who love God may practise them and obtain eternal life for themselves. Above all, see that you

are ready. I am coming to you with joy, without delay. The peace the Lord gave us, I give you. I must return with all haste to the one who sent me.'

With these words the angel rose above our father Isaac's bed. He went away, and Isaac followed him with his eyes. Marvelling at the revelation he had received, he said: 'I shall not see the light until they come for me.' At these words Jacob rose and approached his father's door. The angel had cast sleep upon him so that he would not hear them speaking. Coming close to where his father slept, he said: 'Father, whom are you speaking to?' His father said: 'To Isaac. Do you hear me, my son? They have sent for your old father to take him from you, my beloved son.' Jacob threw his arms around him and said through tears: 'My strength is gone; it has left me. You make me an orphan, father! Today I am wretched and fatherless.'

Isaac in turn took Jacob in his arms and kissed him. Both wept until their tears ceased. Jacob said: 'Take me with you, my beloved Isaac, my blessed father.' His father answered: 'That is not mine to decide, my dear Jacob. Thanks be to God, for you too are a father, my beloved. Wait until they come for you. I too remember the day when the great flourishing cypress was shaken. However much I spoke to my lord and father Abraham, I could do nothing. Now, my son, what God in his power has appointed for each person comes to pass. No one can change what is written. The Lord knows, my son, my heart is very heavy because of you. Otherwise I rejoice to go to him. Take courage and show a steadfast spirit. Stop weeping so much and hear what I wish to tell you, my beloved son.

‘Where is the first creation God fashioned with his hands, our father Adam and our mother Eve? Where are Abel and Seth? Where are Enosh and Mahalalel, Jared and my father Enoch, Methuselah and Lamech? Where is our father Noah with his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth? After them came Arphaxad and Cainan, Shelah and Eber, Reu and Serug, Nahor and Terah, my father Abraham and his brother Lot. All tasted death except our father Enoch, the perfect one, who was taken to the heavenly heights. After them twelve generations will come from you. Thus Jesus Christ will be born of your lineage, of a virgin named Mary.’

God remained with him until he had completed a hundred years. He fasted daily until sunset, offering his sacrifices and those of his household for his soul’s salvation. He devoted half the day to ascetic exercises and half the night to prayer to God. He did this for many years. Three times a year he went forty days without eating. He drank no wine, ate no fruit and slept on neither bed nor mattress. And he prayed to God.

When the crowd learned that the man of God could see clearly, people came from every country and place to hear his teachings of life. They knew that a spirit of God spoke in him. The notables gathered around him asked: ‘Our holy father, what has been granted you? For so long the light of your eyes was dimmed, and now you see clearly!’ The old man who loved God opened his mouth with a laugh. ‘My sons, my beloved brothers,’ he answered, ‘God healed me. When he saw me drawing near the gate of death, he wished to grant me this consolation in my old age.’

God’s priest said: ‘Show me the way with a word of consolation.’ He answered: ‘Keep your body in holiness, for it is God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in it. Keep your weak flesh

in purity and holiness. Watch over yourself. Avoid mingling with people if it will bring an angry word from your mouth. Guard against slander and vainglory. Guard against speaking alone with a woman. Guard against idle words. Watch your hands, lest they reach for what is not yours. Offer no sacrifice if any defilement is in you. Wash in water when you wish to approach the altar. When you stand before God, do not mingle worldly thoughts with thoughts of God. When offering sacrifice, strive to be at peace with everyone. To approach the altar, repeat this prayer to God within yourself a hundred times, making this confession.

"'Incomprehensible, unfathomable, invincible God, holy treasure, purify me in your love. I am flesh and blood and have taken refuge in you. I know I am unclean. Purify me, Lord; I have come to prostrate myself before you. I know I am unclean. Purify me, Lord; I have come to bow down that you may send upon me the fire consuming created matter. Your mercy removes my iniquity. Forgive me, sinner that I am, and forgive all creation that came from your hands. I have no quarrels like beasts. I am at peace with all you made in your likeness. All evil reasonings leave me untroubled. I am your son, your servant, your handmaid's son. I am a sinner; you are the one who forgives. In your love, forgive me. Hear my prayer, that I may stand at the altar and my sacrifice please you. Do not reject me because of my sin. Gather me in like the lost sheep. God who was with our father Adam, with Abel, with Noah and our father Abraham, be with me also. You who were with our father Jacob, be with me and receive my sacrifice from my hand."

‘When you have spoken these words, go up to the altar and offer your sacrifice. Watch yourself carefully so as not to grieve the Lord’s Spirit who is there. Great is the priest’s task. Today and until the last generation, until the world’s end, priests should not gorge themselves on wine, bread or water, speak of worldly affairs or listen to those who do. Let their whole life persevere in prayer, vigils and asceticism until the Lord comes for them in peace. Every monk and priest living on this earth should love the retreat he will soon choose, renounce the world and its evil cares, and remain pure in the angels’ holy service. Through their holy offerings and angelic service, an image of the service they will perform in heaven, they will be purified before the Lord and his angels. Because of their perfect faith and purity, angels will be their companions. Great will be their honour before God.

‘Of everyone, small or great, the Lord expects that they keep from sin. As for the wicked who have sinned, they must repent before God. Commit none of these sins. Kill neither with sword nor tongue. Commit fornication neither in your body nor in your thoughts. Do not defile yourself. Envy no one. Do not remain angry until sunset, nor in vainglory. Rejoice at the fall of neither enemy nor neighbour. Do not blaspheme. Do not accustom your mouth to slander, and let your gaze not pursue a woman with lust. To all these and similar things we must pay close attention until each of us escapes the wrath to be revealed in heaven.’

Hearing this, those gathered around him all cried loudly together: ‘Just and good are these words of truth!’ The old man who loved God fell silent, drew up his covering and

covered his face. The crowd and priest kept silent so he might rest a little. Then his father's angel approached and carried him to heaven. With fear and trembling he saw crowds separated to right and left, as on the last day. The sight was terrifying. Some had a camel's face, others a lion's, hyena's, leopard's or dog's. Others had only one eye and were fearful to see.

'I looked. A man was brought in under pursuit. When they came near the beasts, those accompanying him stood aside. The lions approached, tore him in two, ripped off his limbs one by one, dismembered and ate him. Then they brought him back up, and he regained his former shape. After he passed the lions, the others did the same to him. They passed him from one to another. Each tore him apart, ate him and brought him back up. He became the same man again, just as before. I asked the angel: "My lord, how many sins has this man committed to be treated like this?" The angel told me: "The man you saw spent five hours in enmity with his neighbour. Death overtook him before they made peace. That is why he was handed to five tormentors. For each of those five hours in enmity with his neighbour, he endures a year of torment."

'The angel continued: "My beloved Isaac, do you think they are the only ones? Know, Isaac my beloved, that there are seventy thousand tormentors. For every hour a man has spent in enmity with his neighbour, he must remain in their hands a whole year, unless he repented of his sins before leaving his body." He led me further to a river of fire. I saw its waves, forty cubits high, crashing like heaven's thunder. I saw a

crowd of souls immersed in the river to a depth of nine cubits. They cried out, wept aloud and heaved great sighs. The river spares the righteous. It burns sinners, recognising them by the stench around them. I saw the depths of the abyss, its smoke rising very high. A multitude of people were cast into it. They cried out, and each wept and groaned.

'The angel said: "Lower your eyes and see those too." I saw them, and he told me: "These people immersed in cold are those who committed Sodom's iniquity. That is why their torment is so great." I saw another pit filled with worms that never sleep and with serpents. The people immersed in it cried and wept. I saw Abtelmolouchos, in charge of the punishments. He was entirely of fire. He struck hell's tormentors, telling them: "Strike them, that they may know God exists." I saw another immense pit, all fire, and beneath it a multitude of people crying and weeping, each with their groans. The angel told me: "Look with your eyes and see all these punishments." I answered: "I am willing to look, but my eyes cannot reach far enough to see them. How long will they be in these torments?" He said: "Until the merciful God has pity on them."

'After this the angel took me up to heaven. I saw my father Abraham. I prostrated myself before him, and he greeted me with all the saints. They were all gathered and honoured me because of my father. They walked with me and led me to the Father's veil. I fell and worshipped him with my father and all the saints. We all sang him a hymn and proclaimed: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are filled with your holy glory." From the holy place the Lord said to my father: "If a man names his son after my beloved Isaac, my blessing will remain in his house for ever. Welcome, Abraham the

faithful! Welcome too to the good and blessed root sprung from you! Today, in your beloved son Isaac's name, ask me all you wish. I shall grant it, that the covenant may endure for ever."

'My father Abraham said: "Yours is the power, Lord Almighty." From the holy place the Lord answered: "If a man names his son after my beloved Isaac, or copies his testament and places it in the child's hand as a blessing, my blessing will never leave that house. If he feeds a hungry beggar on the day my beloved Isaac is commemorated, this will make him accepted beside you in my kingdom." My father Abraham asked: "Lord God Almighty, if he cannot copy his testament, let your mercy reach him. You are compassionate and merciful." The Lord answered Abraham: "Let him give bread to the poor and hungry. I shall give him to you in my kingdom, and he will enter with you at the first hour of the thousand years." Our father Abraham said: "And if he is poor and finds no bread?" The Lord said: "Let him keep vigil during my beloved Isaac's night. I shall give him to you as a fellow heir in my kingdom." My father Abraham said: "If he is weak and cannot do so, let your mercy reach him with love." The Lord told him: "Let him offer a little incense in my name on the day my beloved Isaac is commemorated. I shall give him to you as a son in my kingdom. If he finds no incense, let him attend to the testament and meditate on it on the day of my beloved Isaac, your son. If he does not know how to meditate on it, let him go and hear it among those who do. If he can do none of this, let him enter his home, shut the door and pray a hundred times. I shall give him to you as a son in my kingdom. But it is better still that he offer a sacrifice in my beloved Isaac's name.

‘“Whoever does as I have said will share the inheritance of my kingdom’s inhabitants. Let him watch his conduct, perform a work of compassion, even giving a glass of water, copy the testament or meditate on it with faith and all his heart, and believe everything I have said. My power and that of the Holy Spirit will be with such people and guide them throughout the world. There will be no distinction between them in my city. I shall give them to you as sons in my kingdom, and they will enter at the first hour of the thousand years. My peace be with you all, my holy fighters.” When he had finished speaking, all heaven’s inhabitants began a hymn and cried: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are filled with your holy glory.” From the holy place the Father told Michael: “Michael, my faithful steward, call a multitude of angels with all the saints.” The Lord our God mounted the cherubim’s chariot. The seraphim walked before him with the angels and all the saints.’

After these words, Jacob ran to his father Isaac and kissed his lips, weeping. Our father Isaac touched him and signalled with his eyes to keep silent. Our father Abraham told the Lord: ‘Lord, remember my son.’ Isaac in turn said: ‘Lord, remember my son Jacob.’ The Lord answered him: ‘My power will be with him, and he will be glorified in my name. He will rule the land of the inheritance, and the enemy will not prevail over him.’

Our father Isaac told Jacob: ‘My beloved son, keep the commandment I place in your hands today. Watch over yourself with the greatest care. Do not afflict God’s image. Whatever you do to man’s image you will have done to God’s image, and God will do likewise to you when you meet him. This is the beginning and the end.’ At these words the Lord drew from his body his soul, white as

snow. He welcomed it, took it up beside him on a chariot and carried it to heaven, preceded by the seraphim and all his holy angels. He granted Isaac the good things of his kingdom. Every request our father had made to the Lord was granted by the Lord through an eternal covenant.

Thus our lord and father Abraham and our beloved father Isaac left their bodies. Abraham died on the twenty-eighth of Mesore, and Isaac on the twenty-eighth of the same month, aged one hundred and eighty. It was on the eighteenth day of Emchir that our father Abraham had offered him in sacrifice to God. Heaven and earth were filled with the sweet fragrance of his offering to the Lord. Our father Isaac is like tested silver, refined and purified by fire. So will all those be who have been purified through our father the patriarch Isaac. On the day his father, the patriarch Abraham, offered him to God, the sweet fragrance of his sacrifice reached the Almighty's veil.

Happy is whoever performs an act of mercy on the day of the holy patriarchs Abraham and our father Isaac. Such people will be given to them as sons in God's kingdom. For our Lord made an everlasting covenant with them. He will keep it towards them and those who come after them. He told them: 'Whoever performs an act of mercy in my beloved Isaac's name, I shall give to you as a son in heaven's kingdom. He will enter with you at the first hour of the thousand years.' Thus they will celebrate the feast in the ages of light, in the kingdom of our Lord and King Jesus Christ. To him be glory, honour, power and worship for ever and ever. Amen.

Remember the disciple who wrote these words, Macarius, that the Lord may grant rest to his poor soul. Amen.

HISTORICALCOMMENTARY

Testament of Isaac

The hand of Macarius

End of Isaac’s Testament and beginning of Jacob’s, digital f. 173r, formerly 178r.

After the account of Isaac’s death, a request for prayer names Macarius, the disciple who wrote these words. Jacob’s account opens on the same folio.

TRANSLATIONCHOICES

Testament of Isaac

The hand of Macarius

End of Isaac's Testament and beginning of Jacob's, digital f. 173r, formerly 178r.

The request for prayer remains at the end of Isaac. Its 'I' or appeal to the reader belongs to the copying, while Jacob is the character of the following narrative.

ENGLISHTRANSLATION

Testament of Jacob

MS p. 114 · Contents p. 4 · History p. 32 · Choices p. 33

Here now is how our father the patriarch Jacob, called Israel, left his body on the twenty-eighth day of the month of Mesore, in the peace of God. Amen.

Our beloved father the patriarch Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, was growing old. As the day approached when he must leave his body, the Lord sent the archangel Michael to Jacob, who loved God. He told him: 'Israel, my beloved, good root, write your words of instruction for your sons. Draw up your testament for them and put your household's affairs in order. The time has come to join your fathers and rejoice with them for ever.' Hearing these words, Jacob, who loved God, answered the angel: 'My lord...' He was accustomed to speaking to angels every day. This was his answer: 'Let the Lord's will be done.'

God blessed our father Jacob. He placed him somewhere solitary where he could withdraw and address his prayers to God by day and night. Angels came to visit him. They watched over him, saved him and strengthened him in everything. God blessed him, and his people multiplied abundantly in Egypt. When he went down to Egypt to his son Joseph, his eyes had darkened from weeping and suffering over him. But on reaching Egypt and seeing his son Joseph's face, his sight cleared. Jacob Israel threw himself on his son Joseph's neck, bowed before him and said weeping: 'Now I can die, since I have seen your face again and you are still alive, my beloved.' Joseph ruled all Egypt. Jacob lived seventeen years in Goshen. He reached

extreme old age, full of days. He kept all the commandments and lived in fear of the Lord. At last old age darkened his eyes until he could no longer distinguish anyone.

He raised his eyes to the light of the angel speaking to him. The angel had his father Isaac's features and face. Jacob was afraid and troubled. The angel said: 'Do not fear, Jacob. I am the angel who has walked with you since childhood. I chose you to receive the blessing of your father Isaac and your mother Rebecca. I am with you, Israel, in everything you do and everything you have seen. I delivered you from Laban's hand when he pursued you. I gave you all his possessions. I blessed you, all your wives, children and flocks. I also delivered you from Esau's hands and showed you the way to Egypt. I made your household grow in number.

'Blessed be your father Abraham, whose hospitality made him the friend of God Most High. Blessed be Isaac, the father who begot you, because his sacrifice reached fulfilment and pleased God. Blessed be you too, Jacob, who saw God face to face and beheld the multitude of his angels on high! You saw the ladder set upon earth with its top reaching heaven. At its summit you saw the Lord standing in unspeakable power. You cried: "Here is God's house; here is heaven's gate!" Blessed be you, who found strength in God and were mighty among men! Do not be troubled, then, beloved of God. Blessed be you, Israel, and all your descendants. You will be called patriarchs until this age's consummation, for you are truly my people, the root of God's servants.

'Happy is every people who take your holiness, virtues, righteousness and good works as their example. Happy is whoever commemorates you on your venerable feast day! Whoever in your name performs

a work of charity, gives someone a glass of water, presents a perfect offering in your sanctuary or any other holy place, welcomes the stranger, visits the sick, comforts an orphan or clothes the naked, will lack no good thing in this world and [obtain] eternal life in the age to come. Still more will this be so for whoever writes your life and the labours you endured, copies it by hand or reads it attentively, hears it with faith and keeps it in the heart, and imitates your deeds. All will receive forgiveness of their sins and be given to you in heaven's kingdom. Rise now. You will leave toil and sorrow for eternal rest. You will be admitted to endless repose, unfailing comfort, light that never sets, joy, gladness and spiritual delights. Give your final words to your sons, then. Peace be with you. I must go to the one who sent me.'

Having spoken thus, the angel left him in peace and rose to heaven before his eyes. In the house they heard Jacob confess the Lord and praise him with blessings. All his sons gathered around him, from smallest to greatest. They wept with heavy hearts, saying: 'He will leave us! Beloved father, what shall we do? We dwell in a foreign land.' Jacob told them: 'Do not fear. God appeared to me in Mesopotamia and said: "I am your fathers' God. Do not fear. I am with you for ever, and for ever with your descendants after you. The land on which you stand I shall give to you and your descendants for ever." He also told me: "Do not fear to go down to Egypt. I shall go down with you so that you multiply, your descendants flourish always and Joseph lays his hands on your eyes. Your people will become very numerous in Egypt. Then they will return to me in this place, and I shall do them good because of you." Thus one day you will leave this country.'

When the time came for Jacob Israel to leave his body, he called Joseph and said: 'If I have found favour in your eyes, place your blessed hand on my thigh and swear before the Lord to lay my body in my fathers' tomb.' Joseph said: 'I shall do as you say, beloved father.' His father replied: 'I want you to swear it.' So Joseph swore to his father Jacob to carry his body to his fathers' tomb as requested. Jacob leaned upon his son's neck.

Later they came for Joseph, saying: 'Your father is in distress.' He took his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and went to his father Israel. Seeing them, Israel asked Joseph: 'Who are those with you, my son?' Joseph answered his father Jacob Israel: 'They are the sons God gave me in the land of my humiliation.' Israel said: 'Bring them near me.' Israel's eyes had darkened through extreme old age, and he no longer saw clearly. Joseph brought his sons near. Israel kissed and embraced them, then told Joseph: 'God will increase your descendants.' Joseph had his two sons bow to the ground before him. He placed Manasseh under Israel's right hand and Ephraim under his left. Israel crossed his hands, placing his right on Ephraim's head and his left on Manasseh's.

He blessed them and gave them their inheritance, saying: 'May the God whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac pleased, the God who fed me from childhood to this day, may the angel who redeemed me from all my distress bless these boys who are my sons! May they bear my name and the names of my holy fathers Abraham and Isaac. They will grow and multiply. They will become a great nation on earth.' Then Israel told Joseph: 'I am going to die. You will return to your fathers' land, and God will be with you. Behold, you have received a blessing greater

than your brothers', for it was with my bow and sword that I took the Amorites.'

Jacob called all his sons: 'Come to me, all of you. I shall tell you what will happen to you and what will befall each of you in the last days.' From smallest to greatest, all Israel's sons gathered around him. Jacob Israel told them: 'Listen, sons of Jacob; hear Israel your father, from Reuben my firstborn to Benjamin.' He announced what his twelve sons would become according to their names and tribes, under heaven's blessing.

The whole crowd kept silent to let him rest. He was carried to heaven to visit the places of repose. A multitude of tormentors came out, all different in appearance, ready to torment sinners: those who engage in prostitution and prostitutes, those the text calls effeminate, those who defile themselves with men, adulterers, those who destroy God's creature, sorcerers and poisoners, those who act violently, idol worshippers, idlers, slanderers and the double-tongued. For each sin we have mentioned there is a great punishment: the fire that never goes out, the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, the worm that never sleeps. Fearful it is to be led before the Judge. Fearful it is to fall into the living God's hands. Woe to the sinners for whom such torments and tormentors are prepared!

'After this I was taken higher still. He showed me where my fathers Abraham and my father Isaac stood. All was light there. They were full of life and joy in heaven's kingdom, in the beloved city. He showed me all the places of repose, all the good things prepared for the righteous, things eye has not seen, ear has not

heard and that have not entered the human heart. This is what God has prepared for those who will love him, do his will on earth and end their lives well in doing his will.'

After this Jacob told his sons: 'Behold, I shall be taken and laid beside my people. Lay my body beside my people in the double tomb in the field of Ephron the Hittite. Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried there. Isaac was buried there, on the way to the field. The field and its tomb were bought from the sons of Heth.' When Jacob finished these words, he drew his feet onto the bed and left his body like every person. The Lord descended from heaven with Michael, Gabriel and countless legions of angels singing before him. They received Jacob Israel's soul in the dwellings of light beside his holy fathers Abraham and Isaac.

Here is the number of the patriarch Jacob Israel's years. He was one hundred and thirty when Joseph presented him to Pharaoh. He lived another seventeen years in Egypt, one hundred and forty-seven in all. He fell asleep in a fine old age, accomplished in every virtue and spiritual grace, praising God in all his ways, in the peace of God. Amen.

Joseph threw himself upon his father and kissed him, weeping over him. He ordered his servants who embalmed the dead: 'Embalm my father well, according to Egyptian custom.' They spent forty days embalming Israel. After those forty days, they spent another eighty days mourning him. Pharaoh mourned Jacob because of his love for Joseph. When Pharaoh's days of mourning ended, Joseph told his court's great men: 'If I have found favour in your eyes, speak for me to King Pharaoh. When leaving his body, my father made me swear that his remains would be laid in his

fathers' tomb in Canaan. Let Pharaoh therefore command me to go and bury him there, then return.'

King Pharaoh told Joseph the wise: 'Go in peace and bury your father according to the oath he made you swear. Take chariots and carriages, all my kingdom's great men and whatever servants of mine you need.' Joseph worshipped God before Pharaoh and withdrew. He went up to bury his father. All Pharaoh's servants, Egypt's elders, Joseph's whole household, his brothers and all Israel's household went with him. Chariots and horsemen accompanied them. The procession was immense. They stopped at Gadad's threshing floor on the far bank of the Jordan. There they mourned Jacob with very great and painful mourning. They observed his mourning for seven days. The lowland inhabitants heard the lamentations rising from Gadad's threshing floor and said: 'This grievous mourning is the Egyptians'.' To this day they call that place the Mourning of the Egyptians. Israel was carried to Canaan and buried in the double tomb Abraham had bought for silver from Ephron the Hittite, opposite Mamre. Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and Pharaoh's household. He lived many years after his father's death and ruled in Egypt. Jacob Israel had died and been laid beside his people.

Behold, to the extent of our strength we have told you how our father the patriarch Jacob Israel left his body, to give you assurance of it. This is found in God's spiritual Scriptures and the ancient writings of our holy fathers the apostles. I, Athanasius, your father, tell you this. To know the basis of this testament of the patriarch Jacob, take Genesis by the prophet Moses, the lawgiver, and read. Your mind will be enlightened. You will find these things written there, and more concerning them. There you will encounter God and his angels.

You will see that God was the patriarchs' friend while they were still in their bodies and often spoke with them. Many passages of Scripture show it. Several times too he addresses the patriarch Jacob: 'I shall bless your descendants and make them numerous as heaven's stars.' Jacob also told his son Joseph: 'My God appeared to me in Canaan, at Luz. He blessed me, saying: "I shall bless and multiply you; I shall bring peoples and nations from you. I shall give this land to your descendants after you as a perpetual possession."'

My beloved, we have heard the account of our fathers the patriarchs. Let us follow their works, virtues, love of God and people, and hospitality. May we become worthy to be their sons in heaven's kingdom! May they pray to God to deliver us from hell's pains, which the holy patriarch Jacob described to his sons in gentle words and called the Lord God's sword. It is the prepared river of fire, raising great waves for sinners and those who have defiled themselves. This Jacob revealed to the other sons he instructed. Let those who love learning listen, do good always, love one another and love charity and mercy. Mercy prevails over judgement, and charity covers a multitude of sins. It is also said that whoever pities the poor lends to God with interest.

Now, my sons, let us persevere in prayer and fasting. Remain expectant, for thus demons are driven out. My sons, guard against fornication, anger, adultery and all evil, especially violence, blasphemy and theft. No violence will inherit heaven's kingdom. Neither one engaging in prostitution, nor one

called effeminate, nor one who defiles himself with men, nor a blasphemer, greedy person, idolater, one who curses or an unclean person—in short, none of those just listed will inherit God's kingdom.

My sons, glorify the saints. They pray that your descendants multiply and you receive the earth as an inheritance for ever. My sons, practise hospitality, and you will share the portion of our father Abraham, the great patriarch. My sons, love the poor. What you do here for the poor, may God repay above with the bread of life he will give you for ever, to the end. Whoever gives the poor earthly bread to eat, God will give food from the tree of life. Clothe the naked poor on earth so that God may clothe you in heaven with a robe of glory, and you become for ever the son of our holy fathers, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Attend here below to God's word and commemorate the saints. May they record their counsels and the hymns comforting their hearers; may they also inscribe your name in heaven's book of life and count you among the saints who pleased God in their generation and now sit with angels in the abode of the living.

For year after year at this time we commemorate our fathers the holy patriarchs: our father the patriarch Abraham on the twenty-eighth of Mesore, our father the patriarch Isaac on the twenty-eighth of Mesore, and our father Jacob on the twenty-eighth of that same month. Thus we found it written in the ancient works of our holy fathers who pleased God. Through their supplications and prayers may we all obtain their portion and inheritance in the kingdom of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Through him is [...] the Father's glory,

with him and the Holy Spirit who gives life, now, always and for ever. Amen.

Remember me, that God may forgive all my sins, give me understanding and grant me rest without sin. Amen.

ENGLISHTRANSLATION

Appendix · Abraham in the short Greek recension

Witness p. 55 · Contents p. 4 · History p. 18 · Choices p. 19

As the day of Abraham's death approached, the Lord told Michael: 'Rise, go to my servant Abraham. Tell him he will leave life, for his allotted years on earth are complete. Let him put his household's affairs in order before dying.'

Michael departed. He found Abraham seated before his plough oxen, his son in his arms. He looked very old. Seeing the archangel, Abraham rose and greeted him without knowing who he was. 'May God keep you and prosper your journey!' Michael answered: 'You are kindly, noble father.' Abraham continued: 'Come near, my brother, and sit with me a while. I shall have a mount brought. You will come home with me and spend the night, for evening approaches. Tomorrow morning you may set off wherever you wish. Thus no evil beast will risk meeting and injuring you.'

Michael asked: 'Tell me your name before I enter your home, lest I burden you.' Abraham answered: 'My parents called me Abram. The Lord gave me a new name, Abraham. He told me: "Rise, leave your house and kindred for the land I shall show you." When I reached the land he showed me, he said: "You will no longer be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham."'

Michael said: 'Forgive me, father, you whom God has cared for. I am a stranger. I heard how you travelled forty stadia and took a calf to offer when you received angels into your home to rest.' Talking thus, they rose and headed

for the house. Abraham called a servant: ‘Bring me a beast of burden for this stranger. The journey has tired him.’ Michael said: ‘Do not trouble the boy. Let us walk to your home. Your company is sweet to me.’

They set out. About three stadia from the town stood a great fruit tree like a tamarisk, with three hundred branches. From among them they heard a voice sing: ‘You are holy, who remained faithful to the purpose for which you were sent.’ Abraham heard and kept this mystery in his heart, wondering: ‘What is this mystery I have just heard?’

Reaching home, he told his servants: ‘Go to the flock, take three lambs and prepare them quickly. Let the meal be served so that we may eat and drink, for today is a day of joy.’ The servants brought the animals. Abraham called his son: ‘Isaac, my son, put water in the basin so that we may wash our guest’s feet.’ Isaac obeyed. Then Abraham said: ‘I have a foreboding of what will happen. Never again shall I wash in this basin the feet of a stranger received in our home.’

Isaac wept: ‘Father, why say this is the last time you wash a stranger’s feet?’ Seeing his son weep, Abraham too wept abundantly. Michael saw them and began weeping. His tears fell into the basin and turned into a precious stone.

Sarah heard their laments from inside the house. She came out and asked Abraham: ‘My lord, why these tears?’ He replied: ‘No harm has happened. Go back to your tasks, lest we disturb our guest.’ Sarah returned to prepare supper.

At sunset Michael left the house and was carried to heaven to worship God. At that hour all angels prostrate themselves before God, and Michael is foremost among them. After worshipping, each returned to his place. Then Michael spoke: 'Lord, permit me to speak before your holy glory.' The Lord said: 'Say what you wish.'

The archangel answered: 'Lord, you sent me to tell Abraham: "Come out of your body, leave this world. The Lord calls you." I dare not stand before him. He is your friend, a righteous man who welcomes strangers. I pray you, let the thought of his death enter his heart of itself. Spare me from announcing it. It is hard to tell someone to leave the world, especially their own body. From the beginning you made him sensitive to every human soul's fate.' The Lord said: 'Go and stay with Abraham. Whatever you see him eat, eat with him. Wherever he rests, rest too. I shall put the thought of Abraham's death into his son Isaac's heart in a dream.'

That evening Michael returned to Abraham's house. The meal was being prepared. They ate and drank joyfully. Abraham told Isaac: 'My son, prepare our guest's bed so he may rest, and put the lamp on its stand.' Isaac did as his father asked, then said: 'Father, I too am coming to sleep beside you.' Abraham answered: 'No, my son, we might inconvenience the stranger. Go and rest in your room.' Isaac would not disobey and returned to his room.

Around the seventh hour of the night, Isaac awoke. He came knocking at his father's door: 'Father, open to me, so that I may look at you once more before you are taken from me!' Abraham rose and opened. Isaac threw himself on his neck, covering him in kisses and weeping. Abraham wept with

him, and Michael wept at the sight. From her room Sarah heard their lamentations. She knocked: ‘Abraham, my lord, why these laments? Has the stranger told you of your nephew Lot’s death? Has some other misfortune befallen us?’

Michael answered: ‘No, Sarah, I bring no news of Lot. But I know your kindness, both of you. In this you surpass everyone on earth, and God has remembered you.’ Sarah told Abraham: ‘How dared you weep when a man of God entered your home? Why tears in his presence when today is a day of joy?’ Abraham asked: ‘How do you know he is a man of God?’ She answered: ‘He is one of the three men who stopped with us at Mamre’s oak. A servant fetched a calf, which you offered in sacrifice. You told me: “Rise, prepare the meal, so we may eat at home with these men.”’

Abraham replied: ‘You remember well, my wife. I too, while washing his feet, knew in my heart these were the feet I washed at Mamre’s oak. As I asked about his journey, he told me: “I am going to protect your kinsman Lot from Sodom’s danger.” Then I recognised the mystery.’

Abraham told Michael: ‘Man of God, reveal why you have come.’ Michael answered: ‘Your son Isaac will tell you.’ Abraham continued: ‘My beloved son, tell me what you saw in your dream and the words you heard.’

Isaac answered: ‘In a dream I saw the sun and moon. A crown rested on my head. From heaven shone a man of immense stature, like that light called the father of light. He took the sun from my head and left me its rays. I wept and told him: “I

implore you, my lord, do not take the glory of my head, the light of my house, all my glory!" The sun, moon and stars wept, saying: "Do not take the glory of our strength!" The radiant man answered me: "Do not weep if I take your house's light. It passes from labour to rest, from abasement to glory. It is led from a narrow place into broad space, from darkness to light." I told him: "Lord, then take the rays with the sun too!" He answered: "The day has twelve hours. Afterwards I shall take all the rays too." At these words I saw the sun and my house rise to heaven. I no longer saw the crown. And that sun, father, resembled you.'

Michael told Abraham: 'Your son spoke truly. You will be carried to heaven. Your body will remain on earth until seven thousand ages have passed. Then all flesh will rise. Now put your household's affairs in order and make provision for your children. You have heard the fate reserved for you.' Abraham answered: 'If I must leave my body, first grant me, I pray, to be carried up with my body, that I may see the creatures the Lord my God made in heaven and on earth.' Michael said: 'That decision is not mine. I shall speak to the Lord. If he commands me, I shall show you all his works.'

Michael rose to heaven and spoke of Abraham before the Lord, who answered: 'Go, carry Abraham up with his body and show him everything. Whatever he asks, do for him, for he is my friend.' Michael carried Abraham on a cloud to the river Ocean. Abraham saw two gates, one small and one large. Between them a man sat on a glorious throne surrounded by a multitude of angels. Sometimes he wept, sometimes laughed, but his weeping was seven times more abundant than his laughter.

Abraham asked: ‘Who is this man seated in glory between the gates? Why does he weep seven times more than he laughs?’ Michael said: ‘Do you not recognise him?’ ‘No, lord.’ ‘Do you see these two gates? The small leads to life, the large to perdition. The man seated between them is Adam, the first man the Lord created. God placed him there to see each soul as it leaves the body, for all sprang from him. When he weeps, know that he has seen many souls led to perdition. When he laughs, he has seen a few directed towards life. Most people pass through the broad gate leading to perdition. That is why his weeping exceeds his laughter sevenfold.’

Abraham said: ‘Can one who cannot pass the narrow gate not enter life? Woe to me! What shall I do? My body is broad: how shall I pass an entrance through which a child of fifteen could not pass?’ Michael answered: ‘Fear nothing, father, and do not grieve. You will pass unhindered, you and all who resemble you.’

While Abraham marvelled, an angel of the Lord led sixty thousand sinners’ souls to perdition. ‘Are they all going to destruction?’ Abraham asked. ‘Yes,’ Michael replied. ‘Yet let us seek whether even one among them is righteous.’ They found an angel holding a woman’s soul in his hand, one of the sixty thousand. Her sins balanced the sum of her works. The balance tilted neither way, remaining between movement and rest. The other souls were led to perdition. Abraham asked: ‘Is it the angel who draws souls from bodies?’ Michael replied: ‘It is Death. She leads them to the place of judgement for the judge to pronounce sentence.’

Abraham said: 'My lord, I pray you, lead me to the place of judgement so I too may see how they are judged.' Michael carried him on a cloud to paradise. Before the judge, the angel handed over the woman's soul. She said: 'Lord, Lord, have mercy on me!' The judge answered: 'How could I pity you who did not pity your daughter, the fruit of your womb? Why did you kill her?' She answered: 'No, Lord, that murder was not my doing. My daughter herself lied about me.'

The judge called the keeper of the records. Two books were in cherubim's hands, and beside them stood a very tall man. He wore three crowns, one rising above the other two. They were called crowns of testimony. He held a golden pen. The judge told him: 'Make this soul's sin known.' The man opened one of the cherubim's books, searched for the woman's sin and found it.

The judge said: 'Wretched soul, how can you claim not to have killed? After your husband's death, did you not commit adultery with your daughter's husband and kill her?' He also recalled every sin she had committed since youth. The woman cried: 'Woe, woe to me! I had forgotten all the sins I committed in the world. But here they have not been forgotten!' She was taken away and handed to those who inflict torments.

Abraham asked Michael: 'Who is this judge, and who is the other man who exposes sinners?' Michael answered: 'The judge you see is Abel, who first bore witness. God brought him here to judge. The witness is Enoch, master of heaven and earth, scribe of righteousness. The Lord sent them here to record everyone's faults and righteous acts.'

Abraham said: 'How can Enoch, who has not known death, bear the weight of these souls? How could he sentence each one?' Michael answered: 'If he himself pronounced a sentence, it would not be accepted. Judgement belongs to the Lord. Enoch's task is only to write. He prayed: "Lord, I do not wish to judge any soul, lest I wrong someone." The Lord told him: "I shall have you record the faults of the soul that makes amends, and it will enter life. As for the soul that does not make amends [the passage concerning repentance is uncertain], you will find its sins written down, and it will be handed to punishment."'

After Abraham beheld the place of judgement, the cloud brought him to the lower firmament. He looked at earth and saw a man committing adultery with a married woman. He told Michael: 'Do you see this sin? Lord, send fire from heaven to devour them!' At once fire descended and devoured them, for the Lord had told Michael to do whatever Abraham asked.

Abraham looked again. Seeing men slander their companions, he said: 'Let the earth open and swallow them!' He was still speaking when the earth swallowed them alive. The cloud carried him elsewhere. He saw men going to a deserted place to commit murder. 'Do you see this crime?' he told Michael. 'Let wild beasts come from the wilderness and tear them apart!' Instantly beasts came out and devoured them.

Then the Lord God told Michael: 'Take Abraham home. Do not let him travel through all my creation. He shows sinners no mercy. I pity them, so that they may return to me, live, repent and be saved.' Around the ninth hour Michael brought Abraham home. Sarah, not knowing what had become of him, had wasted

away with grief and given up her soul. Returning, Abraham found her dead and buried her.

As Abraham's death approached, the Lord God told Michael: 'Death will not dare approach to take my servant's soul, for he is my friend. Go and adorn Death with great beauty, and send her to him so that he may see her with his eyes.' Michael obeyed and seated Death, thus adorned, beside Abraham. Seeing her, he was seized with great fear.

Death said: 'Greetings, holy soul! Greetings, beloved friend of the Lord God! Greetings, you who comfort and welcome travellers!' Abraham answered: 'Welcome, you who serve God Most High. Tell me, I pray, who you are. Enter my house and take food and drink before departing. Since I saw you seated beside me, my soul has been troubled. I am unworthy to approach you. You are a most exalted spirit, and I am flesh and blood. I cannot bear your glory, for I see your beauty is not of this world.'

Death answered: 'In all God's creation no one like you has been found. God himself searched the whole earth without finding your equal.' Abraham said: 'How dare you lie? I plainly see your beauty is not of this world.' Death answered: 'Do not think this is my beauty, Abraham, or that I appear thus to everyone. If a man is righteous like you, I take garlands to meet him. If he is a sinner, I appear in all my corruption. From such men's sins I make myself a crown, striking them with dread until they are terrified.' Abraham asked: 'Where, then, does this beauty come from?' Death said: 'There is nothing more corrupt than [...]'

Abraham asked: ‘Are you she who is called Death?’ She answered: ‘I am the bitter name. I am lamentation [...]’

Abraham told Death: ‘Show us your corruption.’ She revealed it. She had two heads. One had a serpent’s face: through it some meet sudden death by vipers. The other resembled a sword: through it others die by the blade, as if struck by arrows. That day Abraham’s servants died of fright at seeing Death. Abraham saw them and prayed to the Lord, and the Lord raised them.

Then God returned and drew out Abraham’s soul as in a dream. The archangel Michael carried it to heaven. Isaac buried his father beside his mother Sarah. He glorified and praised God, for glory, honour and worship belong to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always, for ever and ever. Amen.

SOURCESANDILLUSTRATIONS

Sources of the edition

The title in the original language

Coptic heading of the first folio, ‘The three patriarchs’, transcribed in normalised letters. Gamma with a line above it represents three. The title names the three accounts gathered in the manuscript.

Manuscripts and editions

Vatican Apostolic Library · beginning of the Testament of Abraham ↗

Ernst Andersson, Abraham’s Vermächtnis, aus dem Koptischen übersetzt, Sphinx VI, 1903, pp. 220–236. Narrative pp. 220–234, followed by notes. ↗

University of Münster · research and boundaries of the Bohairic Testament of Abraham ↗

G. H. Box and Stephen Gaselee · English edition, London, 1927 ↗

Sources of the illustrations

Cover illustration · Gustave Doré, Isaac Blessing Jacob, nineteenth century. ↗

Gustave Doré, Abraham Receives the Three Visitors, nineteenth century. ↗

Gustave Doré, Isaac Blesses Jacob, nineteenth century. ↗

The folio photographs come from the Vatican Apostolic Library. An edition intended for personal study.

