

The Coptic Calendar

On the Origin of the Calendar of the Coptic Church

On the occasion of the beginning of the Coptic year 1726 AM, we here present to the reader this article written by our late spiritual father, first in September 1973, discussing the basis upon which the Coptic calendar is based. Enjoy!

THE PHARAONIC EGYPTIANS were the first in the world who measured time, who dated the years, and who divided the years into months. For their record keeping, they used a solar calendar. They knew that the year was approximately 365 days long, and they organized their calendar with precision, dividing it into months with 30 days allotted to each—and all this in the year 4240 BC. In his writings on Egypt, the famous Greek historian Herodotus says that the Egyptians were led to this conclusion by means of the stars, and that they greatly excelled the Greeks in adjusting their solar year so that it should begin exactly on schedule. This they accomplished by appending an extra 5 days to the total of 12 months; these 5 days they called the “small month.”¹

At this point it is worth drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that it is this solar calendar of the ancient Egyptians, based on sidereal calculations (i.e., by means of the stars), that has been adopted by all the rest of the world.

It is well known that the Coptic solar year used to be divided into three seasons rather than four as is currently the case. Originally, every season had four full months, with the season of the rising of the Nile coming at the head of all the seasons. After this came the season of planting and cultivation, and last came the season of fruit and harvest. Anyone familiar with the Coptic mass will probably notice that this tripartite division is still used in the liturgical rites of the church. The Church assigns an *owshia*², or special prayer, to each season. First is the *owshia* for the rising of the waters, next comes the *owshia* for the staple crops, and then comes the *owshia* for the winds and the fruit crops. Thus the Coptic year is first and foremost tied to the Nile, or in other words it is a Nilotic year.

As stated above, the Coptic year is based on precise stellar observation and minute calculations. This you can actually observe for yourself by looking up at the night sky just before the beginning of the Coptic New Year—namely, just before the beginning of the Coptic month of Tut (mid-September). At that time of the year, just before sunrise in the eastern sky, you will see a brightly shining star, known to the ancient Egyptians as “Stit” but

¹ Herodotus, 2:4.

² This word comes from the Greek εὐχῆ which means prayer.

now known to us as Sirius. This star is part of the constellation which the Romans called the Great Dog (Canis Majoris). Because the appearance of Sirius was always a portent of the Nile's annual flood, the source of life and prosperity, this star was the object of adoration to the ancient Egyptians as is witnessed in their hymns. Sirius appears close to the sun, and only once a year, so for this reason the Egyptians called it the "flood bringer." They thus adapted the Coptic year according to the course of the star, considering the moment of its appearance to be the beginning of the year.³

Historians believe that the earliest recording of this star's movements began in the days of the first consolidation of the pharaonic government in Heliopolis in the year 4240 BC.

Christian Egypt

Egyptians have been numbering their days and months according to their solar calendar almost continually from the dawn of history up to the present day. This is because of the solar calendar's relationship with the cultivation of the land, the main source of life and livelihood. In contrast to this, Egypt's civic records have been markedly affected by whatever government or sovereign happened to be in power, whether native Egyptian or of a usurping foreigner. History was recorded according to power and conquest, as, for example, in the case of Alexander the Great.

The Roman ruler Diocletian came and horrified the entire world, and Egypt in particular, with his violence and his persecution of Christians. None among the Christian countries escaped having its soil stained by the blood of martyrs. Diocletian even went so far as to shed the blood of the Coptic Patriarch St Peter I, who became known as "the Seal of the Martyrs" since he was the last to lose his life during that sinister reign. As a result of all this, the Copts consider the year AD 284, the year of the tyrant's ascension to sovereignty, as the beginning of their calendar. Thus the Coptic year can be calculated by subtracting 284 years from the current year of the western calendar.

When we read from the writings of one of the Fathers of the Church who was contemporary to the reign of Diocletian, we can understand why Egypt in particular was alone in adopting this painful and gory period as the beginning of her calendar:

If the martyrs of the whole world were put on one arm of the balance and the martyrs of Egypt on the other, the balance would tilt in favor of the Egyptians.

It is estimated that the total number of death sentences pronounced by Diocletian against the Christians, sentences which were actually carried out, amounted to 800,000.

