

2026-02

Book excerpt: the story of the Copts: the true story of christianity in Egypt

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/52422>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

Book Excerpt

Iris, Habib el Masri. *The Story of the Copts: The true story of christianity in Egypt*. N. Pl.: Coptic Bishopric for African Affairs, 1987.¹⁵⁵

St. Paul and St. Antoni (p. 58-62).

61. While Abba Dionysius was so engaged in encouraging the people to face the fierce tempest of persecution raging about them, a solitary figure detached himself and turned his face toward the desert, trudging on and on toward the fastnesses of its inner depth in search of peace through prayer and fasting in its vast solitude. It was St. Paul [230-341 CE], who became the first Egyptian hermit. When he first set out into the desert, no one knew about his intentions, not even the man who sat on the Chair of St. Mark. At the outset of the persecutions of the Emperor Decius, he was a young man of twenty, very wealthy and well-educated in both the Coptic and the Greek literatures. He was of a gentle spirit and a strong lover of God. He had an only sister who was married. Her husband, coveting his wealth, went to the authorities and denounced his wife's beloved brother as a Christian. Hearing of it, Paul's sister went weeping to him, and entreated him to go into hiding. Thereupon, he fled into the desert. His idea at first was to hide temporarily, but the life of solitude both attracted him and appealed to him, and what had been his necessity became his free choice. He journeyed on, further and further, into that vast ocean of desert solitude, until he came to a cave beyond which were a fount of clear water and some palm trees. There he made his abode, from the time of his arrival, at the age of twenty, and there did he abide till he died, ninety years later, at the age of a hundred and ten. All these long years he spent in utter solitariness, unknown and unheard of by man, but in complete communion with God.

Then, in the fullness of time, it pleased God to disclose the secret of this sacred life of his servant Paul – that it may be a sweet smelling incense and an incentive to others. It was disclosed to Antoni (St. Anthony of Egypt) who is known in ecclesiastical history as the “Father of Monks.” The manner whereby Antoni found out about St. Paul was strange indeed. Having himself become a desert dweller for many years, a vain thought assailed and disturbed this holy man. He entertained a sort of pride to think that he was the first desert dweller. But, at night he saw a vision. The Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and told him of yet another desert dweller who had hallowed the desert with his continuous prayers for all humanity, many years before he even set foot therein. Antoni forthwith exclaimed: “As the Lord liveth I must see this man of God”.

¹⁵⁵ Full reference: Iris, Habib el Masri. **The Story of the Copts: The True Story of Christianity in Egypt**. Newberry Springs, CA: St Anthony Monastery, n.d. (2 volumes). Book 1, “**From the Foundation of the Church by Saint Mark to the Arab Conquest**” URL: <https://ukmidcopts.org/kotob/STRCOPT1.pdf>; Book 2, “**From the Arab Conquest to Present Time**” URL: <https://ukmidcopts.org/kotob/STRCOPT2.pdf>

Early the next morning, he started out on his search. For two days he walked from morning till night. At the end of the second day he felt lost and disheartened, so he knelt down and prayed in great earnestness that he might be deemed worthy to find out the whereabouts of him about whom the Angel had spoken. Starting his search again on the morning of the third day, he came to a cave with a big stone closing its entrance.[7] Standing beside it, he heard a voice praying and chanting inside. He stood listening, then knocked on the stone, realising in his heart that he had found him whom he was seeking. Receiving no answer, he cried aloud: "I have asked and I was given; I sought and I have found; I knock, and I trust that it shall be opened unto me". At these words, the stone was rolled from the cave's entrance, and behold, St. Paul stood there. The two saints looked at one another and were overwhelmed with great joy. They fell on each other's necks, crying and praising God for such a union. They spent the day praying and talking together of God's wondrous ways. Near sunset, as they were getting ready for the evening prayer, a crow came to them with a whole loaf of bread in his beak. St. Paul reverently took the bread in his hands, and turning to St. Antoni said: "You see how our Heavenly Father cares for us. In His Mercy He sends me half a loaf of bread every day, but today that you are with me, He has sent us a whole loaf. Blessed be His Holy Name; He Who never slumbers nor sleeps watches over the least of His children". They gave thanks, broke the bread and ate.

For two days Antoni remained with Paul, and they enjoyed each other's companionship. The third day, Paul asked Antoni if he would go back and bring him the cloak that had been given him by St. Athanasius. St. Antoni marvelled in his heart that the hermit, who had been living in such complete solitariness away from the world for nearly a century, could know of this cloak. But out of reverence he dared not question the holy Father. He kissed his hands and his eyes, and immediately set out to do as he was bid. Now, St. Paul did not really want the cloak. He just wanted gently to send his guest away; so that he may not be present with him at the moment of his death, for it had been revealed to him by the Spirit that his hour was at hand.