PART ONE

The manuscript folios

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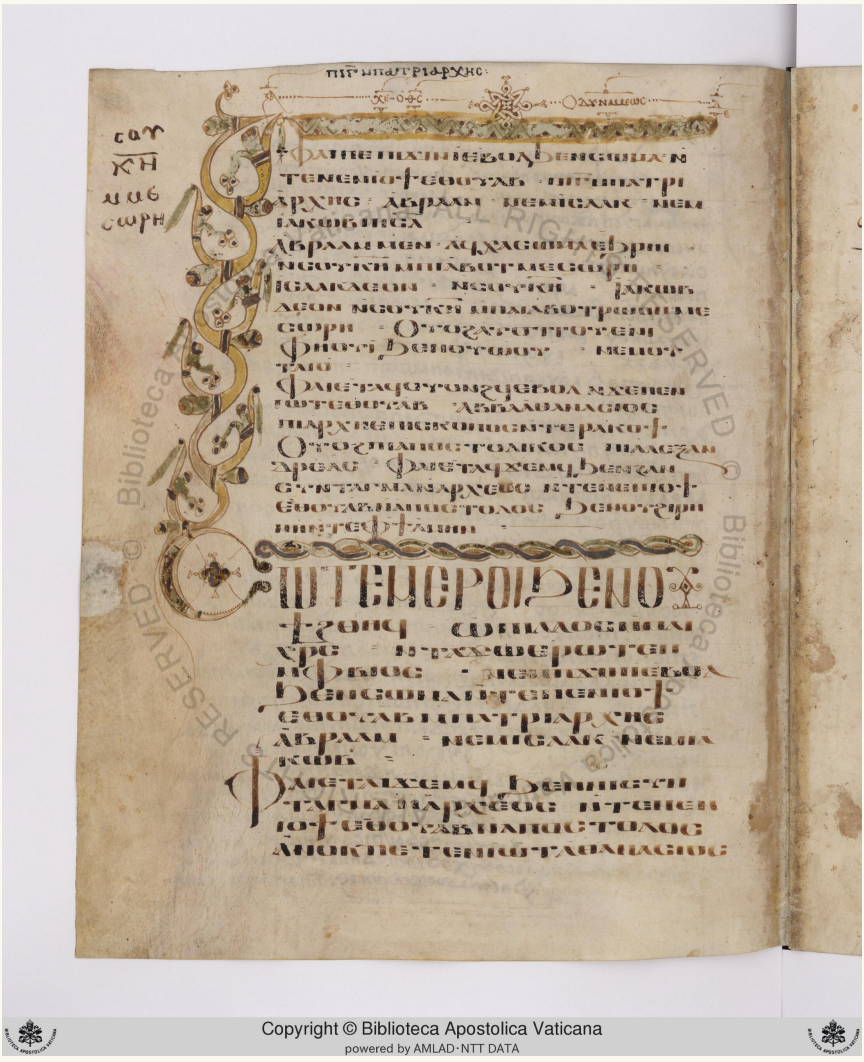
Testament of Abraham



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English p. 5 · Notes p. 18

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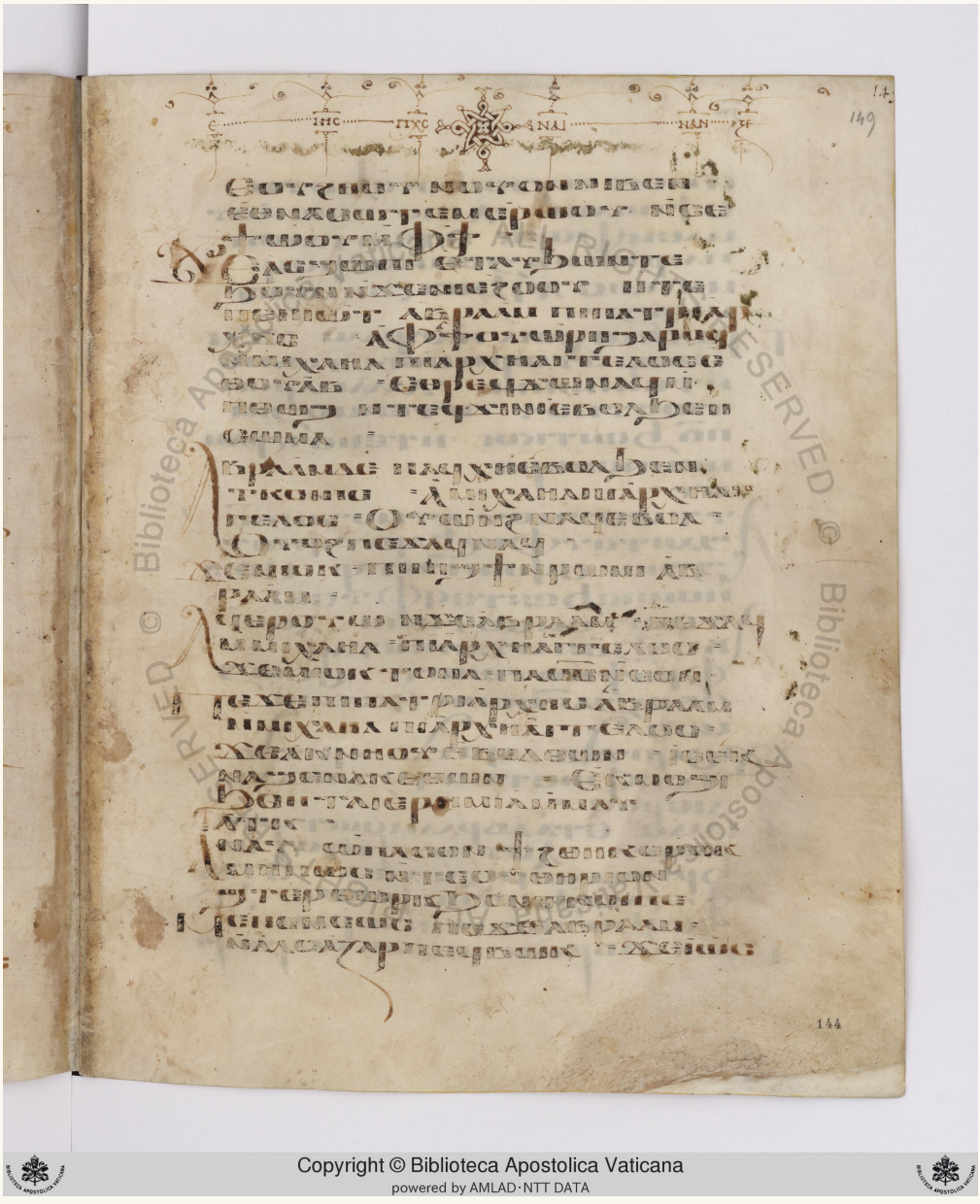

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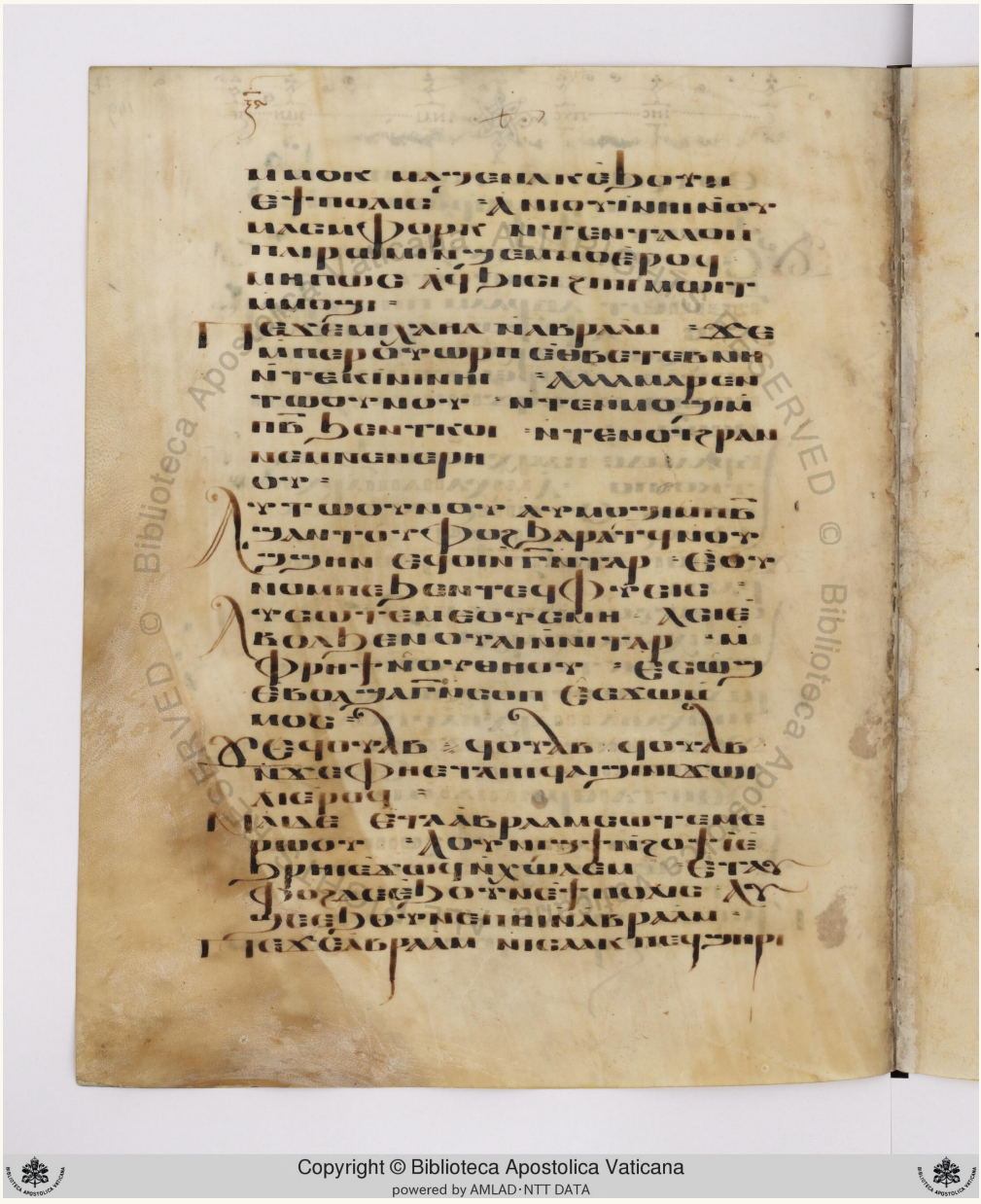
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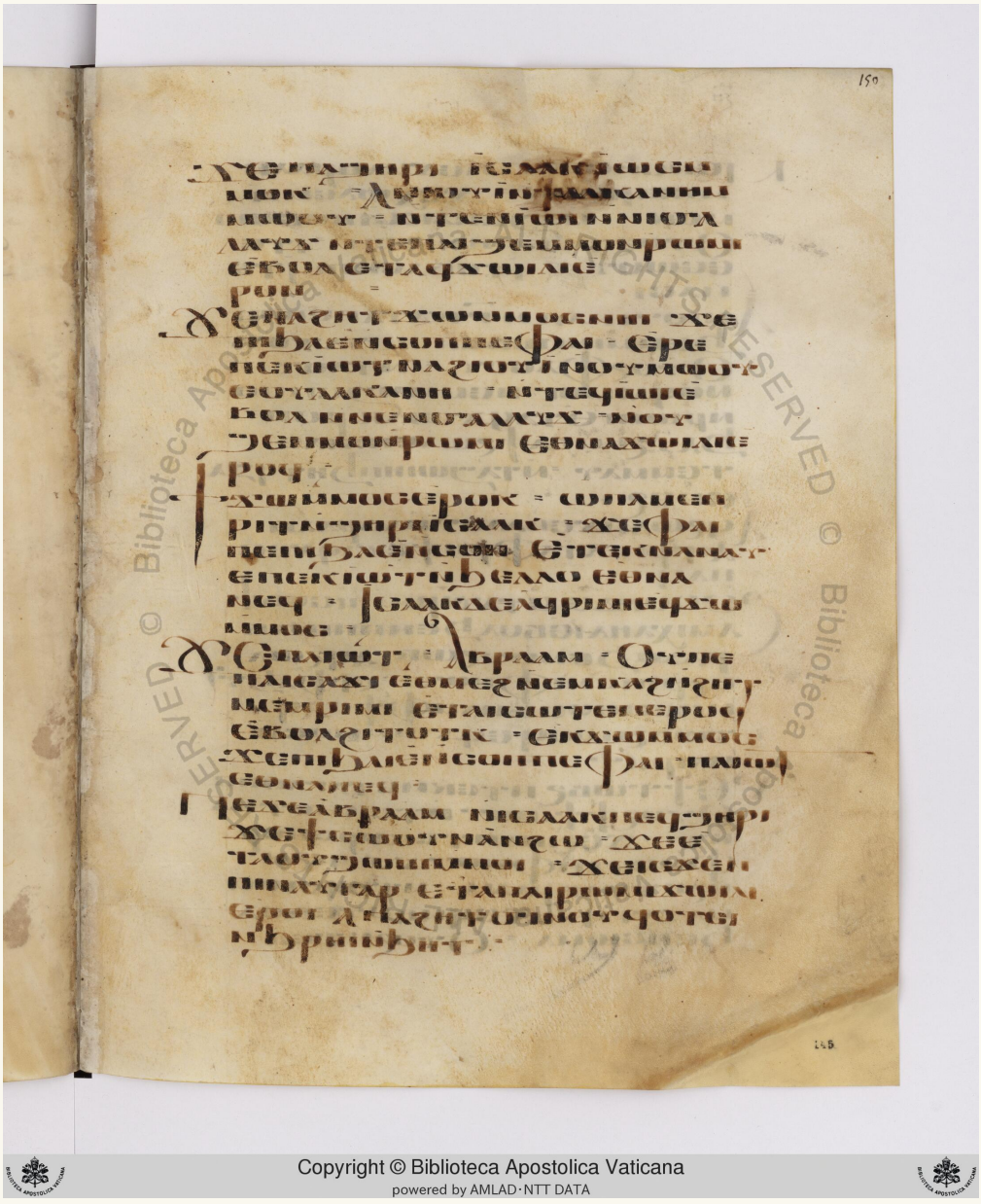
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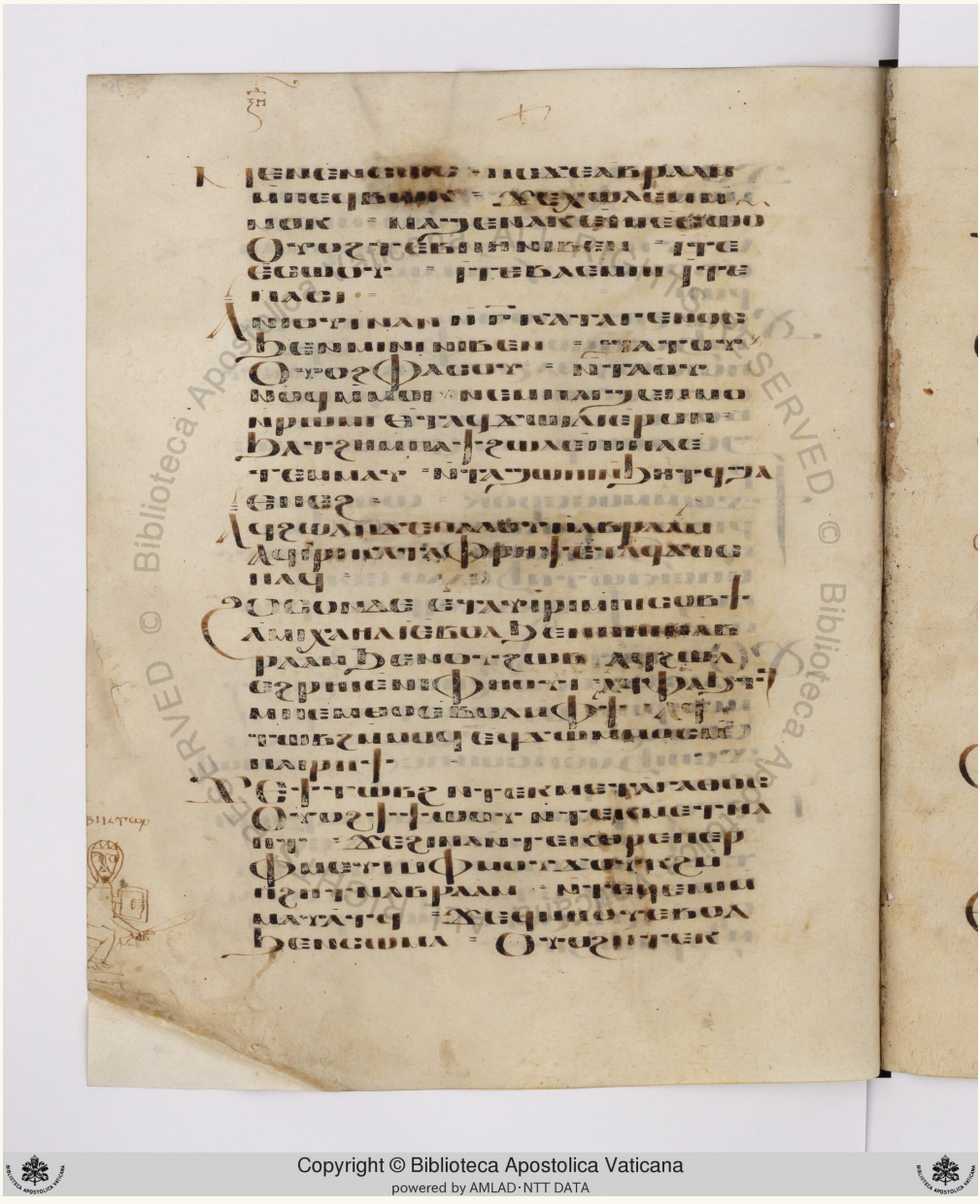
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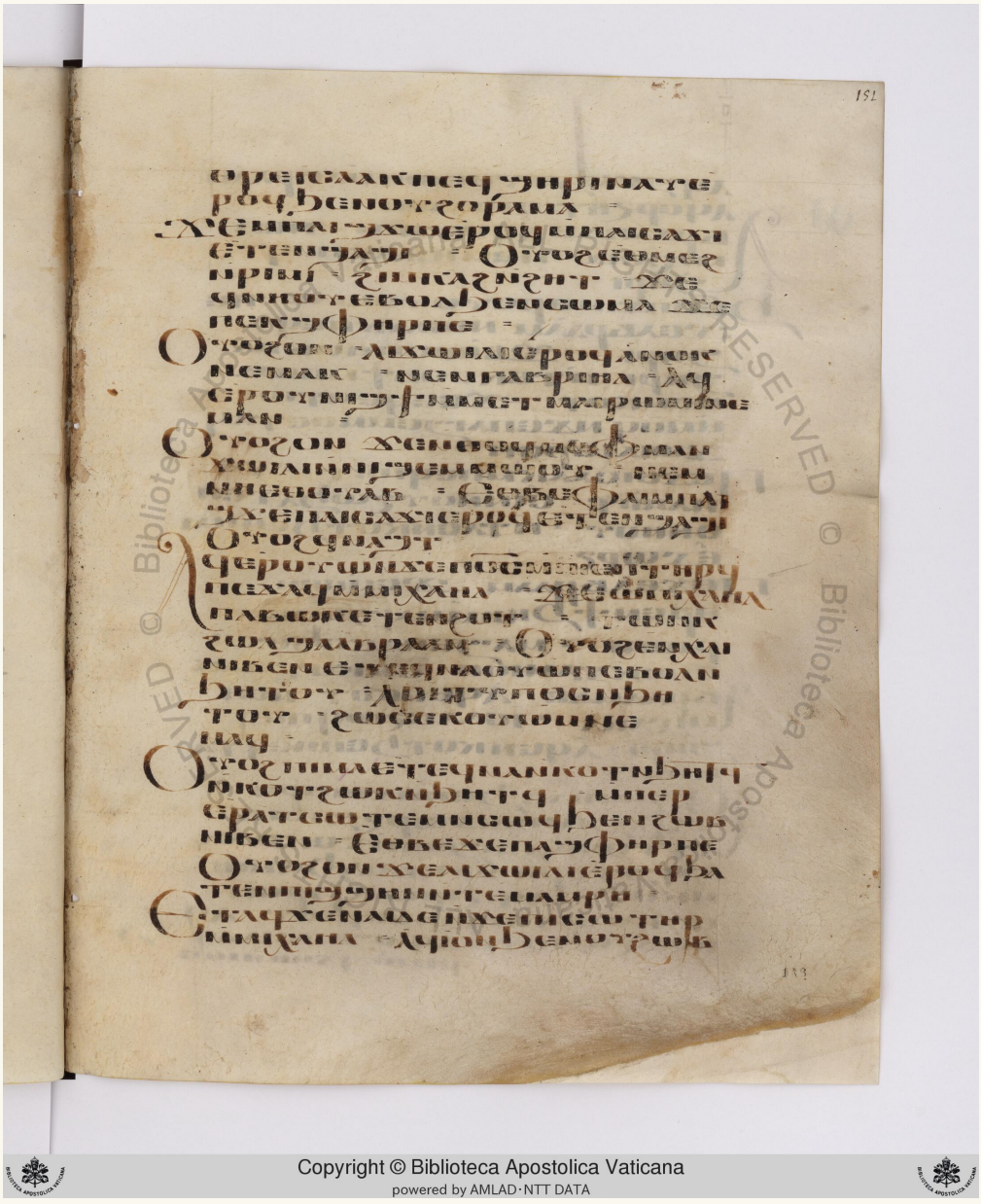

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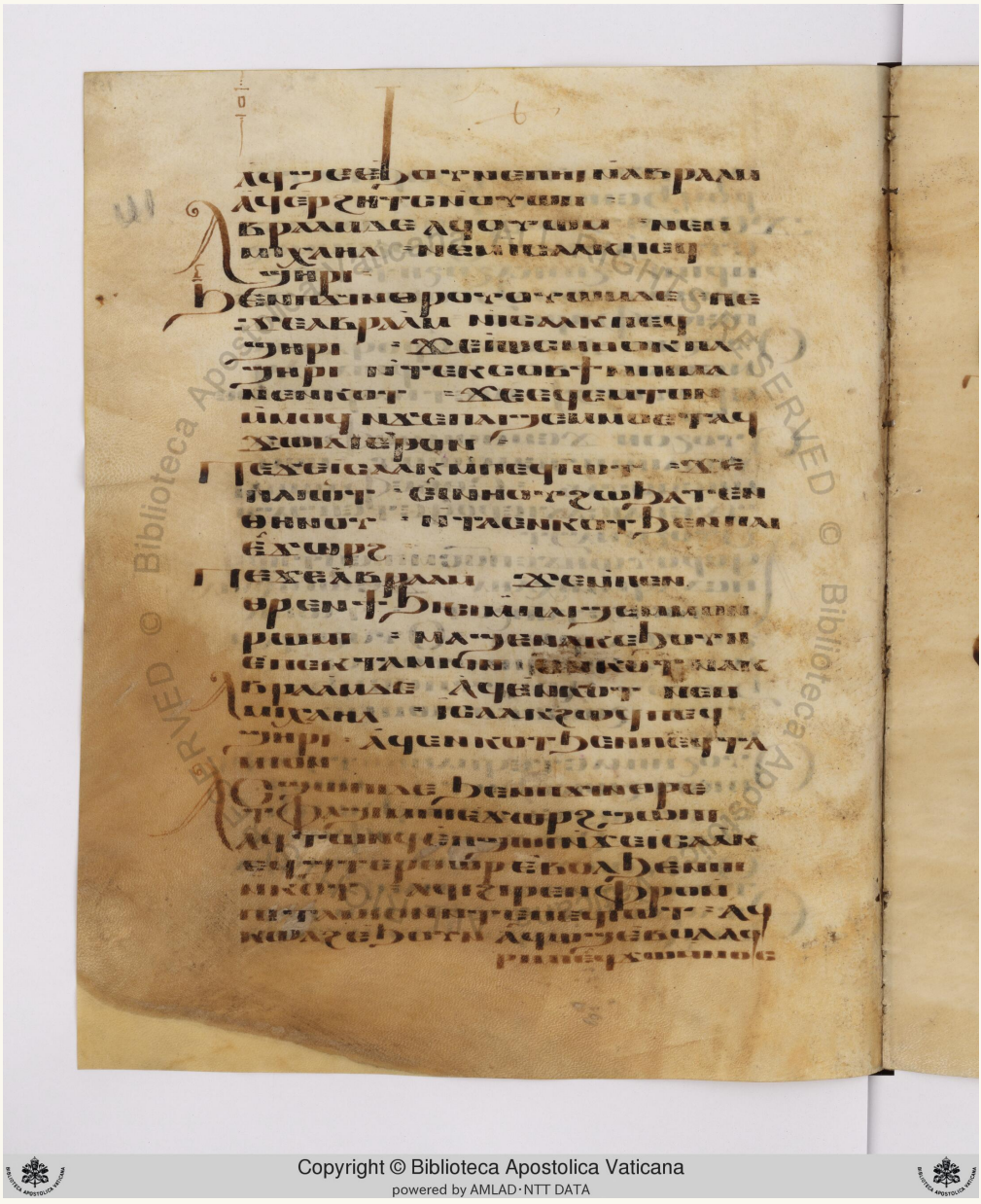
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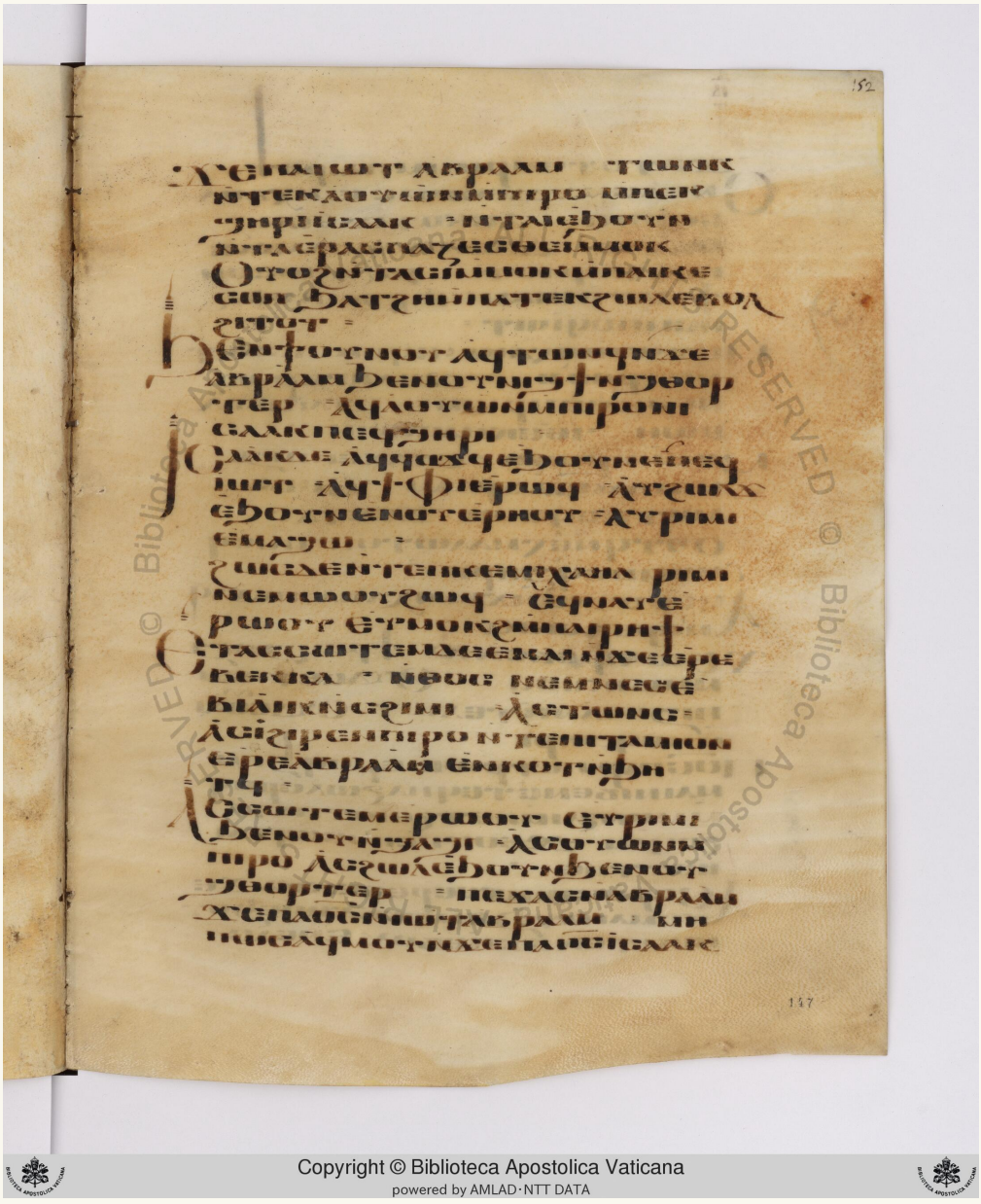

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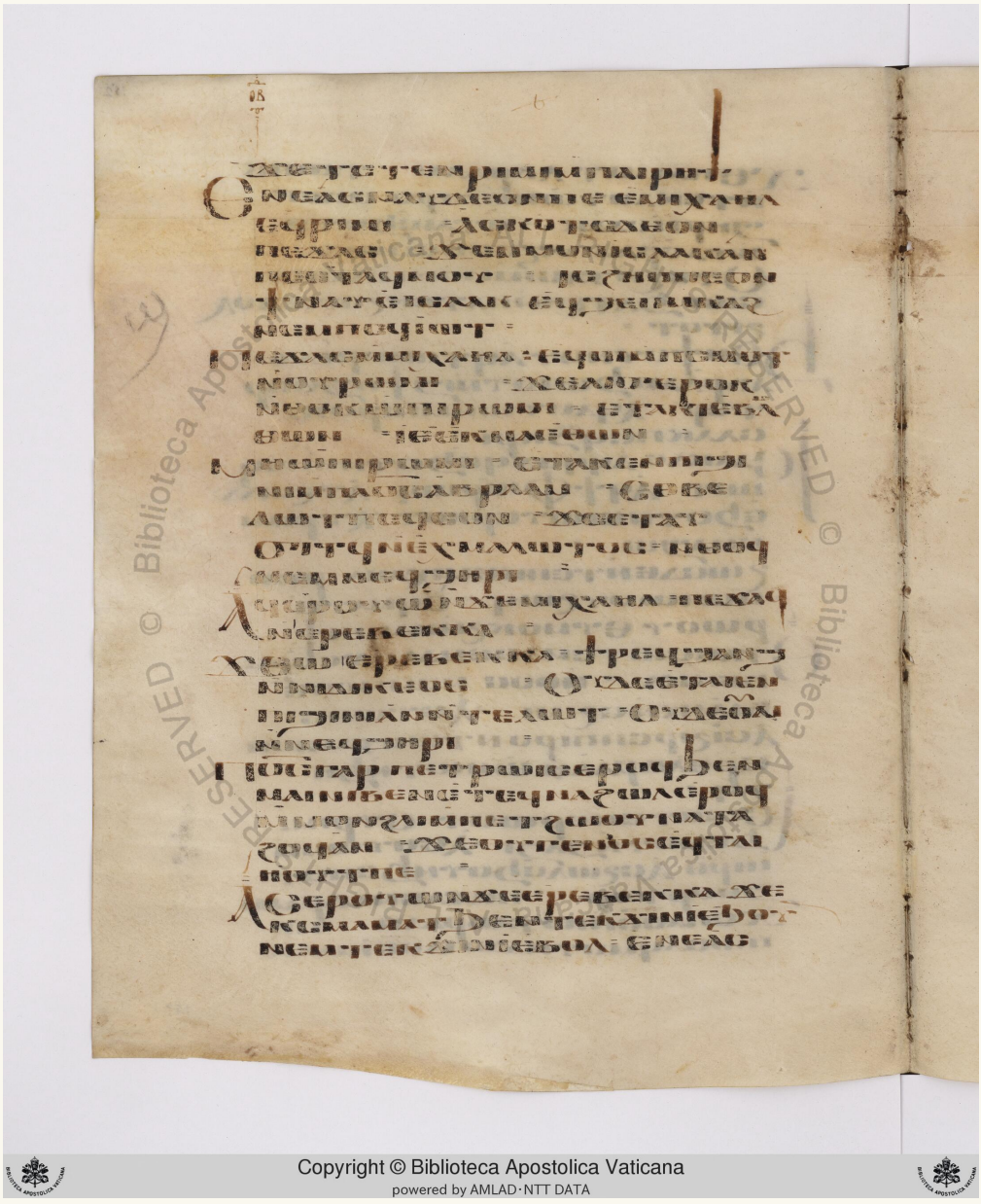
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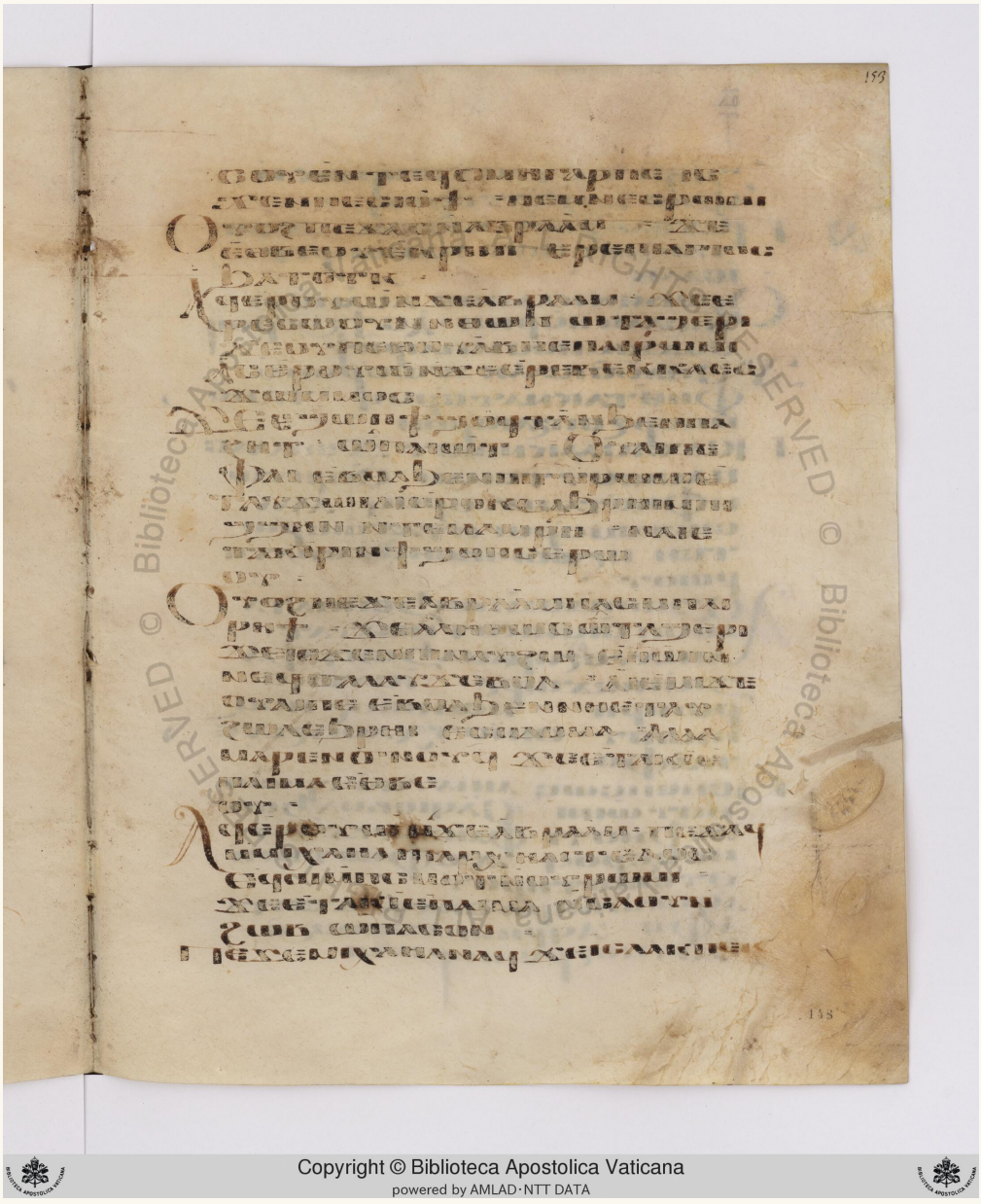

