

The Significance and the Role of the Desert in the Coptic Monasticism: Monastery of St. Samuel as a Case Study

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Abstract: Egypt known as one of the centers of Islamic world today used to be one of the centers of Christian world for more than 500 years before Islam came to Egypt in 7th century. Today 10-15% of total population of Egypt is Christian and it constitutes the biggest Christian community in the Middle East. The major denomination of Egyptian Christianity is Coptic Orthodox Church which belongs to the category of the Oriental Orthodox Churches who separated from the Western Church due to the difference of Christology at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Although Coptic Orthodox Church has not been the forefront in the Christian world compared with the Catholic and Protestant Churches, it is important to note that Christian monasticism first appeared in Egypt and it is deeply related with Coptic Orthodox Church. In 3rd century people who secluded themselves from cities or villages along the Nile Valley started living a monastic life in the vast desert. They started to be called “Desert Fathers (Mothers)” and their ways of life and words later had a great influence on Christian monasticism both in East and West. Coptic Orthodox Church has kept the tradition of the desert monasticism throughout history and in 1960s modern religious revival movement made it even more important in the Coptic society. In this paper, the significance and the role of the desert in the Coptic monasticism will be discussed by using the data of the author’s fieldwork at Monastery of St. Samuel, al-Minyā Governorate in Upper Egypt as a case study.

Key Words: Coptic christianity, Desert, Egypt, Monasticism

1. Who are Coptic Christians?

Although Egypt is known as one of the leading Islamic countries today, 10-15% of its total population believes in Christianity. It means that there are about 8 to 12 million Christians in Egypt today and they are called Coptic Christians. Among the several Christian denominations in the Middle East such as Syrian Orthodox Church, the Maronite, Catholic Church and Protestant Churches, Coptic Orthodox Church, the major Christian denomination in Egypt is the biggest in number and is one of the most influential Christian communities in Middle East and North Africa. It is one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Christian denomination which separated from the Western Church due to the difference of Christology at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

As for the official history of Coptic Orthodox Church, its beginning dates back to 1st century. Christianity came to Egypt in 1st century right after its birth in Palestine as it is known today. Copts believe that their patriarch was established by St. Mark, the Evangelist. Christianity became and had been a major religion of Egypt for more than 500 years until Islam was brought by the Arabs in 7th century. The name “Copt” is derived from Greek word “aigyptos” which means Egypt. Since most of the population of Egypt was Christian when the Arabs came to Egypt, they called the native

Egyptians “aigyptos,” later reduced in Arabic “qibt” and later it came to refer to “Christians in Egypt.” Today Copt or Coptic Christian substantially means Christian Egyptian no matter what denomination he or she belongs to but the word Copt/Coptic Christian often refers to the Coptic Orthodox Christian and it is the denomination which this paper focuses on.

2. Christian Monasticism and the Desert

Christian monasticism was first started in Egypt in the late 3rd century by St. Anthony (251-356) who is known as “the Father of the Monks.” Though Anthony was born in a wealthy Christian family in Egypt, he went through his parents’ deaths in his twenties. When he heard the words of the Gospel: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; come, follow me.” (Gospel according to St. Matthew 19:21) was read in the church, he decided to seclude himself from society (Guillaumont, 1991). He first stayed near his village where he met other hermit but later on he put himself into the inner desert which was the periphery or almost outside of this world and ordinary people never went to. His life as a hermit in the desert became considered as the ideal Christian life and many people followed him (van Door-Harder, 1995).

Another important figure in the beginning of the monasticism is St. Pachomius (292-346). He was a Roman

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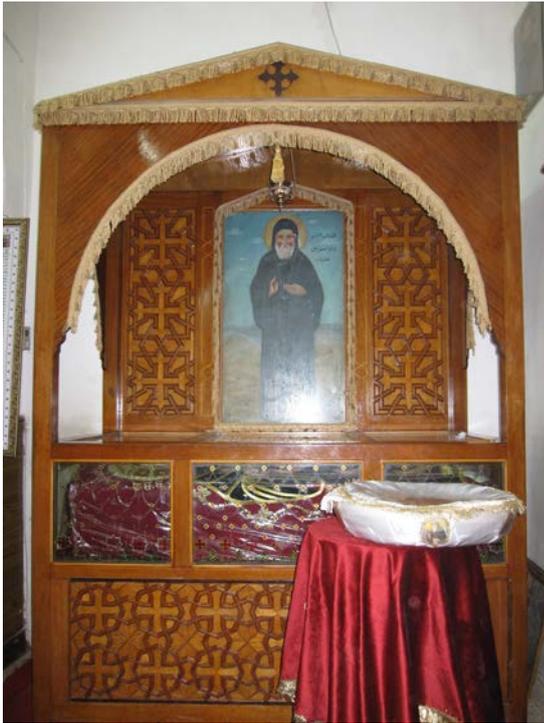


Fig. 3. Icon and relics of St. Samuel. The body of St. Samuel has been kept in the monastery as holy relics. The photo was taken by the author on August 20 2009.

