

# THE VALUE OF COPTIC

## THE ECCLESIASTICAL AND COPTIC PRINCIPLES

### I. Introduction:

People, especially Copts, often ask why do they need to study Coptic. The cause of their dilemma is that Coptic is rarely used even in its last stronghold, the Coptic Church. The answer to such a perplexing question lies in two distinct but closely related principles. The first is called the Ecclesiastical Principle and the second is referred to as the Coptic Principle. Both of these principles hold explanation for the importance as well as the necessity for keeping such language alive among people in general and Copts in particular.

### II. The Ecclesiastical Principle:

The Ecclesiastical Principle is a 3-component concept that describes the Coptic Church in general terms. Its components are derived from the official name used by the Church but in reverse order. These components are as follows:

1. *Church,*
2. *Orthodox,*
3. *Coptic.*

**1. Church:** The first Component, the Church can be assumed to be the substance of Christianity, i.e., the Bible. This is due to the fact that the Coptic Church like any true Christian Church is build upon the Bible, the authentic Word of God.

**2. Orthodox:** The Orthodox component is understood as the authority of the fathers of the Church within the confines of the Coptic Church. An authority that is second only to the Bible because their writings are mere inspired explanation and expansion of the meaning of the Bible.

**3. Coptic:** The last component of this trio is Coptic. The value of this component is embodied in the second principle to be discussed here, the Coptic Principle. It suffices to say here that this component is what gives the Coptic Church its identity and its distinctive flavor that sets it apart from any other Christian Church.

### III. The Coptic Principle:

The Coptic Principle is an extension of the third component of the Ecclesiastical principle. It is in turn explained within the concept of a 3-component system. Such system will help explain the great benefits that can be achieved by the Copts or others when they learn the language. These components are as follows:

1. *Identity,*
2. *Link to the past,*
3. *Key to the treasures of the Coptic Church.*

**1. Identity:** The Coptic language provides a Copt with an identity that spells out an impressive commentary upon the character of such person. It exemplifies in him an unyielding spirit that was tried and came out victorious. A spirit that had to endure endless attempts by those that ruled Egypt for the past 2300 years to replace such language with that of their own. If such was achieved then they can subject the Copts to cultural and religious slavery that would forever made them subservient to such foreign rulers. It was attempted first by the Greeks, through their Hellenizing approach. Then it was continued along the same principles by the successive Arabic and Moslem dynasties that ruled Egypt since the 7th century AD. The significance of such character can also inspire the Coptic youth to fight off the many harmful pressures, whether in spirit or in body, that are facing them in this turbulent Society of ours.

**2. Link to the Past:** The Coptic language is the bridge that links the Copts with their ancient Egyptian roots. It provides them with a continuous written record of their civilization that span over 6000 years, the longest in existence. A civilization that is truly been considered, then and now, a marvel of human achievement. Their accomplishments encompassed most areas of human endeavors such as art, architecture, medicine, and of course their remarkable embalming techniques. A recount of such achievements and others will require many volumes. And to do them justice, it is best left for the experts who have already scratched the surface but has not yet gone deep enough. One last word that needs to be said about such link is that to successfully claim such lineage to greatness, a common language is needed. Coptic, of course, is such a language. It embodies the same Egyptian language of ancient times that was formerly written in the picturesque Hieroglyphs, the practical Hieratic, and the handy Demotic characters.

**3. Key to the Treasures of the Coptic Church:** This third and final category of the Coptic Principle has the most significant values that Coptic brings. By learning Coptic the hidden treasure of the church, the source of its greatness, will become accessible. This will make the Copt more rooted in his Church that has truly survived the test of time.

These treasures has come down primarily in literary form. They were left by the fathers of the Coptic Church over the centuries as the fruit of their labor of love for the Almighty. They cover many areas of Christian knowledge and experiences that are essential for the spiritual well-being of the Copts or anyone interested in learning about God. The discussion here will cover the basics of such treasures but only briefly. These treasures are as follows:

**a. Language:** The language, or rather the development of the script is a treasure in itself. Among the Christians, its appearance was a sign of Christian charity, for it was developed for the primary purpose of translating the Scriptures in order to preach the Gospel to the native population of Egypt. More details about such work will be included in the discussion of the history of the language.

