

**Lesson 15**  
***Coptic Missionaries Until the Sixth Century***  
***By Dr. Aziz Ayyeyia***

**MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE**

A by-product of historic significance to the **monastic movement** among the Copts was their early missionary endeavor. All the aforementioned renowned names who spent years of their lives in the monasteries of Nitrea, Egypt, and the Thebaid, upper Egypt, must be regarded as unchartered ambassadors and missionaries of that Coptic Christianity which they had experienced among Coptic religious leaders. Meanwhile, the Copts themselves, at least in the first four or five centuries of our era, proved to be extremely active in the spreading of the faith beyond their frontiers in practically every direction.

It is not inconceivable that Coptic relations with **North Africa**, notably with Cyrenaica, Libya, or the Pentapolis, Libya, took place with the introduction of Christianity. In his visitations from Alexandria, **St. Mark** must have been accompanied to the Pentapolis by Alexandrine helpers. Educationally, the natives of the Pentapolis looked toward Egypt. Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 370-414), bishop of Ptolemais, received his instruction at Alexandria in both the Catechetical School and the Museum, and he entertained a great deal of reverence and affection for Hypatia, Alexandrian philosopher, the last of the pagan Neoplatonists, famous philosophy, whose classes he had attended. Synesius was raised to the episcopate by Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, in 410. Since the Council of Nicea in 325, Cyrenaica had been recognized as an ecclesiastical province of the See of Alexandria, in accordance with the ruling of the Nicæan Fathers. The patriarch of the Coptic Church to this day includes the Pentapolis in his title as an area within his jurisdiction. It is doubtful, however, whether Coptic influence extended further west in North Africa, where Carthage and Rome held greater sway.

The area where Egyptian Christianity had its most direct impact was probably in the upper valley of the Nile, by the southern gate of Egypt at Syene (modern Aswan). The ancient Egyptians had known those parts since the eighteenth dynasty, some fifteen hundred years before Christ, and their magnificent temples and monuments are spread all over **Nubia**. Two factors helped in the steady flow of Christian missionaries south of Syene. First, the persecutions gave the initial incentive to Christians to flee from their oppressors to the oases of the Western Desert and beyond the first cataract into Nubia. Secondly, the rise of ascetic monasticism furnished the new religion with pious emigrants who penetrated the southern regions as soldiers of Christ. Recent archaeological excavations in the lower Sudan prove that Christianity had struck root in those distant regions by the fourth century. In the fifth century, good relations are recorded between the monastic order of the great **St. Shenute** whose monasteries still stand at Suhag and the Nubian and Baga tribes of the south. At the beginning of the sixth century, there was a certain **Bishop Theodore of Philae**, apparently a Christian substitute to the Isis high priesthood established on that island from Roman times. In the same century, Justinian (483-565) issued a command that all the pagan tribes on the periphery of the Byzantine empire should be converted to Christianity. The imperial order accelerated a process

already taking place in Nubia, though, as a consequence, the Copts had to combat both paganism and the Chalcedonian profession of faith at the same time. It would appear that the Coptic victory was complete by, and through the sympathy and connivance of Empress Theodora, and in defiance of court injunctions, a non-Chalcedonian bishop, Longinus, was consecrated for the See of Napata, capital of the Nubian kingdom. The ancient temples were progressively transformed into Christian churches including the temple of Dandur (now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City) and new churches were constructed.

Furthermore, monasticism was introduced among the Nubians, who founded numerous monasteries on the edge of the valley. The most outstanding example is that of St. Simeon (Anba Hidra), which stood at a short distance across the Nile from modern Aswan. Though raided by Saladin's Islamic armies in the year 1172, its imposing ruins are still a testimony to architectural, artistic, and spiritual solidity.

Even more romantic than the conversion of the Nubian kingdom to Christianity in late antiquity was that of the more distant and isolated kingdom of Abyssinia. According to an apocryphal tradition, the Ethiopian court at Axum had long been acquainted with monotheism. The story of the journey of the Queen of Sheba to the court of King Solomon in the tenth century B.C., their marriage, and the subsequent birth of Menelik I of Ethiopia, though probably legendary, has given the Ethiopian monarch the title "Lion of Judah". Menelik's visit to his father in Jerusalem, and his return with the Ark of Covenant, said to be enshrined in the cathedral of Axum, belongs to the same tale. The next contact with monotheism occurred when the eunuch in the service of "Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians," encountered the Apostle Philip on his return from Jerusalem by way of Gaza. Here, however, the Nubian queen is confused with the Ethiopian.