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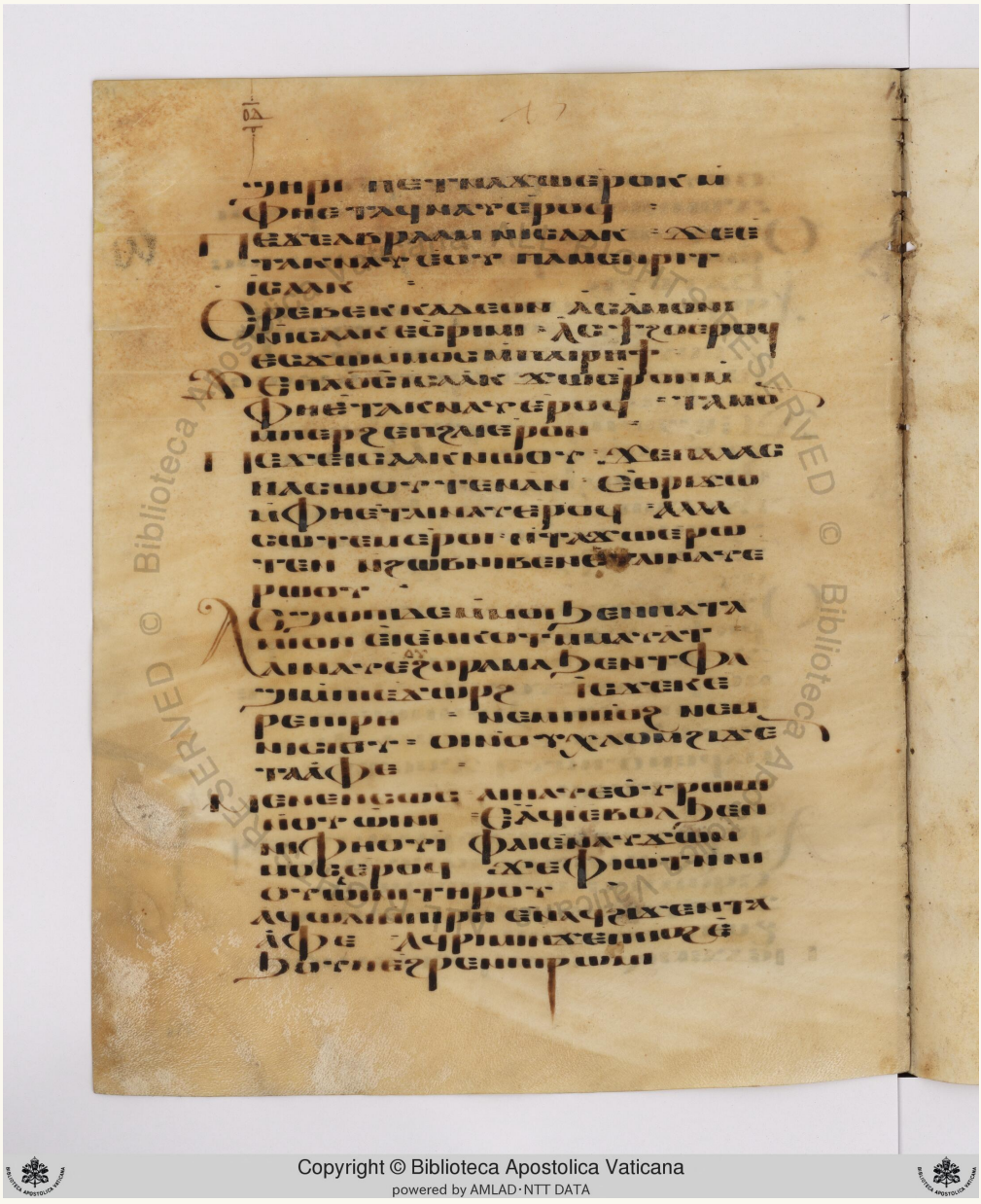
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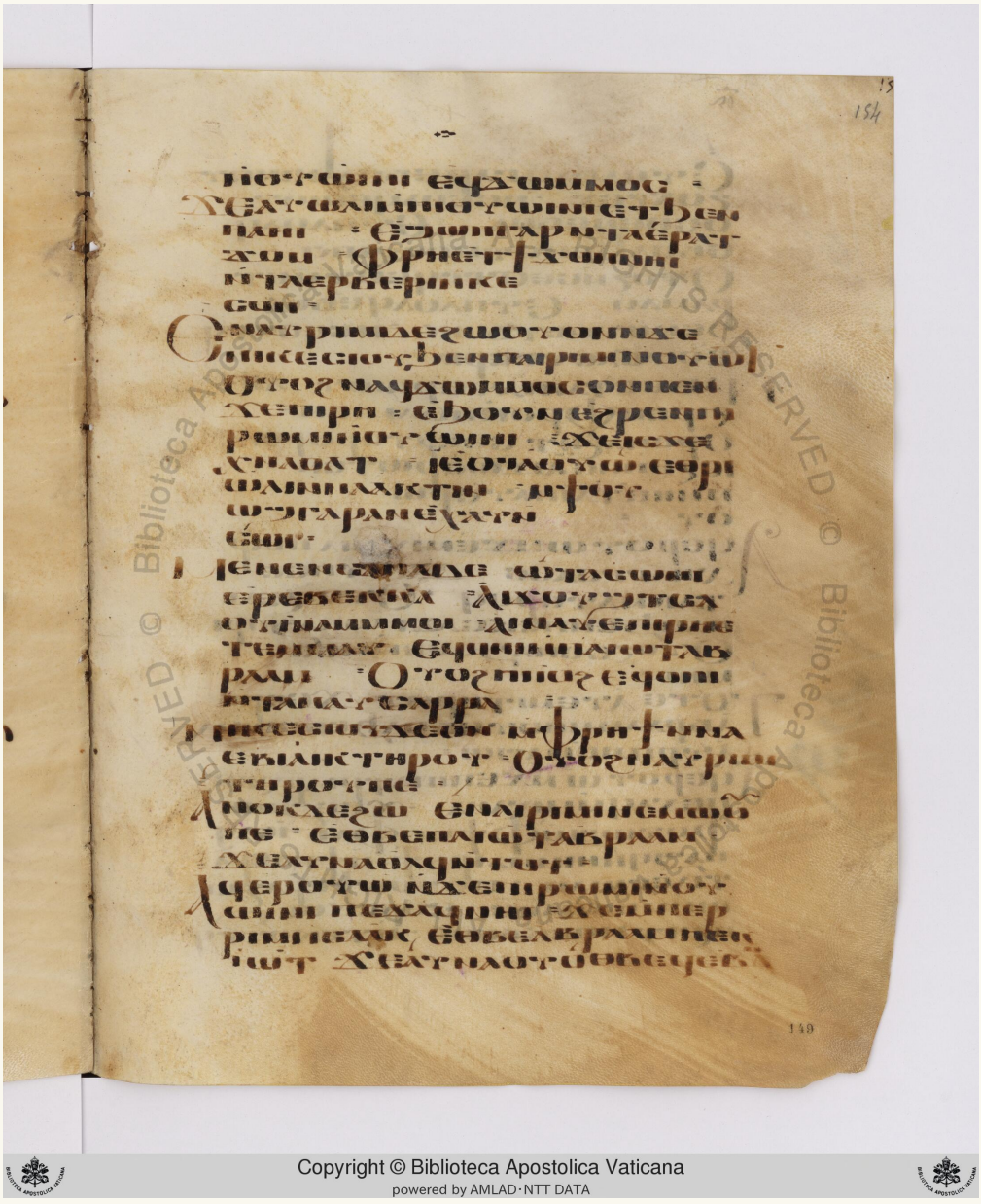
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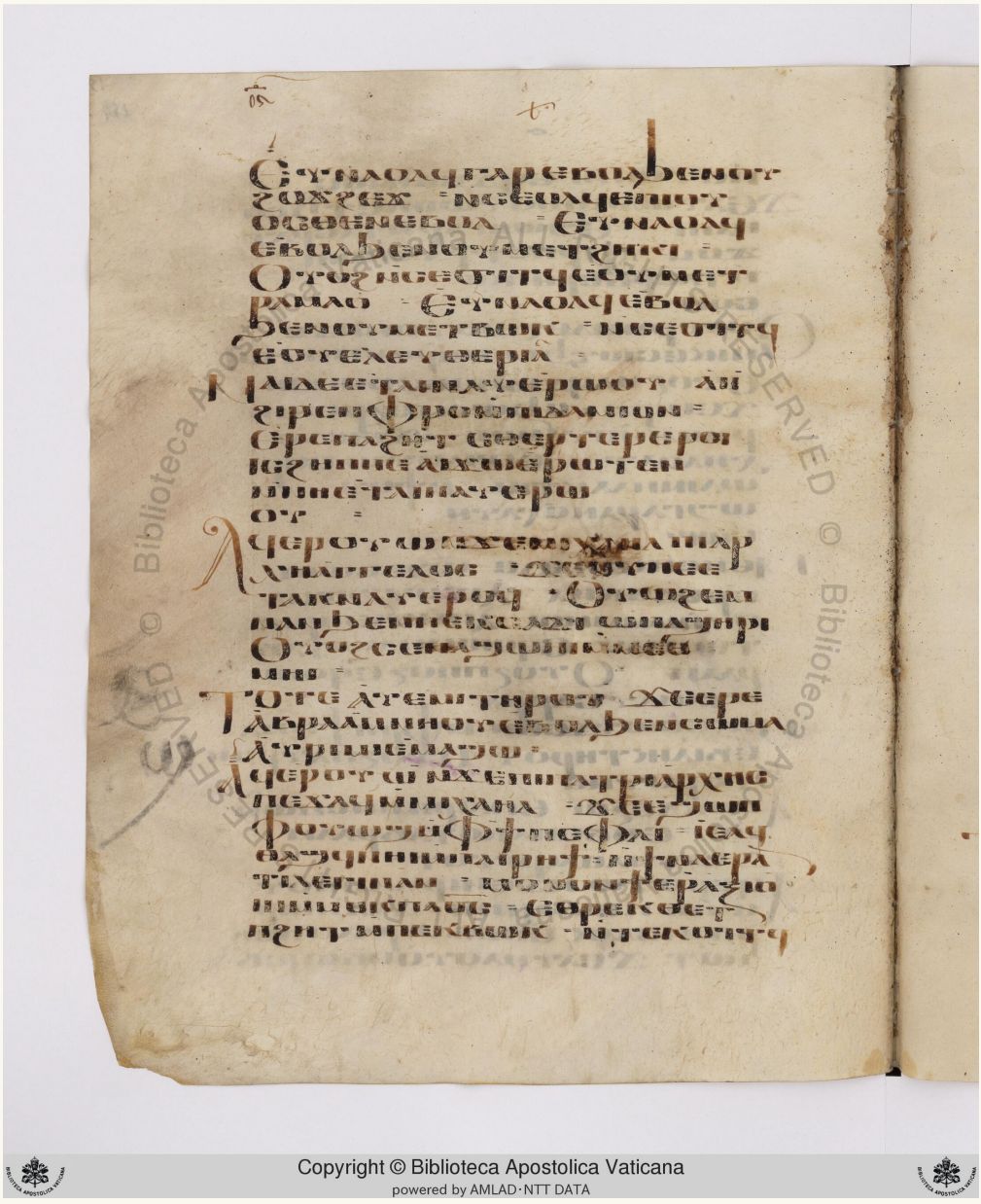
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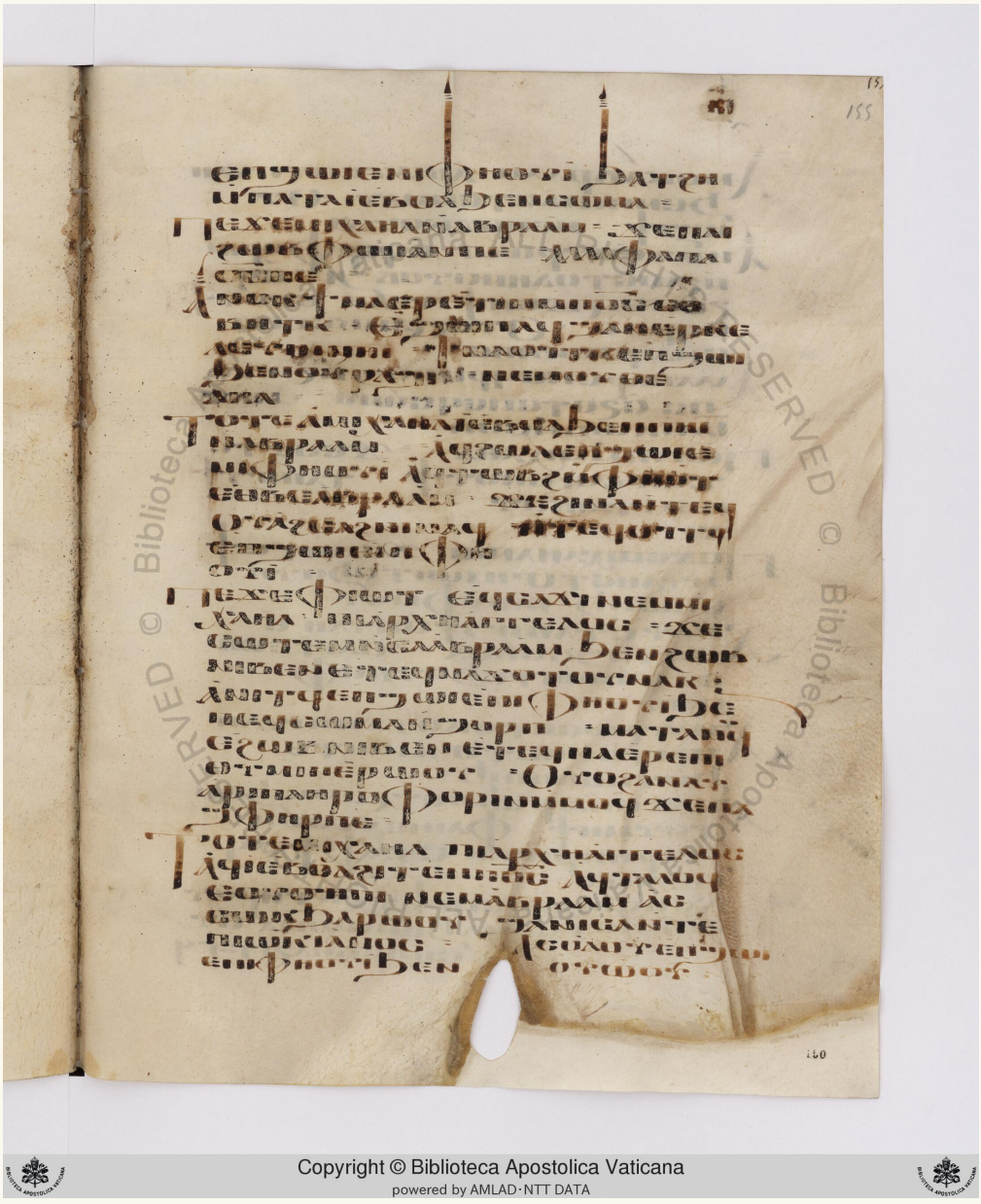
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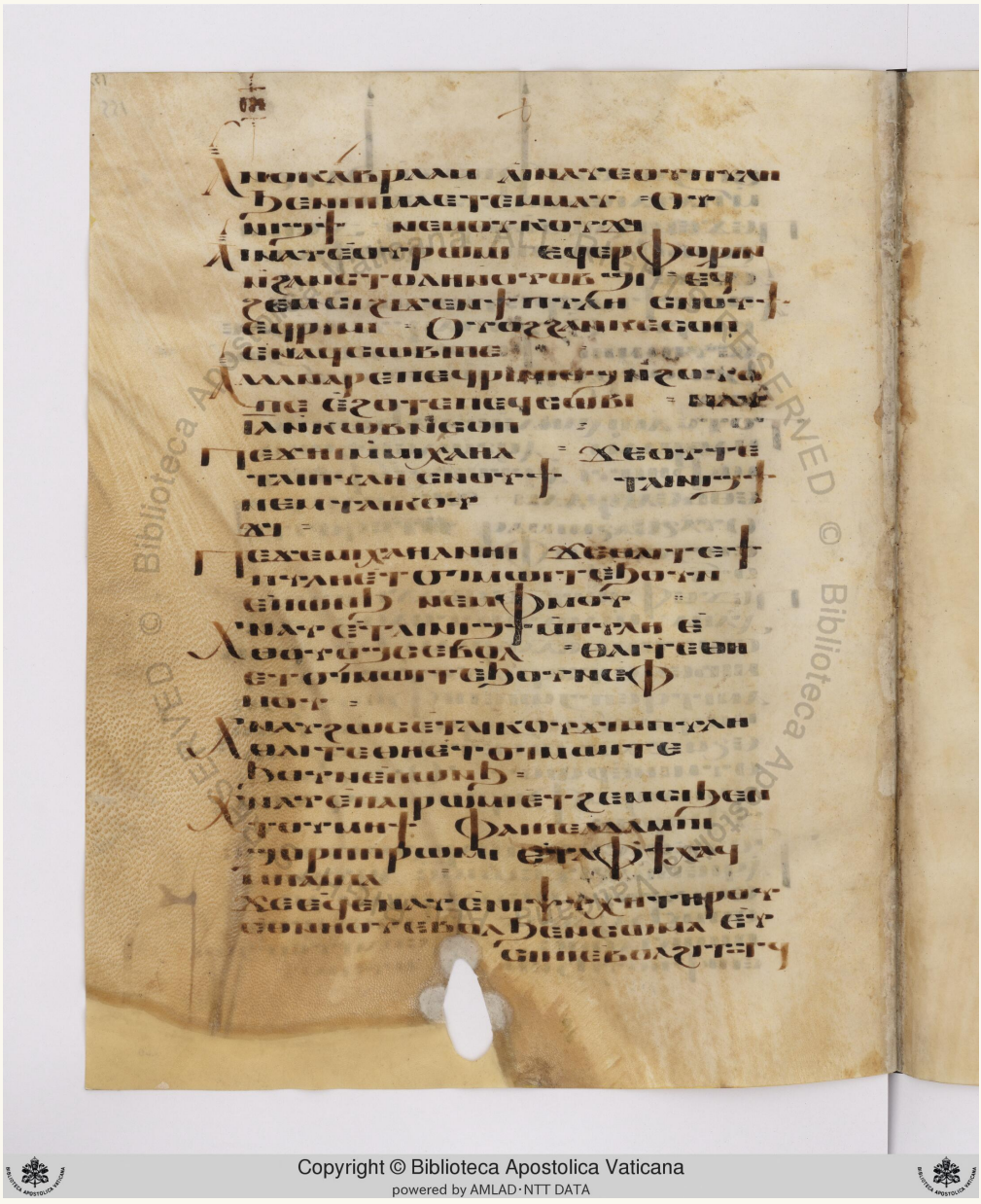
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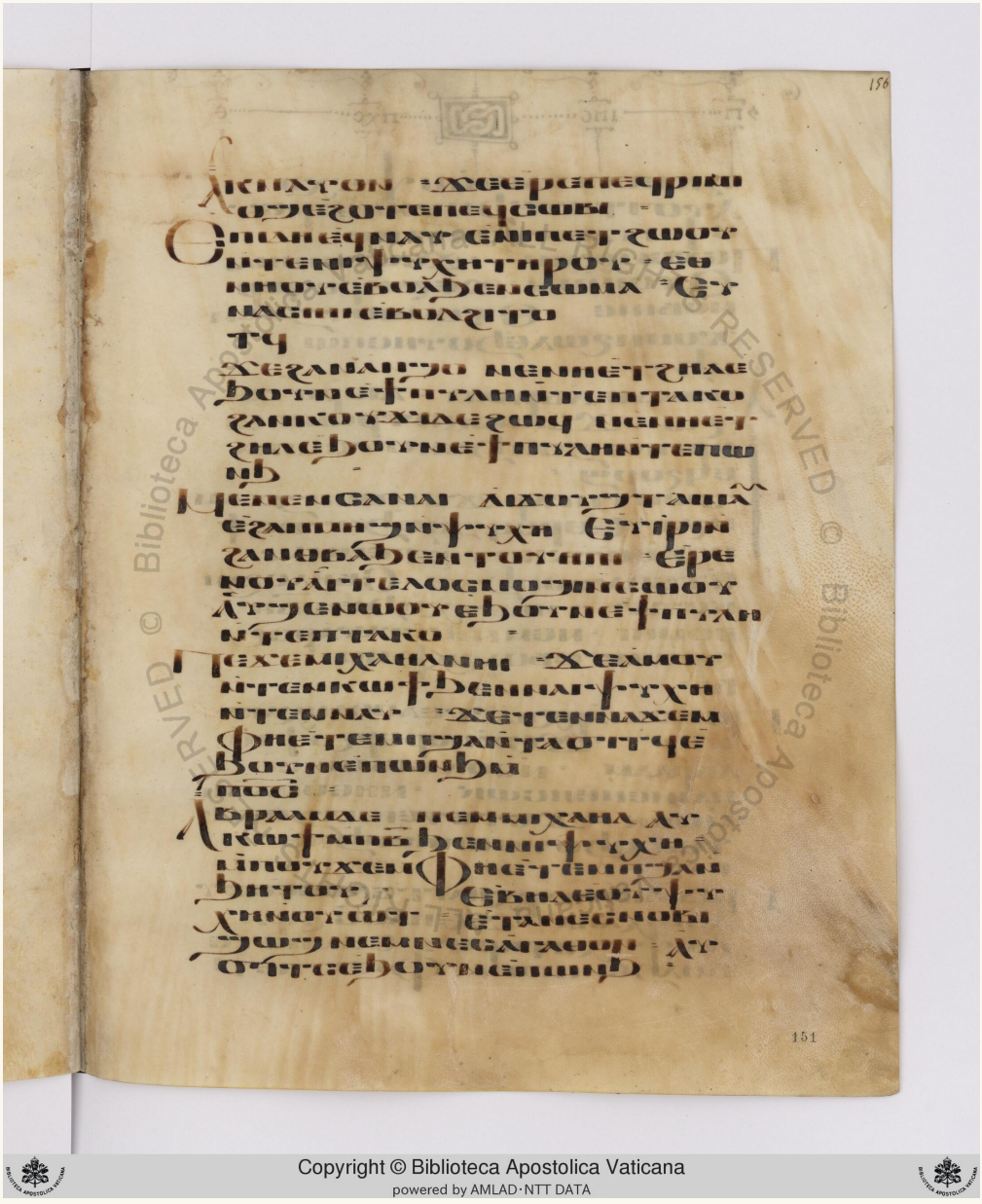

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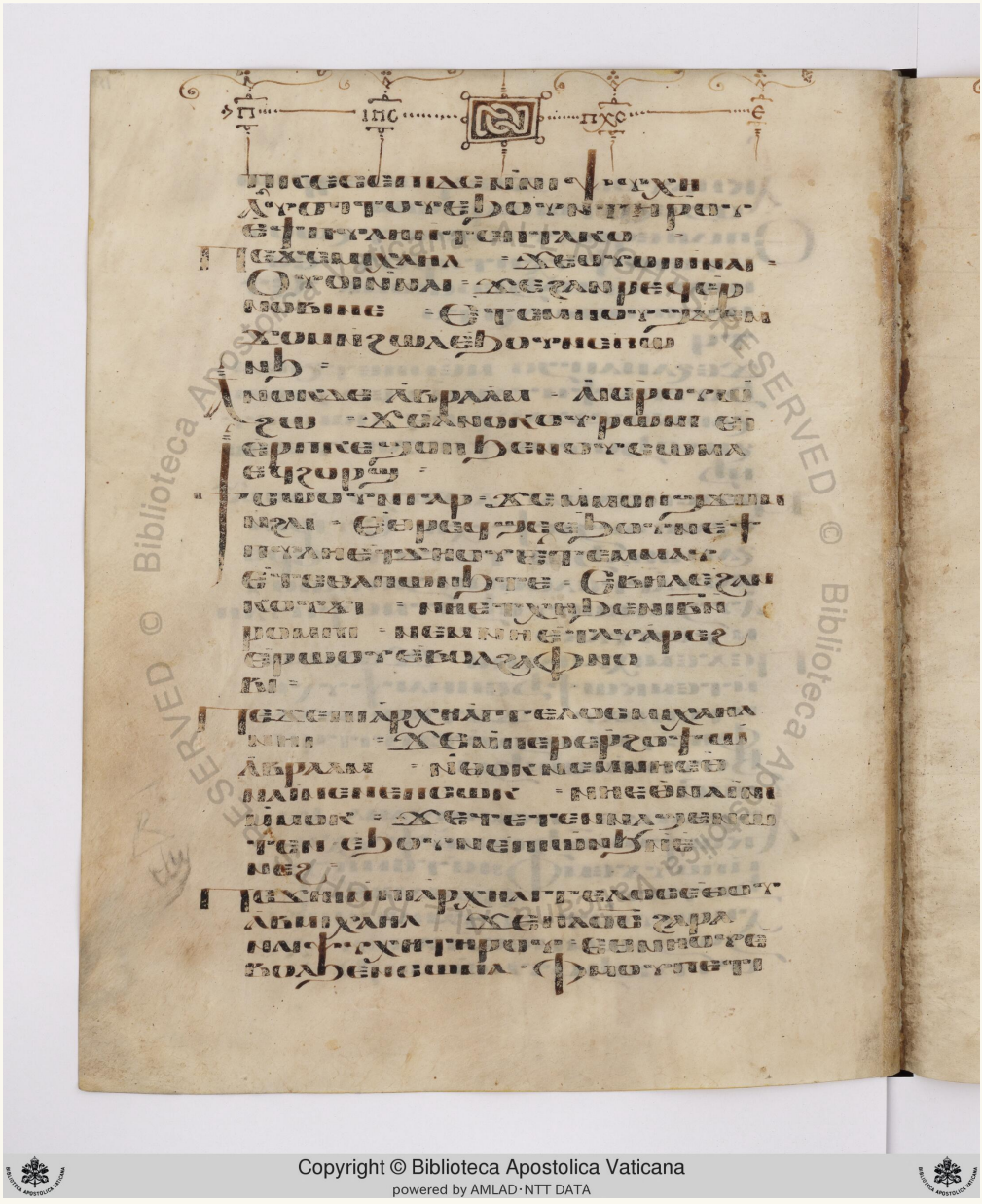
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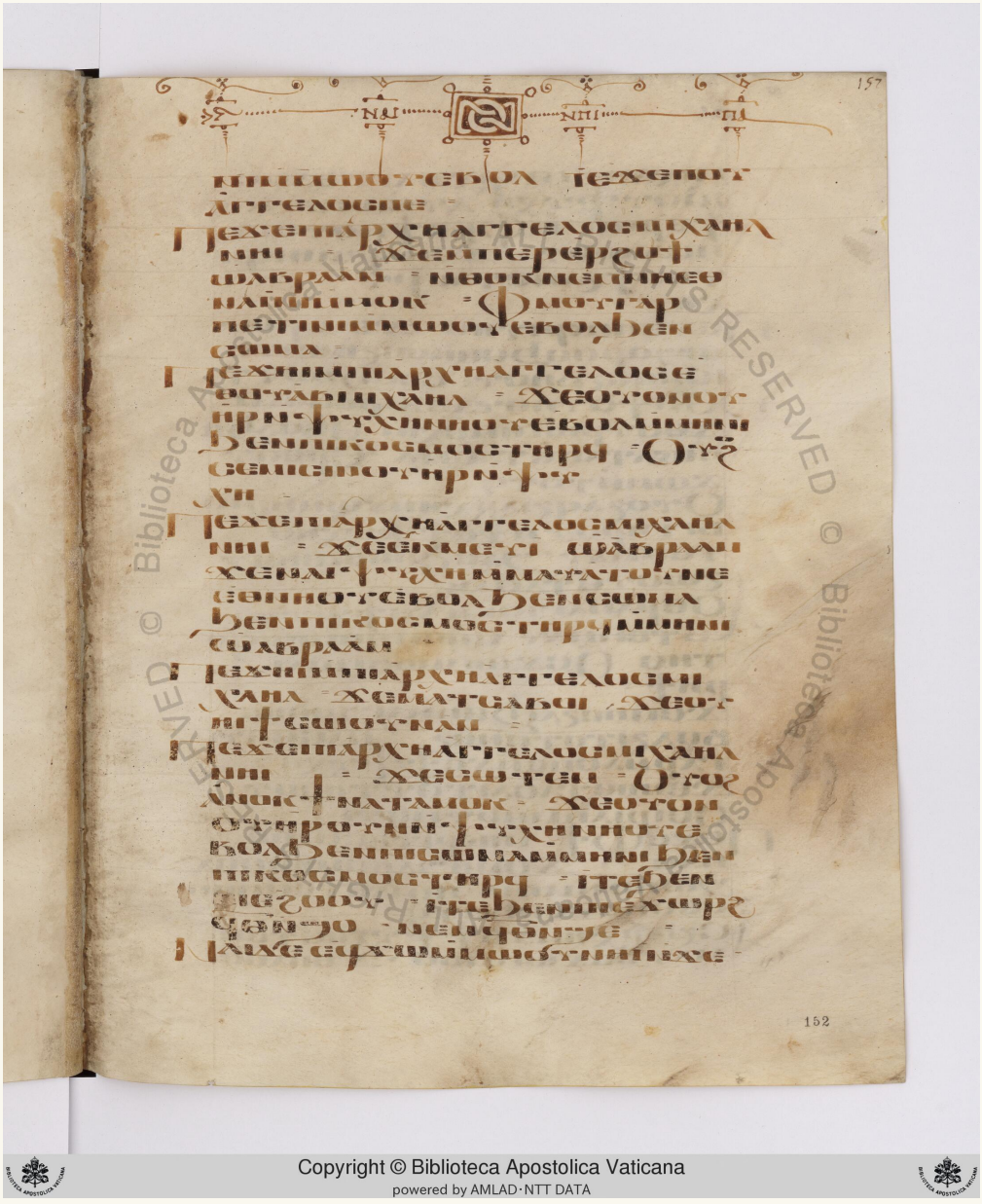

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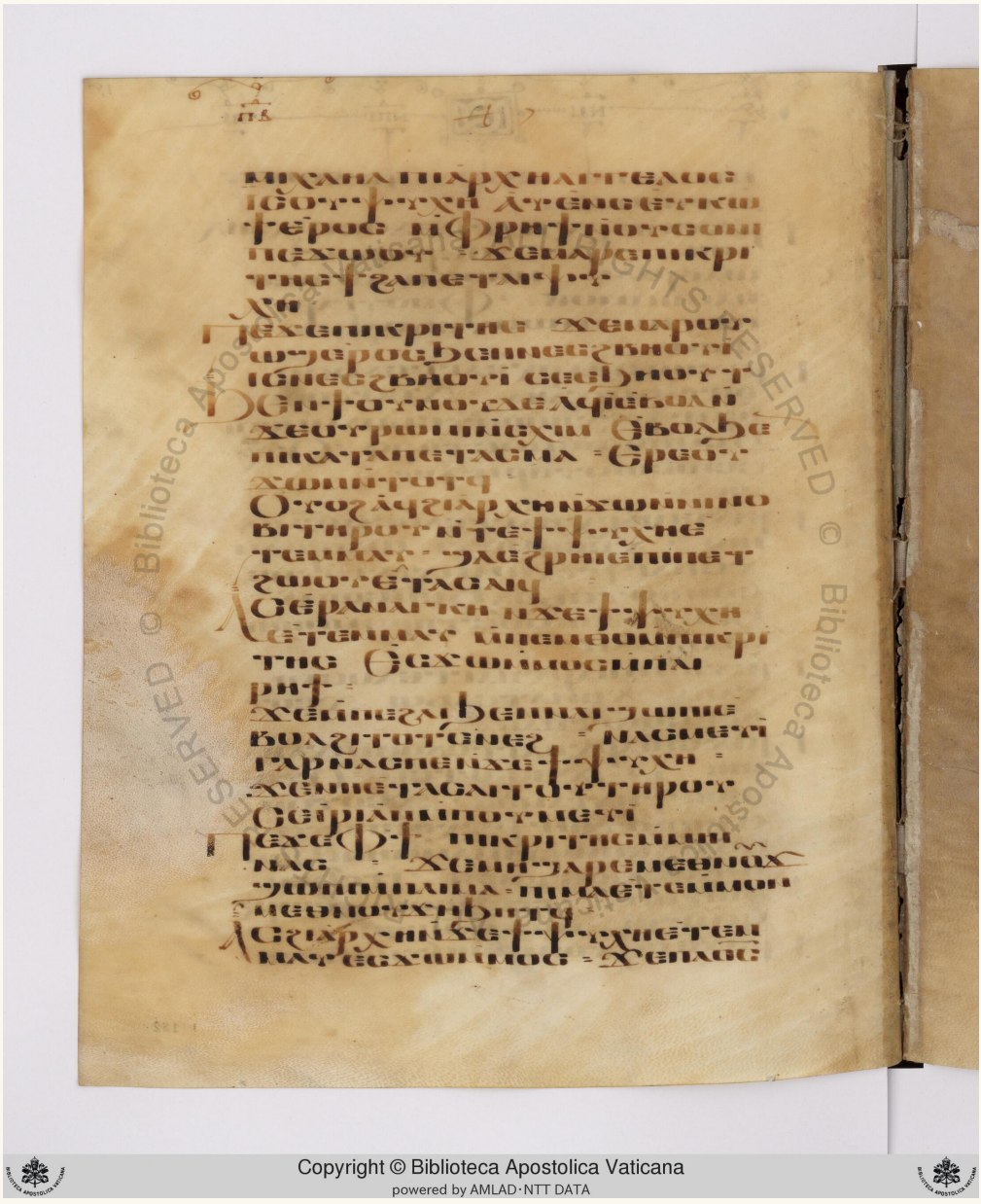
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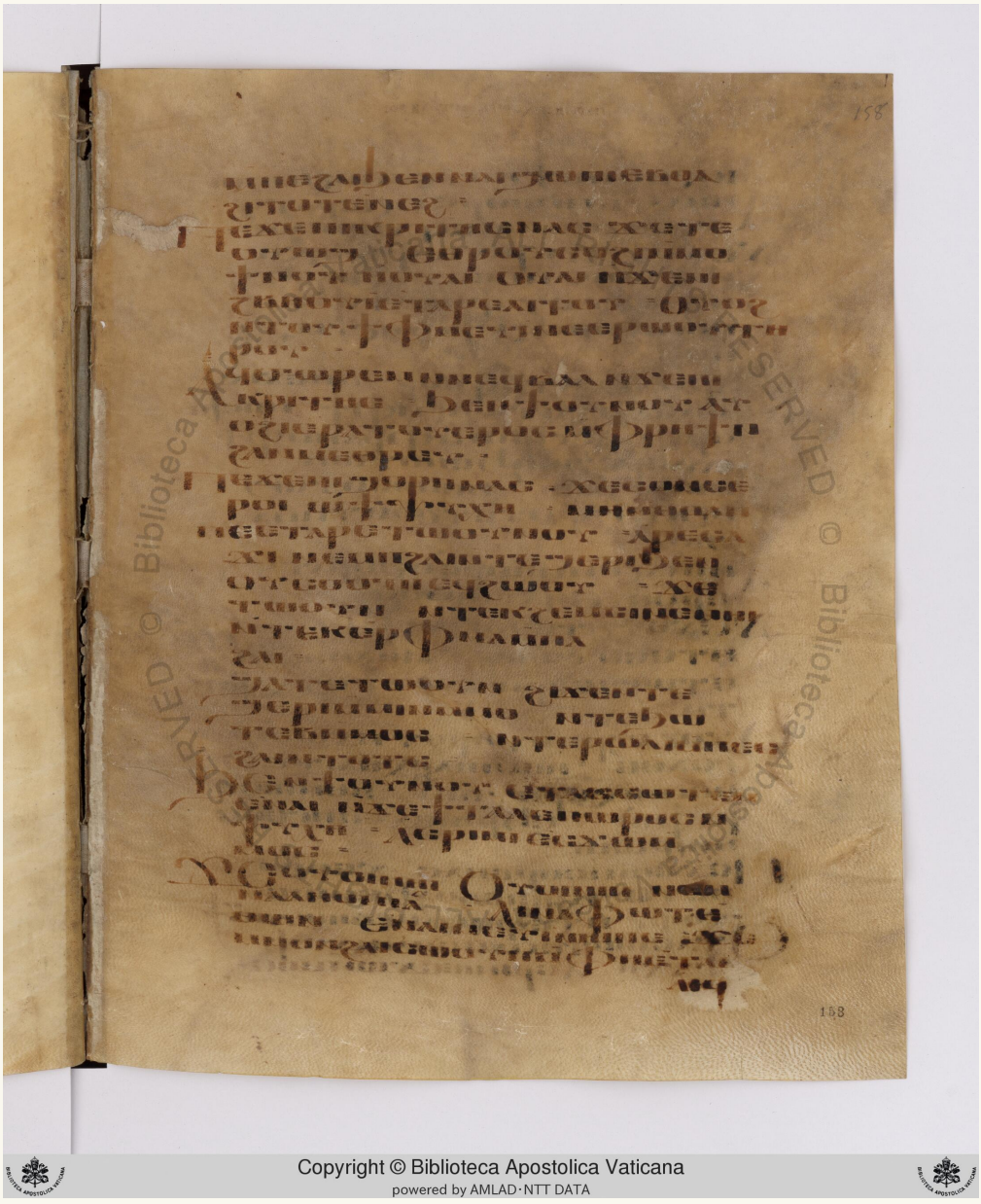

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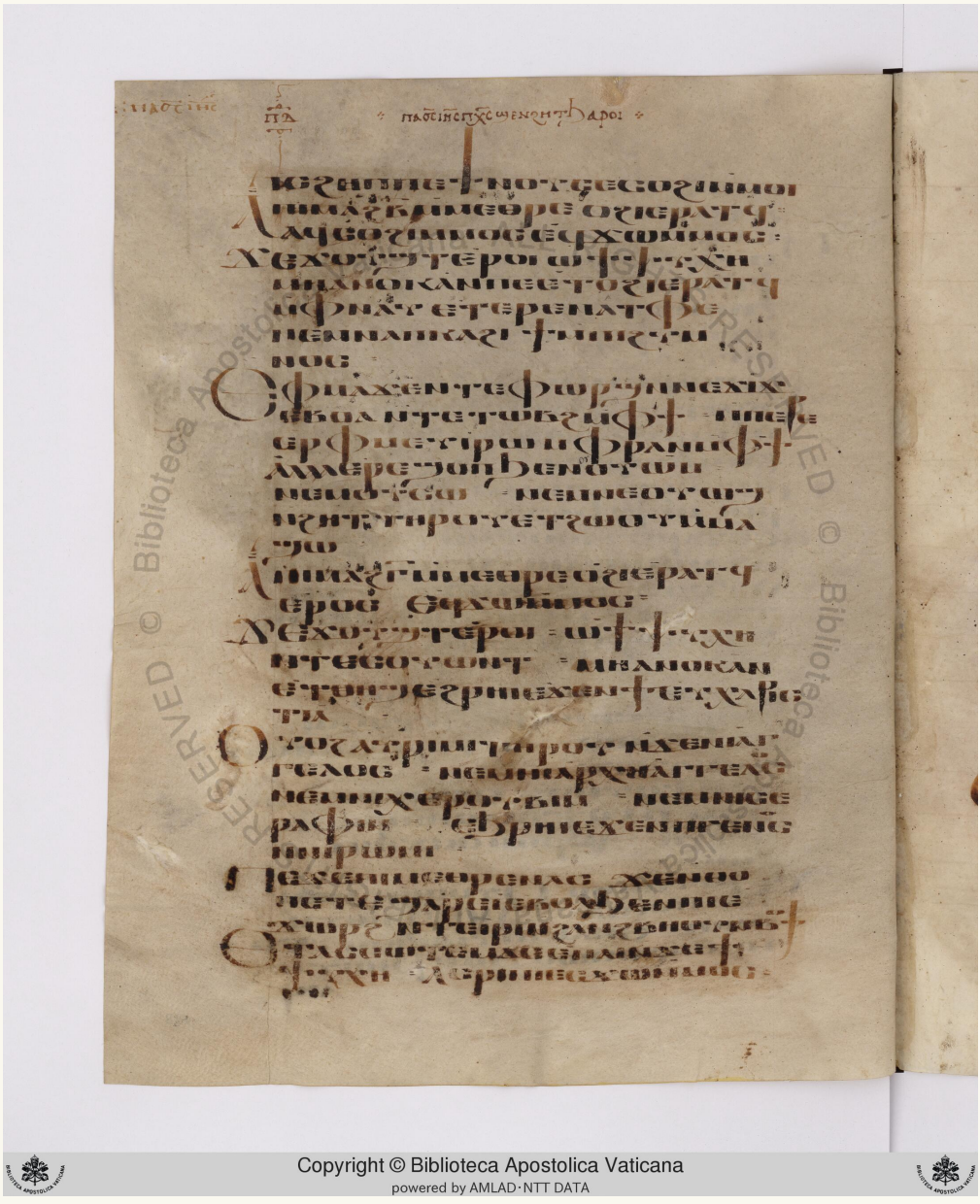
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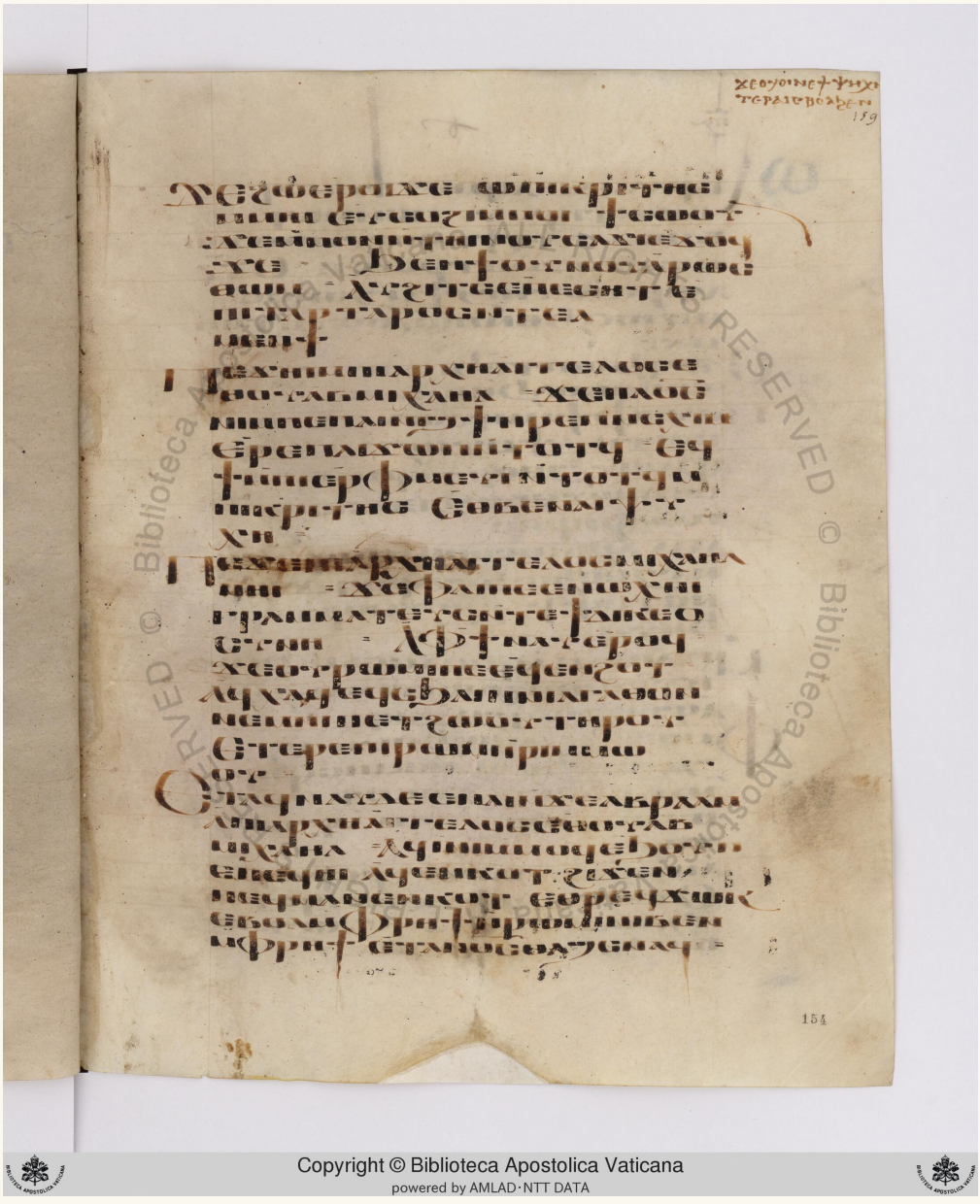