**b. Bible:** The Coptic Version of the Bible is truly the greatest of all the treasures of the Coptic Heritage. Its value has been recognized by biblical scholars from every corner of the Globe. Many reasons contributed to such a high significance being attributed to it. First it utilized Greek originals that did not survive the winds of the persecutions nor the sands of time. Secondly it reflected the conservative, or orthodox, nature of the Egyptian Christians who translated such sacred texts in a method as literal as possible. They even made special adjustments in the grammatical

system to project such a method. Thirdly they presented a better ancient understanding of some certain obscure verses or words in the Greek originals. This was due to the antiquity of the Version as well as the scholarship of those that contributed to it. Because of these factors and others, the Coptic Version is always used as an important witness in the scholarly publications of the Greek Scriptures, Old and New Testaments.

**c. Writings of the Fathers:** The Coptic language handed to us a great collection of the writings of the fathers of the Church. Such writings carry an authority in the Church second only to that of the Scriptures. In essence they are an extension to the Bible. Such collection that survived can be divided into two groups. The first one is a collection of translation from Greek originals of writings of Egyptian and non-Egyptian Church fathers. The second group is a collection of writings of Egyptian Fathers.

The collection of translations from Greek originals are characterized either as being commentaries on the Bible or dealing with spiritual subjects that are suitable more to the monastic community who used them more. The collection of original Coptic writings featured a more variety of subjects. However they still projected the monastic flavor. In other words, most of the Coptic writings did not address the more theoretical aspects of theology as other Greek writings did.

The value of the first collection, that of translated texts, lies in either being an ancient witness to the Greek original or at times the only surviving witness to such writings. The Copts did not translated every thing that came into their hands. They rather translated only those of the more widely known or accepted fathers; and of course those which they considered to be pertinent to their ascetic nature. The most popular writer was St. John Chrysostom. The writings of Saints Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory the Theologian were also popular but not as much as those of St. John Chrysostom.

The second collection, that of original Coptic writings is the more valuable one. It include writings from Alexandrian fathers who usually wrote in Greek, like Saints Athanasius, Theophilus, and Cyril the Great. They also included the monastic writings of St. Pachomius and his disciples as well as those of bishops from the Pre-Arab invasion like Pisentius of Qift, Constantine of Asyut, Mena of Pshati, and Rufus of Shotep. However the greatest of them all is without a doubt the writings of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite, which was the most voluminous with a wider variety of subjects. Worthy of mention here are the substantial writings of St. Besa (Wissa), St. Shenouda's disciple.

The writings of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite are truly the crown jewels of Coptic Literature. Their style, their variety, and their subject matters make them worthy of such distinction. The literary style of St. Shenouda was a unique one. It blended many of the great feature of his time as well as his own added flavor. It dealt with more subjects that are not normally expected to be seen within the writings of a monastic leader. They addressed laymen, clerics, and even high government officials. Their subject matters dealt with what such a variety of people needs along Christian lines. However they presented the reader with a feature that is unprecedented. This feature was the simplification of St. Cyril the Great's theoretical theology into a practical one that the masses can understand and apply.

**d. Lives of the Saints:** The Coptic Church never had a shortage of saints throughout its long illustrious history. Though many of the acts of such saints have survived to this day, still many more perished as a result of the gradual loss of the language. The importance of the lives of the saints lies in the simple fact that they present to us portraits of the living Bible. They furnish proofs for the authenticity of the Bible teachings and the application of its teachings in people's life.

Lives of the Saints are available in many languages and churches other than those in use in Egypt and recognized in the Coptic Church, Coptic Lives however provide a unique brand. They consist of two major collections. The first are those of the martyrs who watered the flowering Church with their blood. The second are those of the monastic fathers who converted the desolate desert from an abode for demons to a haven for saints. There are also many acts of clergy as well as laymen that have reached this honored status.

The value of the Coptic lives lie in their antiquity as compared to the parallel ones available in Arabic and also in their exclusive presence in such language. The Coptic Synaxarium, being the most complete record of the saints of the Coptic Church, preserves only mention of names of some of these saints while their complete acts are preserved in Coptic. This category covers many of the saints of Upper Egypt who seem to have been forgotten by the compilers of the Synaxarium who lived mostly in Lower Egypt.

