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## The Copts and the Bible

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# 3

## The Copts and the Bible

*Aziz S. Atiyat*

I approach the topic of the Copts and the Bible in all humility as a historian, rather than as a theologian or biblical scholar. Even dealing with the bare bones of the historical aspect of this monumental enterprise must necessarily be a curtailed attempt, for all the facts of our theme are not yet uncovered. The Copts, whose heritage—and even whose very existence—was either ignored or forgotten for centuries, have emerged in recent years as a remarkable community in the Christian world, and their role in the development of early organized Christianity has become a subject widely studied by modern theologians and archaeologists. In fact, it has been revealed that Coptic contributions in the formative years of institutionalized Christianity were enormous. In the domain of biblical studies, it appears beyond doubt that their literary remains from the first three centuries of our era stand at the base of the Bible itself.

Historically speaking, the first attempt at a scientific compilation of the Bible text must be ascribed to one of the greatest biblical exegetes of all time, namely Origen (ca. 185-254), a Coptic scholar born in Alexandria. During the first half of the third century, when Christianity and paganism still mingled in Egypt and persecutions were still rife in every province of the Roman Empire, Origen seems to have succeeded his mentor, Clement of Alexandria, as head of a catechetical school of Alexandria. During his tenure in that office, the school came of age as the world

seat of theological studies, and its literary activities grew in abundance around the indefatigable personality of that intellectual giant. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, ascribed to him the authorship of six thousand books, tracts, and treatises, some of which were colossal in size and magnificent in quality. Of course, we assume that in those days men of faith pooled their intellectual and spiritual resources; and thus Origen's pupils must have collaborated in his unusual literary productivity.

One of Origen's principal contributions appeared under the title of Hexapla (Greek "sixfold"). The Hexapla comprised the complete text of the Old Testament in both Hebrew and Greek. Origen gathered together the famous four Greek versions of Aquila of Pontus, Symmachus of Samaria, and the Septuagint in both the original and the revised version of Theodotion. Origen was thoroughly acquainted with all of these second-century works. He arranged them in six parallel columns, probably on papyrus, a perishable organic material, as neither parchment nor paper was yet in use, which accounts for the work's disappearance. Begun at Alexandria in the early decades of the third century, the unfinished collation of the Hexapla was taken by Origen in one of his exiles to Caesarea, where he completed his monumental undertaking before the middle of that century. Fragments of it were gleaned by F. Field in his work *Origenis Hexaplorum Quae Supersunt* (2 vols., 1867-1875); but the fifth column of the Septuagint survived in toto in a Syriac translation by Paul, Jacobite bishop of Tella in Mesopotamia, in 616-617.

We assumed, however, that Origen's biblical efforts outside the Hexapla also extended to the books of the New Testament, where his vast exegetic labors in the Gospels, Acts, the epistles, and Revelation must of necessity have included every text with its special commentary.

Contemporary with Origen's biblical endeavor (or slightly later, but still in or about the third century), is the

stupendous Chester Beatty Papyri, consisting of twelve codices and spreading over the areas of both the Old and New Testaments. Minor sections of that remarkable collection were acquired by the University of Michigan, and some folios escaped to private hands. But the bulk of the treasure has remained in the Chester Beatty collection, now in Dublin; as such it was published in facsimiles and textual transcriptions, with introductions by Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, under the title *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Description and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible*. This series appeared in eight fascicules, each consisting of several brochures. The Old Testament books represented in the collection include Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Esther. Others are the books of Enoch and Melito. Of the books of the New Testament, we have the four canonical Gospels, the Acts, the Pauline epistles, and Revelation. The codices also contain noncanonical writings, such as the *Epistle of Enoch*, which was succeeded by a Christian homily in some eight leaves acquired by the University of Michigan but reproduced with the Chester Beatty texts. The provenance of these manuscripts is tentatively placed in the Fayum, and Coptic glosses by the Coptic scribes who executed them appear in some of them. Many noted scholars participated in examining these codices, including W. E. Crum in relation to the Coptic glosses; Professor H. A. Sanders, the eminent papyrologist of Michigan; Ulrich Wilcken, who dated the papyri at about A.D. 200; Ibscher of Berlin, known as the greatest technician in mending papyrus; and others. A general survey of these manuscripts presents no major variants from the accepted canonical versions, and these manuscripts may have been a natural bridge between the oldest original texts, which had disappeared, and the later codices, with which we will deal separately in our present inquiry.