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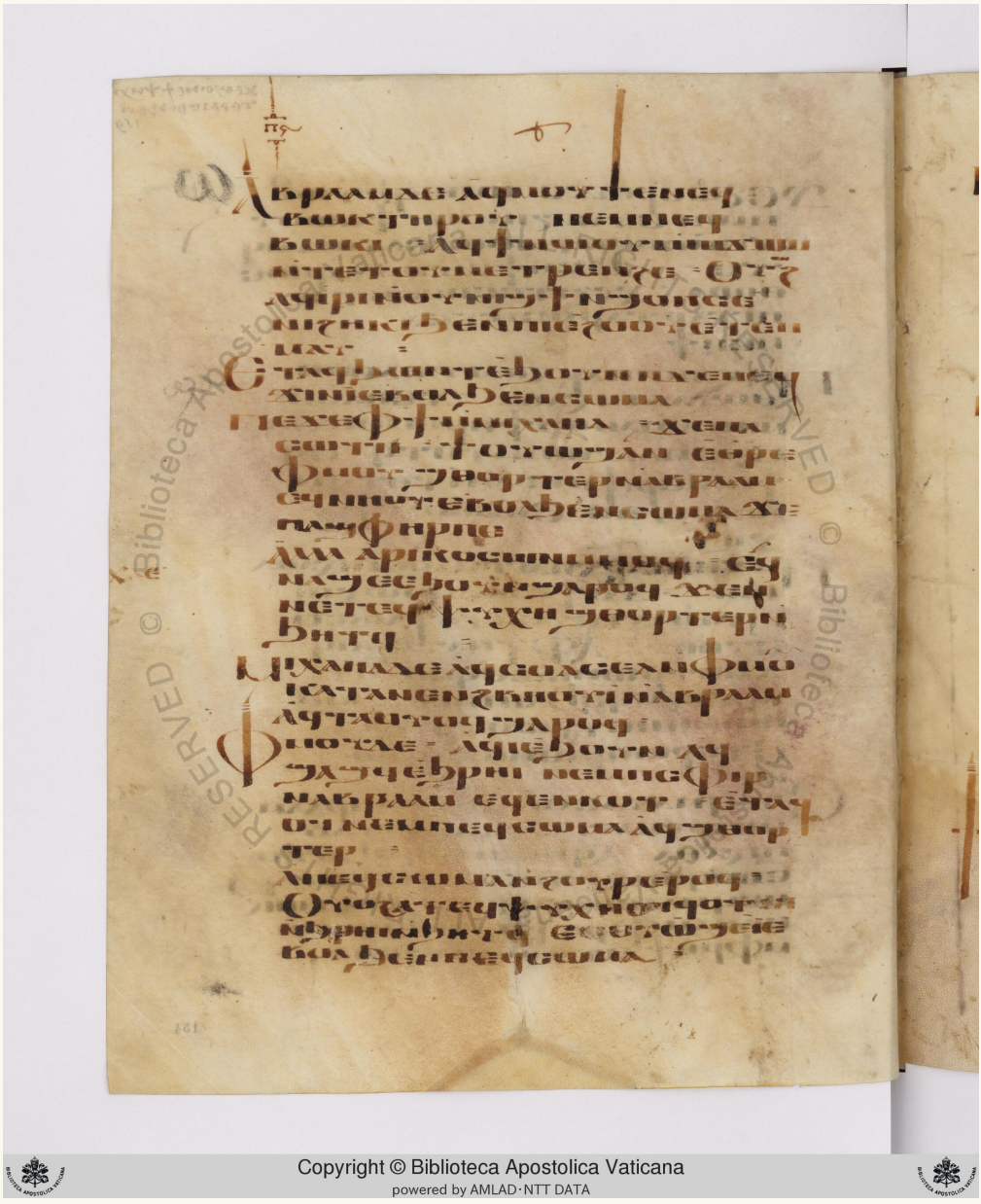
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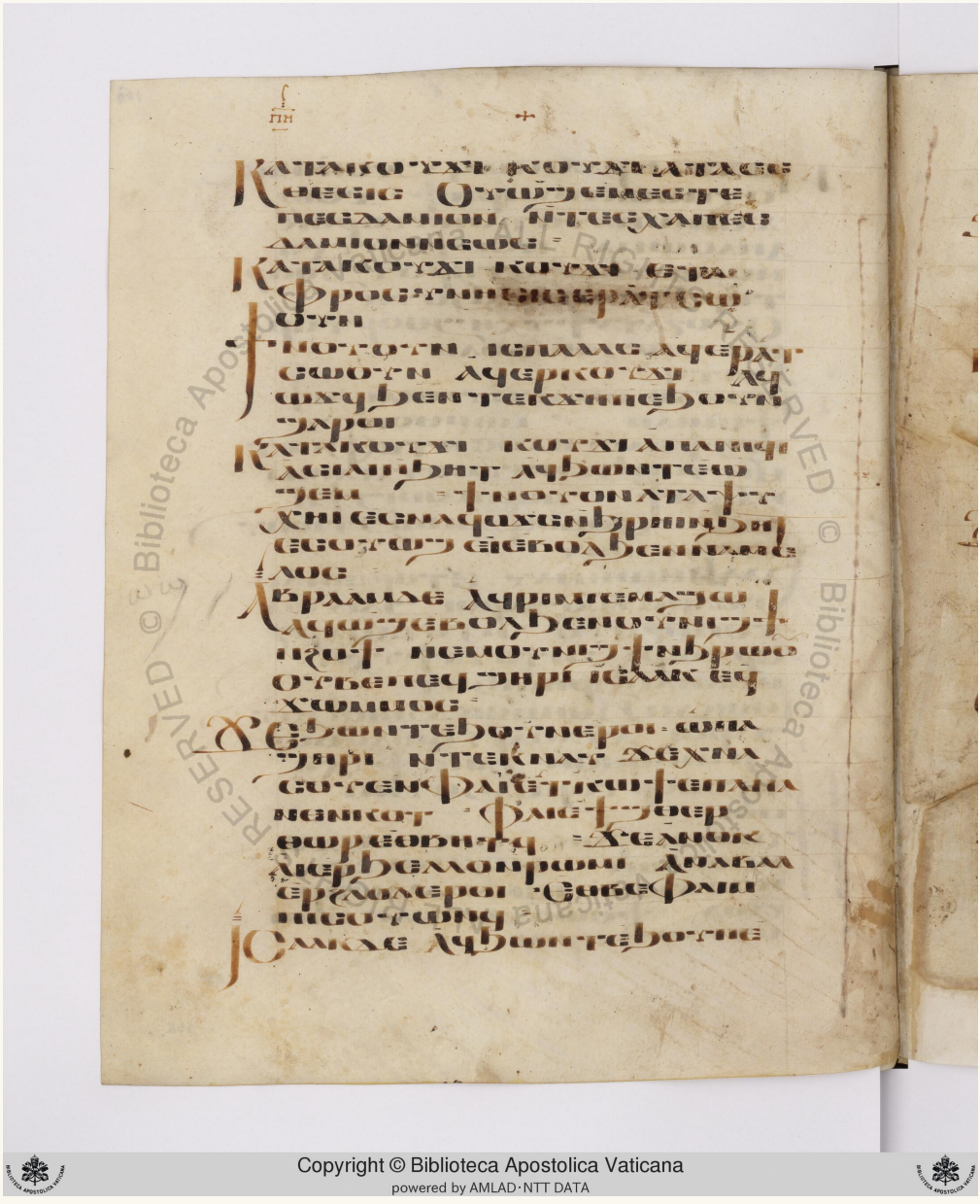
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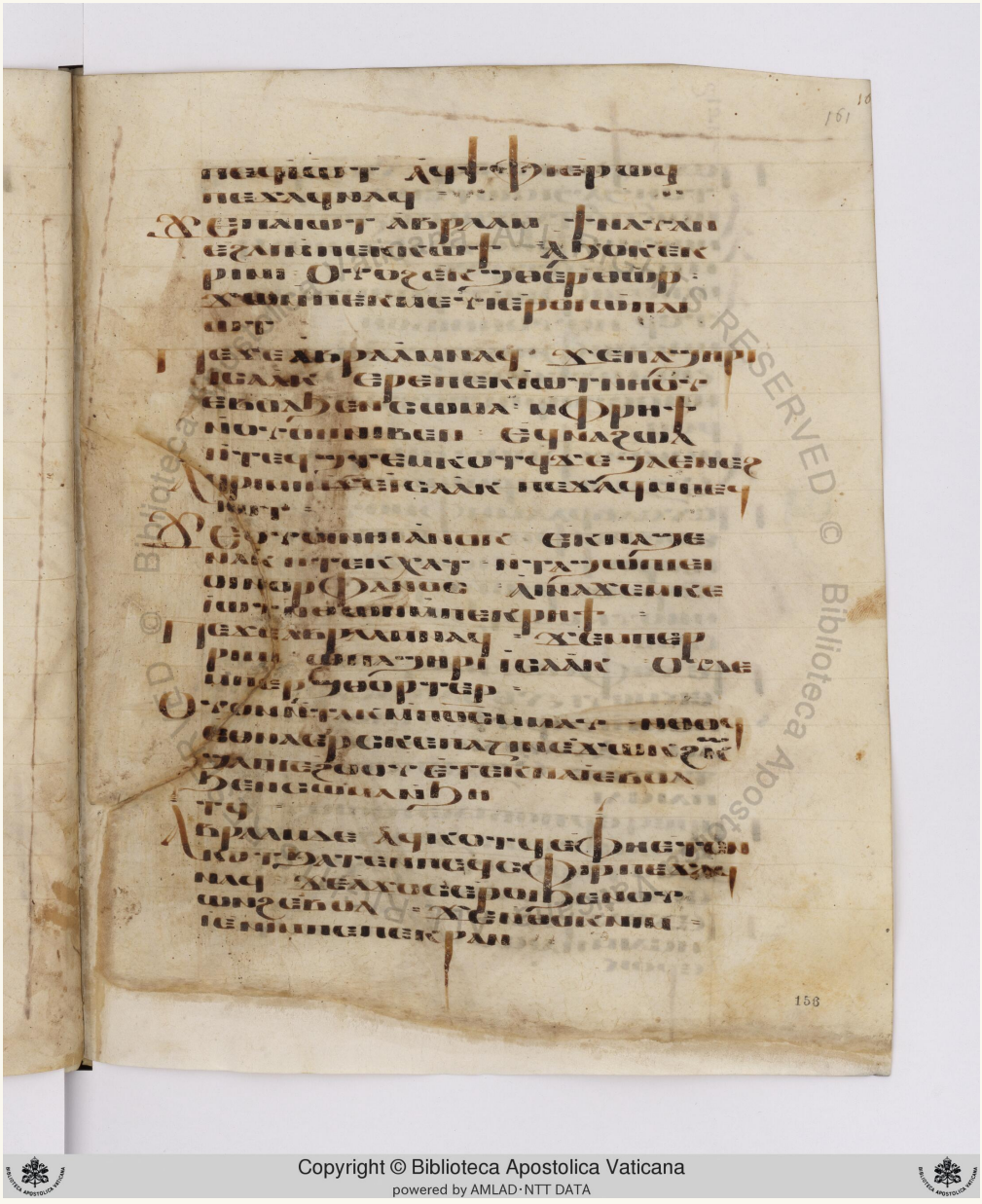
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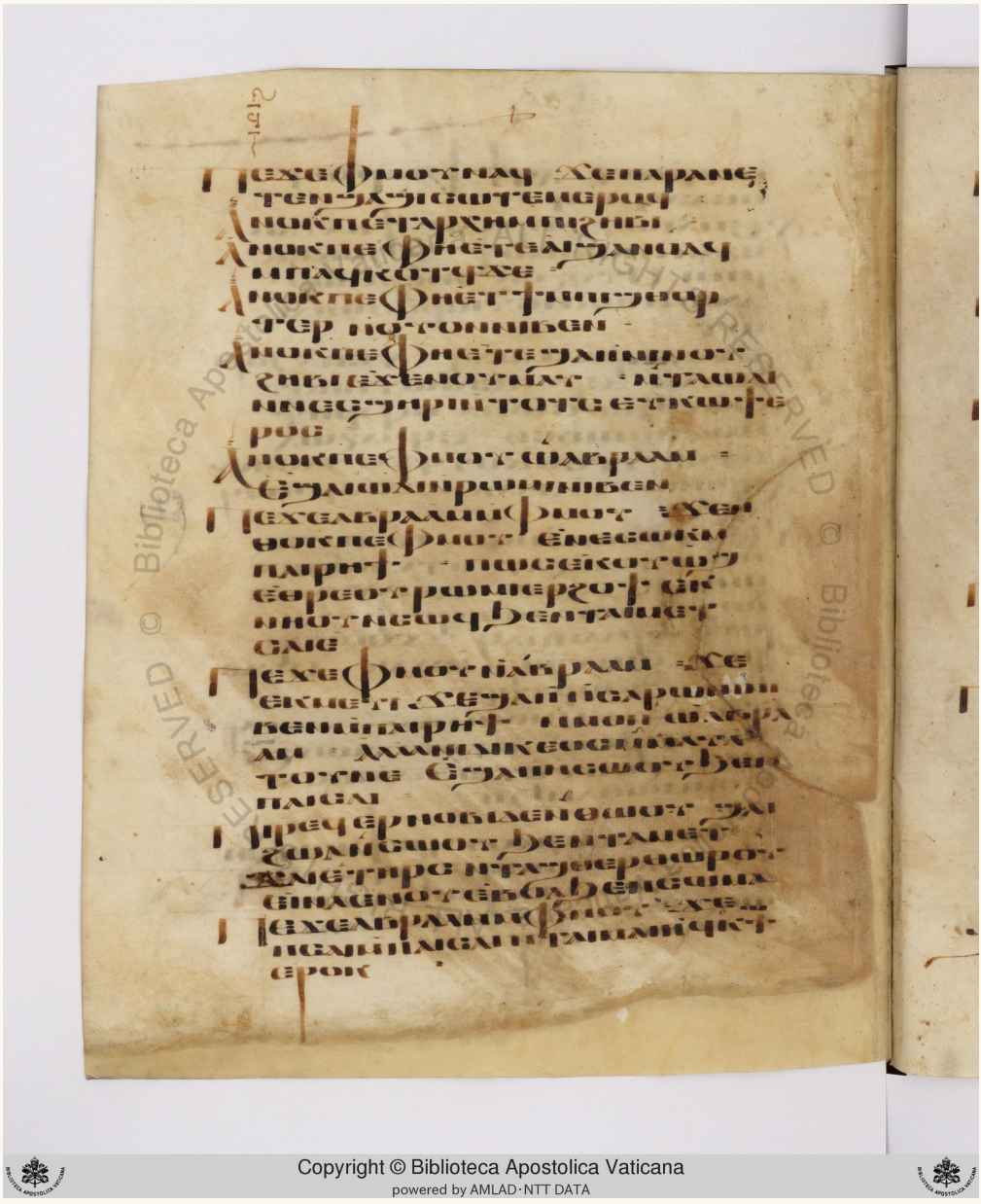
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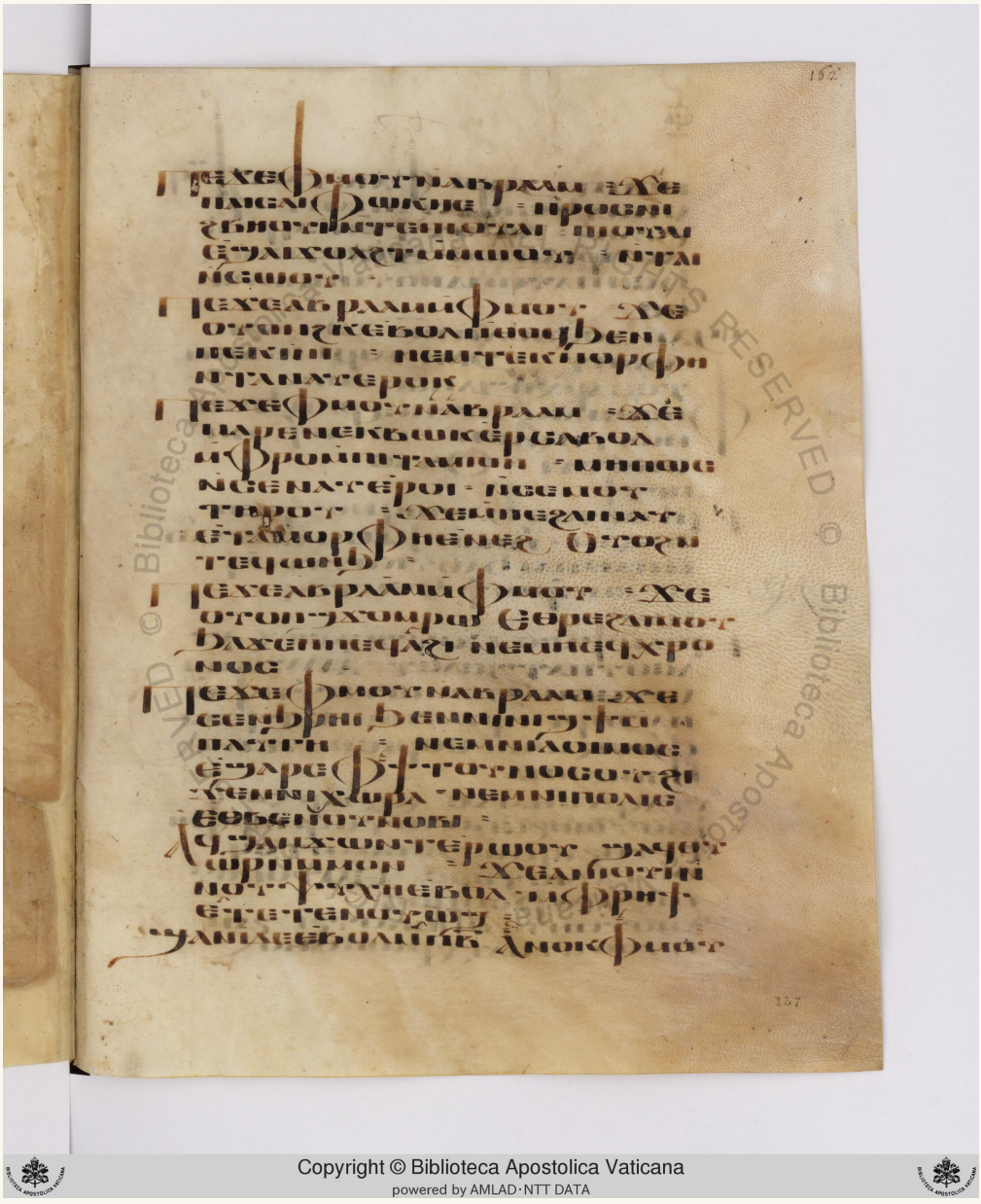
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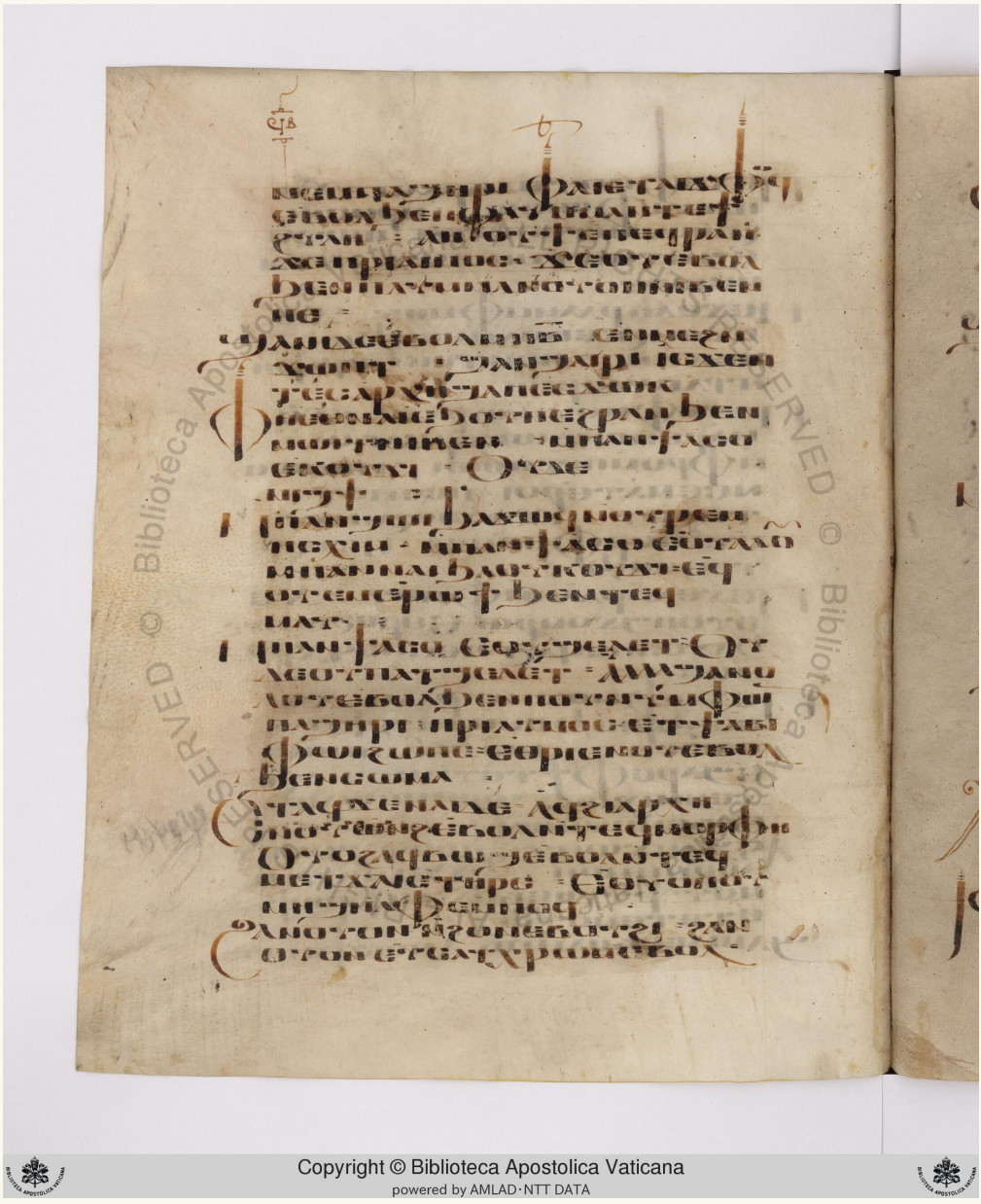
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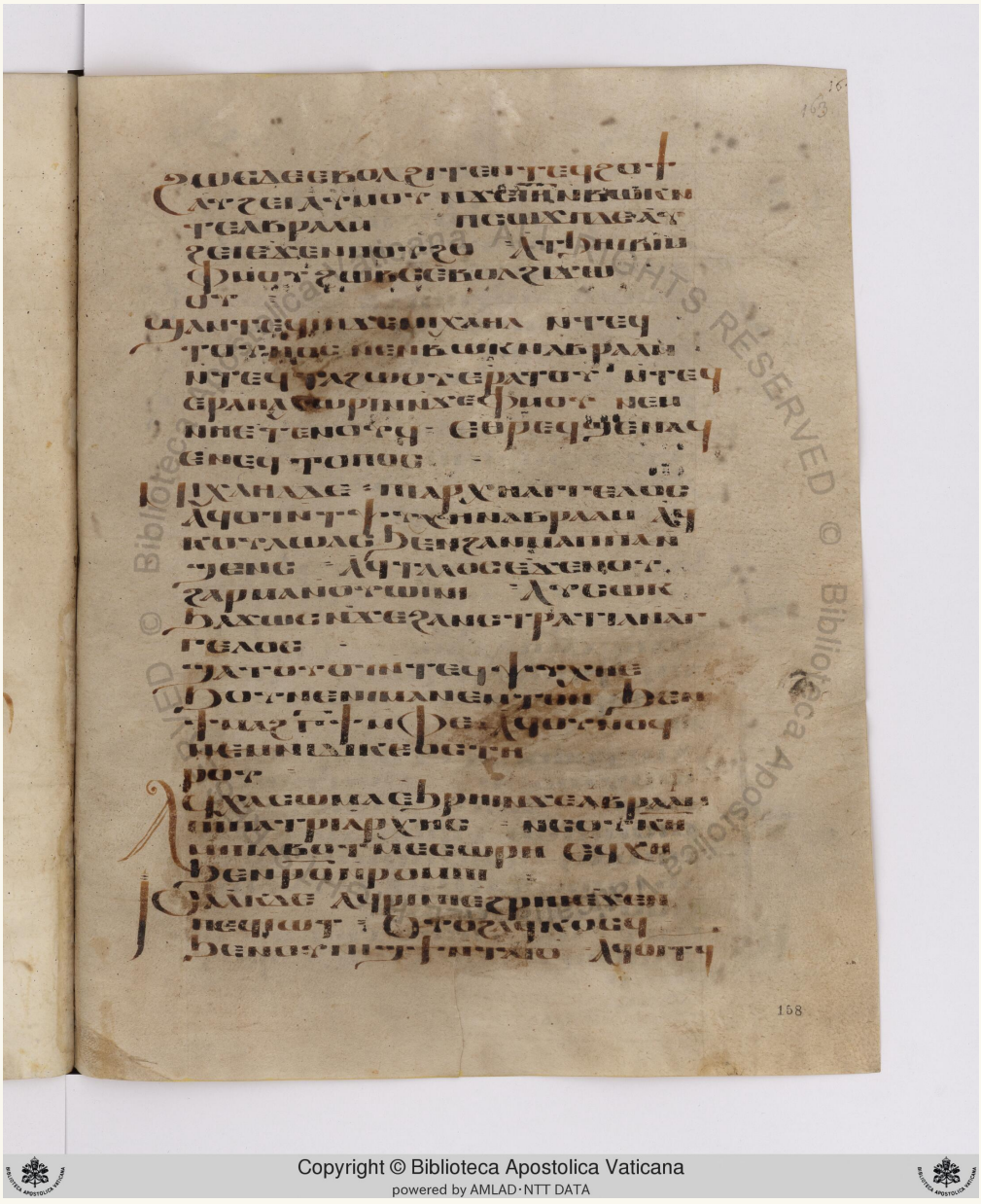

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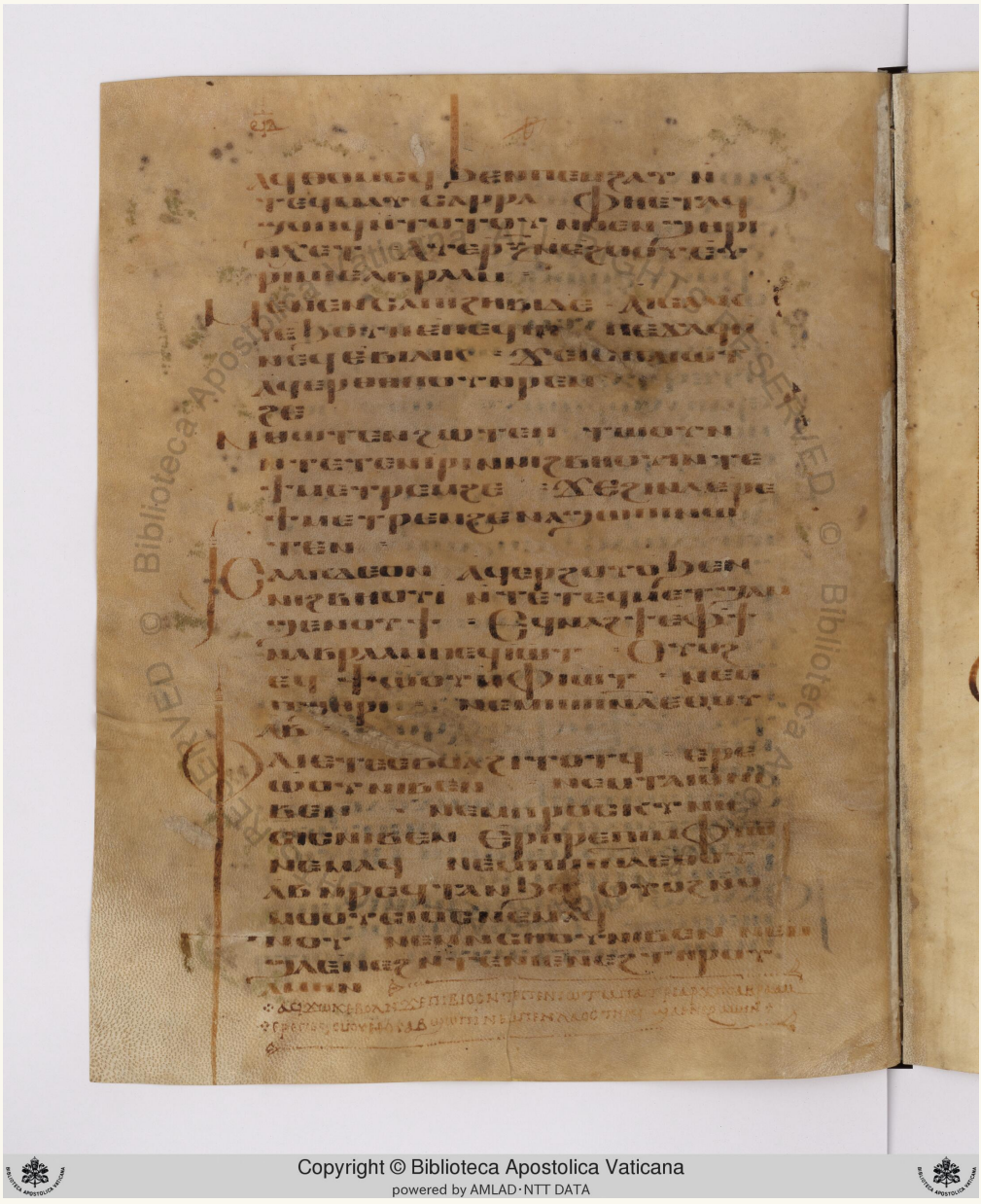
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Testament of Isaac



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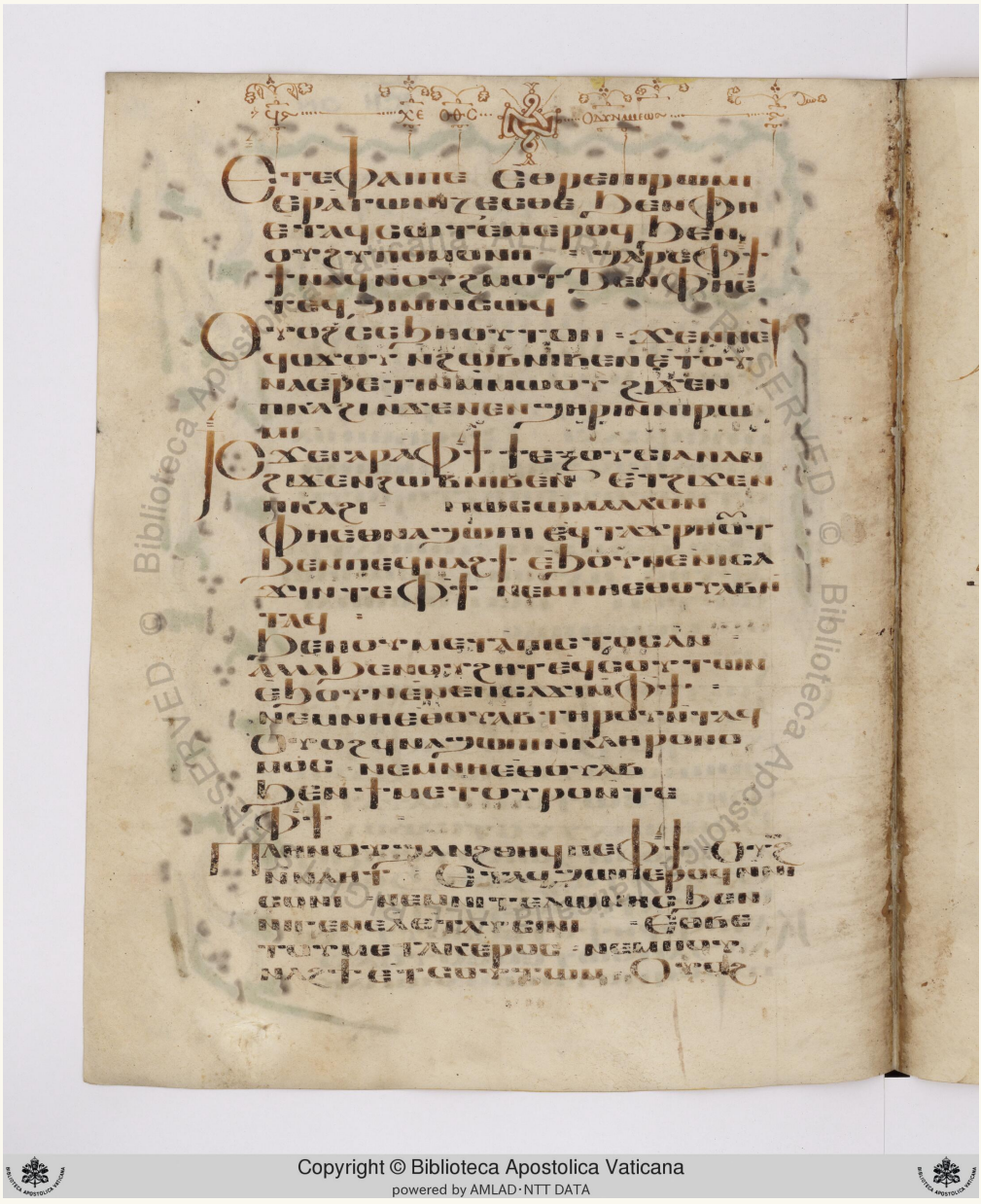
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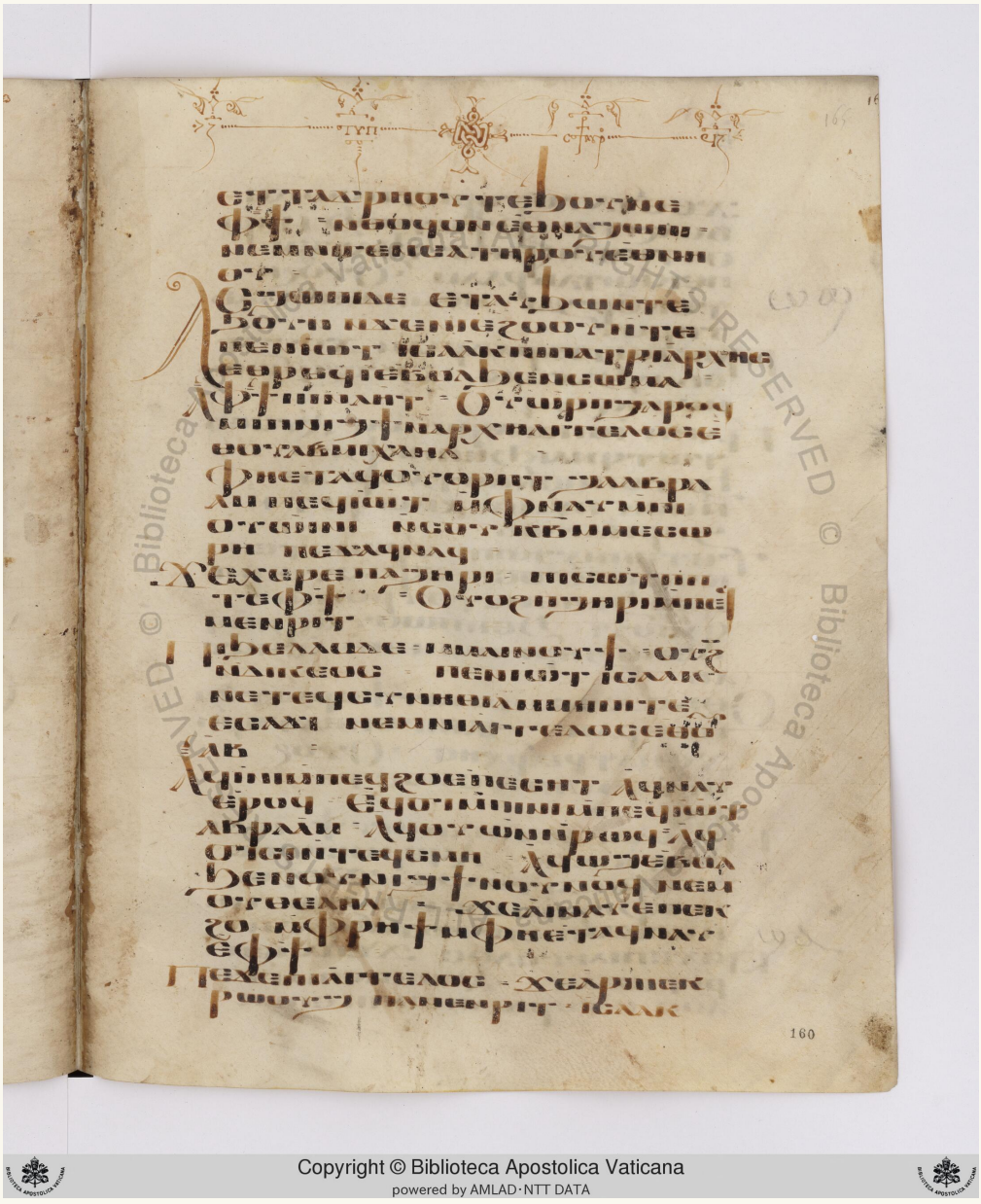

