**The Coptic Church Part I
As An Apostolic Church**

**The Term "Copts"**

The term "Copts" is equivalent to the word "Egyptians." It is derived from the Greek "Aigyyptos," which in turns is derived from the ancient Egyptian "Ha-ka-Ptah," i.e. "the house of the spirit Ptah," a most highly revered deity in Egyptian mythology. From the Arab conquest and until today, This term refers to the Christian Egyptians to distinguish them from the native Muslims.

**SONS OF PHAROHS**

The Copts as the successors of the ancient Egyptians are defined as the modern sons of the Pharaohs. They played an essential role in the whole Christian world, especially during the first five centuries.

Their religious background helped them to accept Christianity with eagerness and to enjoy its depth through their ascetic life, meditation and studying of the Holy Scripture.

In this topic we wish to throw some light on the ancient Egyptian culture and how it reacted towards the new Christian faith.

1. **Their religious background:** It is well known that nature and upbringing have religiously minded ancient Egyptians since the very early times. Herodotus states that "The Egyptians are religious to excess, far beyond any other race of men." Their religious curiosity was satisfied by the Christian faith that puts no limits to spiritual progress, for it raises the believers towards the bosom of the Father that they might enjoy the likeness of God, fast communion with Him and acknowledgment of the eternal divine mysteries.
2. **Their high scientific background:** Modern science achieved unceasing progress, particularly in the last century. Many of the ancient Egyptians’ scientific work which took place thousands of years before Christ are still considered to be obscure secrets; for example the pyramids with their scientific wonder and mysteries, the art of embalming, the art of carving, colored painting on walls etc. All of these arts are still under research to the extent that some believe that the ancient Egyptians were working under the guidance of superhuman (coming from the outer space), or from other stars. Some consider that man would have conquered space much earlier if the library of Alexandria had not been burned, which led to losing scientific secrets of great importance.
In any case, the fact is that the ancient Egyptians put their scientific abilities at the disposal of the religious thinking (such as the building of the pyramids, embalming etc.). It had influenced the Copts. They looked to science not as an enemy of religion or contrary to it, but that science acts in favor of religion. Therefore, the school of Alexandria opened its doors to the scholars and philosophers, believing that science and philosophy could serve the true spiritual life.
3. **Their religious dogmas:**
	1. Each major town in ancient Egypt used to recognize some kind of a triad. But these triads were too alien from the Christian Holy Trinity.
	2. Their philosophers believed in One Supreme Being; the best example is King Ikhnaton (1383-1365 B. C.).
	3. While the majority of the ancient civilizations were preoccupied with the earthly life, seeking temporary pleasures, the Egyptian mind was absorbed in the world to come, and in the resurrection. When they were converted to Christianity, they became involved in awaiting the advent of the Risen Christ, through their lengthy hymns, excessive fasting, enduring and suffering with joy. This eschatological attitude has its effect on our worship, liturgies and even in our daily life.
	4. **The Cross:** Egyptians tended to identify the Cross with their own sign of eternal life, "the Ankh," which was held in the hands of the immortals such as gods and pharaohs. The "Ankh" sign took the shape of a cruciform with rounded tip, which was readily adopted and used by the Copts from the very early times.
	5. In addition to this, the Egyptians seem to have had an idea of the unity of God, His eternity, His infinity, as well as His loving kindness.

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**The Holy Family in Egypt**

**Egypt in the Holy Bible**

The Holy Bible concentrates on "Jerusalem" which means, "land of peace," or "vision of peace" as center of the promised land, where God declares His dwelling among people. And a holy temple was established in it in His Name, where people worshipped Him, offered Him sacrifices and offerings, and celebrated many feasts as a symbol of the heavenly joy. This is Jerusalem, the symbol of heaven, that is called "Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all" (Gal 4:26). On the other hand, we find Babel and Egypt; Babel represents disobedience to God, violence, vainglory (tower of Babel, Gen.11), opposing God through His believers (the Babylonian captivity), adultery and abominations (Rev. 17:5). Egypt was well known for its abundant cops, and its king (Pharaoh) to whom Israel and Jude used to refuge against Babylon. Therefore, Egypt was a symbol of loving the temporary things and trust in human hands (1 Kings 18:21).

Egypt was a refuge to many people, especially in famines. Abraham visited Egypt (Gen. 12:10). So did Joseph who became the second man after Pharaoh, offering crops to all the neighboring countries. Jacob and his sons came to Egypt where they lived as a family and grew as a nation. It was the birth –place of the nursery of the people of God. Their first leader, Moses, the great prophet and his brother Aaron the first chief-priest appeared in Egypt to grant them freedom. St. Stephen says, "And Moses was taught in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds" (Acts 7:22).