It would be a grave error to assume that that rich har-

vest was unique in Egyptian or Coptic antiquity. Other collections must have perished in Alexandria because of the seashore humidity; but in Upper Egypt, samples of various papyri from early Coptic history were saved in the dry sands of the desert. For instance, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, an archival collection of thousands of papyrus fragments discovered in Middle Egypt in 1897, included documents on every branch of the humanities. Perhaps one of its most significant religious contents is "The Sayings of Jesus." This, of course, is an apocryphal fourth-century text that reminds us of another more recent discovery of equal magnitude – the Nag Hammadi Library.

The Nag Hammadi Library is a fourth-century Gnostic series in the Coptic language, essentially translated from earlier original Greek texts. It consists of thirteen papyrus codices with fifty-two tractates, of which thirty-one were hitherto unknown. It also comprises a number of apocryphal gospels that can hardly be overlooked by biblical scholars. Among these gospels are the *Gospel of Truth* (*Evangelium Veritatis*), the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the *Gospel of Mary*. In addition to the gospels are such works as the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* and other acts and epistles. Here, from the heart of the Coptic Upper Egypt, we have five apocryphal gospels and some additional acts and epistles that, whether Gnostic, apocryphal, or technically heretical, will surely give biblical divines fresh materials to consider. These documents should throw additional light on facets of the formative years of the Holy Scriptures.

Another collection of formidable dimensions is the Bodmer Papyri, discovered in the neighborhood of Dishna in Upper Egypt, not far from Nag Hammadi. Although these thirty codices still await critical study, it has been estimated that they are from the second century. If so, this collection is probably the earliest biblical treasure on record.

At this point, we are approaching identification of the definitive moment when the canonical Bible text was formed in Coptic or Egyptian territory. Where do the Copts stand at this important juncture in the long story of the genesis of the Bible's accepted recension? This must in great measure be ascribed to the cumulative work among the Coptic community of scholars in the tradition of Origen. The result of their labor has been described in modern biblical scholarship as the Egyptian Bible text, or perhaps more specifically as the Hesychian Bible Recension cited by St. Jerome. Hesychius was an Egyptian bishop who earned the crown of martyrdom under Galerius, the son-in-law of Diocletian, probably between 303 and 307, that is, only a few years before Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire by issuing the Edict of Milan in 313. The Hesychian recension of the Gospels in particular must have been used by subsequent biblical scholars and scribes.

After the triumph of Christianity, Constantine ordered fifty copies of the Bible prepared and distributed among the churches of Christendom. These copies were made at Alexandria or Caesarea, though Alexandria, having the seat of theological and religious studies associated with its unique catechetical school, remains the stronger possibility. These fifty copies must have been executed largely, if not wholly, during the long reign of Athanasius the Apostolic, bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373. Undoubtedly that great champion of orthodoxy must have participated in the final selection of what was regarded as the canonical Gospels. By no means should this minimize the preceding multitude of earlier apocryphal Gospels cited in the Nag Hammadi Library and elsewhere, though they were condemned as heretical in some letters issued by Athanasius.

(Here it is appropriate to interject a note of the definition of heresy in those early centuries. Heretics and saints in those days were holy men, and sometimes a heretic was

a greater ascetic than many saints. In reality, a heretic became heretic when he was defeated by his antagonist; his heresy could have prevailed as orthodoxy if only he had won the day. We must therefore not dismiss heretics indiscriminately as the heralds of Satan.)

However, the present canonical texts of the Gospels are surely the direct descendants of the fifty versions collated by order of Emperor Constantine I. Of these fifty, four copies have survived on the vellum that began to replace Egyptian papyrus. These four are the Codex Vaticanus, the Codex Sinaiticus, the Codex Alexandrinus, and the Codex Ephraemi Syri Rescriptus. Together with the earlier Chester Beatty Papyri, these Egyptian products constitute the source of the text of our current Bible.