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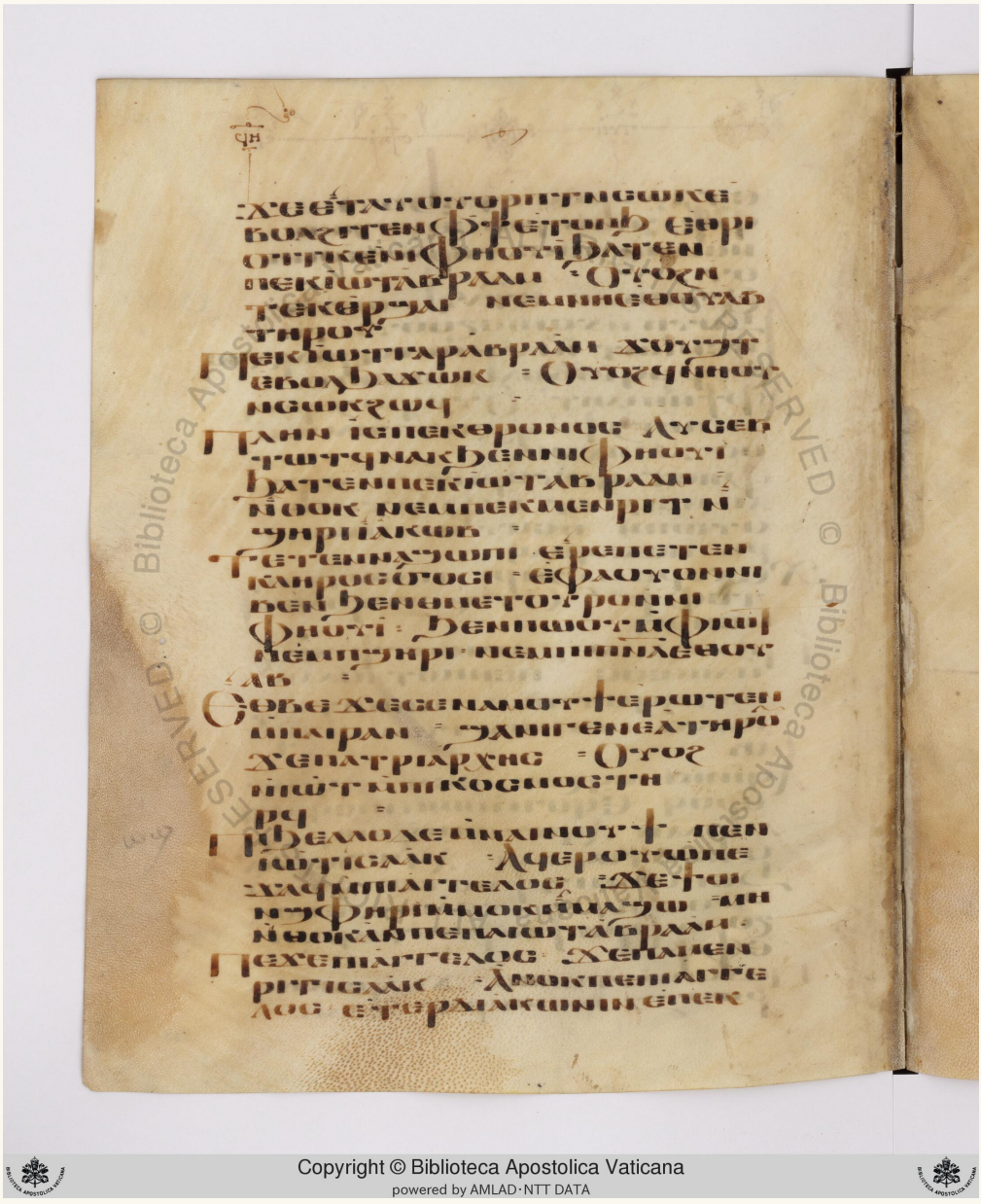
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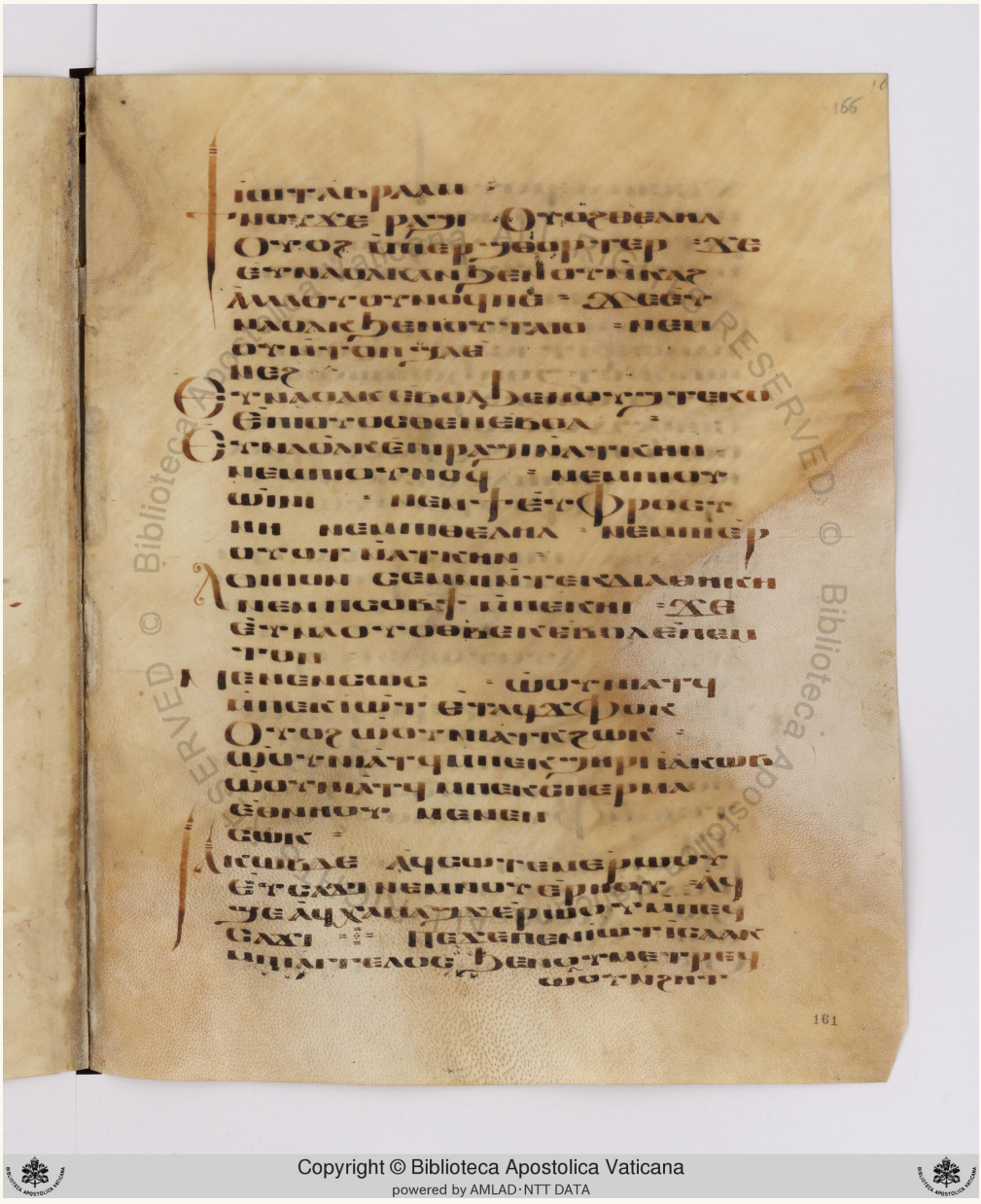

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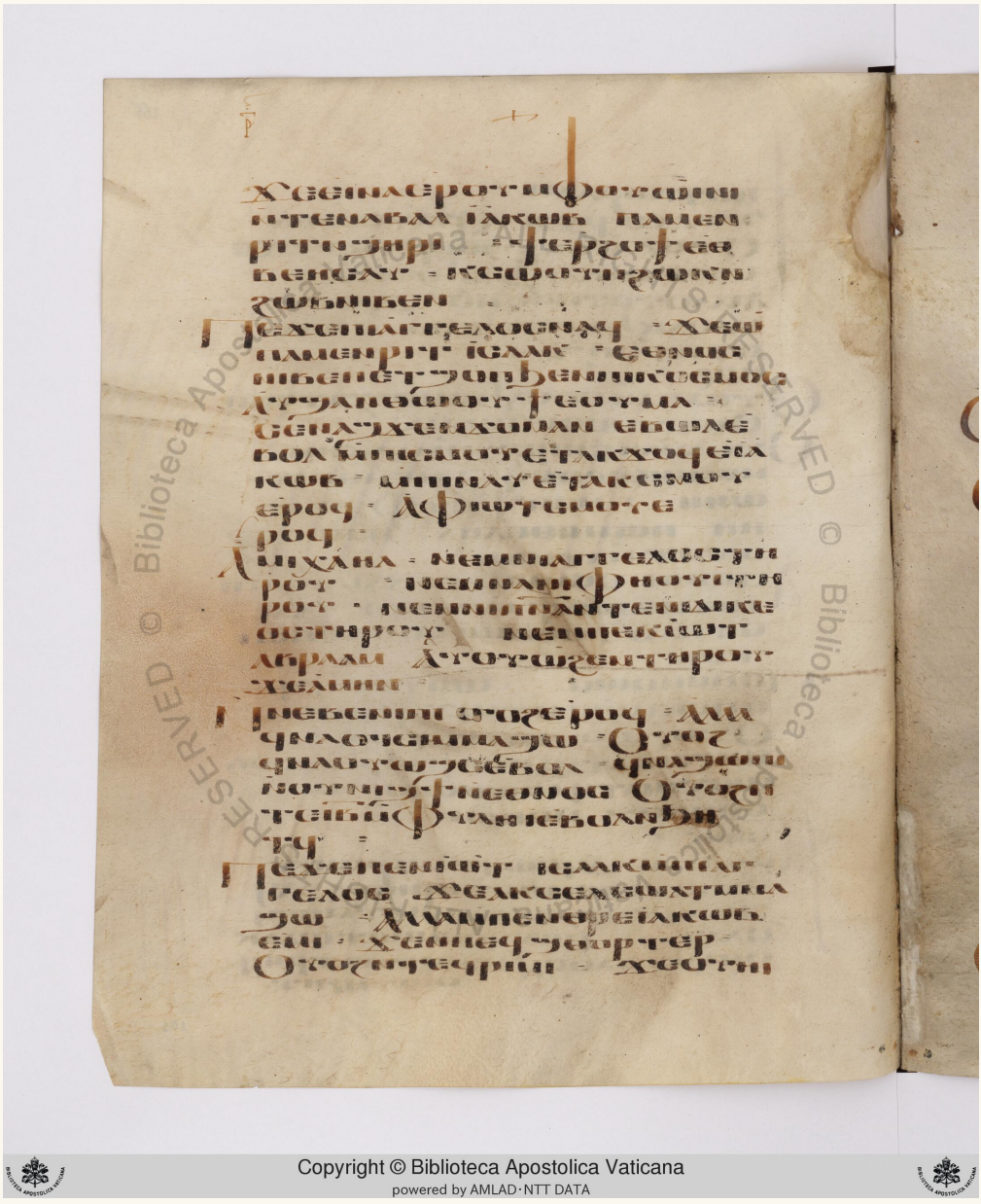
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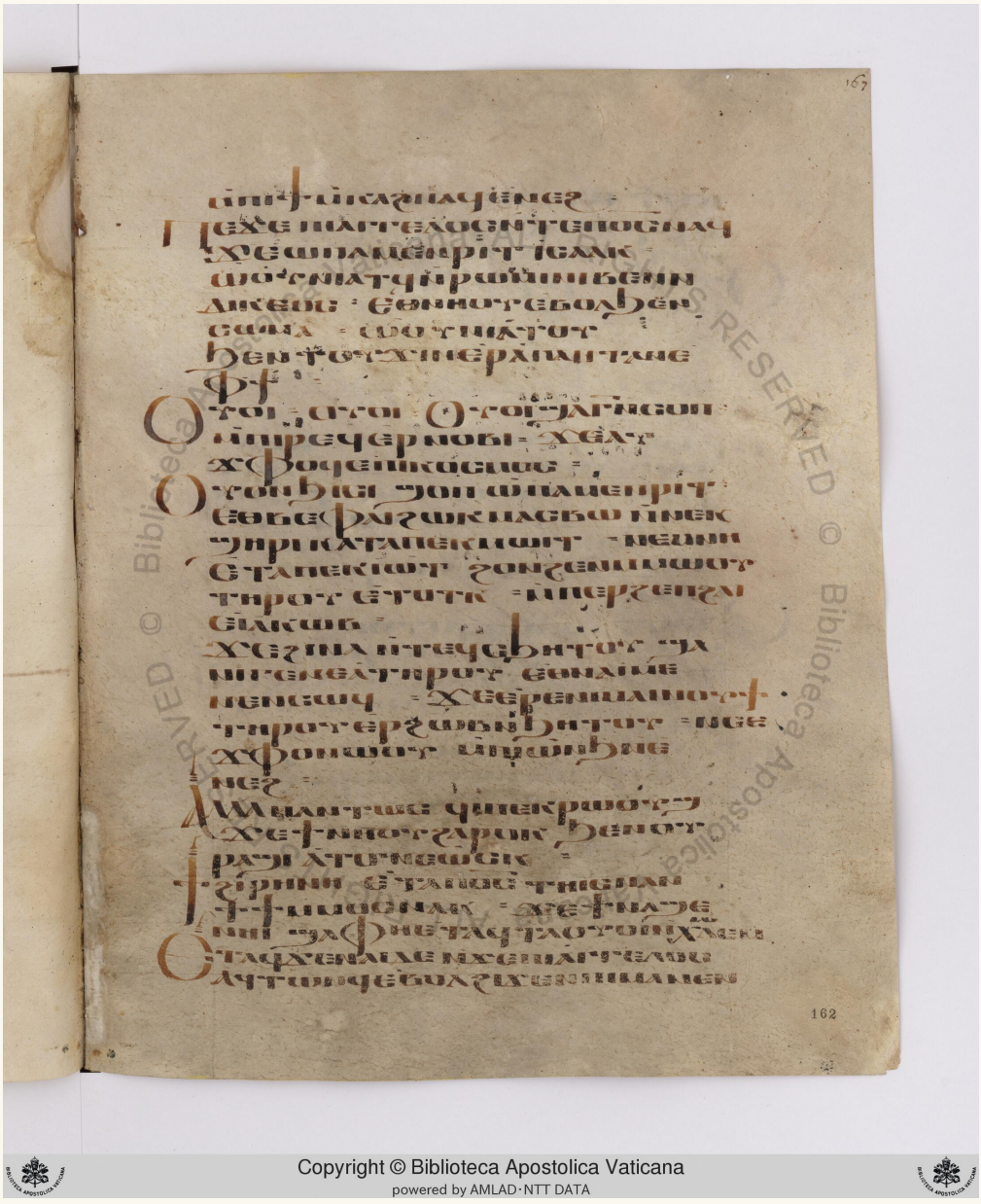

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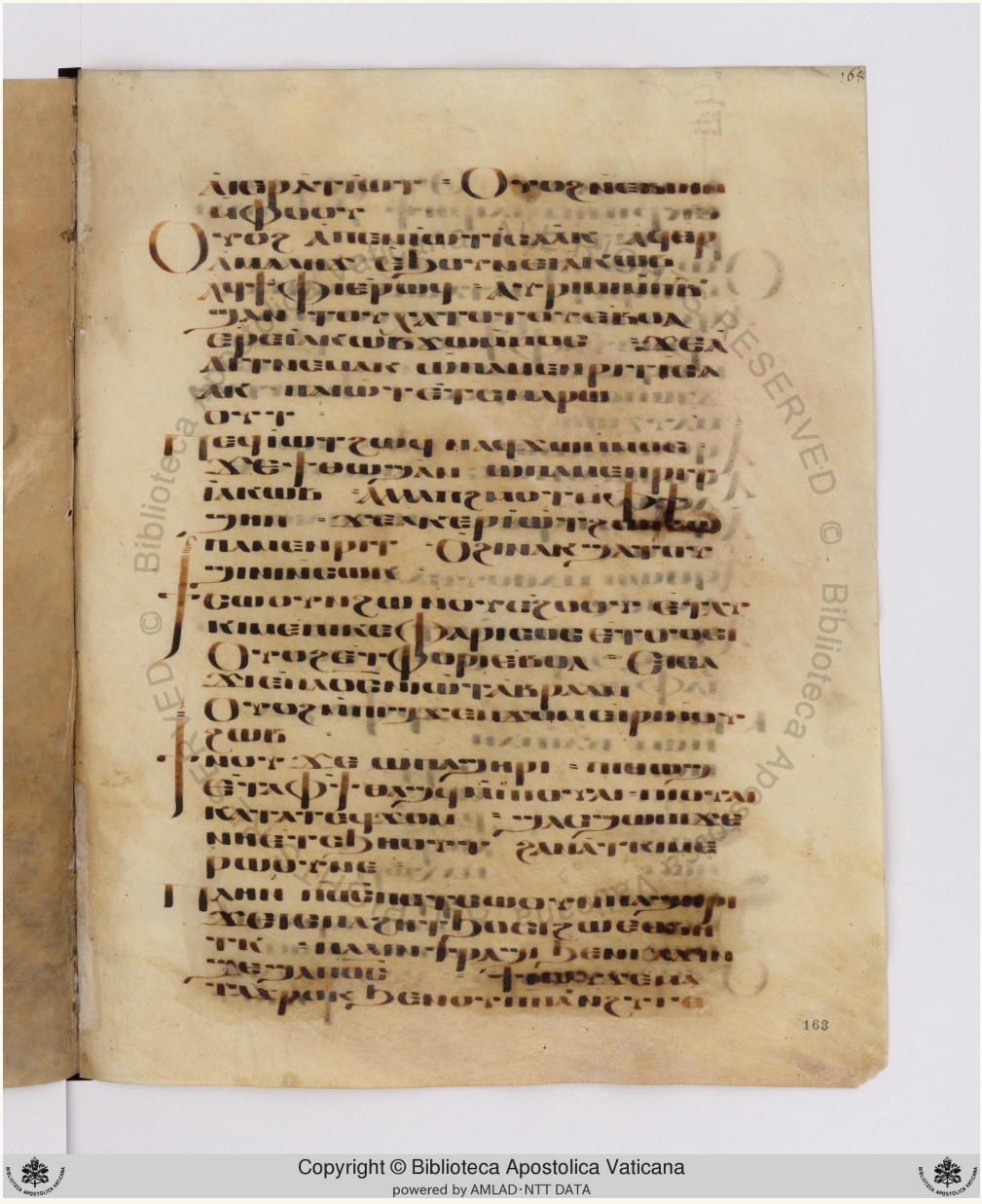

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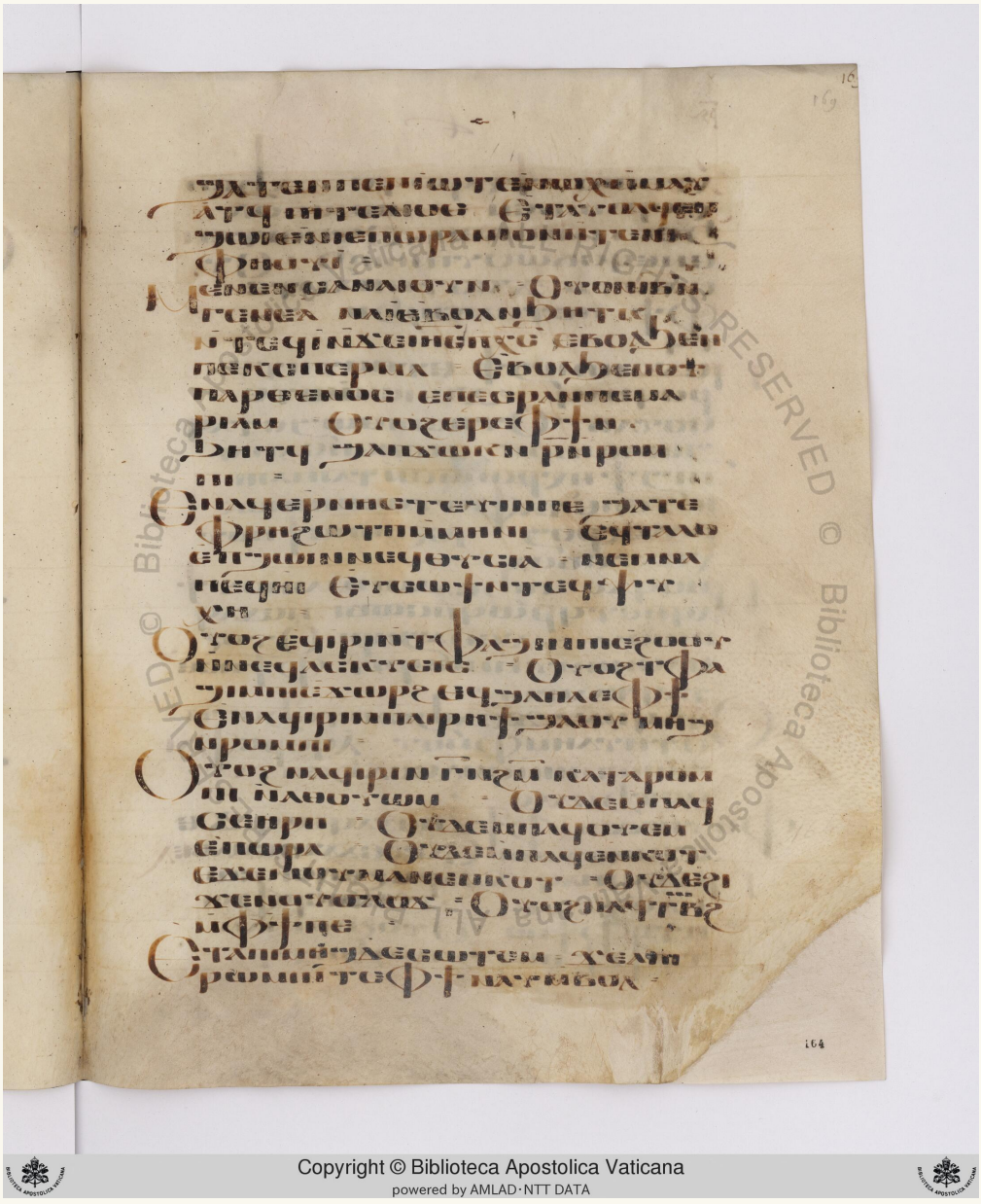

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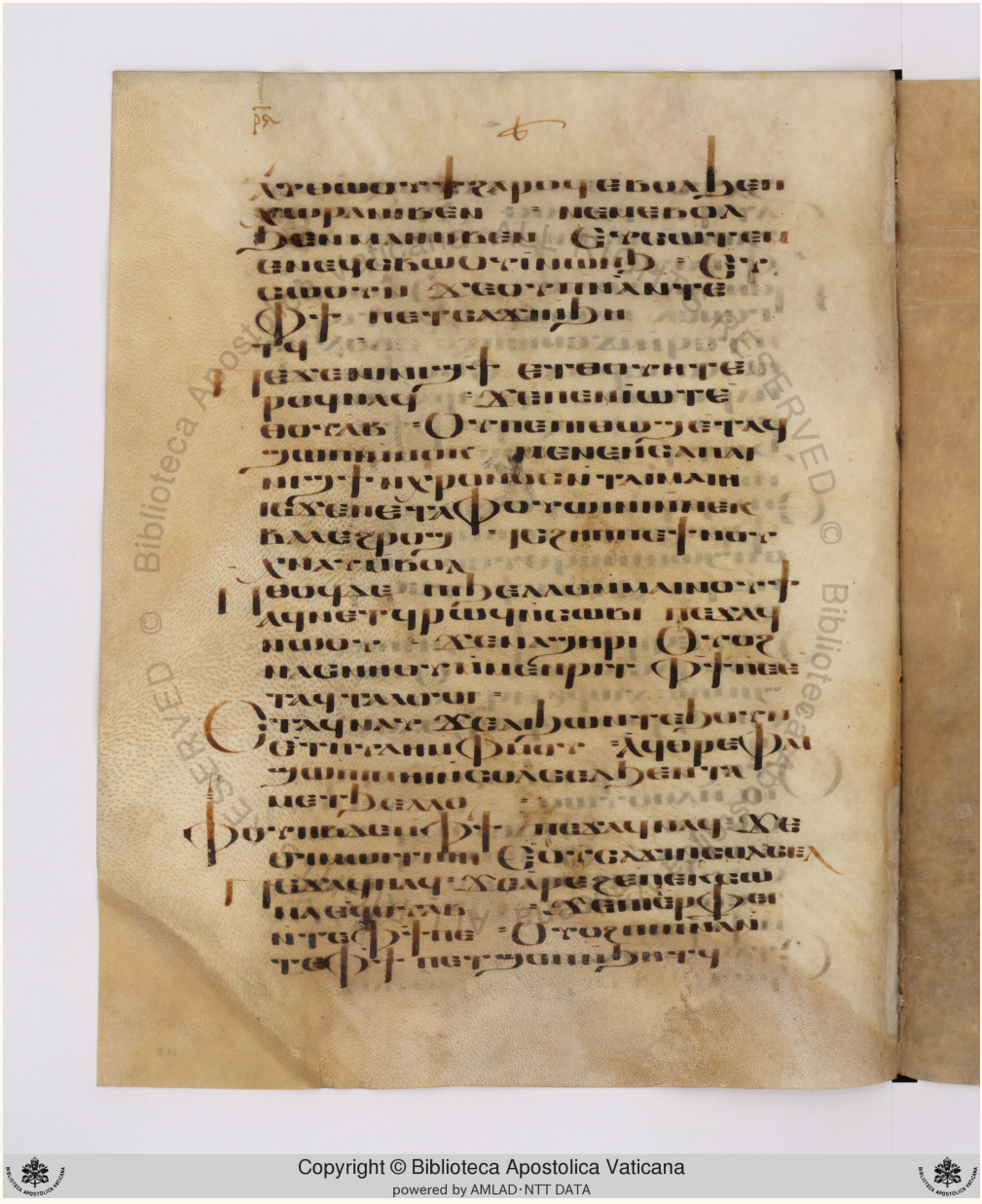
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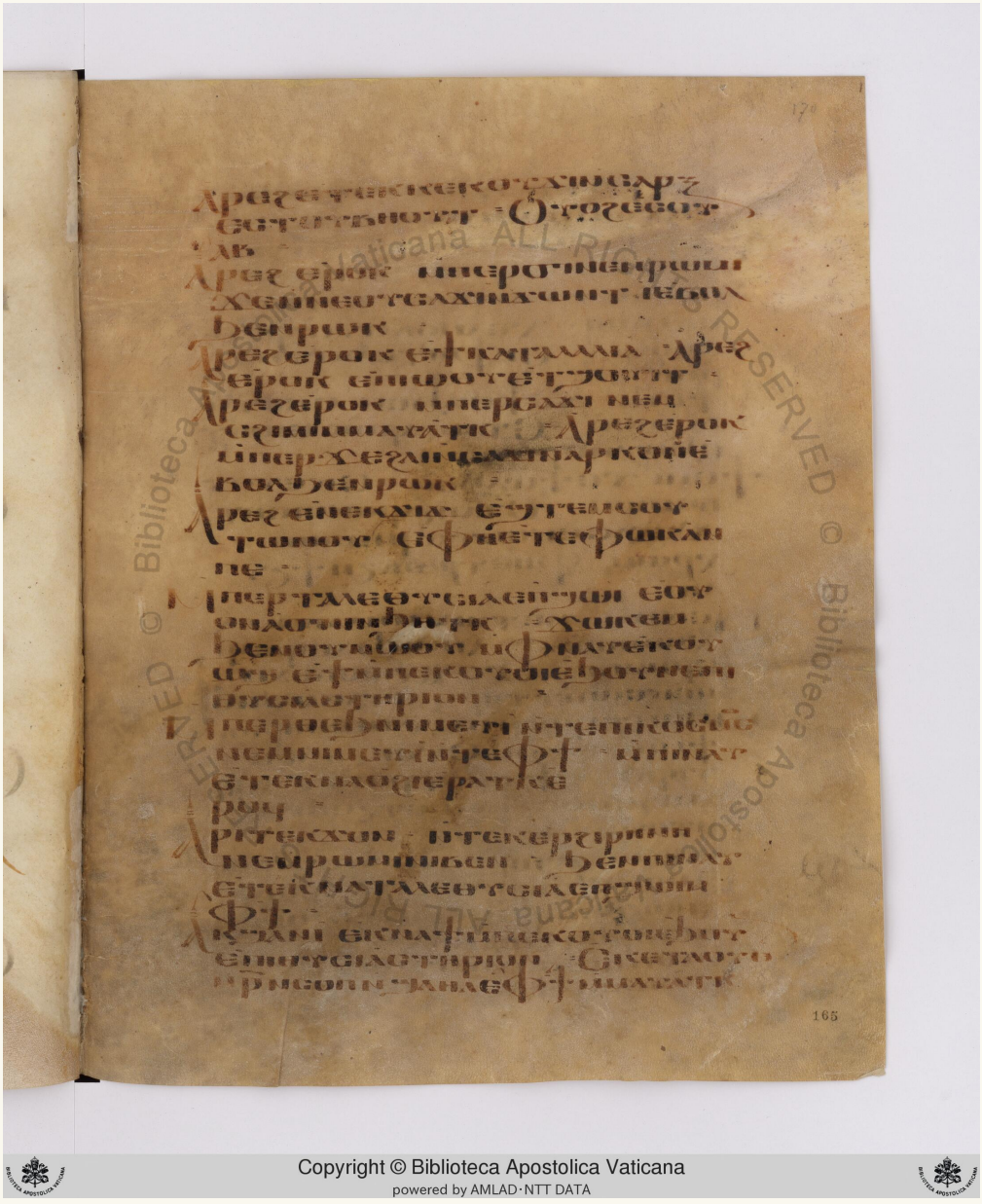

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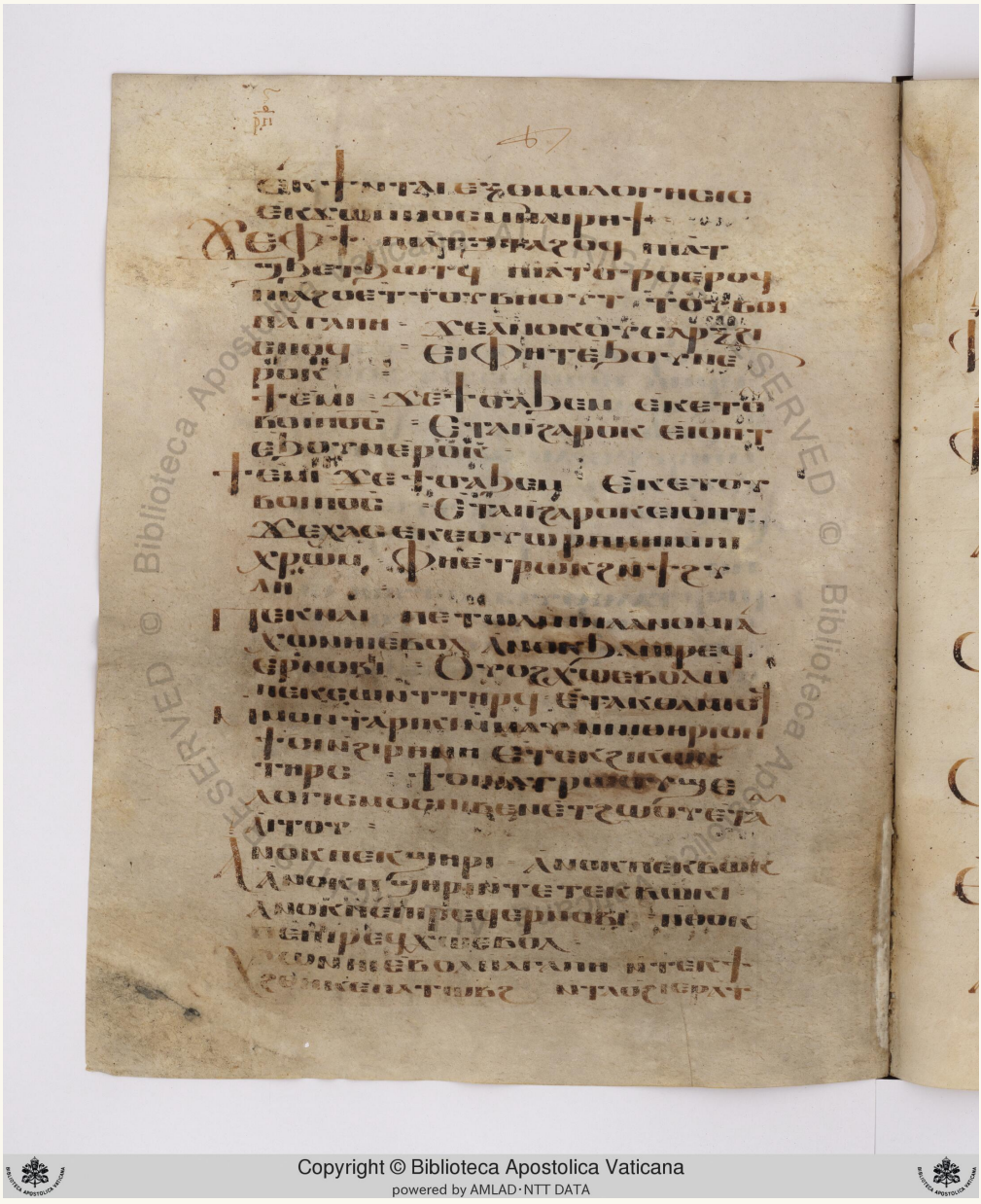
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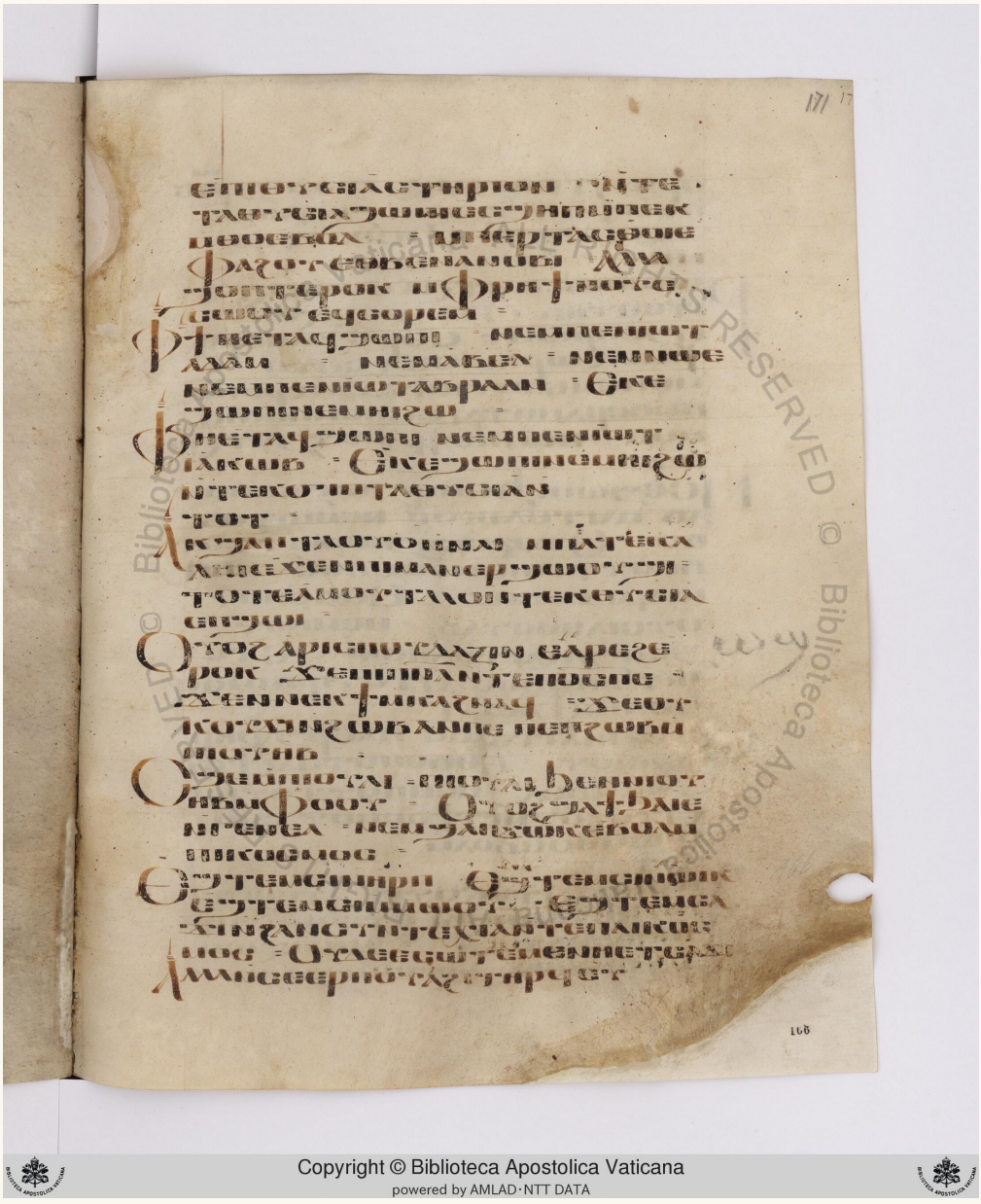
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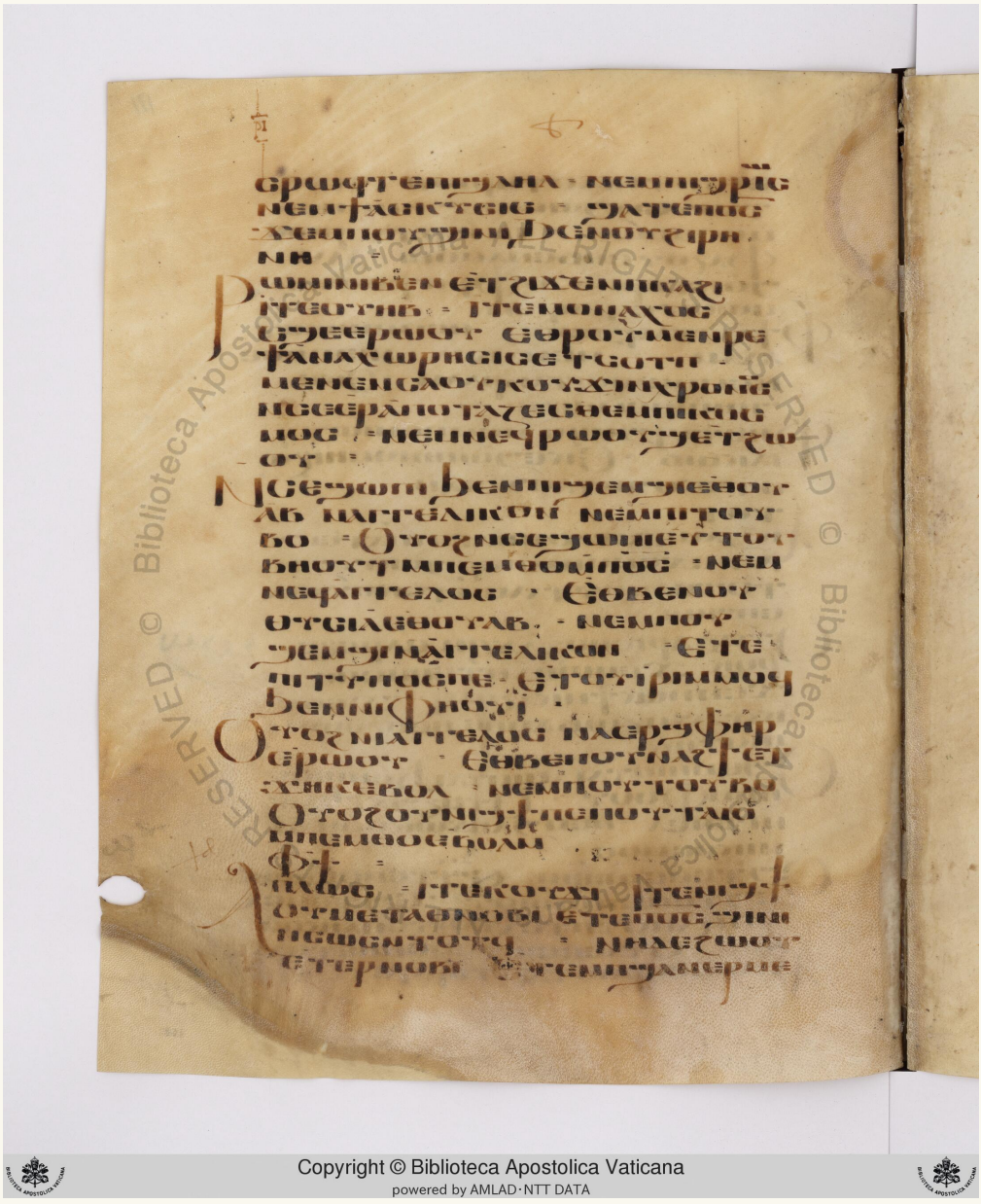
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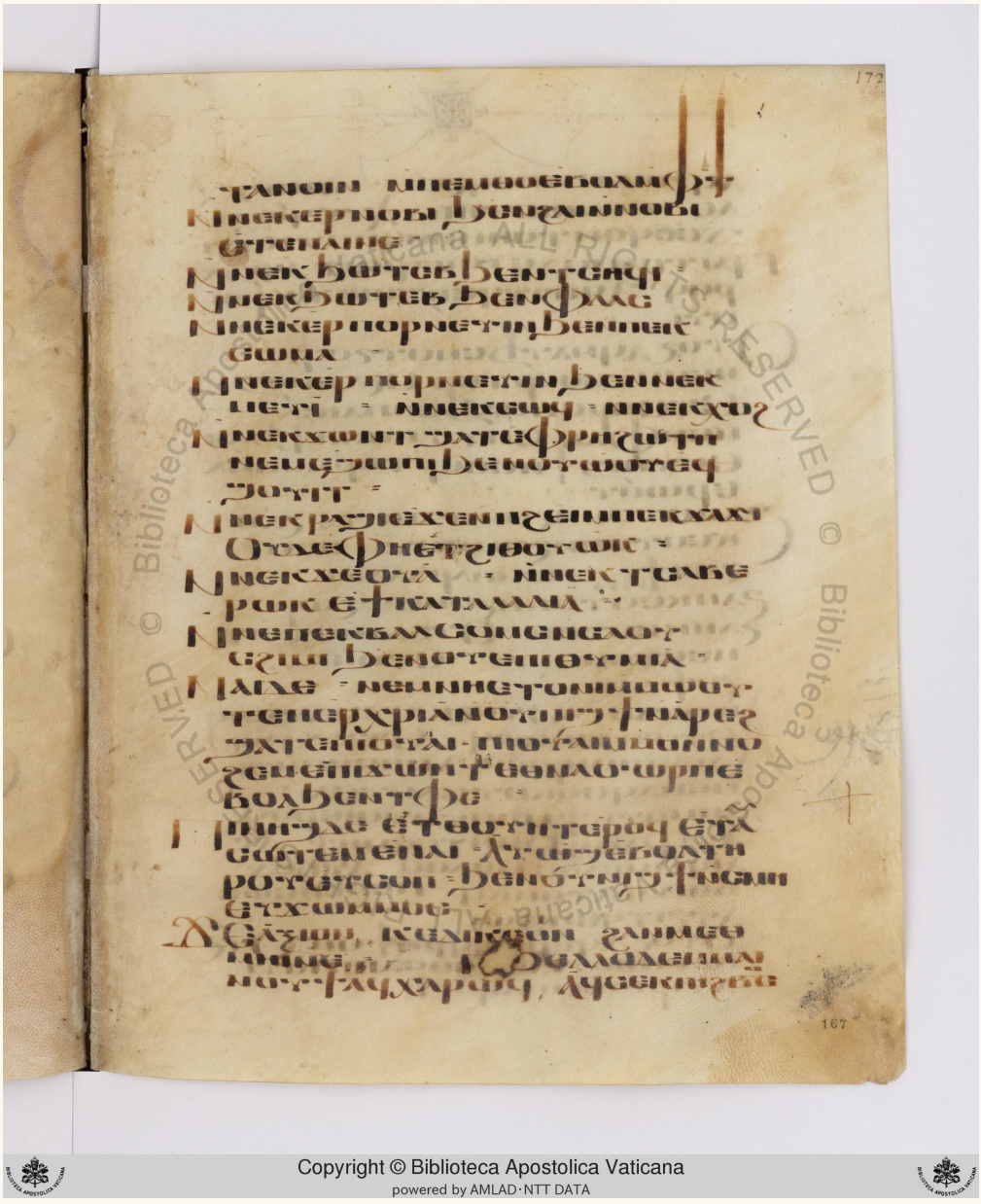