The collection of Coptic martyrdoms mostly includes those martyrs of the Diocletian Persecution (303-311 AD.) The most notable ones are those of St. Menas, St. Anoub, St. George, St. Theodore, and countless others. There are also acts of martyrs of earlier persecutions such as St. Mercurius, and those of later ones such as St. Macarius of Tkoou. There is even a 13th century Coptic martyrdom, that of St. John of Phanidjoit.

The collection of lives of monastic fathers includes Those of the early fathers such as St. Antony the Great, St. Pachomius and his disciples, St. Macarius and his disciples, St. Onophrius, and St. Shenouda the Archimandite. It also include those of the later fathers such as St. Samuel of Qalamun, St. Apollo, and many others.

Unfortunately the hand of man sometimes corrupts the natural beauty of such acts with unnecessary fabricated details. Such wild imagination distorts the saintly image of these acts and their value for the edification of the Christians as they were meant to be. However sorting the truth from fiction is not an easy task because what would sounds like a fabrication to some may still be factual. Careful study of these acts, God's willing, will yield desirable fruits. But caution should be exercised before deleting any details unless they are judged to be impossible to have occurred on historical, theological, and spiritual grounds. May God help those who undertake this worthy and blessed task.

**e. Liturgical Services:** The Coptic Church, in extension of its religious practices and beliefs of ancient times, regulated man's interface with God through an elaborate and comprehensive system of liturgical services. These services cover every aspect of human life in order to strengthen the tie between the Creator and His beloved creation and regulate man's life in accordance with what God has intended. Such services are made of selections from the Bible mixed the writings of the fathers of the Church and handed down by the saints of the Church. A powerful combination indeed!

All these services are made even more beautiful by their poetical arrangement and the magnificent Coptic music that accompanies them. The beautiful melodies that are collectively called Coptic Music has been determined, by the musicologists that studied it, as the richest in Christendom. If music moves the soul then Coptic music must makes it dance. The Church fathers used this powerful tool not only to beautify the words of the services but to vary and enhance their meanings. I would dare to say that in the case of the Coptic Liturgy, the music is responsible for up to 50 percent of the meaning being conveyed. Moreover, the varying tunes provide the believers with an instant way of sharing in the spirit of the Church commemorations. If what was just said is unclear, then one should only observe the services of the Holy Week and the Resurrection service that follows it for instant clarification.

The services include the three great liturgies, those of St. Basil, St. Gregory, and St. Cyril, where man is elevated to heaven to partake in the greatest gift ever given, the Body and Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. Other services include Baptism and Confirmation that make the person eligible to partake in the sacraments. Also there are services for the sacrament of Marriage and that of Unction to spiritually and physically heal, God's willing, man's afflictions. Also the Church consoles her members through the beautifully arranged funeral services. Every order in the Church, from a reader to a patriarch, its possessor participates in ordination services that vary in proportion to the rank being bestowed. There are also the magnificent services of the Holy Week, the Washing of Feet or Laqan, and the Genuflection among others.

**f. Canon Law and Documents:** To regulate man relationship to God, the Church instituted many laws that were based and biblical principles as well as human needs. Coptic preserved the most ancient of the manuscripts of the Apostolic constitutions, which were last compiled in Egypt. Other collections in Coptic are those of the Councils of Nice and Ephesus and those of St. Athanasius and St. Basil.

Another aspect of this treasure is the documentary evidence that Coptic has yielded. These documents include contracts such as those between individuals or between groups. It also includes a collection of private letters. These documents that survived were parts of archives of officials or towns. Their value lie in that they provide us with a window to observe regional history as well as to study the non-ecclesiastical common law that the people were practicing at the time. This provides a great help in studying the real history of the Copts, not only of Church dignitaries. These documents range in age from as early as the 4th century to as late as the 11th century. Such treasure has been nearly untapped by Copts not only because of its relative non-ecclesiastical nature but mostly because of the difficulty encountered in reading its script. To put it in perspective, its documents look like something that a doctor might have written!

# **THE HISTORY OF THE COPTIC LANGUAGE**

## **I. Definition**

The Coptic Language is the name used to refer to the last stage of the written Egyptian language. Coptic should more correctly be used to refer to the script rather than the language itself. Even though this script was introduced as far back as the 2nd century BC., it is usually applied to the writing of the Egyptian language from the first century AD. to the present day.