3.2. History of Monastery of St. Samuel

History of Monastery of St. Samuel is deeply related with the saint whom under the name of. St. Samuel (597-695) was born in a Christian family near northwest Delta. At the age of twenty-two he became a monk in Wādī al-Naṭrūn (Northwest of Cairo in Figure 1). When the foreign Patriarch Cyrus was sent to Egypt by the Roman emperor with a new doctrine, the monks of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, led by Samuel, refused to accept it. The troops of Patriarch Cyrus severely tortured Samuel and he lost his right eye during this torture. Samuel left Wādī al-Naṭrūn and traveled through the hot desert until he reached a monastery in al-Fayyūm (Southwest of Cairo in Figure 1) called al-Naqlūn and made this monastery a big community. However he was again captured and tortured by the soldiers of Patriarch Cyrus. The soldiers finally set him free so that Samuel and his followers wandered through the desert until he found a long abundant monastery in the area called Qalamūn where the Monastery of St. Samuel is now. Although he was captured by Berber raiders twice even after his new life at Qalamūn, he was released because of his miraculous deeds. Soon after his return to Qalamūn the monastery became full of monks and donations. Samuel spent fifty-five years at Qalamūn and passed away at the age of ninety-eight (Alcock 1992).

Monastery of St. Samuel has also been famous since the former Patriarch Kyrillos VI (papacy 1959-1971) and the present Patriarch Shenouda III (papacy 1971-) had once been



Fig. 4. Monks (at the center) and the laity. Monks are highly respected by the laity. Many lay believers visit Monastery of St. Samuel despite of its location in the midst of the desert. The photo was taken by the author on December 20 2009.

its monks (After the submission of this paper, Shenouda III passed away on March 17, 2012).

3.3. Contemporary monastic life and the desert: In the case of Father Bijol

3.3.1 Background of Father Bijol

In the Monastery of St. Samuel, 110 monks from the age of twenty-five to eighty-four are living the cenobitic lives as of author's fieldwork in December 20 2009. Some monks prefer to live alone in his cell in the desert as semianchorites for a certain period and others live inner part of the monastery because they prefer not to meet visitors. They are considered to be contemplative monks. Another type of monks is called active monks and he does social works and interacts with visitors.

The case of Father Bijol (the third one from the right in Fig. 4) who is an active monk and with whom the author had interviews tells us an example how monks are related with the desert. Father Bijol was born in 1968 in the relatively wealthy family in Ṭihnā al-Jabal, the village in al-Minyā governorate. He graduated from the department of English, al-Minyā University and worked as English teacher in the high school for six years. He has been religious since his childhood and he often came to Monastery of St. Samuel to put himself in the religious (Christian) environment so it was almost natural for him to decide to be a monk. At the age of twenty-nine, he entered the gate of Monastery of St. Samuel to be a monk. After having spent the novitiate for five years he became a monk in 2002.

3.3.2 The relationship between the monk and the desert

In the Monastery of St. Samuel, monks are not allowed to have their own mobile phones or e-mail addresses in accordance with the provision of the present abbot, Abbot



Fig. 5. A cell for the monk. Monks of Monastery of St. Samuel spend days and weeks in the caves near the monastery to devote themselves to the God. The photo was taken by the author on December 20 2009.

Basilius as opposed to some other monasteries where monks talk on their own mobiles. In this sense and because of its location in the middle of the desert, the monks of Monastery of St. Samuel are more kept away from the secular world than the other monasteries. However they say it is good for them.

“Love your friends and/but keep away from them.” is the word Father Bijol told the author. This saying implies a monk should live a monastic life in which he devotes himself to God without interacting with his old life. As Brown (1993) says that early Egyptian anchorites such as St. Anthony in third century tried not to interact with others, we can see the same attitude among monks today. In the desert around the monastery, there are many caves (**Fig. 5**) which are originally natural but later modified by anchorites as cells for themselves. All the monks of Monastery of St. Samuel stay their own cell for certain period after they have consultations with the Abbot. As seen in the comment of Father Bijol: “I feel peace in the cell because I can talk with the God,” the cell, the desert in a broader sense, works as a fort to guarantee their monastic life physically and mentally.

3.3.3 The meaning of the desert to the family of the monk

Through the interviews in his hometown, brother of Father Bijol told the author that their parents were first so sad to hear his decision to be a monk but years later, their feeling changed from sadness to pride in his son. As van Doorn-Harder (1997) pointed out that monasteries in Egypt are regarded as not being of this world, to be a monk means the separation from the family, the social system that gives a person his identity and security. That is why it was very hard for the family of Father Bijol to accept him becoming a monk.

It is also important to point out that the ritual to become a monk closely resembles with the funeral ritual. It signifies

that a monk is the one who finished his life in the secular world and was reborn into the holy world.

Therefore the family of a monk usually had hard time to let their son go. Although, as seen in the case of Father Bijol’s family, once one became a monk, his family is proud of his son because he is a servant for the God and a monk for all the Copts, they still miss their son whom they can no longer easily contact with. For the family of a monk, desert is one of the most significant things which physically and symbolically separate the two worlds.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the relationship between the Coptic monasticism and the desert in Egypt was discussed. From its historical beginning, the Coptic monasticism has been deeply related with the desert. Today, as seen in the case of Monastery of St. Samuel, the most significant thing which separates the monks and the secular world is the desert. For the family of the monk, the desert means another world which keeps their son away, while for the monk it signifies a fort to protect their faith from the secular world including their relationships with their family and friends.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks monks, members and the laity of Monastery of St. Samuel, especially Father Bijol who attended my visits to his monastery and Mr. Marzūq Sulaymān who has been my fieldwork assistant in al-Minyā since 2004. This research was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (23720033).

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