About Diocletian

The parents of Emperor Diocletian were both slaves to Anulinus, a member of the Roman Senate. His mother named him after the city in which she was born. After an outstanding display of valor, young Diocletian was granted his emancipation; thereafter he worked within the Emperor's palace. Gradually he was promoted through various offices until he became a consul, and later head of the palace guard. Diocletian fought in the Persian war and displayed such rare distinction that, after the death of Numerian, his rivals were obliged to elect him—a former slave—to ascend the imperial throne. Of the attributes

³ Meyer, Ed. *Aegypt. Chronol.* Berlin, 1904.

ascribed to him by the English historian Gibbon, half relate to baseness, meanness, and hypocrisy; half to courage, sycophancy, and affected refinedness.⁴ Obviously, such contradictory attributes combined in one person render him one of the toughest and most dangerous sorts. Diocletian was a worshiper of Jupiter, the patron god of wealth. Gibbon also says:

Diocletian had astounding perseverance for realizing his goals, with a flexibility for varying the means and great artistry in subserving his skills and the skills of others to the interests of his ambitions, and in disguising these ambitions with the strongest of pretenses, pretending them to be for the sake of justice and common interest.⁵

All these personal attributes will be readily grasped by anyone who reads the Coptic Synaxarium in which are described all the means of torture inflicted upon the Christians who were martyred during Diocletian's reign.

For 21 years Diocletian held the empire in an iron grip; afterward he abdicated his power and retired to the city of Salona in Dalmatia. There he stayed for nine years, in the end dying an invalid.⁶

The Commemoration of Martyrs

Every Christian must be aware that, from the first to the last, Christianity is a testimony to Christ: "Ye are witnesses unto me!" The word "martyr" means "witness." It was first applied to the apostles alone as those who were witnesses to Jesus' life, His death and His resurrection⁷: "And ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8).

Yet it happened that the Lord Himself began appearing to all who, because of their faith in the Name of Christ, endured excessive suffering—especially He appeared to those who voluntarily submitted themselves to death out of love and adoration for the Lord; and this at the moment of the soul's release from the body.

Thus all who accepted death in the name of Christ were called martyrs since they truly entered into an actual vision of the Beloved. In this way, death as the ultimate testimony to Christ came to be very highly regarded side by side with the honor accorded the Apostles. Indeed, in the Church's liturgical commemoration of the saints, the martyrs are mentioned immediately after the apostles and before the great saints. This is so, even if they were only catechumens prior to their martyrdom, since the shedding of one's blood as testimony to Christ was considered as baptism in the deepest sense of the word; as being an indelible dye, and as being a partnership in the death of Christ.

Splendid examples of the honors bestowed by the church on martyrs have been preserved for us in early church history. The Church has always considered the day of martyrdom to be the martyr's true birthday, that is to say his heavenly birthday wherein begins his true and eternal life. To this day the Church continues to bestow honors in the extreme on her martyrs; on the martyr's memorial day all the church services should be conducted in

⁴ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I, p. 286.

⁵ Ibid. pp 286f.

⁶ Ibid. p. 302.

⁷ *Oxford Dictionary* p. 886.

commemoration of his martyrdom. Honor is paid in hymns, prayers, recitals and sermons, then Holy Communion, the highest degree of celebration and glorification, is offered. Since the earliest time the Church has set up small sanctuaries or chapels called “Martyria,” meaning “places of testimony.” We read about this in the life history of St Macarius the Great when he set up a small chapel to contain the relics of Maximus and Domadius:

When the fathers and visitors met with St Macarius, he used to take them to their cell and say, “Let’s go and see the testimony (martyrium) of the young strangers.”

The reader will notice that the word “testimony” here is a literal translation of the Greek word “martyrium,” or chapel dedicated to the memory of the martyr. This chapel was the symbol of the highest veneration by which St Macarius was able to immortalize the memory of these two bloodless martyr-monks.