## **II. Short History of the Egyptian Language before Coptic**

The ancient Egyptians devised a writing system to record their spoken language over 60 centuries ago. The first application seems to have been the calendar. The system started by giving each word a symbol, called hieroglyph. This convention was of course doomed because of the tremendous vocabulary it would have generated. Out of such ideas they took some of these hieroglyphs and associated a sound value to them which, when combined together, would spell out the spoken word. The sound values of such characters depended mostly on the pronunciation of the word that it denoted in the early stage. Thus the hieroglyph for mouth, pronounced 'ro' became the sound 'r' in the new system. About 130 hieroglyphs have been identified as voiced characters. Some represented a single sound, others a two-character sound, and some a three-character sound. Many more hieroglyphs were added to represent the idea or to enhance the meaning of the word. These are commonly referred to as 'ideograms' and they brought the number of identified hieroglyphs to over 4,000. This script, popularly called hieroglyphic, was both beautifully drawn as well colorfully painted. It was used for inscription on Egyptian monuments as well as a variety of written texts on papyrus.

In parallel with the development of the hieroglyphic script, a second script came to light. Such script was a mere simplification of the artistic, and sometimes laborious, hieroglyphic. It was originally devised by the priests to record the records of the temples and then became a tool of the government servants, educated by the learned priests, who used it to record the affairs of the state. Due to the priestly origin of the script the name 'hieretic' was popularly affixed to it. This script used the same symbols, drawn in a simplified way. There is no indication that script had as many ideograms as the hieroglyphic had.

With the decline of the state such a cumbersome writing method became impossible to preserve it as is. So in the fifth century BC. a new script was devised that was both simpler to write and included about ten percent of the total number of hieroglyphs used previously. This new script came to be referred to as 'Demotic'. The cursive, and relatively ugly appearance of characters, in comparison to the hieroglyphic, was compensated for by its relative compactness. Many written records were preserved in that script but they dared not inscribe it on temple walls.

## **III. Origin of Coptic among Egyptian Pagans:**

In 313 BC. Alexander the Great invaded Egypt. His legacy was carried on by his general Ptolemy and his successors in Egypt. That legacy, simply stated, was to have a universal culture. Such culture would of course be the Greek or Hellenistic one. With the culture comes the language,

so it became the proper way for the educated classes to learn Greek and encourage their children to learn it for the economical as well as the social advantages. In script, the Greek was far superior to the Demotic, the last surviving Egyptian script at the time. It offered 24 characters all pronounceable as opposed to over 400 symbols that only a small percentage represented sounds and the rest were ideograms.

It is important to note here that the Greeks learned their writing system from the Egyptians through the frequent travelers of the ancient world, the Phoenicians. In the course of their commercial dealings with the Egyptians, the Phoenicians imported the Egyptian script and molded it into an alphabet with a far smaller number of characters, all pronounceable and all consonants. As they traveled the Mediterranean and traded with the inhabitants of the Greek Isles, they gave their version of the Egyptian writing system to the Greeks. They in turn revised its orthography and added a number of written vowels. A system that eventually became the basis for the new Egyptian script, i.e. the Coptic.

The pagan Egyptian priests, as a result of the invasion of the Greek language, found themselves at a disadvantage. The source of income as well as the power of their temples depended a great deal on the making and the sales of magical amulets. Now these amulets, written in Egyptian, can not be pronounced by those who can afford to pay for them. If they can not use, properly or at all, it is safe to say that they would not buy it. To avert such economic and religious massacre, they reverted to a transliteration system of these amulets. This new system used the Greek characters along with several other characters borrowed from the Demotic to denote sounds not available in Greek. The economic success of such system made them extend its use to other applications such as horoscopes and the like. The number of borrowed Demotic characters eventually were reduced. The resultant script was highly standardized, in the common tradition of the Ancient Egyptians.

#### **IV. Origin of Coptic among Christians in Egypt**

Christianity in Egypt owes its formal introduction to St. Mark the Evangelist. He most likely came first to Alexandria in the early fifties of the first century AD., accompanying his uncle St. Barnabas. This came as a result of the news of Apollo, who represented an imperfect Christianity that existed in Alexandria at the time. After the repose of St. Barnabas in Cyprus, St. Mark came again by himself and started proclaiming the word of God among the Jews. The legacy that St. Mark left in Egypt was a Christian community made up primarily of converted hellenized Jews. Christianity remained eclipsed by the powerful Jewish community in Alexandria at the time. After the Jewish Revolt in the first quarter of the second century AD. and subsequent annihilation of the Jews in Alexandria, the Christians of Egypt became visible to the world.

