

COPTIC VERSIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Topographical conditions along the Nile were such as to foster the growth and differentiation of similar but distinct dialects of the common parent language. During the [early Christian](#) period, the old Egyptian [language](#) had assumed half a dozen [dialectal](#) forms, differing from one another chiefly in phonetics, but also to some extent in vocabulary and syntax.

The earliest Christians in Egypt used Greek, but soon the new faith found adherents outside the Hellenized portion of the population. Exactly when translations of the [scriptures](#) were first made into one or another of the several Coptic dialects is not known, but the earliest version must precede about A.D. 270, the date at which Saint ANTONY was converted after hearing Matthew 19:16ff. read in Coptic in a village church in southern Egypt. The earliest extant biblical manuscripts date from the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century.

Sahidic Version

Of the surviving Coptic documents from the [fifth century](#) or earlier, those in Sahidic are more than twice as numerous as those in all the other dialects. The manuscripts attest to more than one Sahidic [translation](#) of certain biblical books. These were conflated in subsequent transmission, as well as revised against the Greek. The edition of the New Testament in Sahidic, prepared by George W. Horner (7 vols., 1911-1924; reprinted 1969), lacks homogeneity, having been edited of necessity from diverse texts with quite disparate dates and provenance. The textual affinities of the Sahidic version are mixed. Alexandrian readings predominate, but there is also a strong “Western” element.

Bohairic Version

About the eleventh century, Bohairic replaced Sahidic as the liturgical [language](#) of the church. Although a few early manuscripts in Bohairic

have survived, the majority are late. The standard edition is that of George W. Horner (4 vols., 1898-1905; reprinted 1969), who made use of forty-six manuscripts for the Gospels, twenty-four for the Epistles and the Acts (the latter regularly follows the Epistles), and eleven for Revelation. The textual affinities of the Bohairic version are chiefly with the Alexandrian type of text, with some revision toward the Byzantine text.

Other Versions

Besides the Sahidic and the Bohairic, versions were made also in several other dialects used at different localities stretching from north to south along the Nile River. Except for Fayyumic, these dialects died out as literary [languages](#) by about the seventh century.

Fayyumic is well preserved in fragmentary manuscripts dating from the fourth to the eleventh centuries, a few of which have been edited (e.g., Husselman, 1962).

Akhmimic texts of the [scriptures](#) are quite fragmentary and few in number; [perhaps](#) only several biblical books were translated into this dialect.

Sub-Akhmimic, which stands between the Akhmimic and Middle Egyptian (Oxyrhynchite) dialects, flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries. An important manuscript is a fourth-century copy of the Gospel according to John (edited by Sir Herbert Thompson, 1924). Most of the other extant literature in this dialect is Manichaean and/or Gnostic (including several Nag Hammadi treatises).

Middle Egyptian (Oxyrhynchite) is represented by several important manuscripts dating from about the fifth century; one parchment manuscript contains the complete text of the Gospel of Matthew (edited by H. M. Schenke, Berlin, 1981), another (on parchment leaves of exactly the same dimension as those of the Matthew codex) contains the text of

Acts 1:1-15:3 in a form that presents many so-called Western readings. A fifth-century papyrus codex containing portions of ten epistles of [Paul](#) in the Middle Egyptian dialect has been edited by Tito Orlandi (Milan, 1974).

Problems Concerning Coptic Versions

The study of the textual affinities of the several Coptic versions is still far from being complete and many problems remain to be solved. Particularly perplexing are questions concerning the nature and degree of the interrelationship of the several translations, as well as the possibility of stages of revision within a given version.

The limitations of Coptic in representing Greek arise in part from its being a [language](#) of strict word order. Coptic does not possess any grammatical construction comparable with *oratio obliqua*; consequently, recourse is made to direct speech. Nor can Coptic truly represent the Greek passive voice, since it possesses only the active voice. Nevertheless, despite these and other limitations, the textual critic is grateful for the [evidence](#) from the Coptic versions in investigating the history of the transmission of the New Testament text in Egypt. Among noteworthy variant readings in Sahidic is the name “Nineve” given to the rich man who refused to help Lazarus (Lk. 16:19). The doxology at the close of the Matthean form of the Lord’s Prayer (Mt. 6:13) is binary, “For thine is the power and the glory forever.”

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