Among the prophets who visited Egypt was Jeremiah who implored people not to flee to Egypt, but in vain, for they forced him to accompany them in their journey to Egypt (Jer. 41:1, 43:7). He uttered his last prophesies in Tahpanhes of Egypt (Jer. 43:8-44:30).

Thus, Egypt became a representative of the Gentiles to whom Christ came to establish His Church and form His new people.

**Blessed Be Egypt, My People**

Hosea, the Prophet, foresaw the Son of God going out of Bethlehem and fleeing to Egypt, where He found a welcome in the hearts of the Gentiles. Through Hosea, God the Father uttered this prophesy, "I called my son out of Egypt" (Hos. 11:1).

Isaiah the Prophet gave us more details, saying "Behold, the burden of Egypt, the Lord rides upon a swift cloud, He shall come to Egypt, and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at His presence. In that day there shall be an altar to the lord in the midst of the land of Egypt" (Isa. 19:1). St. Cyril the Great interpreted this prophecy saying:

"The glittering cloud which carried the child Jesus to Egypt was His mother, St. Mary, who suppressed the cloud in purity. The altar which was established in the midst of the land of Egypt is the Christian church which had replaced the temples of paganism as the idols collapsed and the temples were deserted in the presence of the Lord Jesus."

**The Holy Journey**

The important stations where the holy family took shelter are:

* 1. **Bubastis Hill**The holy family left Bethlehem on its way to Egypt through Sinai. They followed the Southern Caravan way along the Mediterranean coast, passing through Gaza-Raphia (Rafah)-Rhinocolura, (now El-Arish), and then to Ostrakini which became a diocese of Bishop Abram who joined the council of Ephesus 431 A.D.The last station for the Holy family in Sinai was Pelusium (now Al-Farma) which is located between El-Arish and Port-Said and which is considered the key entrance to Egypt from the eastern side.
	From Pelusium they crossed to Bubastis (Tel-Basta), where they rested under a tree, that is said to have survived until 1850 A.D. Here, at Bubastis Hill, a spring of water erupted, from which the holy family used to drink; and its water healed many from their sickness.
	Soon after the Holy Family resided in the city, the pagan statues began to collapse and this consequently aroused the anger of the pagan priests against the Holy Family. Therefore, the Holy Family left to the outskirts of the city to a place now called "Mastard."
	2. **Mataryah**The Holy Family traveled to Bilbais, then to Miniat-Genah (now Miniat Samanoud), crossing the River Nile to Samanoud and from there to Borolos. They crossed the River Nile to the Western bank to Sakha, and then they traveled westward along Wadi-el-Natroun (Natroun Valley), south of the "Sheheet" widerness. This wilderness became a paradise of monks, the earthly angels.The Holy Family then traveled to Heliopolis, to a district called "Mataryah," where they took shelter under a tree, known as the "St. Virgin Mary Tree." The Coptic Orthodox Church is taking care of this tree which is still blossoming despite its old age. Near this tree is a spring of water shot and balsam plants are still growing. These plants are added to the ointments used to make the Holy Chrism (Oil for confirmation).Pilgrims in the middle ages used to visit "Mataryah" and "St. Mary’s Tree" regarding them as sacred places. Until today tourists come to visit them.
	3. **Old Cairo**Old Cairo is considered the third station for the Family. Here we have St. Virgin Mary’s Church and a nunnery which are both located at Zwayla lane. But the most attractive landmark is the cave in Babylon in Old Cairo in which there is an altar and a niche. It is probable that the Holy family might have used this cave as a place for the Child Jesus to sleep. Above this cave, a church had been built in the fourth Century and is known as the St. Sergius Church (Abu-Sarga).
	Within a week, the idols of the pagan temples began to collapse, the pagan priests aroused with anger, forced the foreign family out of the city. Thus, the holy family left for Memphis then to Maadi where St. Mary’s Church has been built. Perhaps, this church was a Jewish Temple. The present structure with its attractive triple granary domes is known from the thirteenth century.
	4. **In Upper-Egypt**The Holy family crossed the River Nile to Upper Egypt and headed east to Bahnassa (near Beni-Mazar), they then crossed to the eastern bank, where they stopped at Gabal-el-Tair (Mount of Birds) near Samalout.
	From Gabal-el-Tair, the Holy Family went to Ashmounin near Malawi, then to a village called Philes, about 20 km south of Ashmounin. They traveled to Qoussieh (Qousqam) where they were treated harshly and were driven away by the very people who saw that their stone idols had fell before Jesus. The Holy Family escaped to the village Mirah (now Mir), whence they took to the Qousqam Mountain on which the famous Monastery of the Holy Virgin, known as "Al-Muharraq" stands. There, at that mountain it had been revealed to them by Spirit to return back to Jerusalem. They followed a way that took them to the South up to Assyout Mountain where they took shelter for a while in a cave known now as St. Virgin Monastery at Assiout.