The first visible signs of such presence were rather blemishing to the character of the Church. Two teachers of Gnostic, heterodox repute, traveled abroad at different times during the middle of the second century AD. They were Basilides and Valentinus. The latter became infamous due to his quest to be the bishop of Rome. In any case, these teachers influenced the arrival of Pantanus, the missionary, presumably to introduce the orthodox teachings of Christianity to a seemingly Gnostic community. After his arrival he discovered that this was not exactly the case and there was a strong orthodox community present as a result of the evangelizing work of St. Mark and his successors. Being a renowned Christian teacher he was put in charge of the Christian school of Alexandria, a

rather small school that taught those who are willing to serve the Lord the fundamentals of Christianity. Shortly after his arrival, St. Demetrius, the first bishop of Egyptian origin, became the bishop of Alexandria about 189 AD.

The contact between Pantaenus, the missionary, and St. Demetrius the representative of the large and mostly non-Christian Egyptians was truly a match made in Heaven. As a result a missionary movement to convert the Egyptian peasants began. The School of Alexandria probably became a school to prepare the missionaries and direct their activities.

The dilemma faced by those responsible for directing such missionary work was the uniformity of the message to be given to the Egyptians. The missionaries knew how to read Greek but not Demotic. The Egyptian peasants did not know how to read either but they understood the sounds of the language written by the Demotic script, i.e. Egyptian. To insure that the Word of God, written in the Scriptures, be preached the same by the different missionaries, it had to be written in a way that the missionaries can read and the Egyptians can understand when it was read to them. So the missionaries translated the Scriptures into the Egyptian tongue but wrote them using the Greek characters they are familiar with. These attempts differed from those of the pagans in that they did not use any Demotic character in the beginning. The shortcomings of that system were eventually realized and more characters, borrowed from the Demotic, were added to bring them to the current six or seven additional characters that survived in the Sahidic and Bohairic dialects respectively.

### V. Dialects

Now we see two independent attempts to write the Egyptian language in new script. Each attempt was unique in its motive, approach, and audience. Due to the distribution of the population along the length of the Nile, many dialects developed. Each was characterized by the use of different vowels in pronouncing the same words as well as some distinct variation in the vocabulary. The pagans attempted from the start to develop a uniform written language in a neutral Dialect, the Sahidic. Because of their early start, they were successful in their efforts and nearly erased any influence that such regional dialects had on their own version of Coptic. The Christians on the other hand put the benefit of the people ahead of proper language development and resurrected all these regional dialects in a written form. Eventually most of these dialects fell into disuse as the uniform Sahidic became the more dominant again. Another factor that affected these the dialects was the fact that the Coptic language was generally weakened by the influence of Arabic.

All the dialects were to a large extent geographically-dependent. They spanned the entire length of the Nile Valley. Based on literary records we have such dialects as the Akhmimic and the Lycopolitan (Asyutic) dialects of Upper Egypt, the Middle Egyptian and the Fayoumic of Middle Egypt, and the Bohairic of the Delta. Then there is the Sahidic dialect that became, from the earliest times, a neutral dialect used throughout Egypt and eventually gained literary dominance with the extensive writings of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite. There is also a host of minor dialects as well as subdialects to the ones mentioned above.

Now Bohairic is the only surviving dialect of Coptic. It was kept alive first by the strength of the monastic communities of Wadi n' Natrun which used it extensively. Then with the move of the



Patriarchate from Alexandria to Cairo in the 11th century, Bohairic, the dialect of the District, became the official dialect of the Church replacing the Sahidic.

## **VI. The Golden age of Coptic:**

Coptic was used from its Christian beginnings in the late second century AD. till the time of the Great persecution of Diocletian in the early 4th century AD. predominantly as a translational tool from Greek to Egyptian. After the persecution, the monastic movement picked up tremendous steam. It was for the Copts the only way they can express their great love for God, that they earlier expressed with the willing sacrifice of their most precious possession, their earthly lives. These monastic communities were large and mostly Egyptian. This generated the need for the abbots of these communities to write their rules in their own language, i.e. Coptic. Also the Fathers of the Coptic Church, who usually wrote in Greek, addressed some of their works to the Egyptian monks in Coptic.

