

Arab Conquest of Egypt (640 AD)
Church History VIII

1- Objectives

- ❖ To learn about the Arab Invasion to Egypt
- ❖ To learn about the position of the Copts in this event

2- References

- ❖ http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/arab_conquest_of_egypt.pdf
- ❖ <http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/synexarion/benjamin.html>

3- Scriptural Verse

- ❖ “So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5: 41-42)

4- Lesson Outlines

Egypt in Their Dreams

- ❖ Egypt was a well known country to the Arabs and they heard about its wealth and civilization. The Arabs were not civilized, living in deserts and tents from the Quraish Islamic tribe, who were merchants used to sell the eastern merchandise in Egypt to buy expensive cloth, glass, textile and crops.
- ❖ Amr Ibn El-As had visited Alexandria as a merchant youth and he witnessed Egypt's enormous wealth. He knew its important and wealthy cities and that helped him later in invading Egypt.

Arab Conquest

- ❖ Amr Ibn El-As invaded Egypt with a force of only 4,000 soldiers.
- ❖ Egypt had a large Roman legion, with many forts; including the famous fort of Babylon. Pelosium fort fell after 1 month, and Bilbeis fort after another month. They easily reached Babylon.
- ❖ The Arabs kept the fort of Babylon under siege, while Cyrus was inside it, for 7 months.
- ❖ Roman legion had lost 1,000 soldiers for slaughter, and 3,000 prisoners. Cyrus requested from Amr to negotiate. He responded with three options: Convert to Islam and become our brothers, Pay a tribute (Jeziah) and be fully subdued by the Muslims (no human rights) or be killed.
- ❖ The surrounded troops rejected the 3 options.
- ❖ During the siege, reinforcements were sent to the Arabs (20,000 troops) while the Emperor in Constantinople sank into a state of complete apathy; he was on his death bed and his court was fighting about who would succeed him.
- ❖ In Egypt, all local authorities were fighting of who would be the next ruler of Egypt.
- ❖ The fort fell in the Arab's hand by trickery: One of the Muslims entered the fort at night and all the Muslims outside yelled “Allah Akbar!” The Romans inside believed that all the Arabs were in the fort, and fled.

- ❖ On April 641 AD a treaty was signed by Amr and Cyrus (both alien to Egypt) which stated that: Every Copt that does not convert to Islam is to pay 2 denarii per year (elderly, women, minors, and disabled are exempt). The Arabs were not to harm the Copts or their churches in any way.
- ❖ During their march northward, the Arab troops burned villages, killed resistant villagers, stole their belongings, and took the remaining as slaves (mainly women). The Arabs moved to Alexandria (50,000 soldiers), the capital of Egypt, and kept it under siege for 14 months, when it finally fell into their hands because of Cyrus.
- ❖ Great massacres in many districts; Cyrus died in his sadness by the autumn of 642 AD, Egypt had passed from the hands of the Constantinople Emperors into those of the Arabs. From that point onwards, Egypt was ruled by governors sent by the Caliph.
- ❖ Amr granted the Copts freedom of worship on the condition that they pay the Jeziah. He requested the return of Pope Benjamin and his bishops to their parishes. After meeting the Alexandrian Patriarch, he said, “Verily I have not seen a man of God so upright and so majestic in all the provinces through which I passed.”

Reasons of Victory

- ❖ Byzantine suppression and persecution of the Copts for 190 years.
- ❖ Islamic zeal to spread their religion; delighted by their easy victory over Persia that conquered Egypt twice, Arabs concluded that Egypt will be very easy to conquer, beside their ardent desire to enjoy other countries wealth.
- ❖ Low morale of the Roman army after many defeats; Empire treasury was empty; there wasn't a unified Roman army in Egypt but rather different separated units. The Emperor did not want to unify the army for fear of a revolution; there were 5 governors over 5 regions.
- ❖ Roman leaders were fighting with each other for authority over Egypt as Emperor Heraclius was dying causing division inside the Emperor's palace for the coming Emperor.
- ❖ Cyrus' negotiations and surrender, thinking that they'll help fulfill his dream – wanted to separate from the Empire and thinking he will be made governor of Egypt.
- ❖ Fleeing of the Roman leaders from their units facilitated more victory for the Arabs, and more bloodshed for the Copts.

Their Main Objective

- ❖ Leading Egypt to Islamic Arab dominion; there is a consensus among both Muslim and Christian historians, that the number of those who had to pay the tribute to the Arabs was ~6 millions; Since women, minors, the elderly, and the disabled were exempted, it was estimated that the number of Copts at that time was between 25 to 30 million!
- ❖ Gaining: Zakah (tithe) from converts to Islam, Jeziah from Copts rejecting Islam and Loot belonging to the killed people.