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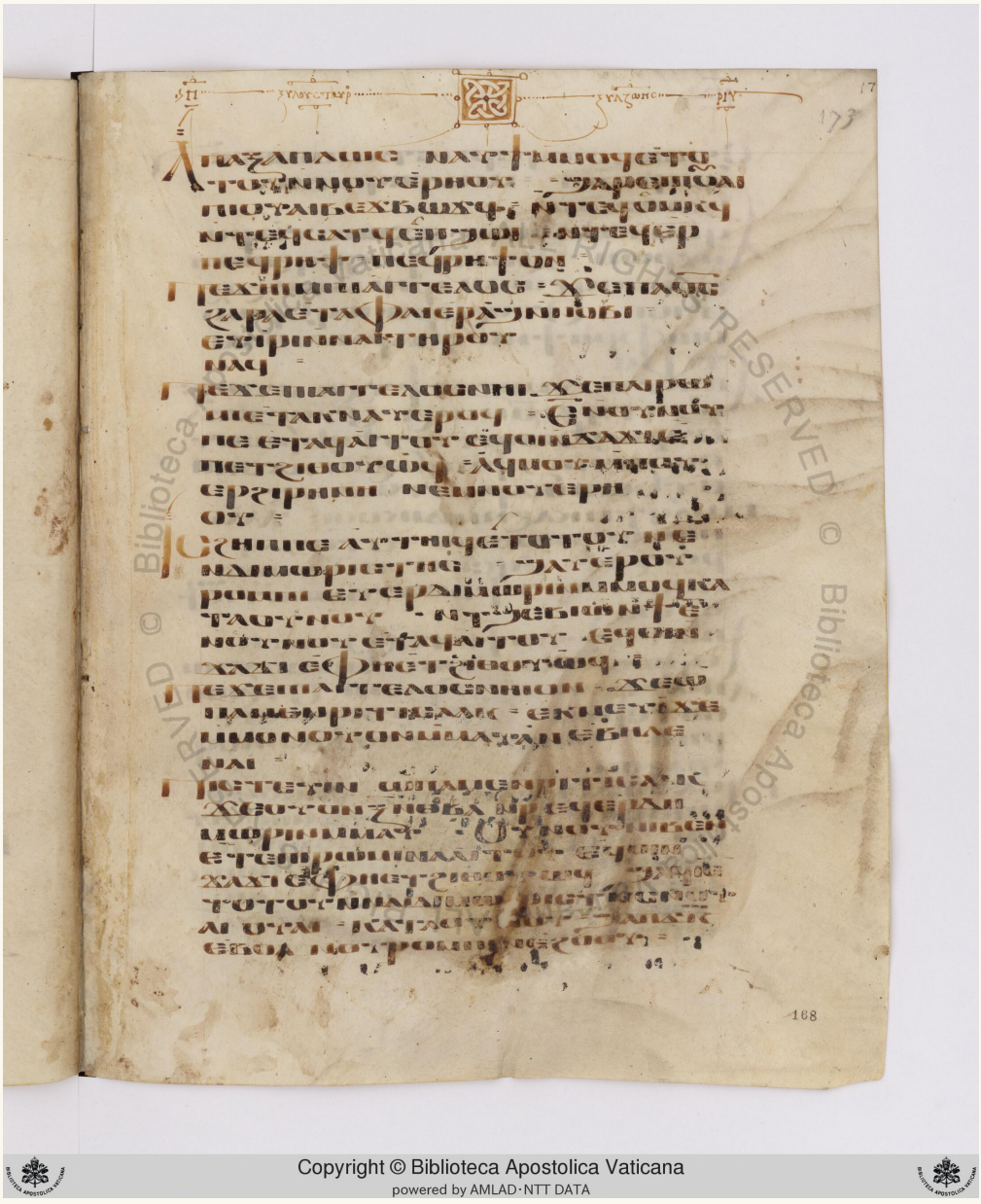

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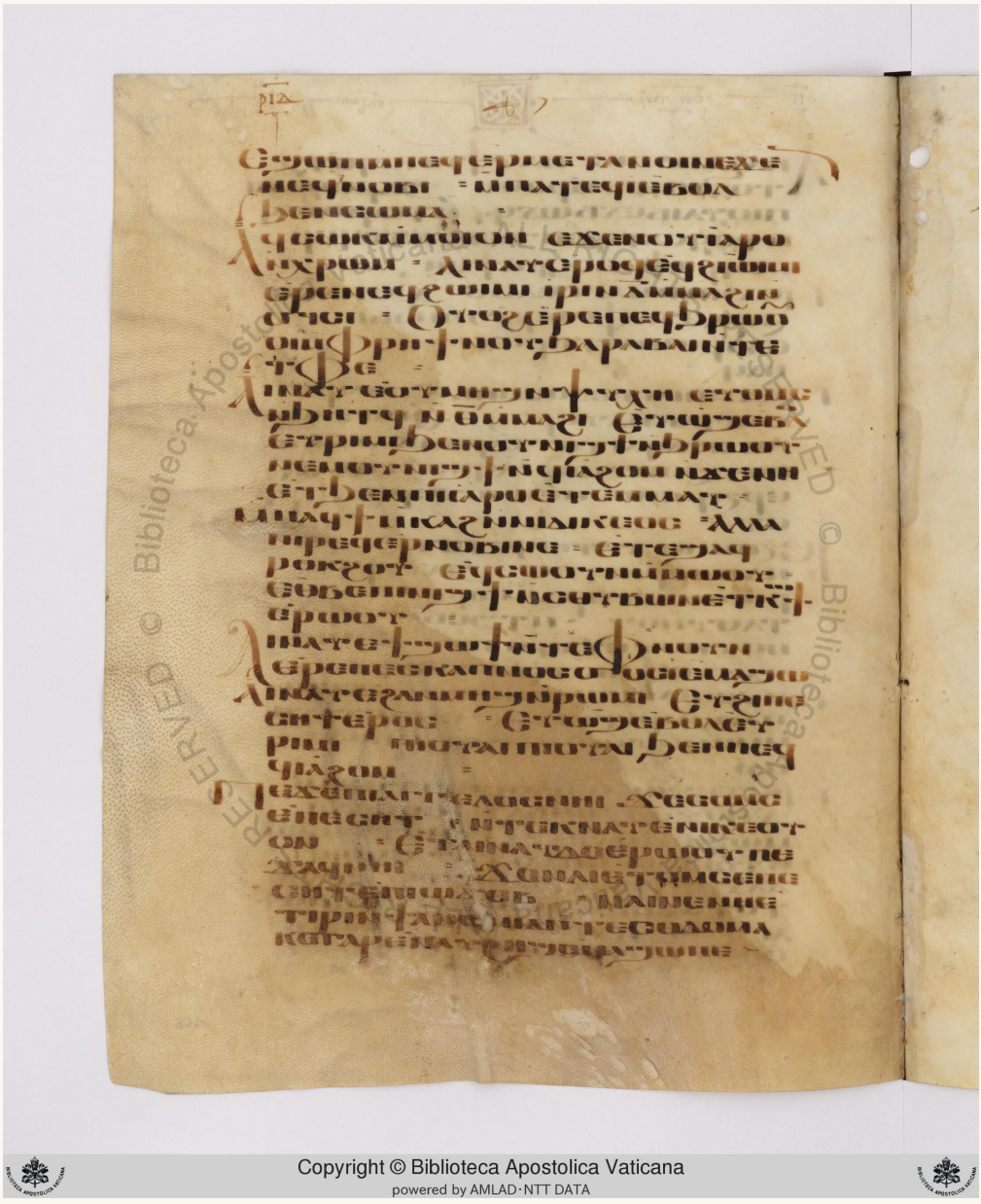
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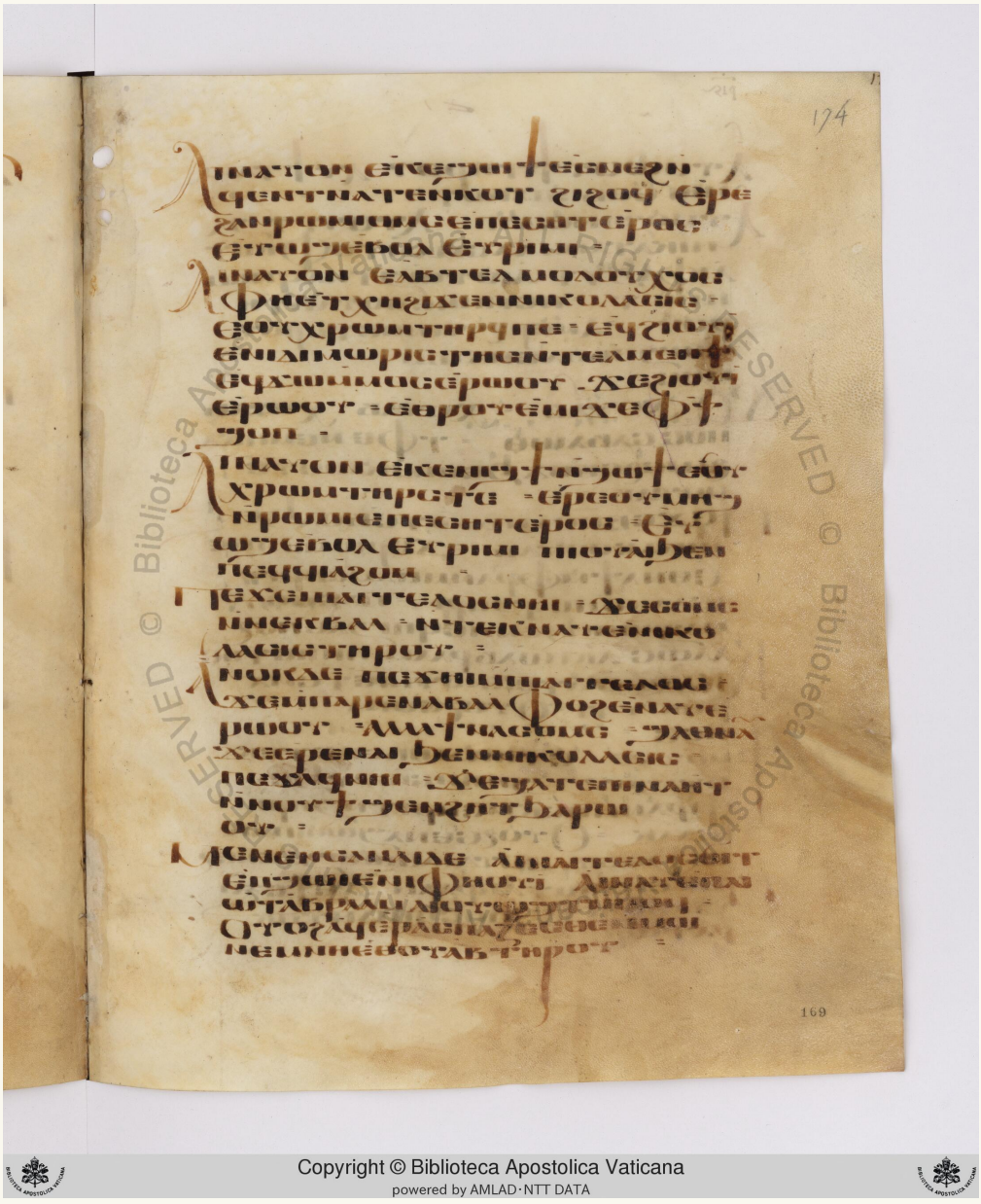

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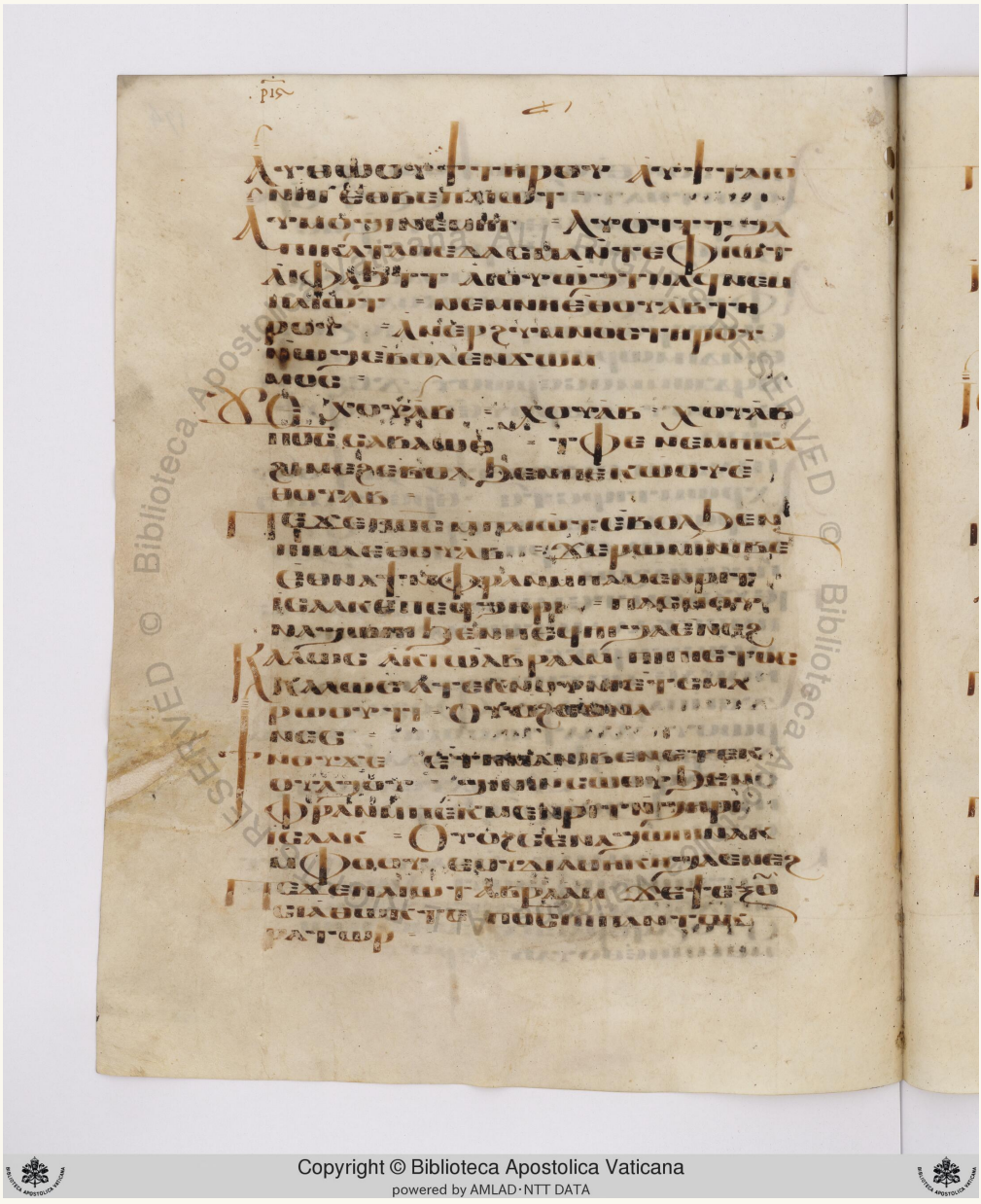
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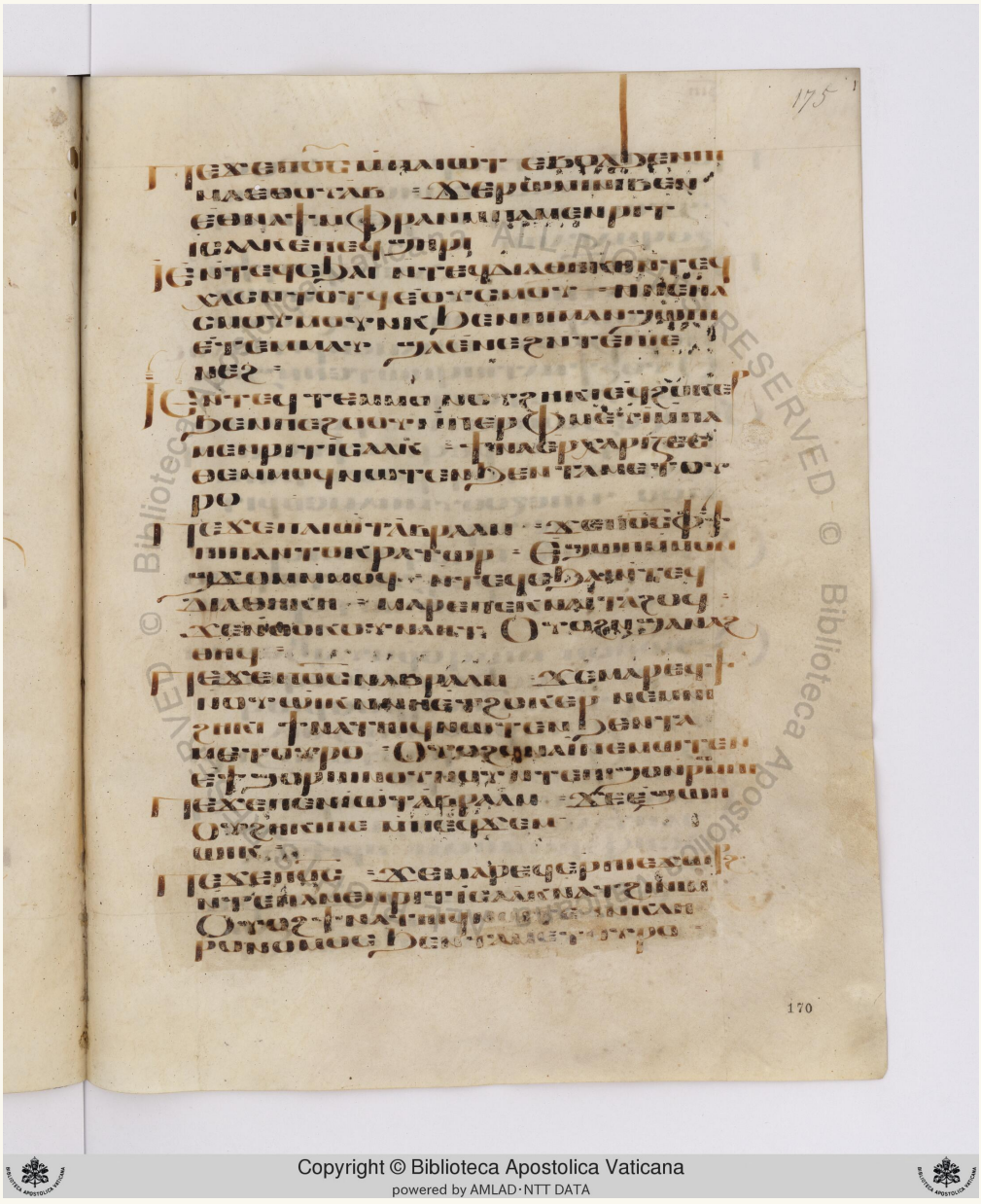

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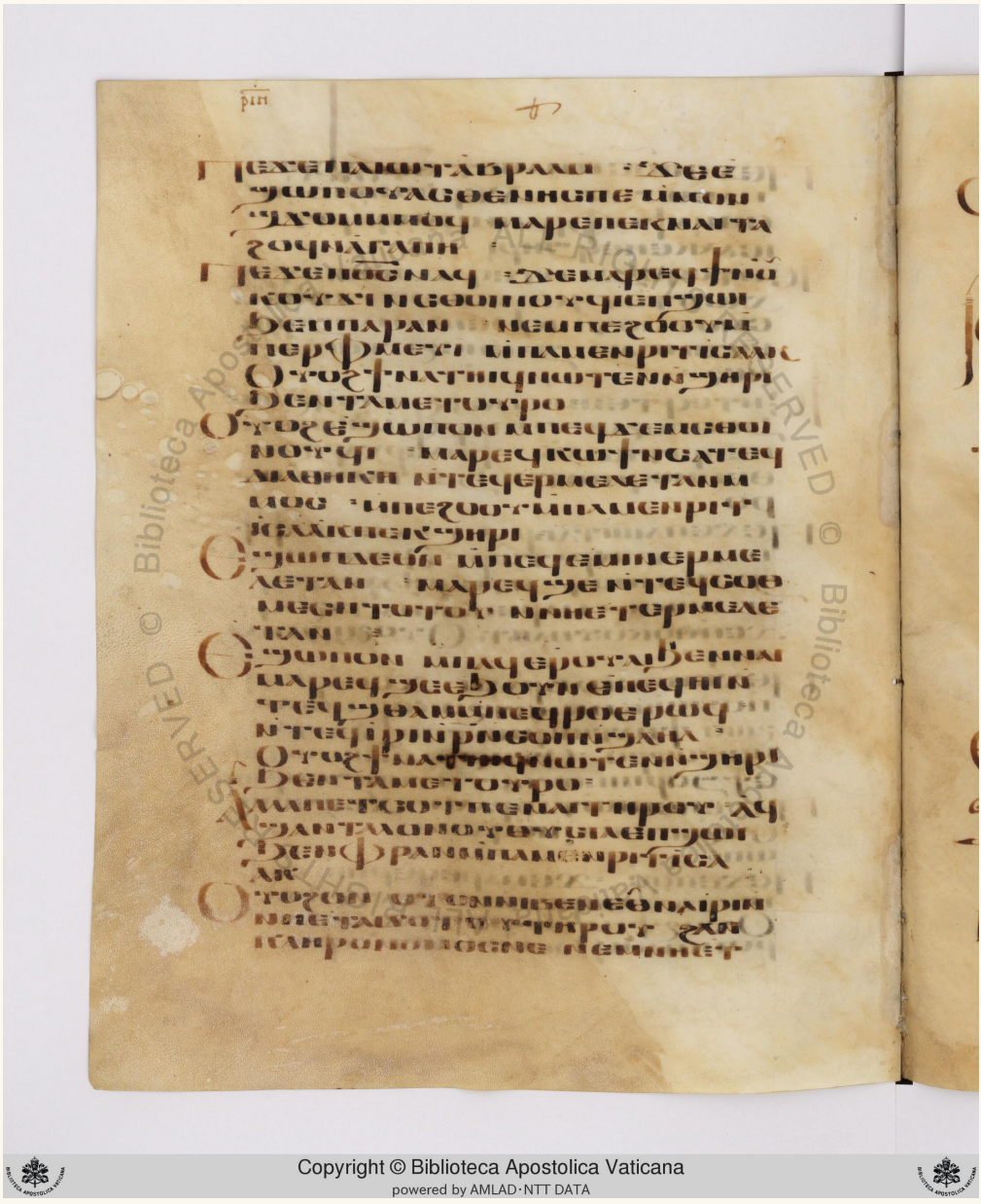
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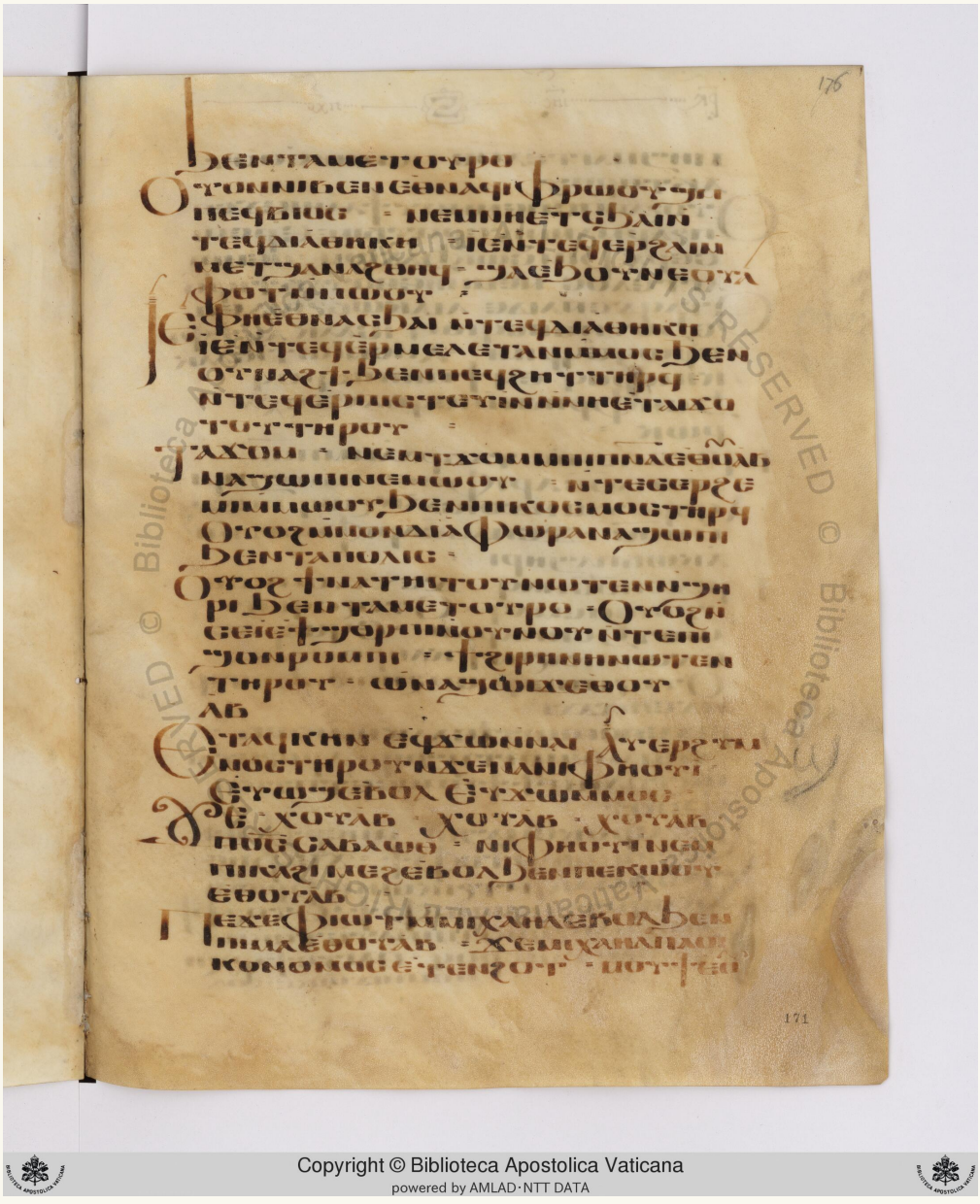

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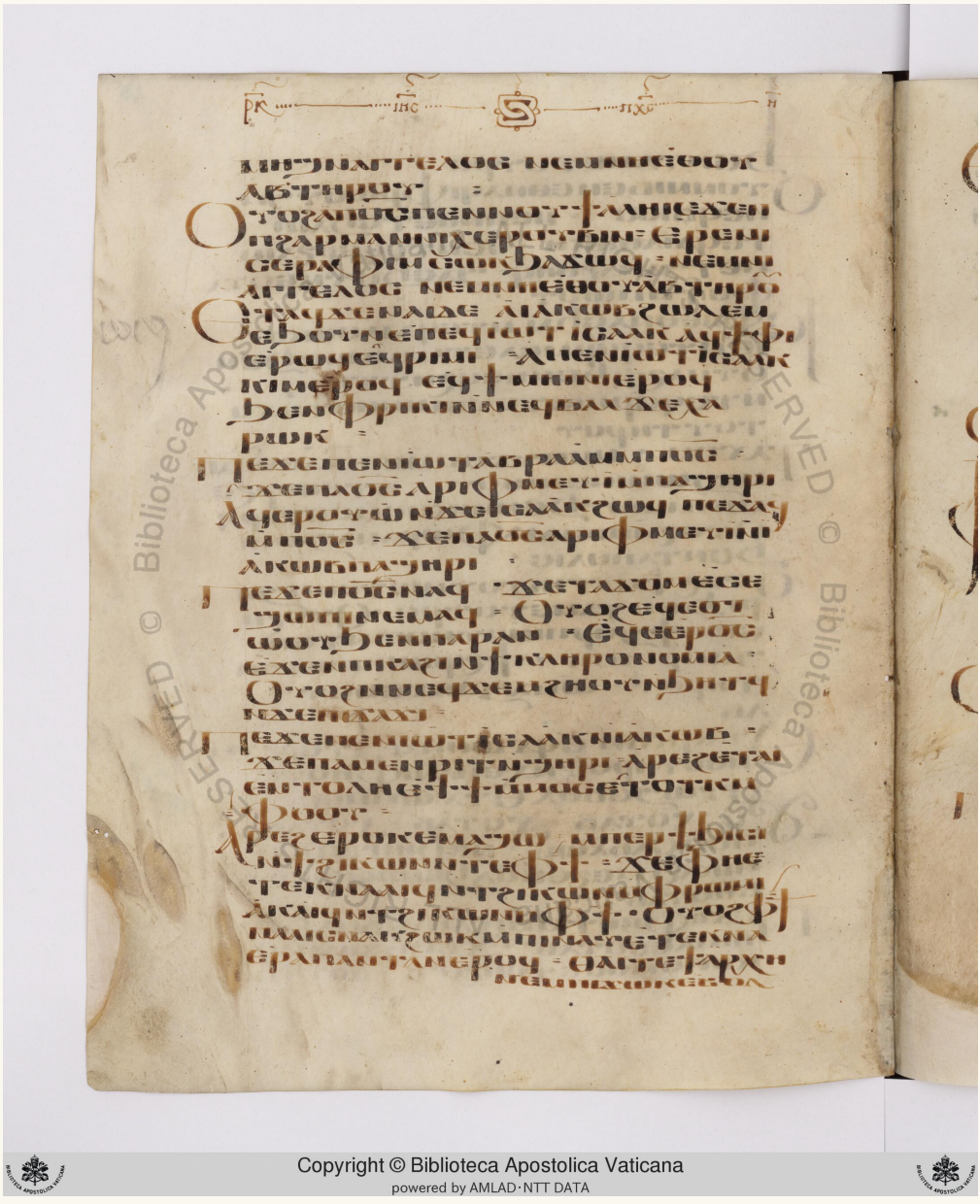
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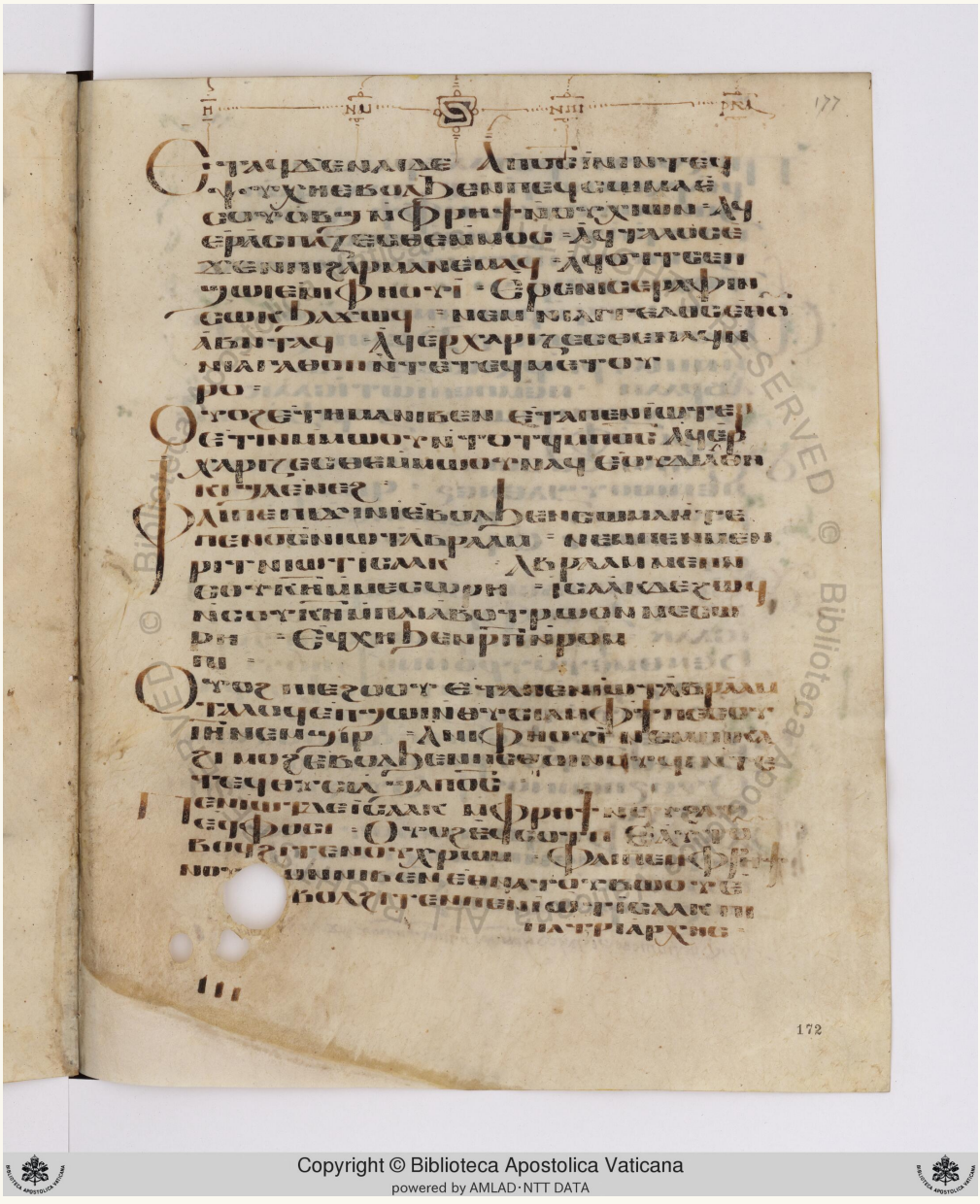
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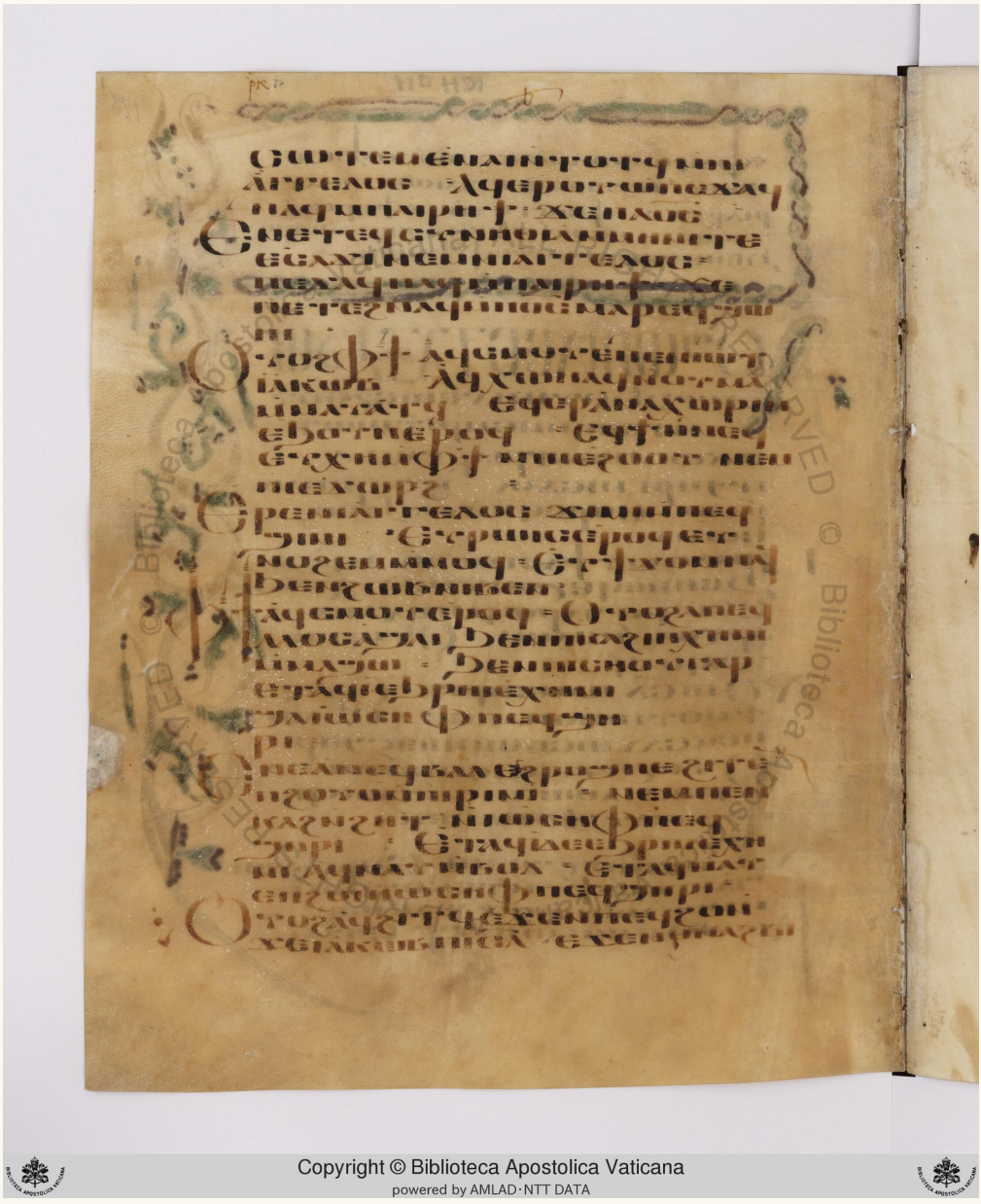
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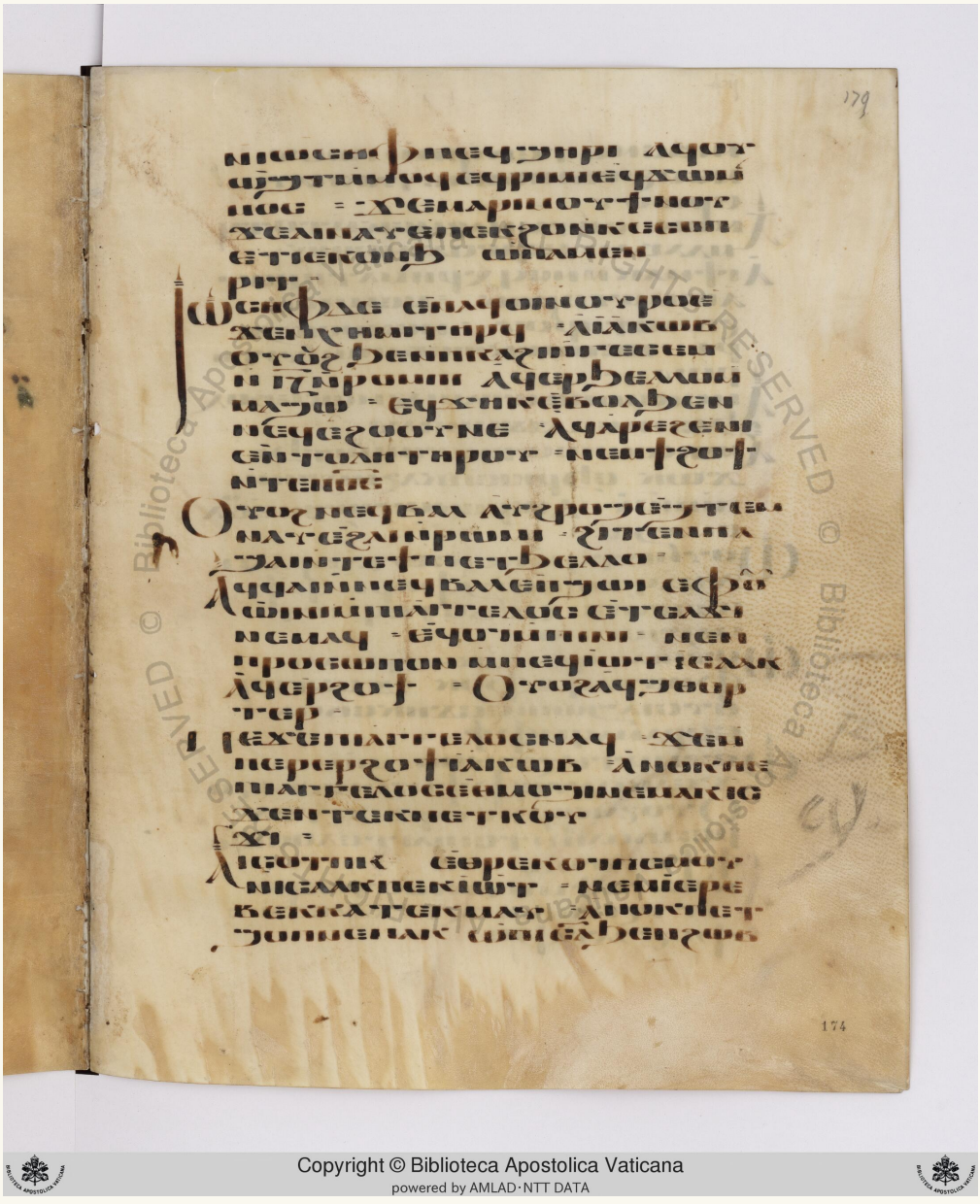

