

BASIL THE GREAT

The archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (330-379). Basil supported the tradition of ATHANASIUS in continuing the defense of orthodoxy against ARIANISM, particularly in Asia Minor. He was an active theologian, but was able to connect theological work with ascetic practice.

Basil's background and education were Hellenistic. The descendant of a rich and longtime [Christian](#) family, he began his studies with fifteen years in Caesarea in Cappadocia, continued in Constantinople, and moved to Athens in 351. Although Basil considered classical learning profane and took a critical point of view toward it, he made good use of his knowledge of the old writers and of the classical world.

As a Christian, he was foremost an ascetic and a monk, a founder of monasteries who gathered persons of like spirit around him. But he also became involved in church practice and church politics, became a presbyter, and in 370 archbishop of Caesarea. Basil was renowned as an eloquent preacher of ethics.

He once visited the monasteries of Egypt, where his principles of asceticism and orthodox theology were well accepted along the Nile. As a result we find Basil's name in Coptic literature, although not every homily transmitted under his name is authentic. A complete corpus of Basil's works in Coptic translations does not exist—a situation true in Greek literature as well. Both traditions erroneously handed down the homilies of Basil under the name of Basilios. Illustrative of Basil's popularity in Egypt, the homily on the wedding of Cana of Patriarch Benjamin I (622-661) includes a quotation by Basil; this is not yet verified.

Some specific homilies attributed to Basil follow. A homily on Noah's Ark (Vatican Library, Codex Copticus 68, fols. 33-52^v) is almost certainly of Greek origin, but is not found in Basil's Greek works and lacks Basilian theological viewpoints. Although this homily is extant in Coptic (Bohairic),

Coptic rhetoric is missing. The author's view of the world points to a source in northern Syria and Mesopotamia about 550 to 600. Perhaps this homily came to Egypt via the Syrian colony, since Bohairic appears to be the original translation. It waxes strong in biblical and ethical exhortations. Another homily exists in Sahidic (two versions) about the generation according to the flesh of Our Lord Jesus [Christ](#) delivered on 29 Kiyahk.

This is attributed in Greek to [JOHN CHRYSOSTOM](#) and is dated about the fifth century. Another homily in Bohairic (Vatican Library, Codex 58, fols. 178-94^v) treats the important problem of fasting. The Greek original has been found in the Greek works of Basil. However, the Coptic (two manuscripts exist) is an adaptation and revision of the Greek original according to Egyptian requirements. Also, the homilies on the subjects of the end of the world, Solomon's temple, and the parting of the body and soul seem to have been composed by Basil and obviously stem from a Greek origin.

As a preacher, Basil's eloquence revolved around the ideas of God's creation, [sin](#) and its consequences, and Mary as a more honorable temple than Solomon's (British Museum, Or. 5001, fols. 130b-162a: [Sahidic-Coptic](#)).

A homily that shows that [God](#) was not the author of evil can be found in a Bohairic codex containing the works of [John](#) Chrysostom. But in Greek the homily is ascribed to Basil. The Coptic version contains some [discrepancies](#) when compared to the Greek (Vatican Library, Codex Copticus 57, fols. 74-89^v).

Two other homilies delivered in the church of the Archangel Saint Michael exist, as well as some Sahidic *Wonders of the Holy Mercurius*, all under the name of Basil. Basil's Greek introduction to the monastic orders is extant in Sahidic.

Well known in Egypt was a catechesis about the THEOTOKOS, the Virgin Mary, pronounced by Basil on the occasion of the dedication of the church built by Eumenios on 21 Ba'ûnah. This catechesis concerns ethical problems, probably the reason for its popularity in Egypt. It is doubtful that this writing is from Basil. Manuscript and fragments are transmitted in Bohairic and show that different recensions existed (Vatican Library, Codex Copticus 67, fols. 69-89^v).

In summary, it is clear that Basil was one of the Greek church fathers most quoted in Coptic literature. His complete works in Coptic are not yet known, but surely the Egyptians translated directly his most popular Greek and Syrian homilies, or revised them, or translated them from existing revisions. Those not known to be authentic were probably translated directly from a Greek original that bears the marks of Basilian philosophy. Such works comprised biblical homilies, or catechetical admonitions about ethics, or eulogies of asceticism.

Finally, we should not forget that the greatest part of the Basilian heritage in the Syrian [language](#) must have been transmitted to Egypt through the Syrian colony, whose labors in this field must not be undervalued. The *Anaphora* of Saint Basil, whose best versions appear in Greek and Coptic in the [Nile](#) Valley, demonstrate also the popularity and renown of Basil in Egypt (see also [ANAPHORA OF SAINT BASIL](#)).

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