We note here that the Copts handled the Greek versions as deftly as they did any Coptic translations. An educated fourth-century Copt was as proficient in Greek as in Coptic, but a Greek knew only Greek. He neither knew Coptic nor had any need to know it. Consequently, we must assume that all texts in either Greek or Coptic that came to us from Alexandria are under the Egyptian umbrella and tied to Coptic biblical scholarship. If rigorously applied, this rule would revolutionize the whole science of patrology, wherein all writers in Greek are now indiscriminately termed Greek Fathers. Looking closely at such names as Demetrius, Athanasius, Cyril, Didymus, and others who wrote Coptic as well as Greek, we must revise the existing description of those giants as Greek simply because their major works are in Greek. The fact that they also wrote in Coptic suggests that we should regard them as Coptic rather than Greek Fathers.

I suppose we must apply this rule in the reverse to biblical studies in Greek and look upon the aforementioned codices as Egyptian products. It is conceivable that all the Bibles ordered by Constantine were based on the Hesychian recension already mentioned as the consummation



of Egyptian efforts to present the most authoritative text in Alexandria.

Owing to the singular importance of these four codices in the framework of a Bible symposium, it behooves us to offer a brief description of each. I shall begin with the Codex Vaticanus, which may be considered the oldest complete Bible in that set. It was probably written in Alexandria on fine vellum around the middle of the fourth century. The dating is defined on grounds of Greek paleography characterized by the absence of calligraphic ornamentation of later times. The surviving parts, which are considerable, consist of 759 folios, of which 142 are New Testament texts. Its leaves average 26-1/4 cm by 25 cm, and each page has three columns of forty-two lines each. Its simple uncials are continuous, and the words are not spaced; nor do the sentences have any punctuation. Few majestic initials occur in the manuscript, and a blank space separates each book from the one that follows. Sacred names are abbreviated throughout. Apparently two scribes wrote the manuscript, one the Old Testament and the other the New. Moreover, two readers, one contemporary with the manuscript and a second of much later date, in the tenth or eleventh century, revised the work and made corrections. Pale words were retraced, probably by the latter reader, who chose to overlook incorrect words without tracing on the assumption that they might be effaced by age. The same writer added breathings and accents.

The Codex must have been in the Vatican Library before 1475 because it appeared in the first catalog, which was printed in that year. Then Napoleon carried it with him to Paris during his Italian campaign of 1809. It remained in the French capital until Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, when the precious book was returned to Rome. While in Paris, the Codex was examined by J. Leonhard Hug, a German professor from Tübingen, who, for the first time, assessed its age and value. After its return



to the Vatican in 1815, it was again scrutinized, this time in 1843 by Constantine Tischendorf, discoverer of the Codex Sinaiticus. But its intrinsic value and unusual importance could be judged only after the text was made accessible to all biblical scholars and classicists through the publication of the whole text in photographic facsimiles at Rome in 1889-1890. Examination of that edition also revealed that sixty-one leaves of the text had been lost.

Second in this Egyptian family of biblical manuscripts is the Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in 1844 in the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai (Jebel Musa) by Constantine Tischendorf. This manuscript consists of 390 leaves of very fine vellum, the remains of what could have originally been at least 730 folios. The extant parts of this work include 242 folios of the Old Testament. The size of the folios averages approximately 37-1/2 cm by 33-1/2 cm, and each page has four columns of forty-eight lines. The lines are written continuously, with no spaces between the words. It has no accents or breathings, though it includes some punctuation.

As in the Codex Vaticanus, sacred names are abbreviated in the Sinaiticus. Three different scribal hands have been identified by their peculiarities, especially in spelling. The New Testament was written almost wholly by the same scribe. Numerous corrections were made in the text, both by its original writers and by others from the fourth to the twelfth century.

The manuscript has the dignified simplicity of the Vaticanus in its calligraphy, and both codices could have originated in Alexandria. Like the Vaticanus, it is probably one of the fifty copies ordered by Constantine.

