

The Coptic Quill

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This book, which contains a collection of 41 texts in different genres by 12 authors occupying 204 pages, is in 'modern' Coptic (Bohairic). A striking feature of the book is that there is not a single word of Arabic in it. My copy has been downloaded from <http://www.remenkimi.com>. The only other language in the book is English, used to translate the brief address to the intended readers of the book. No editor or compiler is named.

My own interest is in much earlier Coptic texts, and I find it intriguing but not surprising that Coptic is developing into not only a medium of oral communication in Egypt (in Church or at home) and probably in Coptic communities in general, but also of written communication.

The Coptic name of the collection is ⲙⲈⲢⲓ ⲛⲣⲙⲛⲭⲏⲙⲓ, which appears in English as 'Coptic Quill'. On p. 4 the anonymous compiler writes: 'We have taken feathers that have fallen from an ibis and written letters, poems etc. in Egyptian'. The association is fairly clear: Thoth, often depicted as an ibis-headed god, is usually associated with writing and learning. Oddly enough, the Coptic text published by E. Chassinat *Un papyrus médical copte* (1921) p. 240 also mentions ibis feathers used for the application of a balm for the relief of pain, and it may not perhaps be too fanciful to speculate that in this case it is a metaphor: balm for the pain caused by prolonged linguistic alienation.

Unlike Aramaic (Syriac), the other major Christian vernacular language in a predominantly Arabic-speaking region, Coptic was unable to survive as a spoken language. I know almost nothing about the survival of Syriac and can follow the language only by using a translation, but there seem to be relatively isolated regions such as Tur Abdin (SE Turkey) and Malula (not very far from Damascus), where there may have been no outside interference with the language. Egypt does not really have isolated areas, except perhaps the Western Desert Oases, which seem to have been almost entirely Muslim for many centuries. One thing is fairly clear: even in the 12th and 13th cent. there was an awareness among Egyptians that their language might disappear, and works such as the long poem known as The Triadon and the grammar by Athanasius of Qus are evidence of this concern. In the 19th cent. scholars such as Claudius Labib did a good deal of work trying to keep the language alive. In the 20th cent. Werner Vycichl, in the mid-1930s, collected some Coptic language material, mostly fossilized phrases, in a village near Luxor called Zeniya (Coptic Pisolsel), published jointly with W.H. Worrell in *Coptic Texts in*

Michigan University (1942). And more recently Emil Maher, who produced a mammoth 4-volume work on the phonology of Boharic for his Oxford D.Phil. thesis, used to hold classes in Coptic in the Abbasiya Cathedral complex in Cairo, this sort of work must have contributed greatly to the 'revival' of the language.

Since there is now a considerable Coptic diaspora, it is likely that the various communities around the globe have also undoubtedly played and will continue to play their part in reviving Coptic.

The following is an English version of the first text in the collection by Abram, described as a 'story' (ΦΙΡΙ) entitled 'O Jesus, Come' (Ω ΙΗ̅C̅ ΛΜΟΥ).

In the first half of the 20th cent. there were great changes in the world. Russia changed from Christianity to Communism and the impiety of terror and tyranny. Churches were closed and opened only occasionally at the whim of government functionaries. But Jesus was in heart of the ordinary people, who kept the Christian faith. The people of Jesus were the victims of much pain at this time and they decided to become martyrs so as not to live in the faithless grove.¹

The Church of Russia suffered much pain to tell the whole world that Jesus was alive in it at all times and was keeping it from evil. At that time there was a small Christian house. The following people lived in that house: the grandfather, Diakofsky and the grandmother Elena, the father Gadosky and the mother Serena and their daughter Evon.² This house suffered great tribulation at the hands of the faithless.

The faithless set fire to their house and for this reason they were in the grove. At that time Serena was pregnant. On one occasion she wept and said to her husband: "How long will we be like this and how will our son live?" He replied: "We have to bear this tribulation, otherwise we will become wild animals like the faithless. We will tolerate this tribulation so that our son will become a man."

At that moment the grandfather Diakofsky came in and said: "Who is talking about

1 I wonder if this an allusion to Deut. 16, 21, in which it is stipulated that groves of trees are not to be planted near an altar. The word is used several times in the text. It is unlikely to be a reference to the 'valley of tears' (ΕΙΑ ΜΠΡΙΜΕ) in Ps. 84,6

2 Perhaps Ivana, the Slavic form of Johanna

the wild beasts, for it is clear that we are sure to find food and eat it ?³" The father Gadosky replied: "By wild beasts I meant the faithless, for Serena knows what they have done to us." Grandfather said: "Do not cry, my daughter. God the merciful will save us and keep us safe." He opened the Holy Book and read out the story of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt.

Serena gave birth to an angelic child and called her Evon. The child grew. Her life was hard. She went to school and heard the words of the faithless and told her grandmother of this, who embraced her, saying: "My darling girl, two thousand years ago a child was born. This boy saved the entire world. He was hanged but rose from the dead because he was the son of God. He is now not loved by the faithless, but we love him and we must love him because he is life."

The child did not understand the words of her grandmother but she loved this boy and spoke with him while standing before his image. At school there were problems between Evon and her teacher, who often became angry with her and made her cry with her constant abusive contempt of the boy Jesus.

The teacher brought a boy named Mark. When she called him, he entered the room. She then said to Evon: "Can you call Jesus and will he come like Mark ?" Evon replied: "Yes." The teacher said: "Look ! I will beat you if he does not come." Evon and two other girls stood beside the teacher and called out: "Jesus, come ! Jesus, come !"

Lord, you are great in truth. There is no God but you. You know what has happened. What happened can be summarized in two words: *Jesus came*. A pillar⁴ of light appeared and grew and the child Jesus appeared. The teacher cried out like a madwoman: "He has come, he has come, he has come." Jesus said to the children: "Come to me, blessed ones of my Father."

The children went to him and he took them to heaven, their bodies radiating light.

3 I do not understand this sentence.

4 I do not recognize the Coptic word, unless perhaps it is meant to be **Ⲫⲟⲓ** 'fragrance', evoking a kind of synaesthesia.

Their parents found out and set off for the school. When they arrived, they heard the voices of the angels. Her mother Serena wept and they asked her: "Why are you weeping?" She replied: "I am weeping because I am overjoyed. You remember the day when I wept and said: 'How will our daughter live in this grove?' On that day I became aware that this girl who was in my womb would fill our hearts with joy, and this is what has happened today."

They took her body and built a small shrine in their house in the grove. On her feast day the house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.