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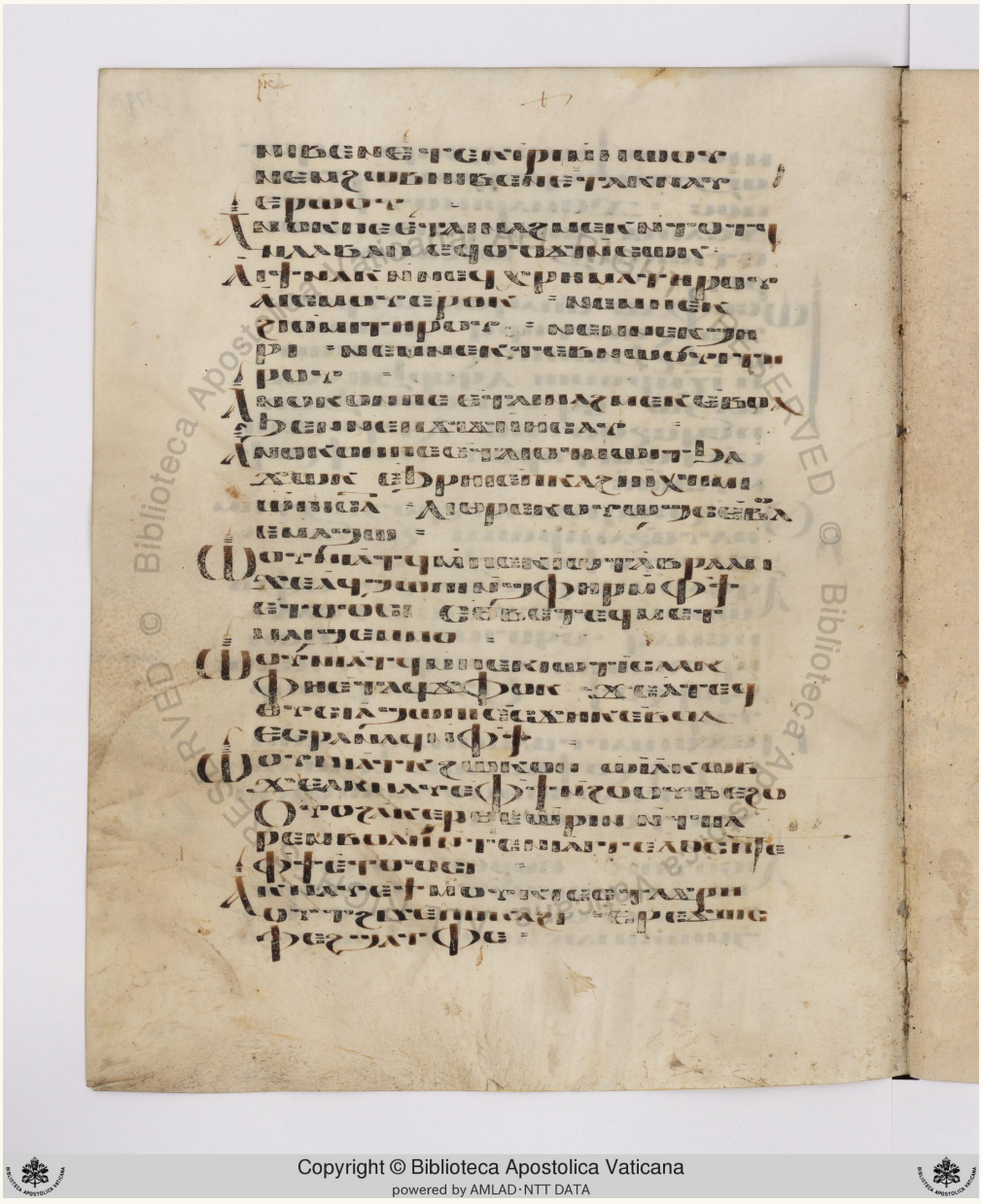
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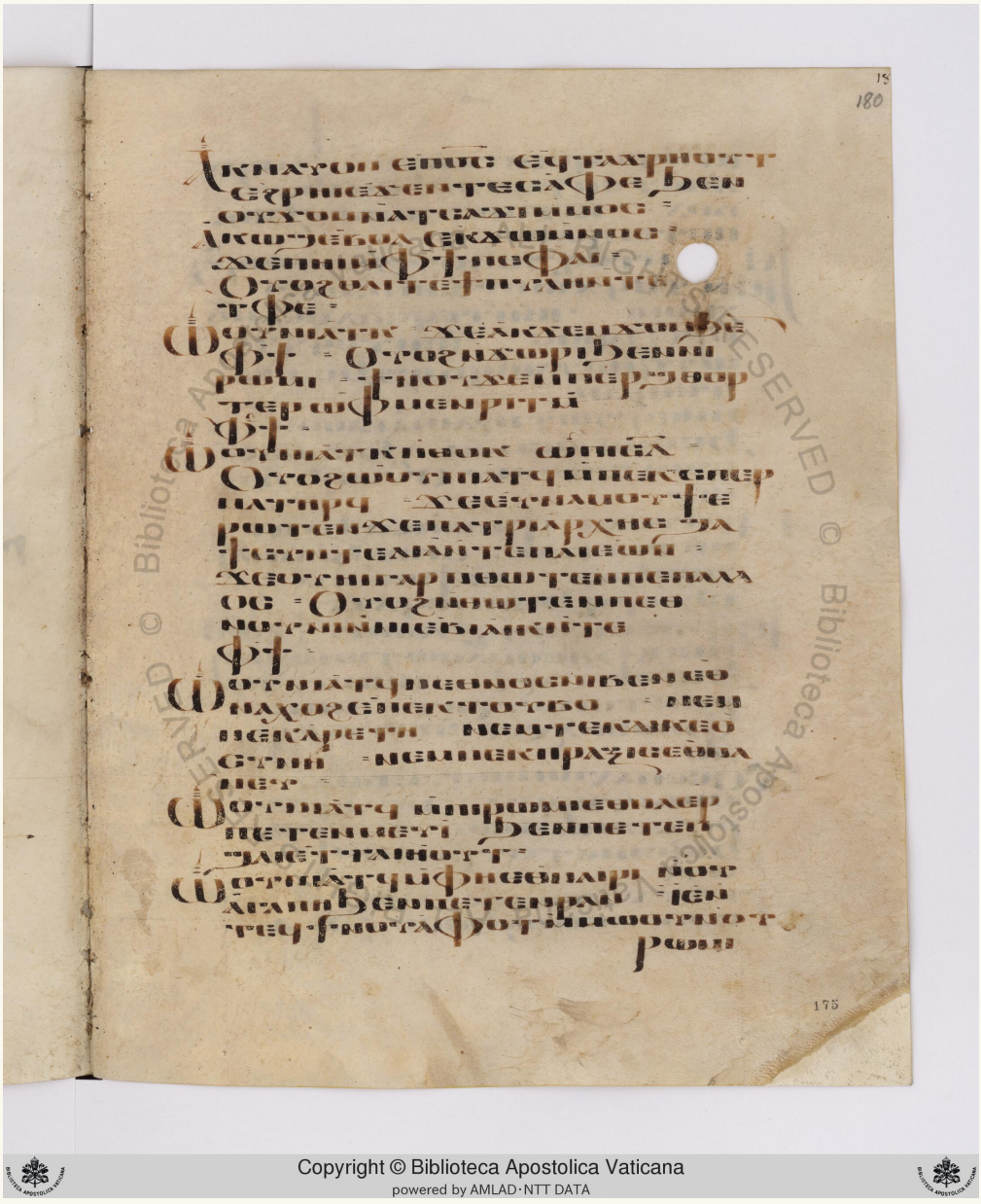
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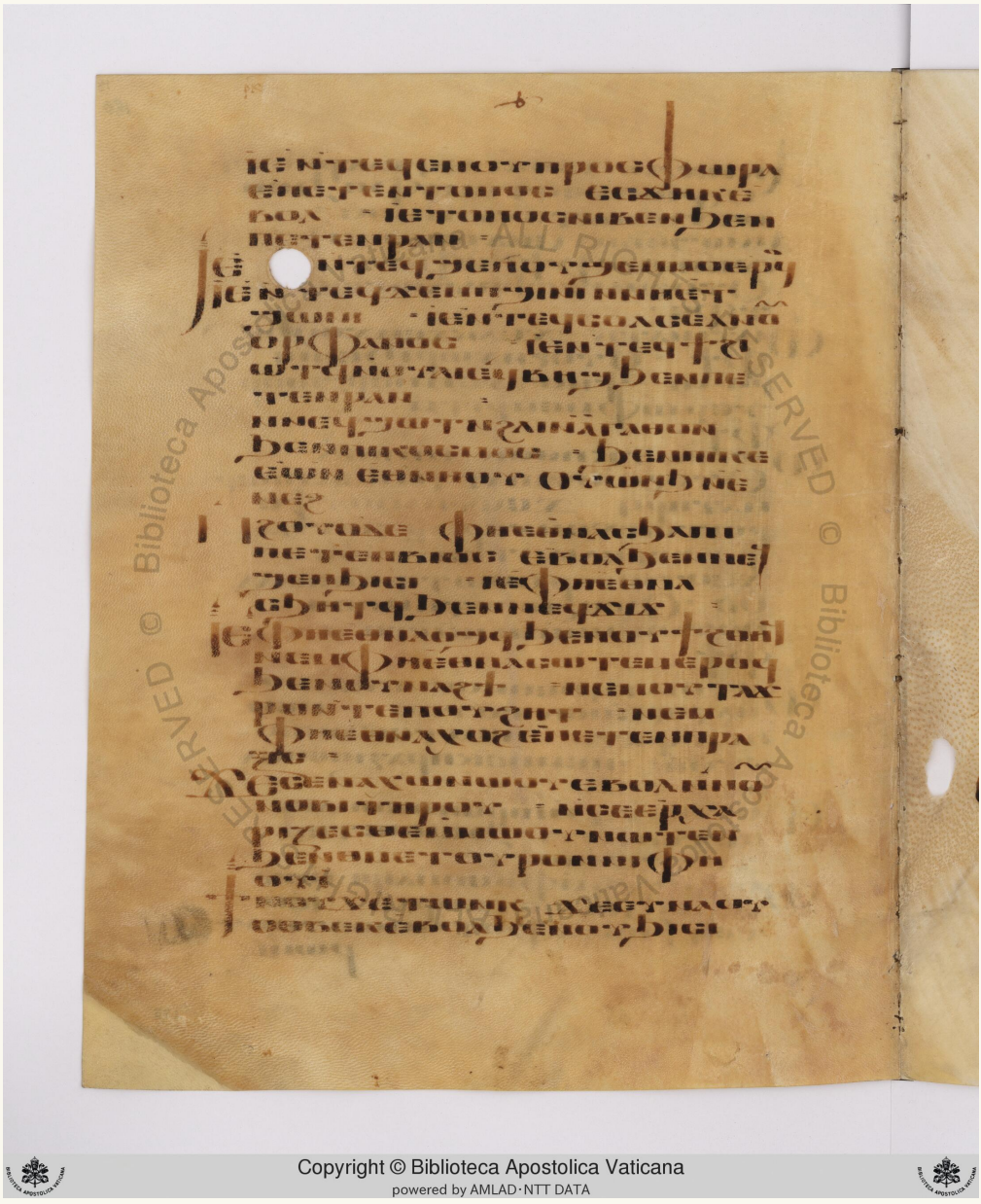
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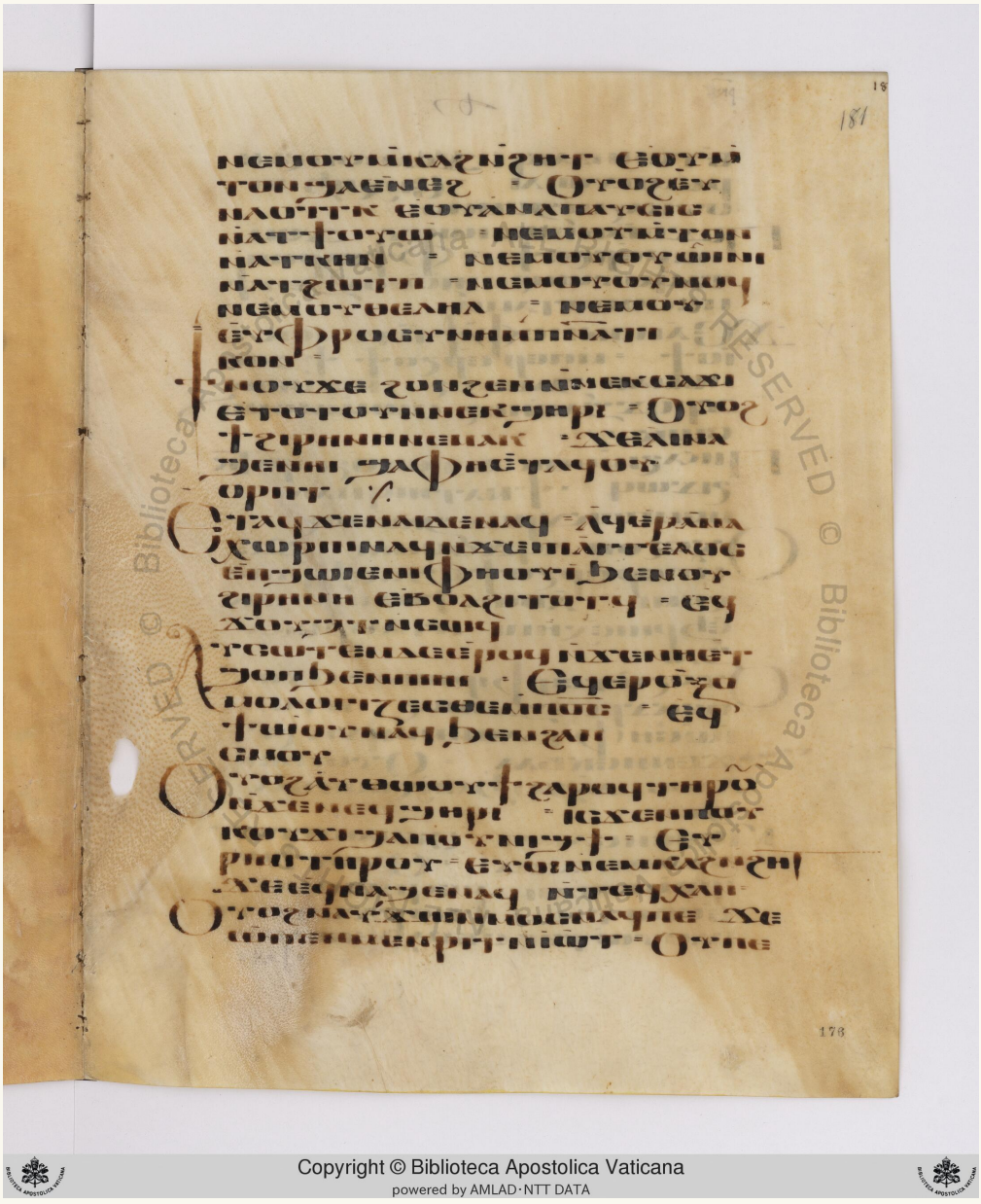

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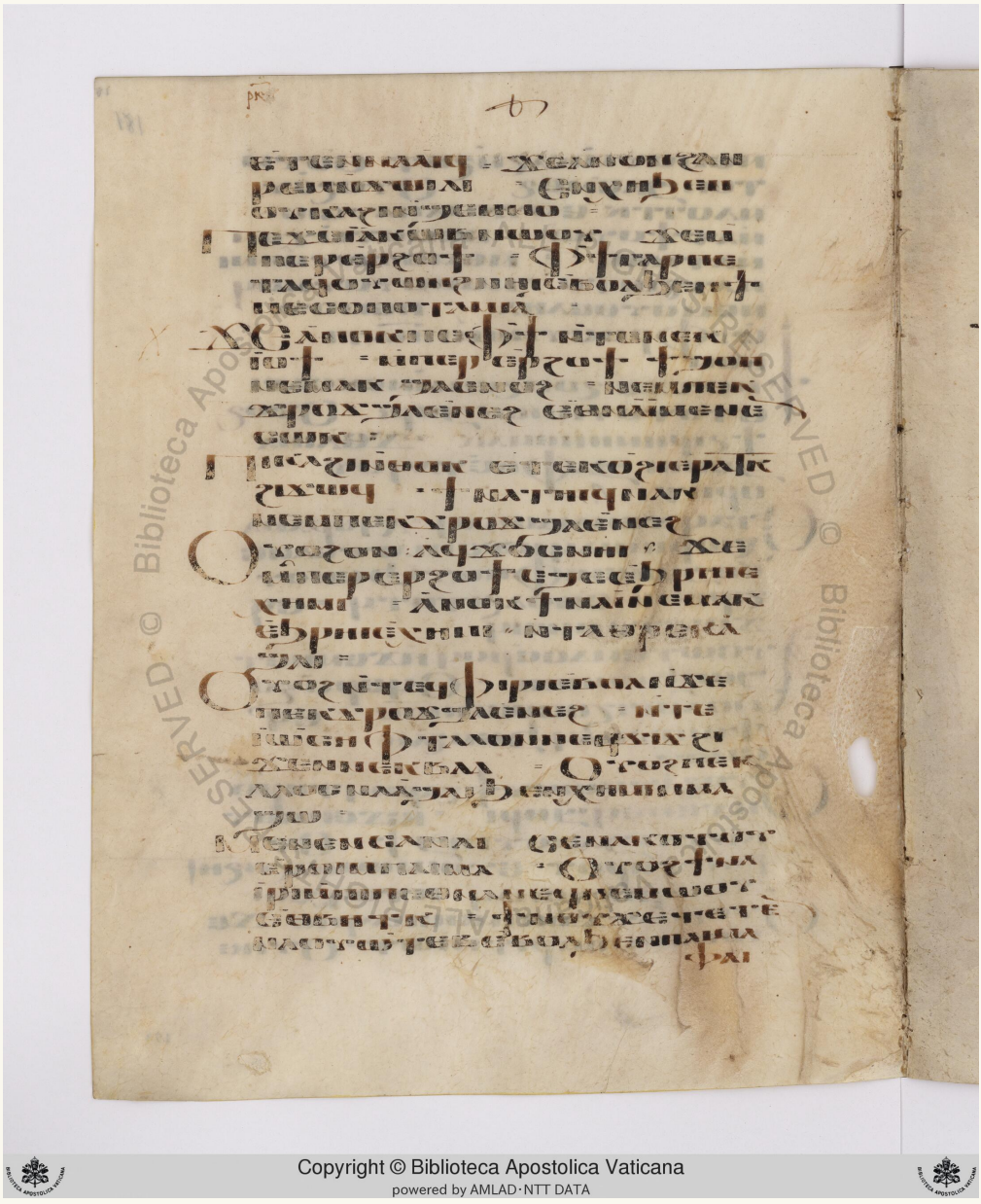
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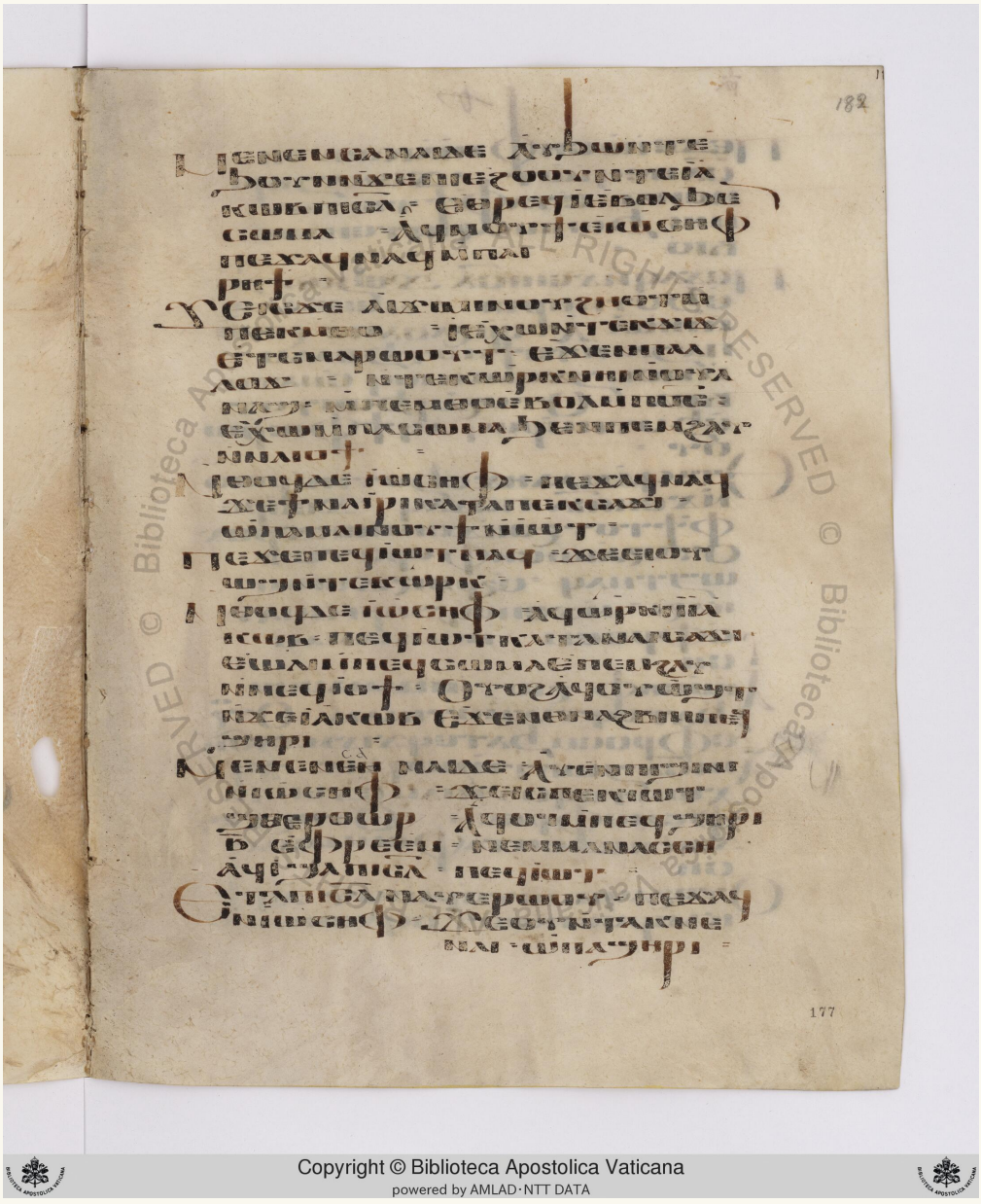

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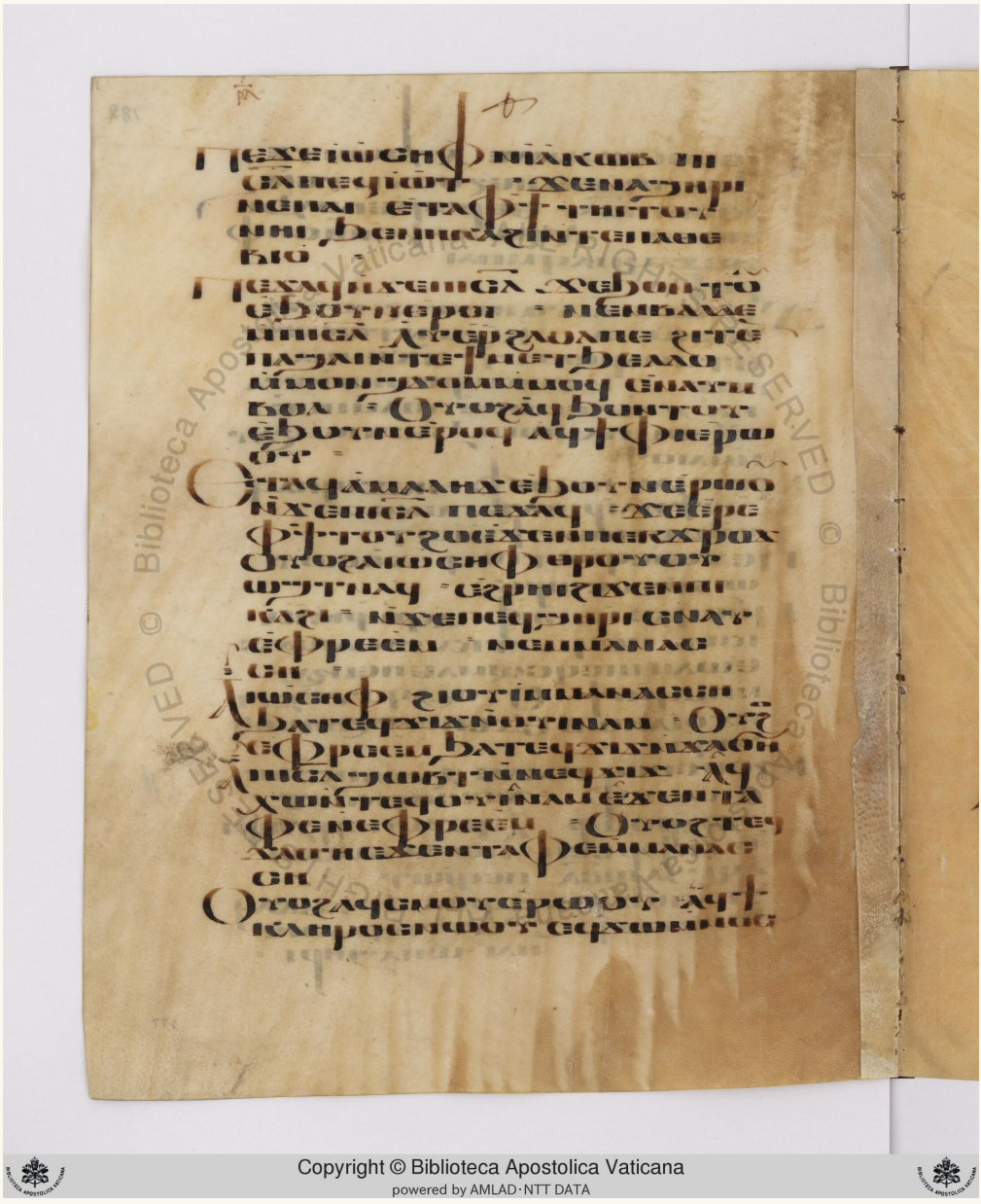
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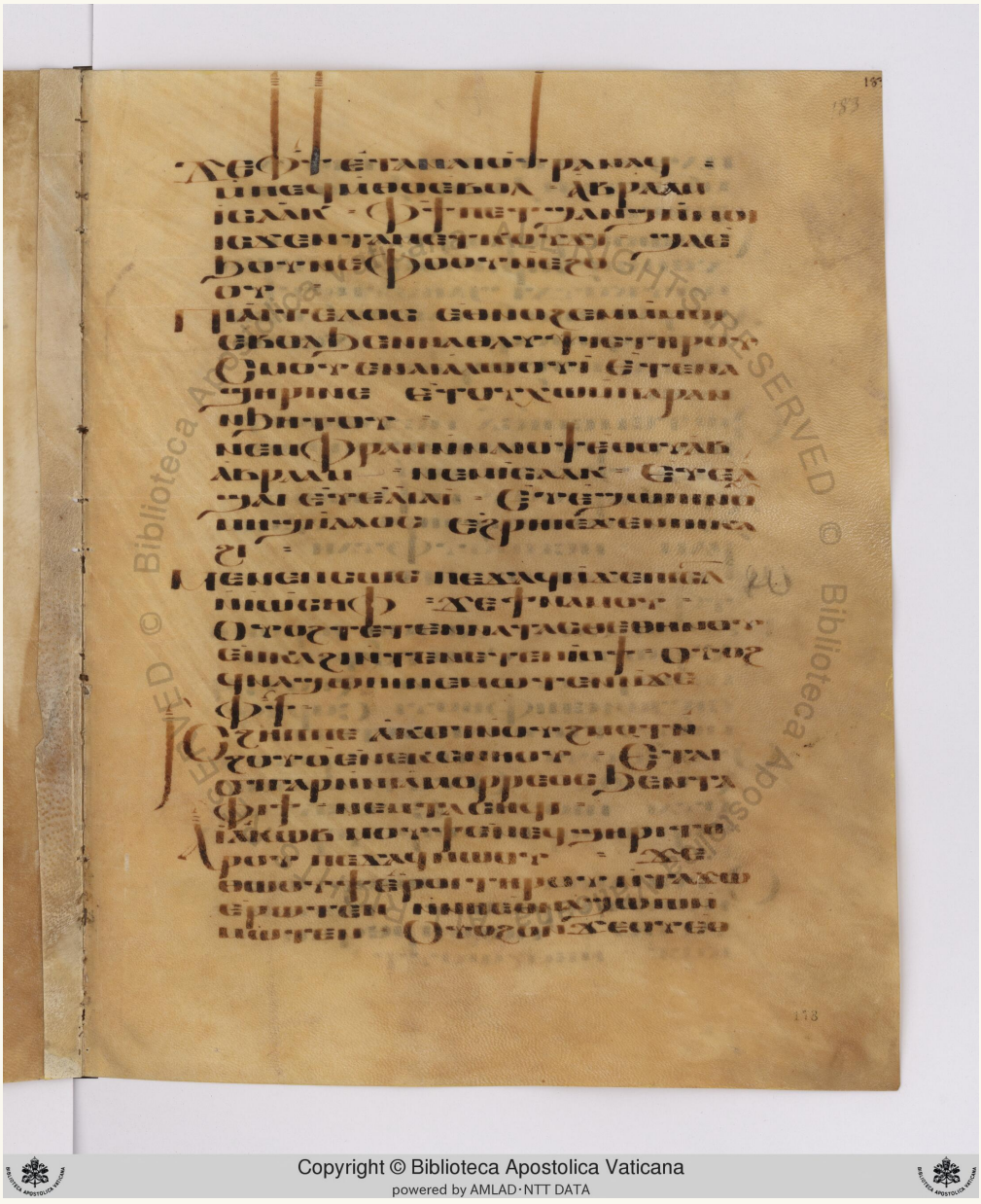
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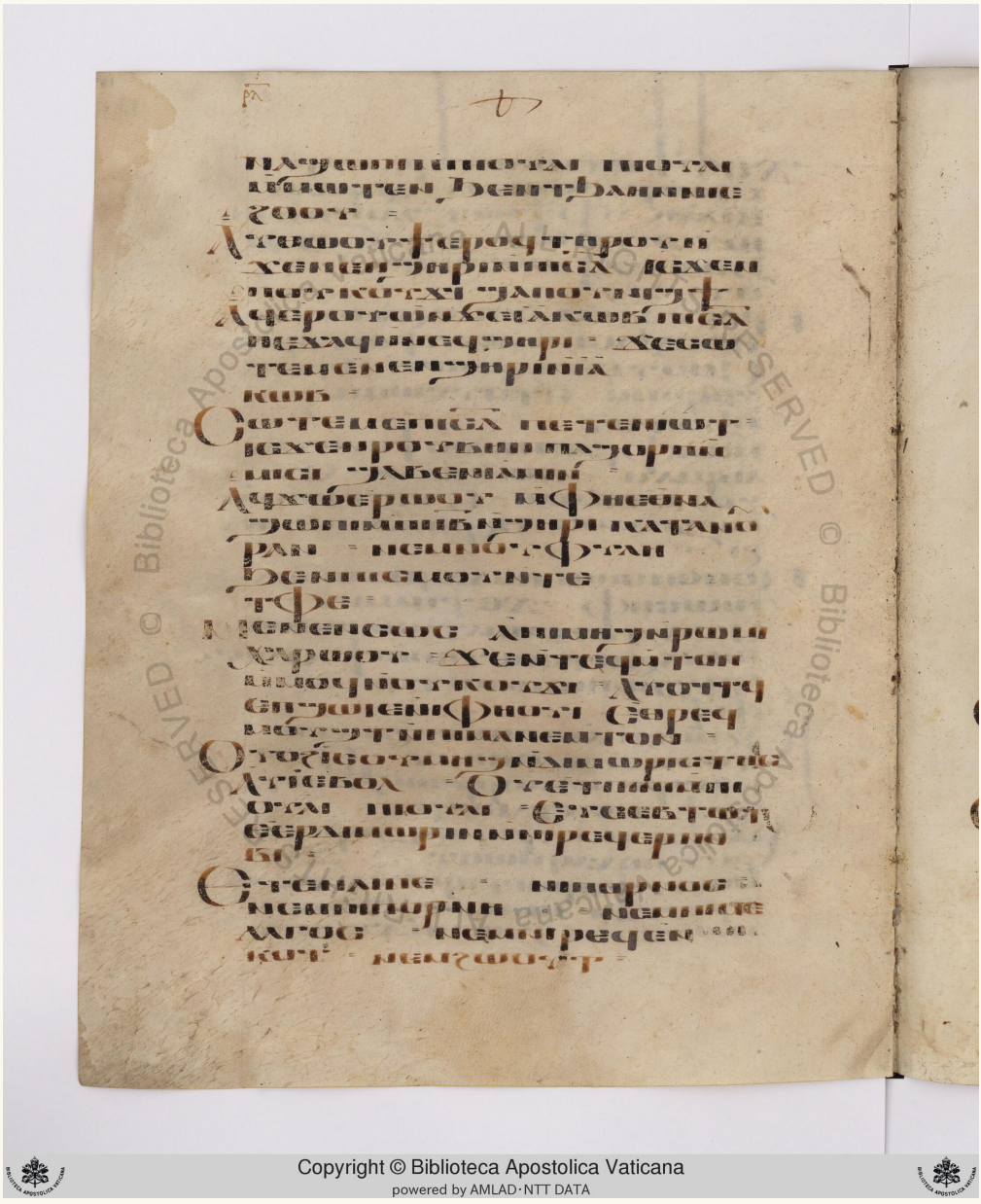
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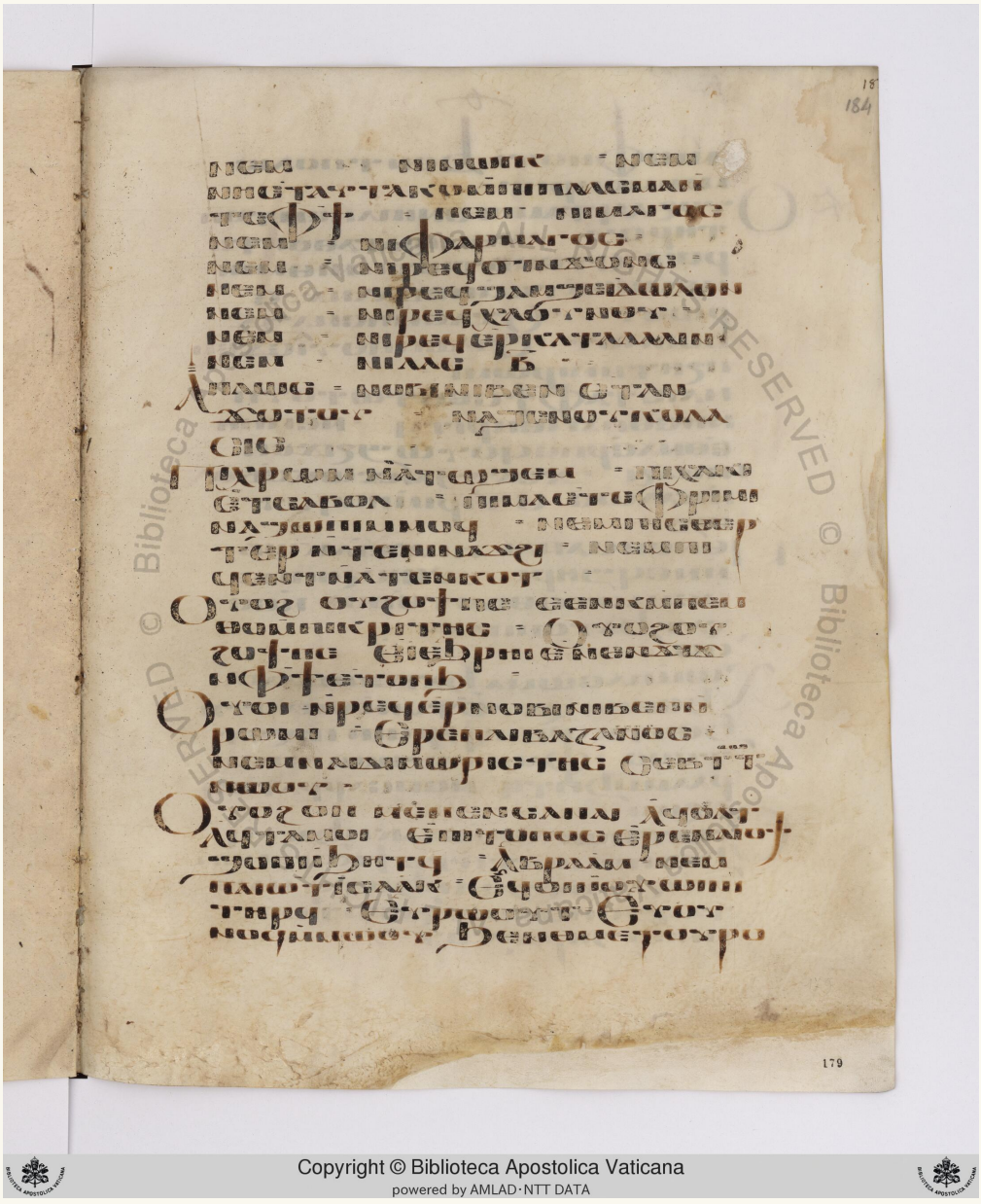