So with monastic fathers like St. Antony, St. Pachomius, and St. Macarius and their respective disciples writing to their monks; and Church Fathers like St. Athanasius, St. Theophilus, and St. Cyril writing also to them in Coptic, the Golden Age of Coptic was about to begin.

It was not until St. Shenouda the Archimandrite came on the scene that Coptic really achieved its literary excellence. St. Shenouda who lived from 348 to 466 AD. was able to transform the language from a tool to communicate instructions to the monks to a wide-variety literary language that addressed monks, ecclesiastic authorities, laymen, and even government officials. His charisma, knowledge of Greek language and rhetoric, and his innovative mind gave him the necessary tools to elevate the Coptic language, in content and style, to a literary height never achieved before nor equaled since. The Coptic scholars are constantly astounded by his great writings as more and more of them are being studied and accurately published.

This literary legacy continued to a lesser degree through the writings of his disciple St. Besa in the second half of the fifth century. But such writings were mostly for the edification of the large monastic community in the White Monastery. later in the sixth and seventh centuries other fathers wrote many works in Coptic like Rufus of Shotep, Constantine of Asyut, and Pisentius of Qift.

## **VII. Coptic During the Early Arabic Period (7th to 10th Century AD)**

By the middle of the seventh century, Egypt came under the dominance of Arab rulers that eventually tried to force the Copts to learn Arabic to keep their government jobs. This policy slowly eroded the number of Coptic lay readers who were mostly from the ranks of these government workers and their families. In other words the pressure put on such families to learn Arabic to ensure their continuing service in the government and the inheritance of such work by their offspring, made them slowly neglect educating their children in literary Coptic. Within a few hundred years Bishop Severus of Al-Ashmunain found it necessary to write his *'History of the Patriarchs'* in Arabic to address such a drastic decline.

Ecclesiastically, the language continued strong. In fact, a great number of Hagiographic texts were composed during the early parts of this period. Coptic continued to be used in the Church with

Greek as the second language, as seen from the texts that survived from the period. However a relatively small number of liturgical manuscripts survived from such period to show how it was being used. This was due to the heavy use that such manuscripts were subjected to, poor preservation during the period of decline in use, and the parchment material they were written on that did not lend itself to such heavy use.

During this period some Arabic loan-words made their way into the language. But there was no indication that the Arabic language was used in the Church. There were no Coptic-Arabic manuscripts that belong to this period or any literary citation to indicate its possible use. Coptic was also the spoken language of the peasants and probably the clergy.

### **VIII. Coptic versus Arabic (from 11th to 14th Century AD.)**

As the 11th century approached, the excellent relations between the rulers of Egypt and the Church were drastically changed as the Hakem-bi-Amr-Allah became the ruler. His violent mood swings took their toll on the Christians who were periodically subjected to open persecutions, had their churches closed for up to two years at time, and saw their language being prohibited from use. Through God's grace, this period did not last long, but it definitely left open the door for further decline in Coptic use.

During the same period, the European Crusaders waged their wars against the Moslem rulers of the Middle East in an effort to secure the holy places. Their presence in the area generated waves of persecutions and oppressions against the Copts. This was due to the Moslems seeing in the sign of the Cross, displayed by the Crusaders, an implied alliance of the Copts with those invaders and a great threat to the country. Of course there was no chance of such alliance, for the Crusaders considered the Copts as heretics and treated them worse than they treated the Moslems, as sad as it might sound. Introduction of Arabic in the 12th century by Patriarch Gabriel ibn Turaik was probably an attempt to show the Moslems that the Copts are different from real enemy that they were fighting.

Such move may have been considered wise at the time but it actually opened the flood gates. Christians Arabic literature flourished afterward. Later in the period, Arabic invaded the liturgical books, replacing Greek in bilingual texts and intruding on traditionally non-bilingual ones. Even purely Arabic liturgical texts began to appear, indicating that Arabic moved from a mere reference translation to actual use in the churches. Original composition in Coptic became limited to liturgical hymns and prayers. The only Coptic literary texts composed in the later part of the period were the martyrdom of St. John of Phanidjoit, written as such to shield from the eyes of the Moslems, and compositions, urging the Copts to revive their language.