**St. Virgin Mary’s Church at Zaytoun**

The Holy Family might have passed through Zaytoun, a suburb of Cairo. On the domes of St. Mary’s church at Zaytoun, a good number of St. Mary’s apparitions occurred (from the 2nd of April 1968 until 1971). Such wonderful apparitions occurred successively and were obviously seen by thousands of people.

**St. Virgin Mary’s Closet At El-Ezrawia**

It is said that the Holy Family passed by a watermelon farm where seeds had just been sown. St. Joseph asked the farmer to tell the soldiers, who were chasing them, that the Holy Family passed by his farm at the time when he was sowing his seeds. Two days later, when the soldiers arrived at the farm, the watermelon had blossomed and some fruits were visible. This made the soldiers believe that the Holy Family had passed by this place several months before. Therefore the soldiers slowed down the chase after the Holy Family.

**Palm (El-Kaf) Mountain**

It is said that while the Holy Family was crossing the Nile to Gabal-el-Tair a huge rock from the Mountain was about to fall on their boat. St. Mary was afraid but her Son – who has power on nature – stretched His hand thus prevented the rock from falling, and left his palm print on it. Queen Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine, ordered that a church should be build at this place. In the twelfth century (1168 A.D.), when Almeric, King of Jerusalem invaded Upper-Egypt, he cut away the piece of the rock and took it back to Syria.



**See of St. Mark**

The Coptic Church or the Church of Alexandria is called "**See of St. Mark**;" on of the earliest sees: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome.

**How Was Christianity Introduced to Egypt?**

St. Mark is considered the founder of the Coptic Church. However, evidence indicates that Christianity was introduced into Egypt before St. Mark, though undoubtedly, it must have been on a very small scale. The following are some interesting points on this subject:

1. The Book of Acts refers to the Jews of Egypt who were present at the Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Upon their return home, they must have conveyed what they saw and heard about Christ and their relatives.
2. The same book mentions an "Alexandrine Jew named Apollos" who arrived at Ephesus… He was described as an eloquent man with sound knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. He preached with great spiritual earnestness and was able to demonstrate from the Scriptures that Jesus was the expected Christ (Acts 18:24028). It is quite possible that Apollos was a member of a small Christian group of Jewish origin who lived in Alexandria.
3. St. Luke addresses his Gospel to "His excellency Theopilus," a Christian believer from Alexandria.
4. The Coptic book of Sinxarum (the day of 15 Bashance) records the preaching of Simon the Zealous in areas of south Egypt and Nubia.

**St. Mark The Founder**

The Copts are proud of the apostolicity of their church, whose founder is St. Mark; one of the seventy Apostles (Mark 10:10), and one of the four Evangelists. He is regarded by the Coptic hierarchy as the first of their unbroken 117 patriarchs, and also the first of a stream of Egyptian martyrs.

This apostolicity was not only furnished on grounds of its foundation but rather by the persistence of the church in observing the same faith received by the Apostle and his successors, the Holy Fathers.

**St. Mark’s Bibliography**

St. Mark was an African native of Jewish parents who belonged to the Levites’ tribe. His family lived in Cyrenaica until they were attacked by some barbarians, and lost their property. Consequently, they moved to Jerusalem with their child John Mark (Acts 12:12; 25; 15:37). Apparently, he was given a good education and became conversant in both Greek and Latin in addition to Hebrew. His family was highly religious and in close relationship with the Lord Jesus. His cousin was St. Barnabas and his father’s cousin was St. Peter. His mother, Mary, played an important part in the early days of the church in Jerusalem. Her upper-room became the first Christian church in the world where the Lord himself instituted the Holy Eucharist (Mark 14:12-26). There also, the Lord appeared to the disciples after His resurrection and His Holy Spirit came upon them.

Young Mark was always associated with the Lord, who chose him as one of the seventy. He is mentioned in the Scriptures in a number of events related with the Lord: He was present at the wedding of Cana of Galilee, and was the man who had been carrying the jar when the two disciples went to prepare a place of the celebration of the Pasch (Mark 14:13-14 ; Luke 22:11). [He was also the same man who fled naked before the Crucifixion (Mark 14:51, 52)]. Accordingly, the church insists on calling St. Mark "Theorimos," i.e. the beholder of the Lord, in order to prevent counterfeits of some historians.

**St. Mark And the Lion**

The lion is the symbol of St. Mark for two reasons.

* 1. He begins his Gospel describing John the Baptist as a lion roaring in the desert (Mark 1:3).
	2. His famous story with the lion, as related to us by Severus Ebn-El-Mokafa: Once a lion and a lioness appeared to John Mark and his father Arostalis while they were traveling in Jordan. The father was very frightened and begged his son to escape, while he awaited his fate. John Mark assured his father that Jesus Christ would save them, and began to pray. The two beasts fell dead and as a result of this miracle, the father believed in Christ, and died shortly thereafter.