Historic evidence shows that **Ethiopia** remained pagan until the fourth century A. D. when the authentic evangelization of the kingdom took place. Two brothers, **Frumentius and Aedesius**, residents of Tyre but originally from Alexandria, boarded a trading ship going to India and were shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast near the shores of Erythria, now known as Eretria. They were picked up by men of the Ethiopian monarch, probably King Ella Amida, who took them into his service. Aedesius became his cup-bearer, and Frumentius his secretary and tutor to the young crown prince, Aeizanas (Ezana), to whom he doubtless gave a Christian education. When Aeizanas became king, he and his courtiers and retainers were converted, and Christianity was declared the official religion of the state. Afterwards Aedesius was allowed to return to Tyre, while Frumentius went to Alexandria to convey the news to the Patriarch Athanasius and to plead with him to consecrate a special bishop to watch over the spiritual welfare of those distant Christians. The meeting with Athanasius was presumably between 341 and 346<sup>33</sup>. The patriarch appointed Frumentius himself under the name of **Anba Salama**, that is, "the father of peace"<sup>34</sup>. The new bishop of Axum finally returned to his see in or before 356, no doubt accompanied by presbyters to help in the process of evangelization of the kingdom and the establishment of churches in the country. In 356 the Emperor Constantius, an Arian, wrote to Aeizanus to withdraw the Orthodox Frumentius, but without avail. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Ethiopians adhered to the Coptic profession.

The winning of Ethiopia for the Gospel must have been regarded as one of the most spectacular events of the century, crowning the labor of the Copts in Africa. Further east, the Copts emerged in the missionary field in **Asia**, though of course on a more modest scale. It is very difficult to generalize here on the basis of isolated instances, but there is no doubt that the Egyptians moved freely to many parts of **Palestine, Syria, Cappadocia, Caesarea**, and to some extent **Arabia**. **Origen**, the great theologian, was invited to Bostra to arbitrate in doctrinal differences. **Mar Augin** of Clysma (the modern Suez, Egypt) was the founder of monasticism in **Mesopotamia** (now is Iraq) and the **Persian empire** (now is Iran) making a considerable impact on both Syrian and Assyrian Christianity<sup>37</sup>. As early as the second century the great **Pantaenus** (d. ca. 190), who presided over the Catechetical School of Alexandria, was chosen by Demetrius I, the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria to preach the Gospel in India<sup>38</sup>. After accomplishing his mission, he visited **Arabia Felix** (the modern Yemen) where he must have continued his missionary enterprise. Unfortunately our information on this fascinating chapter is extremely limited. In the sixth century there was a further Indian adventure by another Alexandrine, **Cosmas Indicopleustes**, who later became a monk in Sinai and left an account of his travels, now in St. Catherine's monastery. He speaks of Christian communities with their bishops in the **Persian Gulf**, the existence of Christians in the island of Socotra, and the yet more numerous Christians of St. Thomas in **India**. He is reputed to be one of the first travelers to Ceylon.

The role of the Copts in **Europe** may be illustrated from the first two exiles of the great Alexandrine patriarch, **Athanasius**. The first exile began in **Constantinople** and ended in Trier, where the saint spent parts of 336 and 337, and it is difficult to believe that he did not preach during all that time in his new environment. Most of the second exile, from 339 to 346, was at the Roman curia as the guest of Julius I. Apart from establishing good relations between Alexandria and Rome, Athanasius carried out some missionary work by introducing into Roman religious life the highly developed monastic rule of the Fathers of the Egyptian deserts. This was an important event in view of the magnitude of **the contributions of the rising monastic orders in the preservation of culture, and in the progress of European civilization as a whole**.