The Church still considers her martyrs to be those who intercede before God on her behalf, intercessors whose blood pleads before God better than the blood of Abel. The Church considers the remains of their bodies to be a treasure dearer than perishable gold, and more precious than any adornments, any beauty, or any splendor. Though it be small and poor, though its walls be of mud, a church should consider itself to be greater than the most magnificent cathedral in the world if it possesses the body of a martyr. This pride is not from pride in a name, a race, a land, or in a language; it is rather the pride in a testimony of God that has been sealed in blood—as it says in the Gospel: “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1Cor 1:31). Indeed, there was a time when the Church did not regard any altar worthy of consecration unless it contained some relic of a martyr.⁸ Moreover, the priest appointed to a martyr’s altar was considered to be of a higher rank than any other priest; he was called “Martyrarius,” meaning “servant of martyrdom.”

Feasts of Martyrs and Their Liturgies

The early church in all its enthusiasm used to celebrate in honor of Christ twice a week with prayers and hymns on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the year. Vigils starting on Saturday would go on all night with a display of complete joy and a spirit of true festivity. On Sunday, the liturgical service would then culminate in the divine oblation.

Beyond these two days the Church used to congregate for an additional meeting one or two times every week. This we learn from St John Chrysostom in his sermon number forty which was delivered during one of the occasions when a martyr’s feast day was commemorated with vigil, prayers, and hymns until daybreak, after which the solemn rite was brought to an end with the offering of holy communion, just as on Sundays. We also learn from his sermon number fifty-five, regarding the vigil held inside the church in honor of a saint:

You have kept vigil yesterday all night long, and have completed the requirements of sanctity, so that you have changed night into day; so now do not change your day into night with drunkenness and dissolution.

Among the very earliest documents describing the way in which martyrs were commemorated is the report written by the ancient historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, who describes

⁸ Ibid.

the celebration of the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who achieved martyrdom in AD 168. Of the bishop's church in Smyrna we are told by St John Chrysostom that:

They decided by the will of God to congregate around his tomb to celebrate his birthday [i.e., the day of his martyrdom] with joy and jubilation to venerate his sufferings so as to exemplify that to the rising generations.⁹

Tertullian also refers to the rituals used by the church of his day when celebrating a martyr's feast day. He says:

The oblations are offered on behalf of those who have passed away on their birthdays as a perpetual commemoration of the day of their martyrdom.¹⁰

St Cyprian also describes the Church's interest regarding this, saying:

The Church offers the oblation on behalf of them when they set up to commemorate their suffering in the days of their martyrdom as a perpetual annual commemoration.¹¹

It used to be that the liturgical service would always include a recital from the history of these martyrs. The writing of this was entrusted to the bishops themselves, or it was at least revised by them in order to meet ecclesiastical standards, and to acquire an official status. Indeed, the Church would not accept a history that had not been approved of by a bishop. The council of Carthage, for example, instituted a legislation regulating the writing and reciting of the martyrs' histories.¹²

Among the rare manuscripts in the library of the Monastery of St Macarius, a text composed in the Bohairic Coptic dialect was found in which was written a preface that was to be recited by the patriarch or bishop before the reading of the life histories of the martyrs. It also contained instructions for the priest, should it be that the bishop were not present. Herewith is presented the Coptic text followed by an English translation:

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[qen `vran `mviwt nem `ps/ri nem pi`pna eyu ounou]
`nouwt piouai `mmauatf `nte `vmi: Piatar,ou ouoh
pietjwk pinis] qen pefco[ni ouoh pijwri qen
nef`hb/oui v/etsop qen mai niben ouoh eymoh
`e`pt/rf piyucauroc `nte niagayoc ouoh
`m`pref]`m`pwnq v/etcaji qen pinomoc nem
ni`prov/t/c ]]ho `etafmetagayoc eyref]n/i
`nou`hmot nem ounai ouoh ntefouon `nnibal `nte
pah/t nem `p,a] eyriemi `e pefnomoc ouoh `nte areh
`e nefentol/ nem nefouacahni ouoh `nte ]wou
`mpefnis] `nran ey`meh `nwou saeneu am/n:
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⁹ Eusebius, I:15, Bingham *Antiq.* IV, p. 536.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 536.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 536.

¹² Council of Carthage, law no 47.