St. Antoni lost no time. Exhausted and panting he reached his dwelling. Two of his disciples, who for a long time had ministered unto him ran out to meet him, asking: "Where hast thou tarried so long, master?" "Woe is me," he answered, "that do falsely bear the name of monk. I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, yes, I have seen Paul in paradise". And so, with tight-pressed lips and his hand beating his breast, he carried the cloak from his cell. To his disciples, who were eager to know more, he answered, "There is a time to speak and a time to be silent". And leaving the cell, and not even taking with him some small provision for the journey, he again took to the roads.[8] He journeyed for a whole day. As the dawn of the second day illumined the sky, he started walking again, when behold, afar off he saw a wondrous sight: St. Paul was climbing the steps of Heaven, apparelled in light, and surrounded by an Angelic host, singing and praising God. Whereupon Antoni exclaimed: "Verily this is the Spirit of my father the blessed Paul, being carried up to Heaven". He accelerated his steps to the cave.

Upon arriving there he found that St. Paul had already gone to his rest, and his body was lying, with hands outstretched in the form of the cross. St. Antoni wrapped

his body, knelt beside it and chanted the Diptych (or prayer for the dead). Wanting to bury him, he felt at a loss as he had no tools with which to dig the grave. While wondering what to do, he saw two lions coming towards him. They came into the cave and stood beside the body, bowing their heads as though kissing it: Then they looked up at St. Antoni, as though offering their help. Antoni outlined with his finger the plot to be dug for the grave. The two beasts immediately set themselves to the task. When they finished, Antoni, with the help of the lions, interred St. Paul. This done, the lions bowed their heads over the grave, as if in silent prayer for a moment, then they turned back to where they had come. St. Antoni watched them go, then raised his hands in praise to the Almighty, whose command even the wild beasts obey.[9]

Notes (p. 67):

7. Up to the present a monastery bearing the name of St. Paul still exists within the vicinity of this cave. When, in 1884, A. J. Butler published his book "Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt" he said on p. 346, v. I, "This far convent has scarcely ever been visited by a European traveller, and its beauties and its treasures must be left to their ancient silence". This is no more the case, however, for the monastery. Cars and desert routes have made the monastery accessible now.

8. "Desert Fathers" transl from Latin and Greek mss. by Helen Waddell, London, 1936, p. 50.

9. Arabic ms. No. 49 Hist. dated 1380 AM (1664 AD) pp. 1r-78r. kept at the Papal Library Cairo. It may be noted that one of the wonders connected with the saints is their power over wild beasts, a power similar to that which Adam had before his fall. Having attained saintliness, God bestows on them this power in recompense for their struggle toward spiritual perfection. Cf. R. P. Cheneau d'Orleans, vol. II, p. 518.

The Theban legion (p. 93-95).

Since Egypt was being ruled by the Romans, the latter exercised their right to mobilise Egyptian youth to serve in their army. One of the Egyptian legions that had won high repute in the armed service was known as the Theban legion – so-called because its members were natives of Thebes, capital of Pharaonic Egypt (and site of the present day town of Luxor). Unknown to the Romans, the soldiers of the Theban legion had all been converted to Christianity.

When, in the course of the history of the Roman Empire, the province of Gaul [present-day France] rumbled with signs of rebelliousness, Emperor Diocletian [284-305 CE] commissioned Maximian – an old comrade and loyal friend of his whom he had appointed as his second in command and given the title of Caesars [8] to quell their rebellion. Maximian having heard of the valour of the Theban legion requested Diocletian to send it over to him that it might participate in the action. When they arrived, Maximian divided them into two groups: one was to encamp on the border of Gaul, and the other, in present day Switzerland, in preparation for the attack. On the eve of the battle, Maximian, as was his habit, decided to go to the pagan temple to pay homage to his gods, and he ordered the men of the Theban legion to go with him. But he was both surprised and infuriated when they unanimously refused to obey his order and declared they were Christians. He therefore, ordered them to stand in file and had them decimated (ie., every tenth man killed), hoping thereby to intimidate them.