**Preaching With The Apostles**

At first, St. mark accompanied St. Peter on his missionary journeys inside Jerusalem and Judea. Then he accompanied St. Paul and St. Barnabas on their first missionary journey to Antioch, Cyprus and Asia Minor, but for some reason or another he left them and turned home (Acts 13:13). On their second trip, St. Paul refused to take him along because he left them on the previous mission, for this reason St. Barnabas was separated from St. Paul and went to Cyprus with his cousin Mark (Acts 15:36-41). There, he departed in the Lord and St. Mark buried him. Afterwards, St. Paul needed St. mark with him and they both preached in Colosy (4:11), Rome (Phil. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11) and perhaps at Venice.

**In Africa**

St. Mark’s real labor lays in Africa. He left Rome to Pentapolis, where he was born. After planting the seeds of faith and performing many miracles he traveled to Egypt, through the Oasis, the desert of Libya, Upper Egypt, and then entered Alexandria from its eastern gate on 61 A.D.

On his arrival, the strap of his sandal was out loose. He went to a cobbler to mend it. When the cobbler – Ananias – took an awl to work on it, he accidentally pierced his hand and cried aloud "O one God." At this utterance, St. mark rejoiced and after miraculously healing the man’s wound, took courage. The spark was ignited and Ananias took the Apostle home with him. He and his family were baptized, and many others followed.

The spread of Christianity must have been quite remarkable because pagans were furious and sought St. Mark everywhere. Smelling the danger, the Apostle ordained a bishop (Ananias), three priests and seven deacons to look after the congregation if anything befell them. He left Alexandria to Berce, then to Rome, where he met St. Peter and St. Paul and remained there until their martyrdom in 64 A.D.

Upon returning to Alexandria (65 A.D.), St. Mark found his people firm in faith and thus decided to visit Pentapolis. There, he spent two years preaching and performing miracles, ordaining bishops and priests, and winning more converts.

Finally he returned to Alexandria and was overjoyed to find that Christians has multiplied so much that they were able to build a considerable church in the suburban district of Baucalis.

**His Martyrdom**

In the year 68 A.D., Easter fell on the same day as the Serapis feast. The furious heathen mob had gathered in the Serapis temple at Alexandria and then descended on the Christians who were celebrating Easter (Christian Pasch) at Baucalis. St. Mark was seized, dragged with a rope through the main streets of the city. Crowds were shouting "The ox must be led to Baucalis," a precipitous place full of rocks where they fed the oxen that were used in the sacrifices to idols. At nightfall the saint was thrown into prison, where he was cheered by the vision of an angel, strengthening him saying, "Now your hour has come O Mark, the good minister, to receive your recompense. Be encouraged, for your name has been written in the book of life…" When the angel disappeared, St. Mark thanked God for sending His angel to him. Suddenly, the Savior himself appeared and said to him "Peace be to you, mark, my disciple and evangelist!" St. Mark started to shout "O My Lord Jesus" but the vision disappeared.

On the following morning probably during the triumphal procession of Serapis he was again dragged around the city till death. His bloody flesh was torn, and it was their intention to cremate his remains, but the wind blew and the rain fell in torrents and the populace dispersed. Christians stole his body and secretly buried him in a grave which they had engraved in a rock under the altar of the church.

**His Relics**

During the schism which burst between the Copts and the Melkites, the first kept the head while the body remained with the latter. On 644 A.D., a soldier sneaked into the church where the head was buried. He took it away to his ship under the impression that it was a treasure. Later, when Amro-Ebn-El-Aas (leader of the Arab troops) ordered the ships to sail off Alexandria, that particular ship could not move. Eventually the soldier had to confess and Amro handed it back to Pope Benjamin.

The saint’s body did not remain in Egypt, for it was stolen and taken to Venice by some Italian merchants. They built a huge cathedral in St. Mark’s name, believing that St. mark was their patron Saint. In 1968, part of his relics which is now kept in the new Cathedral in Cairo, was offered to the Egyptian Pope Cyril (Kyrillos VI) from Pope Paul VI).

**His Apostolic Acts**

St. Mark was a broad-minded Apostle. His ministry was quite productive and covered large fields of activities. These included:

* Preaching in Egypt, Pentapolis, Judea, Asia Minor, and Italy, during which time he ordained bishops, priests, and deacons.
* Establishing the "School of Alexandria" which defended Christianity against the philosophical school of Alexandria and conceived a large number of great Fathers.
* Writing the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist, which was modified later by St. Cyril to the liturgy known today as the Liturgy of St. Cyril.
* Writing the Gospel according to St. Mark.