Ouh `ntatamwten `w nas/ri `mmenrit ... `cmou eroi
`cmou:
qen `vran `m`viwt nem `ps/ri nem pi`pna eyu ounou]
`nouwt:
`cmou eroi ic]metanouia,w n/i ebol naio] nem
nen`cn/ou `e`sl/l ehr/i `ejwi `nagap/ hina `nte p%
V] pimairwmi nagayoc]n/i `noubouji `ncwoun nem
ounouc efr/c nem ouh/t efme h `nka] hina `ntaws qen
pefnomoc `nte areh `enefentol/ ouh `nte]wou
`mpefnis] `nran eyneh `nwou sa eneh am/n:
`ntatamwten `w nas/ri `mmenrit:]

This translates as follows:

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, of true oneness, of no beginning, the perfectly great in His counsel, Omnipotent in His deeds, Omnipresent and utterer through the Law and the Prophets, I beseech His Benevolence to grant me grace and mercy and open the eyes of my heart and understanding, so that I should understand His law and observe His commandments and His will and glorify His great name which is filled with glory forever. Amen. That I might inform you my beloved sons....

Then he says, "Bless me, bless me..."

However, if the utterer of the benediction is a priest he should not recite what is written earlier, but rather the following:

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God. Bless me (he prostrates himself). Forgive me O my fathers and my brothers. Pray for me with love, so that the Lord, the benign philanthropic God, should give me some consciousness, an alert mind and a heart imbued with comprehension, so that I could read in His Law and observe His commandments and glorify His great name which is filled with glory forever. Amen. That I might inform you, my beloved sons....

Lest it be thought by the naïve that the Orthodox Church's veneration of martyrs is actually a part of her worship, we present here the opinion of the early church concerning such an assumption. The representatives of the church of Smyrna requested the viceregent to give them the body of the martyred Polycarp (actually the burnt remains of his body) in order to venerate him. The Jews of the city sarcastically exclaimed that the Christians were now going to abandon the Crucified and begin worshipping the body of Polycarp. The Church's reply to this was:

We worship the Son of God. As for the martyrs, they are the disciples of the Lord who followed His tracks. So that we love them because they are worthy of that, by virtue of their incomparable love for their King and Teacher. We wish we were also to become their partners, and companions to them in such discipleship.

And when the centurion saw the contention of the Jews, he put the remains of his body in the middle and burnt them. This had become customary with them. We thus gathered his bones afterwards. They are dearer than the precious stones and more valuable than gold. We put them in a befitting place. We hope that the Lord would allow us to meet together in blissfulness and felicity to celebrate the memory of all those who previously struggled, and as a discipline and preparation for those who follow their example.¹³

It is worth calling the reader's attention to the fact that this lovely ecclesiastical celebration happened in AD 168. It is the most ancient account to come down to us concerning the commemorations of martyrs. The extract quoted above is from Eusebius of Caesarea, the bishop and eminent church historian. From it we realize that the veneration of martyrs had been an inseparable part of the religious life of believers; it has always enkindled their faith to the highest degree.

A testimony from the Church in the West is also worth noting. Bishop Austin (the original pronunciation of Augustine who died in AD 604) was the first archbishop of Canterbury who had been sent by Gregory the Great as a missionary to establish the Church in England. He tells us:

We used to revive the memory of our martyrs with official ecclesiastical rituals. This to elevate ourselves to the level of being able of (sic) emulating their behavior, and to count ourselves partners with them in this fate, and the merits they earned, and to obtain among ourselves some benefit through the prayers for them. Nevertheless, we did not present worship or oblation to any martyr under any circumstances except to the God of the martyrs alone. This despite the fact that we actually set up sanctuaries and altars in the names of the martyrs as a memorial to them exclusively. It never ever happened that the priest stood to present to the body of the martyr lying underneath the altar worship or oblation, saying to you anything like: "We present this oblation, O St Peter and St Paul or Cyprian!" Rather, what was presented of worship and oblation was presented entirely and solely to the Lord God who venerates his martyrs: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps 116:15).¹⁴

As for our Nairuz message, it is to shed further light on our Coptic calendar which is based from first to last on testimony to Christ; it is as if our entire history is a story of love toward Christ, a story stained with blood. Each year of the story is a prolonged chapter crowded with heroes whose memories are retold again and again, yet we do not get bored remembering them. As for our day, it is a touching scene in which we are crucified—for indeed in Christ we are crucified every day and resurrected every day: "for thy sake we are killed all the day long!" (Rom 8:36).



¹³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *History of the Church* IV, 15.

¹⁴ *Ad Faustus* I, 20, 21.