Did the Copts welcome the Arabs?

- ❖ Arab history books say that the Copts were happy that the Arabs came to free them from the Byzantine rule but actually the Arabs declared objective, contradicts the idea that they are coming to save the Copts.
- ❖ Copts who rejected the Chalcedonian doctrine, could not embrace a whole new religion.
- ❖ The Arabs were uninvited people and the Copts had to resist unto death: 1st resistance was at Bilbeis, where they had to fight for a month; Pope Benjamin's return after 3 years – not immediately when the Arabs arrived. There were no common language for communication.
- ❖ They were encountering injustice with humiliation and destruction; Amr ordered the Copts to pay the Jeziah, and increased taxes 3-fold and the Caliph Omar Ibn El Khatab wrote to Amr to humiliate the Dhimmi people (Christians & Jews) by forcing them to wear distinctive clothes and riding horses and donkeys sideways and Looting their wealth). Amr said: “Any one hiding a treasure from me, I will attack him and kill him.”
- ❖ It was widely believed in Islamic theology that the Dhimmi people are of second class to Muslims, hence they did not have the same rights as the Muslims; they defended the Jeziah by saying, “The Jeziah was not imposed on the Dhimmi people for religious reasons, but only because they were not allowed fighting with the Muslims.”

Islam and the national unity

- ❖ Copts were forced to dress in distinctive clothes from that of the Muslims; the building of new Churches for Christians, and Synagogues for Jews were forbidden, and the most that should be allowed is renovating the existing ones without any increase in space.
- ❖ Amr decreed the Copts to offer 3 days hospitality to every soldier wherever they were, providing care and food for their horses as well. He also ordered the Copts to provide his troops with crops and clothes, beside the Jeziah yearly.
- ❖ He encouraged his soldiers to conquer Alexandria by allowing them to occupy every luxurious house they succeeded to take.
- ❖ Burning many cities and villages, e.g. burning Damietta after their tough resistance; Killing without mercy, and enslaving resulted in disturbance and horror everywhere.
- ❖ Amr used his authority to collect huge wealth in a short time; Caliph Omar asked him to increase it, and send it to Medina saying: “May God destroy Egypt for the Medina's development.”
- ❖ The historian Dr. Saida Ismail Elkashif said, “The Arabs focused on collecting as much Jeziah as possible from the Copts, who in many cases had no choice but to convert to Islam to get rid of it. Consequently, this left to a decrease in income for the Government, who acted to double the Jeziah on the Copts who remained Christian.
- ❖ It was said that the Caliph Omar Ibn Abdel Aziz (known to Muslims as being “Second to Omar Ibn El Khatab” because of his fairness) ordered the Waly (ruler) of Egypt Haian Ibn Sheriek to collect the Jezeiah of dead Copts from their families.
- ❖ “As well, the Waly of Egypt Abdel Aziz Ibn Marwan (685-705 AD) imposed a Jeziah of one Denarius per person on the Coptic monks, he also ordered to count all the monks in the monasteries after which no one was allowed to become a monk.”
- ❖ Burning the Famous Library of Alexandria: Upon learning of “a great library containing all the knowledge of the world, ancient and recent, Amr, the conquering general, asked Caliph Omar for instructions, The Caliph responded, “If their content is in accordance

with the book of Allah, we may do without them, for in that case the book of Allah more than suffices. If, on the other hand, they contain matter not in accordance with the book of Allah, there can be no need to preserve these. Proceed, then, and destroy them.”So all the manuscripts were allegedly destroyed by using them as tinder for the 4,000 bathhouses of the city for Arab use.

- ❖ Pope Benjamin, 38th Pope of Alexandria (623-662 AD); His Papacy (39) years could be divided into 3 periods: From ordination to disappearance (620 – 631 AD), during his disappearance (631 – 644 AD) and during Arab occupation (644 – 662 AD). A great famine was ended through his prayer before all the people perished.

5- Conclusion

- ❖ Islam and Dhimmitude: Paying Jeziah, even for the dead; Special clothing; No building of new churches or monasteries; No rebuilding of destroyed ones; excluded from governmental offices; no restrictions for conversion to Islam; death penalty (re)converting a Muslim; not allowed to carry weapons; columns were taken from Coptic Churches to build Mosques.

6- Activities / Discussion Points

- ❖ Some Arab leaders were very rude with Christians while few others were fair and did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians and this was mostly due to the great Coptic leaders of the church who impressed them by their conduct and sometimes by miracles (Abba Benjamin and the great miracle of the Nile flood; Abba Abraam ebn Zaraq moved the Mokattam; Abba Abraam Bishop of Fayoum ...Pope Shenouda).