

The Coptic Language

Objectives

To learn about the origin and evolution of the Coptic language; to understand the reasons behind its success and decline throughout time and to understand the importance of preserving the language

References

- ❖ www.stshenouda.com

Scriptural Verse

“In that day there will be an **altar** to the Lord in the midst of the land of **Egypt**, and a pillar to the Lord at its border” (Isaiah 19:19)

Lesson Outlines

Origin of the Coptic Language

- ❖ 6000 years ago, the ancient Egyptians constructed a language utilizing symbols to represent words. This proved to be very laborious as the vocabulary had to be very extensive. In order to overcome this problem some of the hieroglyphs were given sound values that usually depended on the word that it had represented earlier.
- ❖ This was called Demotic and was made up of 4,000 characters.

Its Evolution

- ❖ In 313 BC, Alexander the Great invaded Egypt and wanted to have a universal culture and language. Therefore, Greek was imposed on the Egyptians.
- ❖ The Greek was far superior to the Demotic, since it only consisted of 24 pronounceable characters.
- ❖ Greek was spoken by the educated classes in Alexandria while the Demotic was spoken by the peasantry throughout Egypt.
- ❖ In order to simplify the Demotic and to translate Scripture, scholars translated the Egyptian language using Greek characters.
- ❖ They borrowed seven characters from the Demotic that were not in the Greek language.
- ❖ 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 Akhmimic and the Lycopolitan (Asyutic) dialects of Upper Egypt.
- ❖ The Middle Egyptian and the Fayoumic of Middle Egypt.
- ❖ The Bohairic of the Delta which is actually the only surviving dialect of Coptic.
- ❖ The neutral dialect, called the Sahidic. This dialect eventually gained literary dominance with the extensive writings of St. Shenoudah the Archimandrite.

Its Peak

- ❖ Coptic was used as a translational tool from Greek to Egyptian from the late 2nd century A.D. till the time of the great persecution of Diocletian in the early 4th century AD. After the persecution, the monastic movement picked up tremendously. These monastic communities were large and mostly Egyptian. This generated the need for the abbots of

these communities to write their rules in Coptic. Also the Fathers of the Church, who usually wrote in Greek, addressed some of their works to the Egyptian monks in Coptic.

- ❖ St. Shenoudah the Archimandrite, who lived from 348 to 466 A.D. 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.

Its Decline

- ❖ By the middle of the seventh century, Egypt came under the dominance of Arab rulers who tried to force the Copts into learning Arabic to keep their government jobs.
- ❖ Those who did not know Arabic were not employed by the government.
- ❖ In an effort to exterminate the Coptic language and discourage Copts from speaking it, the tongues of Copts were cut off if they were heard speaking Coptic.
- ❖ 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 the 11th century approached, severe persecutions of the Christians in Egypt by the Muslims started to take place, which intensified during the Crusade.
- ❖ Introduction of Arabic into the Church in the 12th century by Patriarch Gabriel ibn Turaik was probably an attempt to show the Muslims that the Copts were not their enemies.
- ❖ This move actually allowed Christian Arabic literature to flourish. Later, Arabic invaded the liturgical books, replacing Greek in bilingual texts and intruding on traditionally non-bilingual ones. Purely Arabic liturgical texts began to appear, indicating that Arabic was being used in the churches.
- ❖ Arabic texts written with Coptic characters started to circulate among the monks 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.

Its Revival

- ❖ Pope Cyril IV who assumed the throne of St. Mark in the second half of the 19th century started a Church-sponsored movement to educate the clergy and the new generations in Coptic.
- ❖ Coptic service books, grammar books were published again for the first time.

Its Current State

- ❖ Coptic continued to grow in the Church and among ecclesiastically-educated groups in the early parts of the 20th century. However, the pronunciation system established seemed to be a hindrance to the spread of the language among the masses.
- ❖ With the 1952 Revolution, Arabic became more prominent in Egypt and eventually it had an influential effect on the educated classes among the Copts.
- ❖ This allowed Arabic to enter the church again and weaken the Coptic.
- ❖ Today the use of the Coptic language is limited to liturgical services in churches and monasteries.

Coptic Manuscripts

- ❖ The whole New Testament is preserved in Bohairic and Sahidic with some whole books and fragments preserved in other dialects.
- ❖ Many writings of the fathers are preserved mainly in Sahidic as well as some in Bohairic. These include the writings of Saints Athanasius, Shenoudah the Archimandrite, Cyril I, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Pachomius and his disciples, Wessa, and others .
- ❖ A variety of the martyriologies especially during the Diocletian Era and lives of the saints and the monastic fathers in Sahidic and Bohairic.
- ❖ Most of the liturgical manuscripts are preserved in Bohairic with some in Sahidic.
- ❖ Some canons of the fathers as well as the councils are preserved in Sahidic.
- ❖ There are some legal documents such as contracts, deeds, wills, as well as private letters.
- ❖ These are preserved in monasteries, libraries and museums throughout the world.

Conclusion

- ❖ Coptic is an ancient Egyptian language which has miraculously survived thousands of years of modifications, alterations and near extinction.
- ❖ It is up to the Christian remnant of Egypt to preserve this language in order to uphold the beliefs of the church fathers who communicated in this language, to maintain the rich heritage of the church and to preserve the identity of the Coptic people.

Activities/Discussion Points

1. Ask the class if they know any words in Coptic and have them teach it to the rest of the class.
Below are some examples:
 - ❖ Good Morning – **Nane Towi**
 - ❖ Good Evening – **Nane Rouhi**
 - ❖ Hello – **Nofri**
 - ❖ How are you? – **Pekreeti Ou**
 - ❖ Fine Thank you – **Nane Shepehmot**
 - ❖ Bye Bye - **Ougai**
2. Do you know what parts of the liturgy are in Coptic and what parts are in Greek? The priest's prayers are in Coptic while the deacon's and the people's responses are in Greek.
3. Can you give examples of praise hymns that are in Greek? (e.g. Arepsalen)