

# *Establishment of the Coptic Church*

Saint Mark the Apostle and Evangelist, one of the seventy apostles and writer of the oldest gospel, established the Church of Alexandria in about 55 AD. In Alexandria, St. Mark structured the church worship; ordained one bishop and seven deacons; established the famous School of Alexandria; and was martyred there by the Romans in 68 AD.

It was at the house of Saint Mark that the Lord met with His Apostles and celebrated the Passover, where the Lord appeared to them after His Resurrection, and where the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost. Thus, it is well known by all the Apostolic Churches as the first church in the world. Hence, the Coptic Church is one of the oldest churches in the world, spanning 20 centuries of history. By the end of the second century, Christianity was well established and very active in Egypt.

The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the five most ancient churches in the world and is called the "See of Saint Mark." The other four ancient sees are the Church of Jerusalem, the Church of Antioch (Antiochian Orthodox Church), the Church of Rome (Roman Catholic Church) and the Church of Athens (Greek Orthodox Church).

*An Excerpt from the book, "Saint Mark the Evangelist" by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Chapter 6*

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[Thursday, April 30, 2009](#) | No comments.

## The Greatness of Alexandria

Alexandria was the cultural capital of the world when St. Mark arrived there. Its famous School was the centre of science and philosophy with a library filled with hundreds of thousands of books. The population of Alexandria was estimated to be from half to three quarters of a million,<sup>(1)</sup> who were Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, Ethiopians, Nubians and other races.

## Its Religious Status

The people St. Mark faced were a complex of different religions. There was the old Pharaohic religion, that had many gods like Isis, Oziris, Hirus, Amun, Abis, Hathur etc., under the great god Ra. The Greeks had many gods under their supreme god Zius. At this period there was a movement calling to combine both the Egyptian and the Greek gods, as 'syncretism' to be under the god 'Sirabis', the great idol. The Romans too had many gods under Jupiter.

There were also the Jews, with their prophets, laws and the scriptures and the heresies that the Pharisees introduced. Their number in the city was huge, that they occupied one out of the five districts of the city. At the same time some of the Jews who arrived recently from Jerusalem were already converted to Christianity before coming to Egypt.

The name of Christ had already arrived to many individuals, through Apollo of Alexandria. Apollo was mentioned in the Book of Acts, "An eloquent man and mighty in scriptures... He was fervent in the spirit ... For he mightily convinced the Jews and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ." [Acts 18:24 -28]. It might be possible that some of the Jews of Alexandria had received the Word of God through St. Simon of Cana or through "dear Theophilus" who was close to St. Luke. But all of these cases were limited to some individuals only. Beside all these religions, there were many wise men from India, Persia and Egyptian priests who were leaders in a pagan environment.

Accordingly, the city was a mixture of idol religions with an atmosphere of philosophical arguments and discussions, particularly at the school of Alexandria and its museum. St. Mark stood alone to face all these religions and philosophies, but he was capable in defeating them with the power of God. He entered Alexandria with a torn sandal from walking the long way.

## When Did Saint Mark Arrive in Alexandria?

It is difficult to determine the exact dates for the journeys of the apostles. Usually calculated in relation to the events, and the time of the arrival of St. Mark was no exception.

Josephus, the famous historian, mentioned that St. Mark came to

Alexandria in 43 AD, while Mrs. Butler estimated it to be in 45 AD. Patriarch Maximos Mazloom suggested that it was in 49 AD. Selim Soliman, Francis Al Etre, Deacon Menassa Youhanna gave the date as 55 AD. For Ibn Akbar it was 58 AD and for Fr. Chineau it was 60 AD, when St. Mark was 50 years old. Abu Shaker Ibn Al Raheb, Anba Isedoros, Habib Guirgis, Kamel Saleh Nakhla and Iris Al Masri, said that his arrival was in 61 AD. With such variations in dates, most of the ancient historians preferred not to guess and rather to stress on the events themselves. That was what the Book of Acts almost did. We don't accept the earlier dates, as St. Mark was still a youth, in the company of other apostles. Certainly he didn't come before the Council of Jerusalem which was about 50 AD, as agreed by all the historians.

After the Council of Jerusalem, he accompanied St. Barnabas to Cyprus where both preached together. Later, St. Paul, appreciating the importance of St. Mark in preaching, he called him to work with him.

When St. Mark was alone on his own, he went to the Five Western Cities and stayed there for few years. He may have arrived there between 55-58 AD. It is most probable that he arrived in Alexandria about the year 60 or 61 AD and this was accepted by most of the Coptic historians who estimated his stay in Alexandria to be seven years or seven years and eight months.(2)

## On the Way to Alexandria

On his way to Alexandria, the words of Isaiah might have been on his thought,

+ "The burden of Egypt. Behold, the Lord rode upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt and the idols of Egypt shall be removed at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it."

+ "And that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord...And it shall be a sign and for a witness unto the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt...And the Lord shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation, yes, they shall vow a vow unto the Lord, and perform it..."