Since the Codex predates the sixth-century foundation of the Monastery of Saint Catherine, we must assume that it was taken to Mount Sinai by the monks when they went to live there. From an early date, however, Sinai had attracted hermits who resided in caves around the holy

mountain beyond the oasis of Pharan, near Jebel Serbal, where a cathedral with a bishopric is known to have existed. That area was associated with the prophet Moses, being the supposed site where the Lord gave him the tablets of the Ten Commandments, and where he received God's initial revelation to him in the burning bush. Consequently, it had been a center for pilgrimage by pious adventurers since the early Middle Ages. Among those early pilgrims was the renowned Spanish nun Etheria, who left an account of that terrain and its holy inhabitants around the year 460. Furthermore, Saint Helena, mother of Constantine, visited the Holy Land in the fourth century and was instrumental in building a church around the traditional site of the burning bush. This church is preserved behind the sanctuary of the present cathedral, which Justinian erected in 525 as part of the monastery complex. He built it both to commemorate Theodora, his queen, and as a pious act to protect the monks and ascetics of Sinai from wild nomadic tribes. That fortified refuge at the foot of Sinai, the Holy Mountain, originally called the Monastery of the Transfiguration, was later renamed in honor of Saint Catherine.

The story of its renaming is interesting. Saint Catherine, a highly literate native of Alexandria living at the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, was martyred during the reign of Emperor Maximinus (305-313), and legend has it that angels transported her body to Sinai and deposited it on the mountain that bears her name to this day (Jebel Katrina). Sometime in the ninth century, a monk of Sinai had a vision of her resting place; consequently, the holy men followed that dreamer in a procession to Jebel Katrina, found her body intact, and transferred it to their monastery, which has borne her name ever since.

Throughout the Middle Ages, monks of many nations are known to have flocked to Saint Catherine's monastery

with their sacred treasures. This is how the Codex Sinaiticus reached the monastery, although we do not know when that happened.

The discovery of the codex occurred in May 1844 in the monastery library, which is renowned among biblical scholars, classicists, and theologians for its accumulation of Christian manuscripts in numerous languages, especially Greek.<sup>1</sup> Constantine Tischendorf was one of these scholars, and during his exploration he was attracted by a basket full of parchments, of which some moldering specimens had been destroyed by fire. On closer examination, Tischendorf found, in his own words, "a considerable number of sheets of a copy of the Old Testament in Greek, which seemed to me to be one of the most ancient that I have ever seen."<sup>2</sup> He prevailed upon the monastery authorities to let him select forty-three folios that, according to his story, were otherwise destined for the flames, and took them with him to Leipzig, where he edited them in 1846 under the title of Codex Frederico Augustanus in honor of his patron, the king of Saxony.

He returned to Sinai in 1853 and searched again, without results; but in 1859 he came a third time, now armed with a letter of recommendation from Alexander II, the emperor of Russia. Nevertheless, systematic searching yielded no results, and Tischendorf was preparing for departure when the steward of the convent invited him to his cell and put before him a bulky mass wrapped in red cloth. On opening it, to his amazement, Tischendorf found the rest of the parchments he had saved from the basket in 1844. He found Old Testament folios, segments of the Epistle of Barnabas and the Pastor of Hermes, and a complete New Testament. He was allowed to take that unwieldy mass of leaves to a branch monastery in Cairo for further study, since his time in the monastery was coming to a close; and he finally took the folios to Saint Petersburg, where he presented the loose leaves of the manuscript to

the Russian czar on behalf of the monastery. In return, the Russian ruler paid the equivalent of \$6,750. The valuable codex was retained in the imperial library at the Russian capital until 1933, when the Soviet authorities sold it to the British Museum for the enormous sum of one hundred thousand pounds sterling, the equivalent of half a million dollars. Thus the codex found a permanent home and was delivered on December 27, 1933, as a disorganized pile of loose quires and folios without apparent beginning or end. Here its vellum leaves were treated with the utmost care, organized, and bound in two separate volumes comprising the Old and the New Testament.

The third of the Egyptian family of biblical texts in Greek is another work on vellum known as the Codex Alexandrinus, which is also deposited in the British Museum. Like the other codices, it is written in simple but exquisite uncials; but unlike them it is slightly ornamented with rubrications at the outset of every book, and its paragraphs are defined by larger capital initials in the margins. Its lines, however, are continuous, without spaces between the words, and its marginal initials are placed mostly at the beginning of the line when they follow a verse ending in the middle of the line. The text has few breathings and no accents. Quotations from the Old Testament are marked and sacred names are abbreviated. Each book has a colophon at its termination. Apparently the manuscript is the work of three scribes, with numerous corrections in the same style from the same period. It could date from the early part of the fifth century, a little later than both the Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus.