In those days the stream of pilgrims who came from the west to visit the Egyptian wilderness with its hermits and monks included many who may well be regarded as **missionaries of Coptic religious culture**, since they transplanted Coptic teachings to their native countries. One of the most eminent of these was **John Cassian** (ca. 360-435), a native of southern Gaul and the son of rich parents who gave him a good education. He and an older friend named Germanus decided to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and in Bethlehem they took monastic vows. Then they went to Egypt, where they spent seven years visiting the solitaries and holy men of the wilderness of Scetis in the Nitrean valley, Egypt, as well as the Thebaid, Egypt, during the fourth century. It was on that occasion that John Cassian collected the material for his two famous works, the *Institutes*<sup>41</sup> and the *Conferences*. These books deal with the life and habits of the Egyptian monks as well as their wisdom and institutions, and both were widely read in medieval Europe. St. Benedict of Nursia used them when he codified his rule in the sixth century.

After spending some time with St. John Chrysostom in Constantinople on his return journey, John Cassian was ordained priest, probably in Rome, before settling down in the neighborhood of Marseilles, France, where he has been accredited with the introduction of Egyptian monasticism into Gaul (Modern France). At Marseilles, above the shrine of St. Victor, who was martyred by Emperor Maximian (286-305) in the last Christian persecution, John Cassian founded a monastery and a nunnery on the model of the Coenobia, which he had witnessed in Egypt. In the catacombs below the present day fort of St. Victor will be found numerous archaeological remains, including sarcophagi with stone carvings and sculptures which portray in animal and plant motifs the direct influence of early Coptic art. On the island of St. Honorat, off the coast at Cannes, there is an old monastery where the monks explain to visitors that they use the rule of St. Pachomius of the Thebaid.

Wherever the Roman legions went, they apparently were followed by Christian missionaries. To Switzerland a **mission from Thebes**, Upper Egypt, according to local legend or tradition, arrived in the year 285 with the Theban legion. It was led by **St. Mauritius**, who seems to have earned the crown of martyrdom for refusing to sacrifice to the heathen gods. His statue stands today in one of the public squares of Saint-Moritz, and his body was enshrined in what later became the chapel of an abbey of Augustinian canons at Saint Maurice in the Valais. His companions, a legionary named **Felix**, his sister **Regula**, and a third called **Exuperantius** hid themselves in the dreary wastes of the land of Glarus and ultimately reached the Lake of **Zurich**, where they baptized converts until they were seized by the emperor's men and led before Decius, the Roman governor of the region. On refusing to sacrifice to the gods, they were tortured. Legend says that as they were beheaded a voice from heaven called to them: "Arise, for the angels shall take you to Paradise and set upon your heads the martyr's crown." Thus the bodies arose, and, taking their heads in their hands, walked forty ells<sup>44</sup> uphill to a prepared ditch, where they sleep underneath what is now the crypt of the Zurich Grossmunster.

On the spot of their martyrdom arose the Wasserkirche. The Fraumunster cloister across the Limmat River has eight famous medieval frescoes representing every stage of their story. The three saints with heads in hand are the subject of the coat of arms of the city of Zurich. A parallel story with some variation has been recounted about the town of Solothurn, and the name of **St. Victor** (the Coptic *Boktor*) is mentioned as its hero and patron saint.

There is little doubt that the Coptic missionaries reached as far as the **British Isles** on the fringe of medieval Europe. Long before the coming of St. Augustine of Canterbury in Christianity had been introduced among the Britons. The eminent historian Stanley Lane-Poole says, "We do not yet know how much we in the British Isles owe to these remote hermits. It is more than probable that to them we are indebted for the first preaching of the Gospel in England, where, till the coming of Augustine, the Egyptian monastic rule prevailed. But more important is the belief that Irish Christianity, the great civilizing agent of the early Middle Ages among the northern nations, was the child of the Egyptian Church. Seven Egyptian monks are buried at Disert Uldith and there is much in the

ceremonies and architecture of **Ireland** in the earliest time that reminds one of still earlier Christian remains in Egypt. Everyone knows that the handicraft of the Irish monks in the ninth and tenth centuries far excelled anything that could be found elsewhere in Europe, and if the Byzantine-looking decoration of their splendid gold and silver work, and their unrivalled illuminations, can be traced to the influence of Egyptian missionaries, we have more to thank the Copts for than had been imagined.

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This document is found in Dr. Atteyia's book, "*Coptic Contribution to the Christian Civilization*," which you can easily download from the Internet.