

LITURGY IN THE COPTIC CHURCH

The etymological origin of the word *liturgy* is from *leitōs*, “public, relating to the people,” and *ergon*, “work.” It is used in the New Testament as a religious (priestly) service in Luke 1:23: “When the days of his *ministry* were accomplished, Zechariah returned to his house.” In Acts 13:2 we read that at Antioch, the prophets and teachers held a worship service (doing service to the Lord) and appointed [Paul](#) and Barnabas as missionaries. Hebrews 8:2, having described the resurrected Christ as the heavenly high **priest**, calls him “*Leitourgos*” of the sanctuary of the true tabernacle. Hence we can conclude that this word means a religious public service.

The beginning of the Coptic liturgy is obscure and it is difficult to find the origin of the liturgy before the final Peace of the Church (312 a.d.). We will give a list of the most important direct [sources](#) of the liturgy followed by the indirect sources.

A) Direct [Sources](#)

1. The New Testament. The New Testament remains our foremost liturgical source giving information about the life of the first Christians and their faith. Here and there, parts from hymns are to be found. The use of the [Psalms](#) derives from the Jewish background. It is important to mention that the Eastern liturgies are primarily related to the liturgy of Jerusalem, which had widespread influence. Since the time of Constantine, Jerusalem and Palestine generally had been the pilgrimage places [par](#) excellence. Even the beginning of the Church of **Alexandria** is always related to Jerusalem, as evidenced by the Book of Acts (2:10).
2. The ***Apostolic Tradition***. The *Apostolic Tradition*, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome and usually dated to ca. 215, can be regarded as providing reliable information about the liturgical activity of the Church of Rome. Unfortunately the original Greek text has not

survived, but a few isolated fragments from Coptic, Arabic, and Ethiopian texts have survived, which shows that at one stage it was used in the Alexandrian Church.

3. The Canons of Hippolytus. The Canons of Hippolytus, which are derived from the *Apostolic Tradition*, were composed in Egypt between 336 and 340. Only an Arabic version survives, which provides important liturgical data.
4. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (**Didascalia**). This is a reworking of the *Apostolic Tradition* written in the fourth century, probably in Syria, and shows the development of the liturgy.
5. The **Euchologion** of Sarapion of Tmuis. This collection of prayers traditionally is regarded as the work of Sarapion, **Bishop** of Tmuis in Lower Egypt and a friend of **Athanasius** of Alexandria.
6. The travel journal of Egeria. In the journal of her travels, Egeria gives a detailed account of the services during the weekdays and on Sunday. She describes also in details the rite of the Passion Week in Jerusalem. According to Egeria, the monks took part in communal worship together with the clergy and the congregation.

B) Indirect [Sources](#)

1. The paschal letters. Since the middle of the third century, the **patriarchs** of Alexandria were accustomed to writing letters announcing the date of Easter and giving some moral lessons to the congregation. These writings, especially those of Athanasius and **Cyril** of Alexandria, contain much liturgical material.
2. Monastic literature. There are liturgical materials in monastic [literature](#) and especially in the rules of **Pachomius** for the monks.
3. Hagiographical texts. The lives of saints and especially of monks and bishops contain several quotations from liturgical texts. A detailed study of the Coptic liturgy scattered through **Coptic hagiography** would be highly profitable.

The Church in Egypt was divided by the **Christological** controversy, which came to a head in the **Council of Chalcedon**. The Coptic Church maintained its liturgical particularity, but the Syrian Church, sharing the same faith, influenced it to a certain extent; hence, it is important to mention some of the [sources](#) of the Syrian tradition.

1. Cyril of Jerusalem delivered 24 catechetical lectures that explained Christian initiation and contained some liturgical details.
2. John Chrysostom's works, especially his initiation catecheses, are rich in liturgical information as well as his festal homilies.
3. Ephrem the Syrian was an inexhaustible hymn writer.
4. [Severus of Antioch](#), well known for his dogmatic controversies, was a great liturgist. He wrote several hymns and liturgical texts, and his cathedral homilies contained a great deal of liturgical information such as his explanation of the ***Trisagion***.

The Coptic liturgy comes to our knowledge through four groups:

1. Greek texts, including anaphoras such as the Anaphora of St. Basil, and hymns for several occasions.
2. Sahidic texts, including the anaphora and the liturgy before the mass (**Psalmodia**) in addition to several excerpts. We have several papyri from the seventh and eighth centuries, although most of the texts in this group date from the ninth and tenth. Some hymns survive from the rite of concoction of the Myron from the year 1374.
3. Bohairic texts, including nearly all the liturgical texts. The Egyptian popes moved their residence to Cairo in the Middle Ages, and the Bohairic dialect became the official dialect of the Coptic Church. The manuscripts of this group are of a late date. The most ancient manuscripts date from the 12th century.
4. Arabic texts, consisting of some late hymns for the month of Kiahk and other occasions.

It is impossible to mention, in this limited space, the full list of the Coptic

liturgical manuscripts. The reader should start with W. Kammerer's *A Coptic Bibliography* (1951). For manuscripts the reader should refer to De Lacy O'Leary's *Primary Guide to Coptic Literary Material* (1938). In addition, we have the following:

- A. Khater and O. H. E. Burmester, *Catalogue of the Coptic and Christian Arabic Mss preserved in the Cloister of St. **Menas** at Cairo* (1967).
- A. Khater and O. H. E. Burmester, *Catalogue of the Coptic and Christian Arabic Mss preserved in the library of the Church of the All-Holy Virgin **Mary** known as Qasriat Ar-Rihan at Old Cairo* (1973). The church was destroyed but some manuscripts were rescued and are preserved in the **Coptic Museum** and Coptic patriarchate.
- A. Khater and O. H. E. Burmester, *Catalogue of the Coptic and Christian Arabic Mss preserved in the library of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus known as Abu Sargah at Old Cairo* (1977).
- B. Layton, *Catalogue of Coptic Literary Manuscripts in the **British Library** Acquired since the year 1905* (1987).
- L. Depydt, *Catalogue of Coptic Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library (**Corpus of Illuminated Manuscripts**)* (1993).
- A. Elanskaya, *The Literary Coptic Manuscripts in the A. S. Pushkin State Fine Arts Museum in Moscow* (1994).
- *Koptische Handschriften, 1-2* by O. H. E. Burmester (1975), L. Stork (1995, 2002).

The reader is also referred to the reports on the liturgical studies published every four years in the Acts of the International Congress of Coptic Studies. The last published report was H. Brakmann's "Nueue Funde und forschungen zur Liturgie der Kopten," *Agypten und **Nubien** in spatantiker und christlicher Zeit, Akten des 6. Internationalen Koptologenkongress* (1999, pp. 451-468). See also ETHIOPIAN LITURGY; LITURGICAL INSTRUMENTS.

GAWDAT GABRA



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