Further testimony to the gradual decline of the language as a reading tool was supplied by the many lexicographic works that were introduced during the period. They were in the form of Muqadimat (Grammar) and Salalem (Scalae or word lists). Another sign of decline was Arabic texts circulating among the monks but written in Coptic characters, as they could not still read the Arabic script. This eventually was replaced with the writing of Coptic text in Arabic letters that we see nowadays in the Coptic Church.

In summary, this period saw the decline of Coptic literary use in its last stronghold, the Church. Eventually, it led to the weakening of the Church which subsequently weakened the language more, a natural chain reaction. The number of Christians declined due to conversion to Islam. This can probably be attributed to the decline in Coptic which represented a cultural barrier for the Copts from the Arabic-Moslem Culture. But now the increasing use of Arabic bridged that barrier and made it easier for the border-line Christians to cross to seemingly greener grounds!

### **IX. Coptic Decline as a Spoken Language (to 17th Century)**

After the 14th century the Church experienced a decline spiritually and in numbers. The dominance of the Ottoman Empire over Egypt in the early 16th century seemed to accelerate such decline. Production of Coptic Manuscripts slowed down to a trickle. This is an indication that Coptic books were not used as often as before in the Church, so there was no need to produce more. Tradition still mandated that Coptic be used in Church services but in a decaying fashion. Eventually Vansleb, the French traveler, concluded upon seeing an old man speaking in Coptic that with his death (the man's) Coptic will die. Such observation may not have been completely accurate but it gave an indication that Arabic has replaced Coptic as the primary spoken language among the Copts, if not the only one!

### **X. Revival of Coptic in the 19th Century AD**

God, in His great mercy, did not let that decline goes unchecked. In His usual fashion, He brought forth a gleam of light in the midst of that self-imposed darkness. Such light was St. Cyril IV, Patriarch of Alexandria in the beginning years of the second half of the 19th century. St. Cyril started a Church-sponsored movement to educate the clergy and the new generations. Revival of Coptic seemed to be a necessary tool for such a movement. So Coptic language education was offered in all the schools that he built alongside the other curriculums that was needed to make a new, better, and educated generation.

St. Cyril did not last long on the throne of St. Mark. In fact too short of time for such a great figure in Church history. His death was in part brought upon by opponents of his reforms. But he laid the ground work for such movement to continue. In the last half quarter of that century the movement to revive the Coptic language intensified. The eyes of those in that movement turned to Greece in an effort to establish a standardized method of pronouncing Coptic. It was felt that Greek preserved the original sound value of many of the characters in Coptic because of its close association with Coptic in its early days. However the Greek tongue underwent some modifications due to the effect of 150 years of Turkish (Ottoman) dominance. Because of the lack of any other available means, a new pronunciation system was established for Coptic that made it sounds not as Egyptian as it should have sounded.

In spite of the above shortcoming, those dedicated people spread the language among the masses. They printed many of the Coptic service books for the first time, as they were only extant in manuscript form. Thus reviving the use of Coptic in the Church services. Several works of grammar was produced as a result along with a more comprehensive dictionary that was available before. The establishment of the Clerical College also aided in the propagation of the movement.

**XI. Coptic in the 20th Century**

Coptic continued its growth in the Church and among the Ecclesiastically-educated groups that were produced in the early parts of the 20th century. Coptic schools, instituted by St. Cyril IV and others that emulated them, continued their valuable work among the Coptic community. The clerical college also continued the tradition of the 19th century revival of Coptic. However, the pronunciation system established seemed to be a hindrance to the spread of the language among the masses. With the advent of the revolution of 1952, Arabic became more prominent in Egypt and eventually it had an influential effect on the new educated classes among the Copts. As members of these groups were called upon to serve the Church, they brought with them a preaching spirit that put Arabic in a new prominent position in the services, i.e. sermons. Unintentionally, and in spite of the good will of such people and their love of the tradition of the Church, they introduced again an element that eventually weakened the revival process. If such process is not wisely put in check and eventually reversed, we are liable to face in the future a Church with a lost identity. May God have mercy on those who would contribute to such a sorry end!