+ "Blessed be Egypt my people." [Isiah 19 : 1 , 19 -21 , 25]

Also he might have been thinking about the journey of Christ with the Virgin St. Mary and the blessing they left to Egypt. It was said that he entered Alexandria, coming from the Five Western Cities, passing through the oasis to Upper Egypt and from there to Alexandria where he entered it east to the port where there was an obelisk.(3)

## Preaching to the Cobbler

He was praying before entering Alexandria to God, to provide him with the spiritual needs for the success of his mission. By the time he arrived, his sandal was already torn, so he went to Anianus, a cobbler, to repair it. While Anianus was holding the needle, it went through his finger and he screamed from pain and said, "O' the One God". St. Mark was delighted when he heard this phrase, which was an appropriate chance to begin talking to him about that One God. It was also appropriate to ease him from his pain first, so he took some mud and spat on it and put it on his wound, saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ, Son of God, heal this hand." (4) It was healed on the spot as if nothing happened to it. Anianus was surprised at the miracle which was done in the name of Jesus Christ and opened his heart to the Word of God.

St. Mark asked him about the One God he called, but Anianus replied that he heard about Him, but didn't know Him. Then St. Mark began to talk to him spiritually. When his sandal was repaired he was invited to go to Anianus' home to talk more about that God. As St. Mark entered the house he made the sign of the cross and asked God's Blessing to fill it. (5) He stayed with this family talking about Lord Christ. When Anianus asked to see The True God, St. Mark assured him that he will. He talked with him about the scriptures, the prophets, the incarnation, the miracles, the crucifixion and the great sacrifice He provided to the world. Anianus and his family became believers and St. Mark baptized them. This home was the first fruit in St. Mark's preaching in Egypt.

## Spread of the Faith in Egypt

St. Mark who is considered the, First Bishop of Alexandria, found that his first responsibility was to continue preaching from one place to another, challenging all the difficulties that he met. With great enthusiasm he was able to convert many to the faith in God, in spite of the different numerous religions of the Egyptians,

Greeks, Romans, Persians and the arguments of the Jews.

The Catholic Jesuit, Fr. Frermaj reported in his book "Moraweg Al Akhyar" referring to St. Mark, that " God blessed him for his unique enthusiasm. The land which was full of darkness of the filth among the unbelievers, was changed by St. Mark the Evangelist to a heavenly paradise, with justice shining over it." (6) Maximos Mazloom, the Patriarch of the Greek Catholic Melchites, wrote about St. Mark, " He pulled the inhabitants to the faith in Christ, in grooves, with God's blessing and the marvelous miracles he did, that Alexandria became a second Jerusalem, similar to what happened when the Holy Spirit descended in the Chamber of Zion . (7)

The Word of God flourished forcefully and very fast despite the encountered difficulties, which were overcome. We understand what St. Paul meant when he said about St. Mark, "For he is profitable to me in the ministry." [2 Titus 4:11]

## Alexandria after Saint Mark

St. Mark had great impact on Alexandria. His success to convert large numbers to believe was due to his deep spirituality, and his strong relation with God. Eusebius the famous historian, referred to this as such, "There were multitudes of believers, men and women, who gathered from the beginning and lived the extraordinary simple life, that Philo noted to be worthy to describe. Their efforts, gatherings, and their comfort in all the ways of their lives were tremendous. (8) Eusebius in a complete chapter in his book about the philosopher Philo admired the monastic life in Egypt.

Fr. Chineau in his book " The Saints of Egypt," wrote, "Life became marvelous in Egypt after accepting the faith and Philo, the famous Jew, confirmed that Alexandria brought back the memory of the early days of the Church in Jerusalem. (9) Let us find what the philosopher Philo said about the believers in Egypt as stated by Eusebius, "They left their properties, under the influence of their faith and followed the path of the prophets;" "There was a holy place in every house, to practice their religion in, in complete isolation. They didn't permit into it any food, drink or anything for the need of the body;" "All day long from the morning to the night they were praying, reading the Holy Books".; "They created songs and praises for God with different tunes and rhythms" ; "They ate

only after sunset" ; "They enjoyed the wisdom, without limit, tremendously." He also referred to their purity and described their prayers, silence and services.

## Other Works of Saint Mark

St. Mark established a Theological School to stand against the school for the pagans and to combat their ideas. He designated St. Justus to manage the school who later became the sixth bishop of Alexandria. He wrote the Holy Liturgy for St. Anianus and the priests to use in praying.

## Anianus Ordained a Bishop

With the tremendous success and achievement for the faith in Egypt, the unbelievers were very angry and they decided to kill St. Mark. The believers advised St. Mark to leave Egypt for a while for the safety of the church. St. Mark, who preached other cities in Egypt, agreed to leave, to return back to the Five Western Cities. He then ordained St. Anianus to be the Bishop of Alexandria in 62 AD. He also ordained three priests, Milius, Sabinus, Sardenus, and seven deacons.(10) It is noticed that Anianus was ordained a bishop while St. Mark was still living, which indicates St. Mark's apostolic universal authority to ordain bishops wherever he went, as he did in the Five Western Cities.

St. Jerome, mistakenly in his book, wrote that St. Mark was killed in 62 AD the year Anianus was ordained, assuming that his predecessor must have died before such an event could be possible.(11)

## The Return of Saint Mark to Alexandria

St. Mark stayed for a few years among the church in the Five Western Cities and with St. Paul preaching in Rome. Then the two great apostles St. Paul and St. Peter were killed and St. Mark returned to Alexandria. On his return, he found that the church he planted, grew and became prosperous and the number of the believers increased tremendously. and a church was built in the eastern part of Alexandria, known as Pokalia. (12)

St. Mark kept watching his people grow and visited and preached other cities in Egypt. This annoyed the pagans to the extent that they named him as, " The exterminator of the idols".