But the rest assembled together and wrote him a letter which they all signed. In it they said: "Great Caesar-we are your soldiers, and at the same time we are God's slaves. We owe you our military service, but our prime allegiance we owe to God. From you we receive our daily wages; from Him our eternal reward. Great Caesar, we cannot obey any order if it runs counter to God's commands. If your orders coincide with God's commands we will certainly obey them; if not, "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), for our loyalty to Him surpasses all other loyalties. We are not rebels; if we were, we would defend ourselves for we have our weapons. But we prefer to die upright than to live stained. As Christians we will serve you. But we will not relinquish our Faith in our Lord, and this we openly declare".[9]

When Maximian read this letter the very steadfastness it portrayed angered him all the more. Again he ordered a second decimation, and once more asked the remnant to accompany him to the temple. Fearlessly they said: "We are Christians". Thereupon Maximian ordered his Roman soldiers to wipe out the whole Legion. Pere Cheneau describes this saga in the following terms:

Thus were they martyred: some in Agaune, others in Soleure, in Ventimiglia, in Bergamo, and in Treves. It was a mighty holocaust; an unparalleled massacre, the plains were drunk with blood and the bodies strewn to the winds. But by being willing to make the supreme sacrifice, the men of the Theban Legion proved that their faithfulness to their Heavenly Lord and King surpassed their valour as soldiers in the army of the temporal ruler.[10]

Notes (p. 109):

8. *Cambridge Ancient History*. Vol. 12, p. 327.

9. Pere Cheneau d'Orleans. *Les Saints d'Egypte*, 240.

10. *Ibid.* vol.-2, pp. 241-8; 357-8.

St. Dimiana and the forty virgins (p. 99-101) :

110. Since persecutions and martyrdom were not confined to men, the next 'witness' to be considered here is a woman saint and martyr. Her name is Saint Dimiana, and she is, perhaps, the most widely known and most popular heroine in Coptic sacred history. Her icon in many a Coptic church depicts her in the centre with forty virgins around her. The reason will be known as her story unfolds. Dimiana was the only child of Marcus, Governor of Burullus [18] during the rule of Emperor Diocletian. Marcus and his wife were Christians and had brought up their daughter in the fear of the Lord. She had been taught the Scriptures from her early childhood and had become so captivated by them that their study occupied most of her time and interest. As she grew up, Dimiana became a beautiful young lady, and her parents – like all others – aspired to have her well married. When she was approached on the subject, however, Dimiana refused to consider it and revealed to her parents that her sole wish was to dedicate her life to the service of the Christ. Disappointed; but complying with her wish, her parents built for that a special mansion in Za'afaran [19] where she and forty virgins decided to

live and plan their Christian activities. In this abode Dimiana and her companions lived harmoniously together, worshipping God and serving the surrounding community. The happiness and peace they enjoyed was not destined to last, however. One day Diocletian, who had already begun his persecution of the Christians, asked the Egyptian princes and noblemen, of whom Marcus was one, to accompany him to the pagan temple to offer incense to the Roman gods. Fearing the loss of prestige and perhaps of life itself, Marcus joined the ranks of the worshippers, and did not publicly declare that he was a Christian. A few days later, the news of her father's frailty reached Dimiana in her seclusion.

Immediately she left her abode and went to meet him in his capital. As she entered his mansion, her father sensed her sorrow and hurried forward to greet her. But as she responded to his paternal solicitude, her whole frame shook and her tears gathered and fell. Finally when she collected herself, she told her father how disappointed she had felt when she heard that he had not had the courage of his faith, and that she could have borne with greater fortitude the burden of his loss than the shame and treachery of his survival. Her words and her sobs moved her father so deeply that he regretted what he had done, and told her he was going to redress it. In a mood of resurgent courage and resolution, he went back to see the Emperor.

Firmly, proudly but quietly he declared before him and his retinue his fealty to the Christ. Diocletian, infuriated by the change of heart Marcus had, and the calm defiance he showed, ordered him to be beheaded at once. Then, when he learned that it was his daughter, Dimiana, who was the instigator of her father's repentance, Diocletian sent one of his officers at the head of his regiment, with the orders to do his utmost to dissuade her from her faith. If neither promises nor threats availed, she was to be tortured; and this failing, be put to death.

The officer obeyed his orders. He tried persuasion at first, but Dimiana and her forty companions refused to denounce their faith. Forthwith they were tortured outrageously and inhumanely, but despite that, never wavered. Amid their pains and suffering, they kept praying and praising God. Finally they were all put to death and received the crown of martyrdom. Before Dimiana's head was cut off, she prayed, then proclaimed: "The Lord Christ I confess, on Him I rely, in His Name I die, and through Him I live forever".

A large crowd of people stood by and watched, and when they beheld her courage and steadfastness, and the patience with which she accepted torture, in a surge of miraculous exaltation many of them confessed the Christ, and were massacred on the spot.[20]

Notes (p. 110):

18. The sea-coast province, lying between the Rosetta and Damietta Nile branches, right on the Mediterranean.

19. A town twenty kilometers south of the coast and about forty kilometres southwest of the city of Damietta which is at the mouth of the Eastern branch of the Nile.

20. *Coptic Synaxarium*. 1969 ed: vol. 2, pp. 139-142 (under the 12th day of the Coptic month Bashans).