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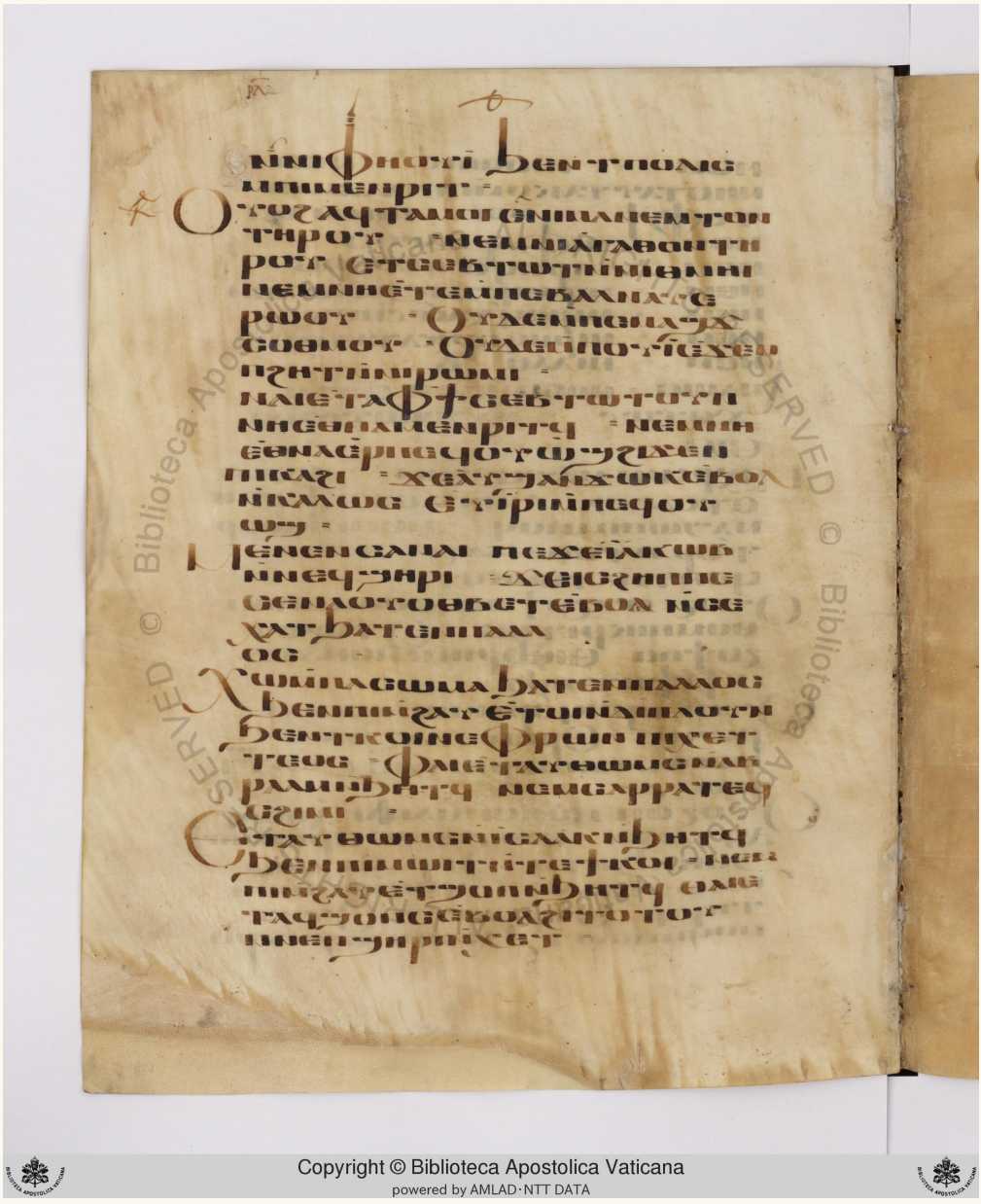
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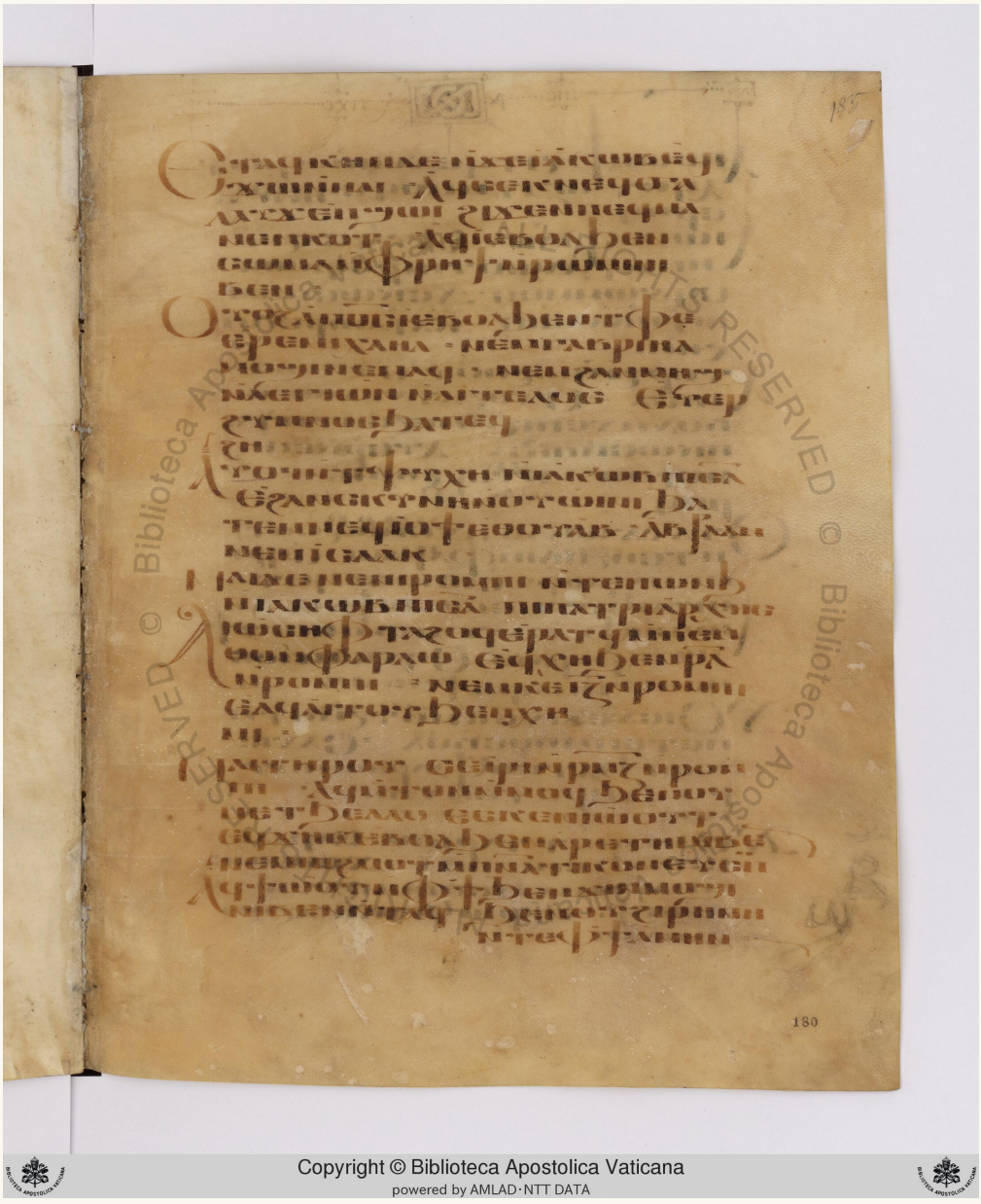

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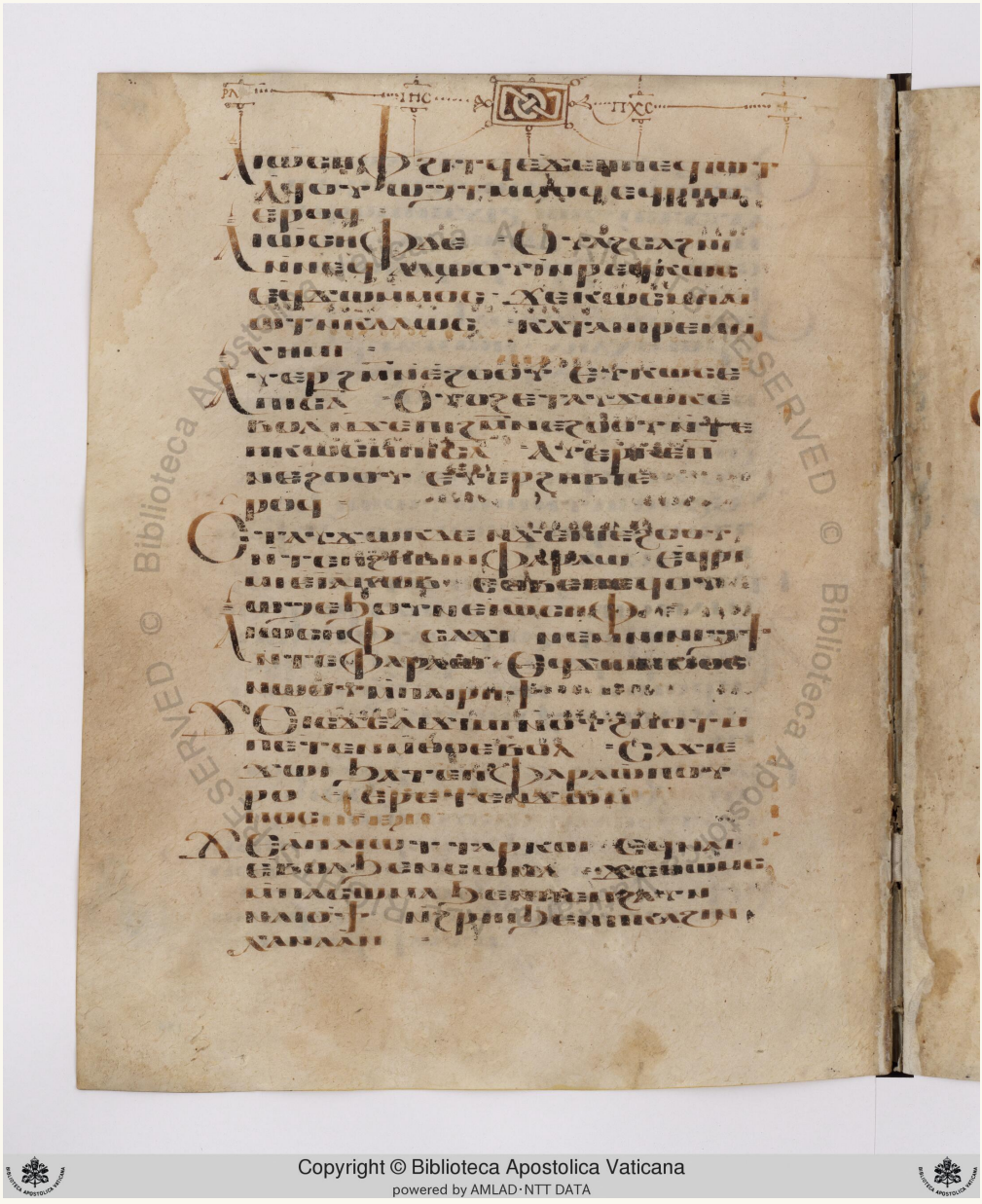

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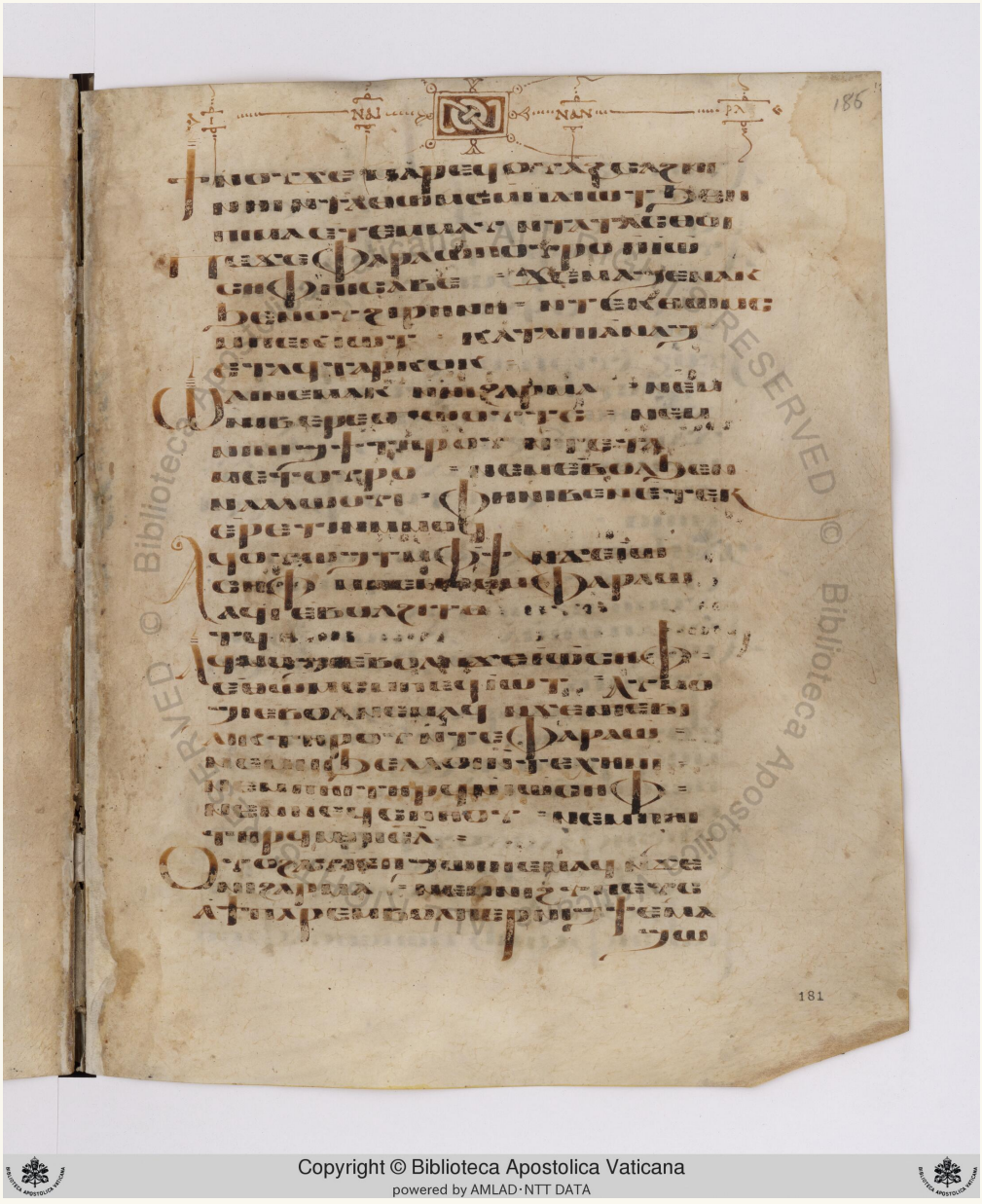

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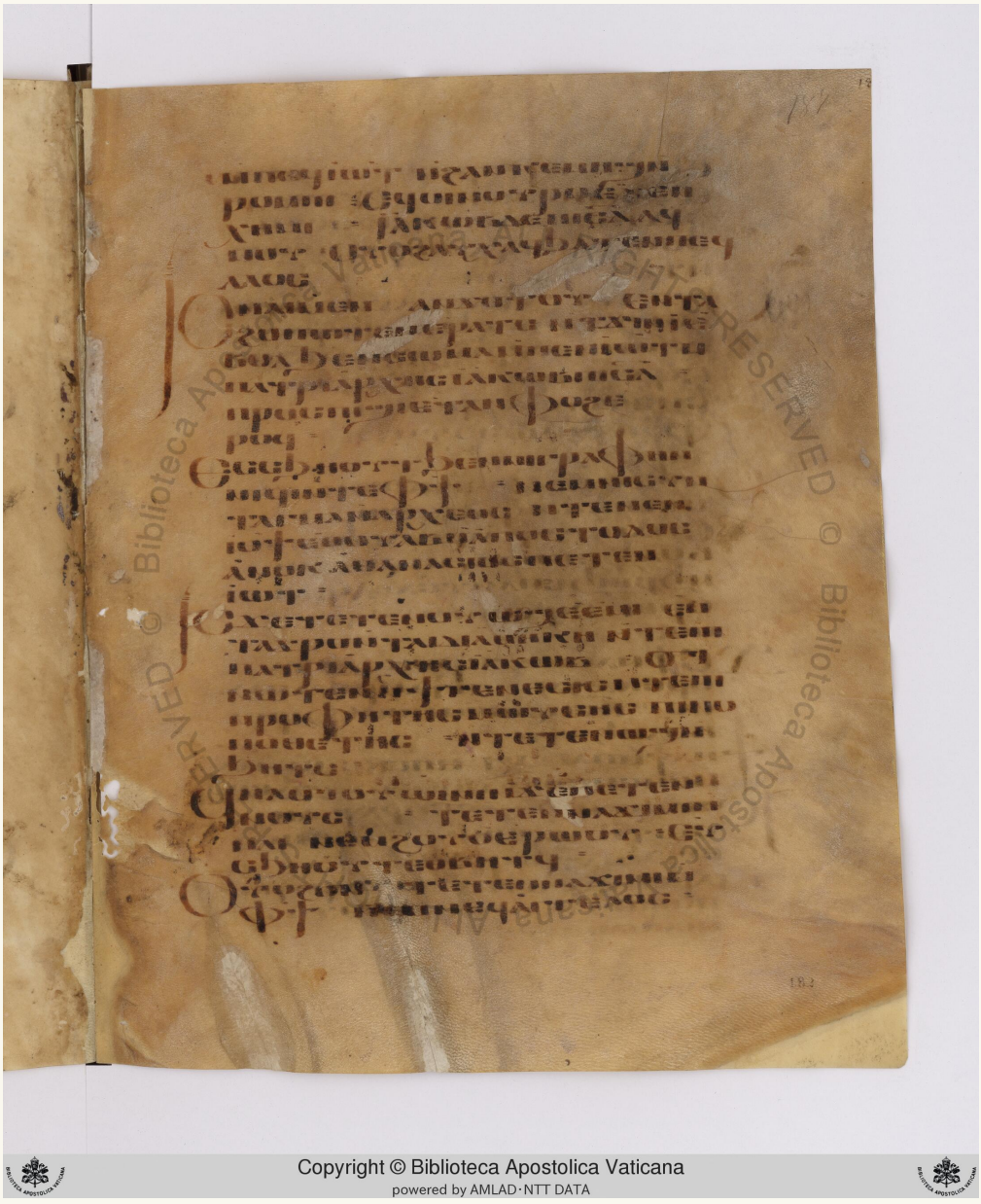

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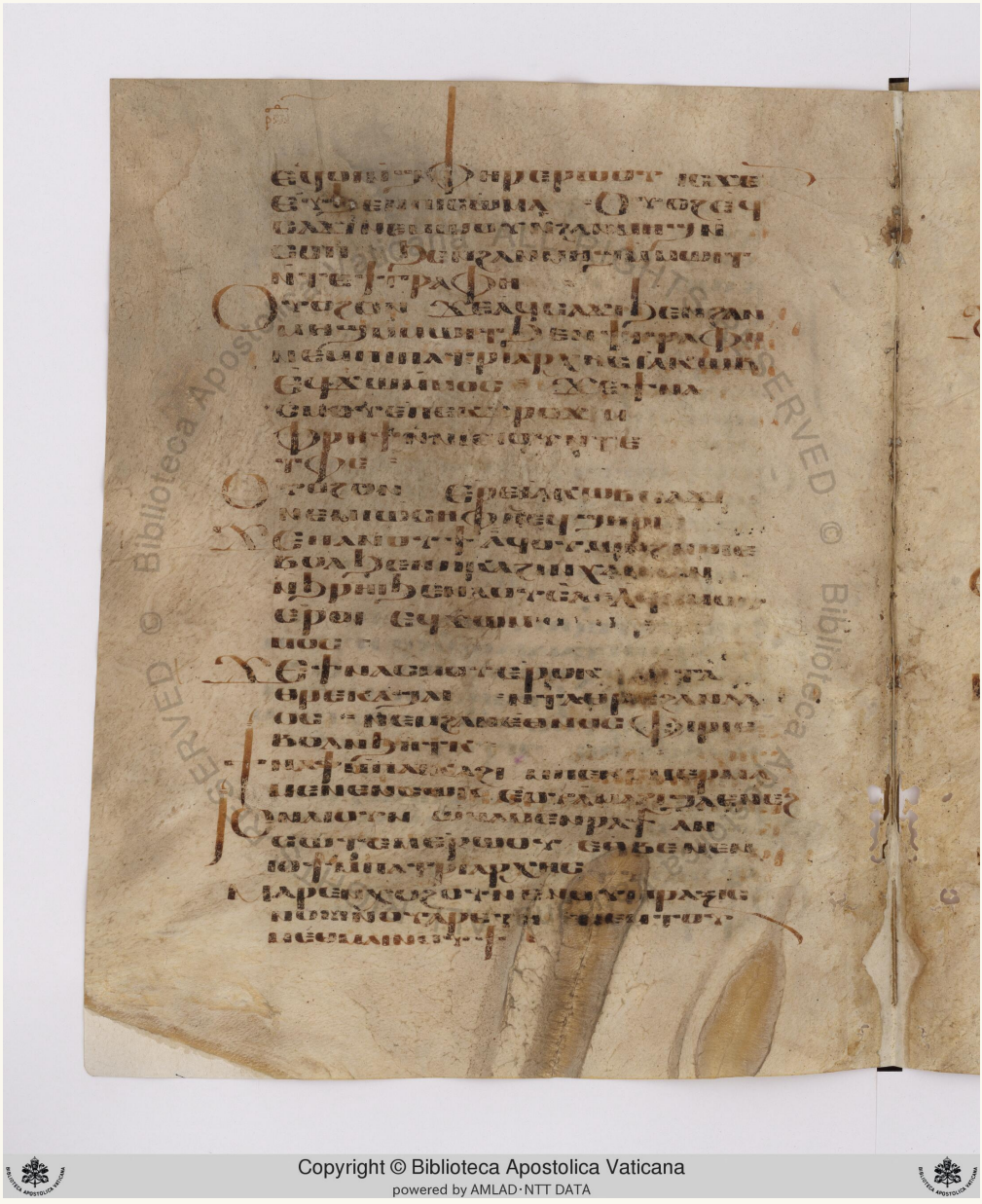
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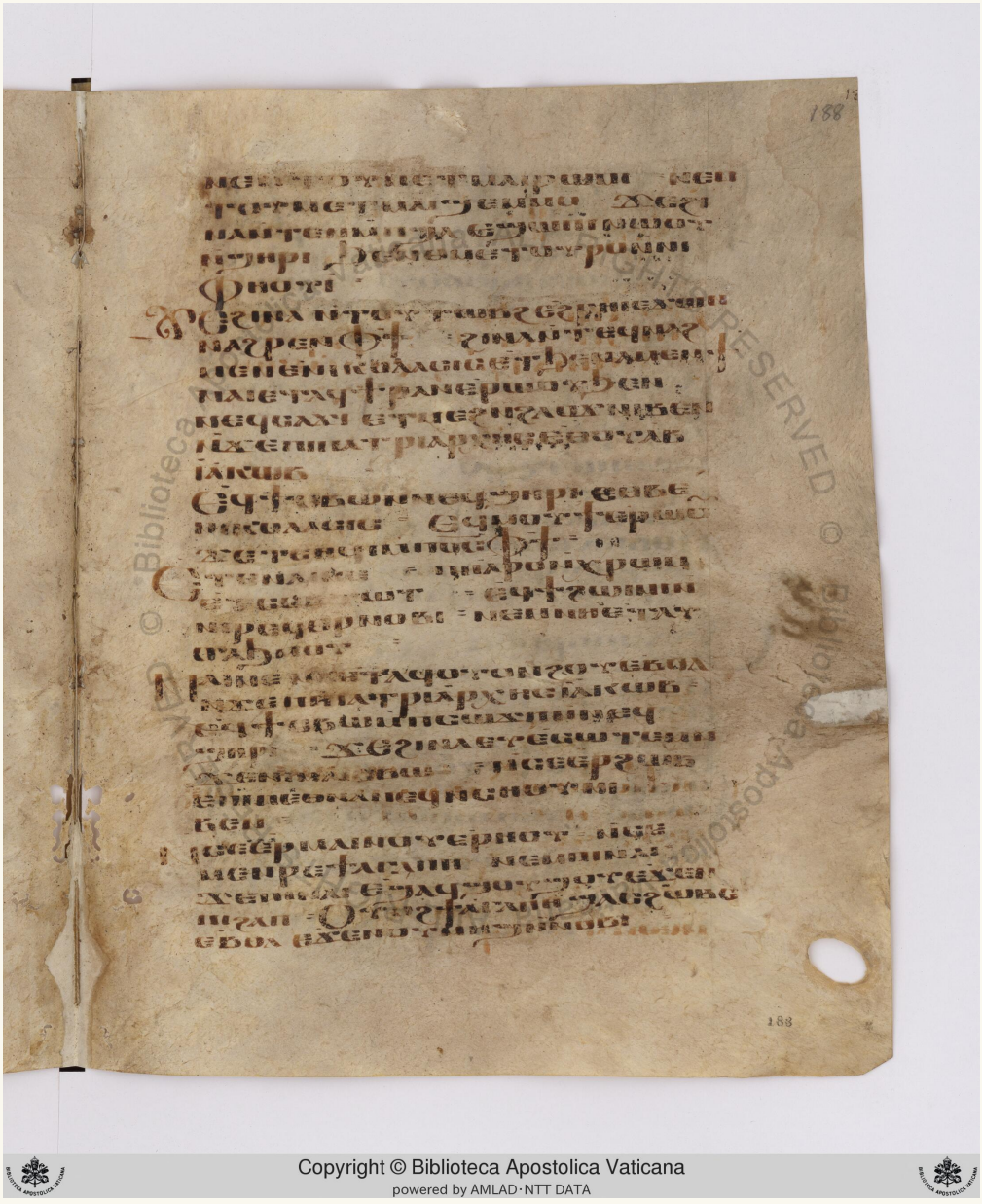

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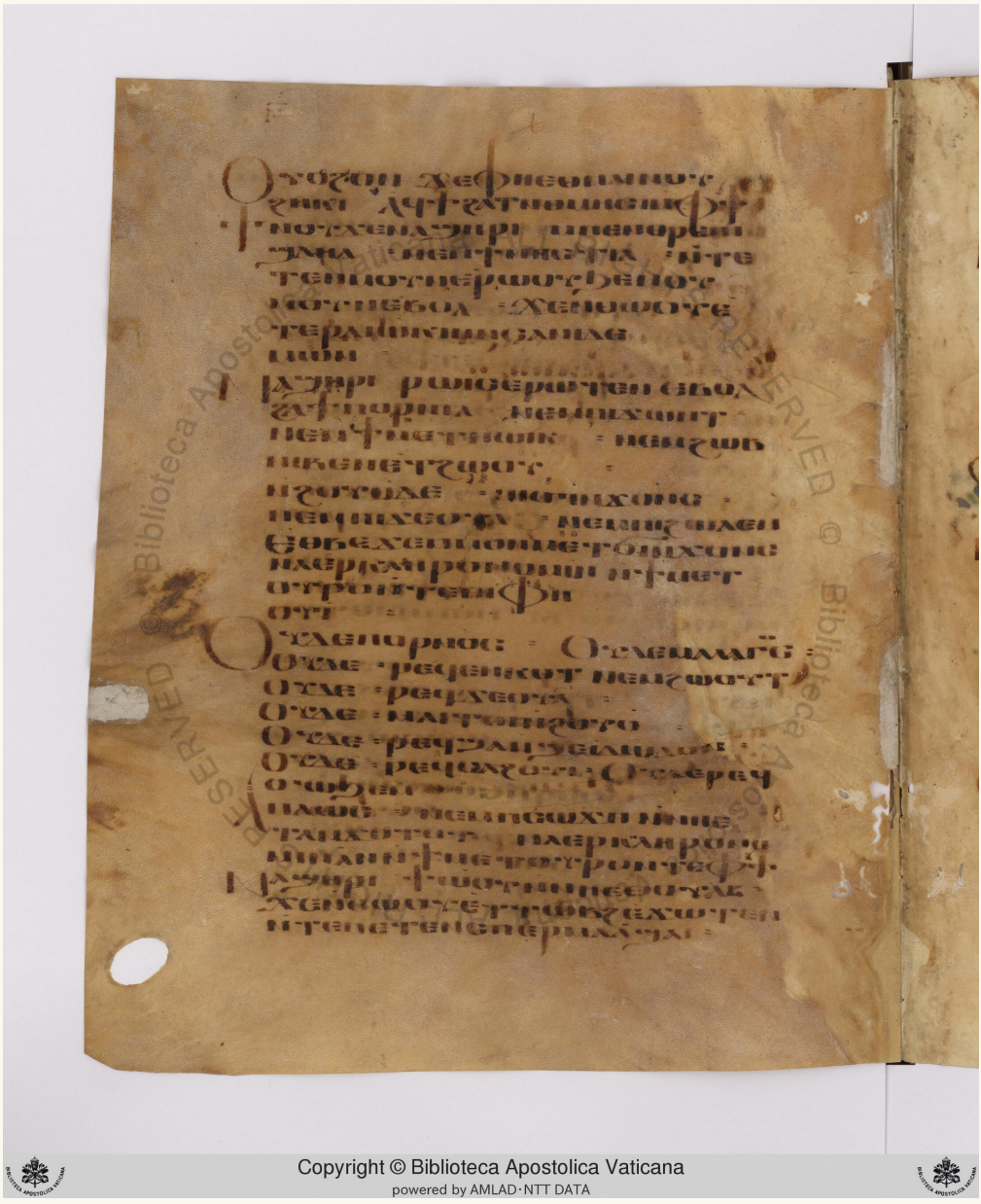
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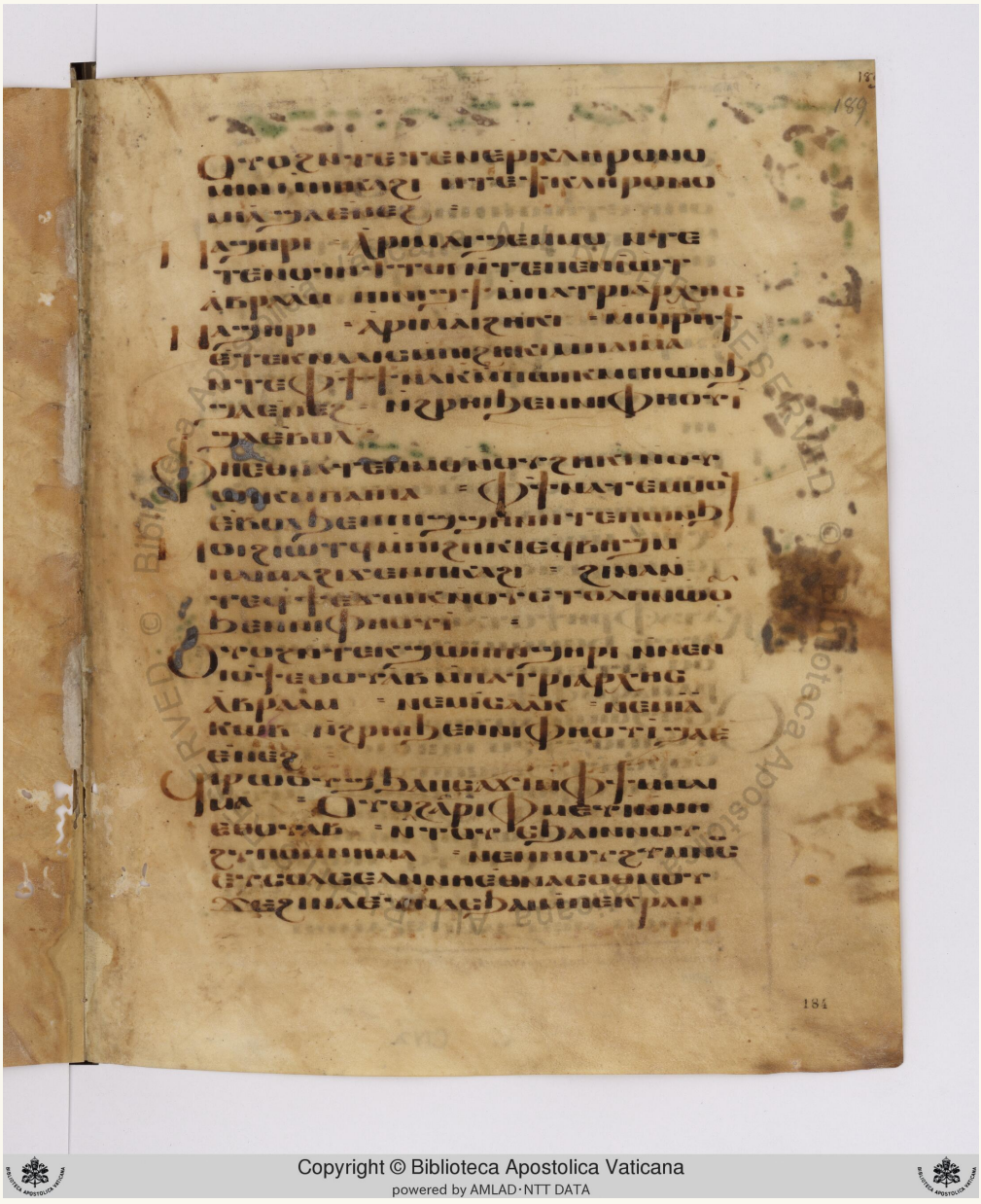

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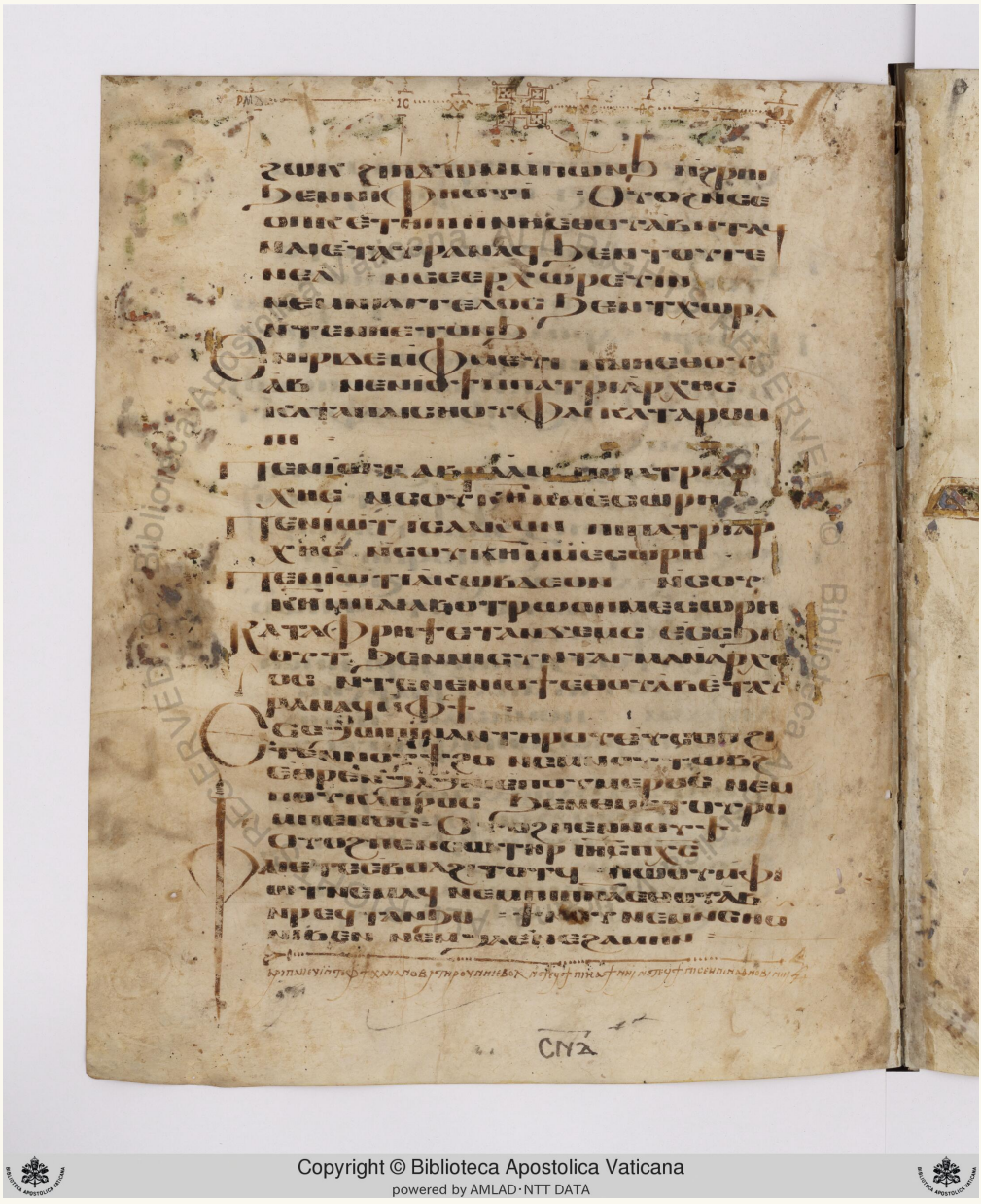
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