The Alexandrinus is relatively large, consisting of 773 folios, though the original has been calculated to have been at least 820 folios. The Old Testament occupies 630 folios and the New Testament 143. The dimensions of each folio are approximately 32 cm by 25 cm. The manuscript is composed of quires of eight leaves, and its pagination appears

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in three sets of numbers: one contemporary in original Greek at the top of each folio, a second from the fourteenth century in Arabic numerals at the outer lower corner of the verso side of the folios, and a third in a relatively modern ink by Patrick Young, librarian of King Charles I.

The strange story of how this codex wandered from Alexandria to the Royal Library in Britain is quite interesting. First, Cyril Lucar, the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, in whose library that Codex was deposited, took it with him to Constantinople after his preferment to the Ecumenical Greek Patriarchate in the Turkish capital. There he presented it on January 30, 1625, to Sir Thomas Roe, then ambassador to Turkey, who brought it with him to London in 1628, where he placed it in the Royal Library. It passed to the British Museum in 1757.

On the title page of the book of Genesis, an inscription in Arabic is made by Athanasius the Humble, who lived at the beginning of the fourteenth century. He dedicated the book to the Patriarchal Cell in the city of Alexandria, coupled with a curse against anyone who might succumb to the temptation of moving it from its place. The curse did not, however, alter the course of events.

The fourth of the famous Egyptian family of codices is known as Codex Ephraemi Syri Rescriptus, so called because a twelfth-century scribe, short of vellum, decided to erase the original biblical text by rubbing the leaves with pumice stone or soaking them in lime juice. He rescued the vellum for a new Greek version of the homilies of Mar Ephraem the Syrian, a great fourth-century divine theologian. Thus the manuscript became a palimpsest, the older defaced text still perceptible under a later text on the same vellum by a later scribe. With the help of modern technology and the use of ultraviolet rays, the whole of the original fifth-century text could be construed. It consists of biblical text in full page rather than the numerous columns of the first three codices mentioned. It is written in

similar uncials without accents or breathings, and its words are continuous without spacing. It is possibly the work of a single scribe with two occasional marginal inscriptions. Since it is relatively small, consisting of only 209 folios, the original must have been much more extensive. The New Testament section occupies 145 folios and lacks 2 Thesalonians and 2 John.

The provenance of this fourth codex can be traced to the days of the Medici dynasty in Italy, when it was owned by Cardinal Ridolfi of Florence. Later it was passed to another member of the family, Catherine de' Medici, who married Henry II of France. She took it with her to Paris, and it was finally deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale, where it still remains.

It is not difficult to deduce from this brief survey of our scripture's ancient manuscripts that we owe a considerable debt to Egyptian or Coptic source material for our existing Bible recension. In reality, the whole field of Coptic studies is still in its infancy; and the future may still hold masses of valuable information on the place of the Copts, not merely in relation to the Bible but also in the wider framework of Christian civilization. The whole world is just beginning to learn more about Coptic faith and culture after the sect's centuries of persistent struggle under very adverse circumstances.

Like a great and solitary Egyptian temple sorrowfully standing on the edge of the desert and suffering repeated sandstorms until it became almost submerged, so the ancient Coptic church led its lonesome life unnoticed on the fringe of Christian civilization and was buried in the sands of oblivion. Like the same massive temple, however, it has proved itself indestructible, though battered by the winds of change and obscured by accumulated rubble. In the past few decades, with increasing security and liberty within and support and sympathy without, its children have begun, with the tools of scholarship, to recover its original

dimensions and glory from beneath the sands of time. It even shows modest signs of shining again.

The task of reconstructing Coptic contributions through archaeology, papyrology, theology, art, and architecture now belongs to the world of scholarship at large; and the rising centers of Coptic studies in institutions of higher learning are gradually throwing increasing light on a valuable phase of a most ancient Christianity. It is hoped that the Coptic Encyclopaedia now being prepared will be an instrument of great enlightenment as it assembles the scattered facts about this little-known facet of our heritage that stands at the root of almost every segment of Christian civilization.

### Notes

1. Constantine Tischendorf, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Ancient Biblical Manuscript Now in the British Museum* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), 7–32, recounts the discovery of this codex.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.