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## **BIBLICAL ELEMENTS IN COPTIC ICON**

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### **Abstract**

This paper deals about relation between Coptic icon and Scripture, in old and new pictorial artefacts. After a historical survey of Christianity in Egypt, with correspondence in Egyptian and Hellenic culture, we show the value of Coptic icon, also in aesthetical and theological perspective. The Bible speaks about Egypt even in Isaiah's prophecy and also in Matthew's quotation about the flee into Egypt. The specific of saint's face are the great head and eyes, always frontal oriented.

*Keywords:* religious picture, large eyes, the flee to Egypt, the image of God

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### **1. General historical overview**

The art of icons and the Coptic art such as artistic expression were influenced by two main sources, the classical (Hellenic) world and the ancient Egyptian world.

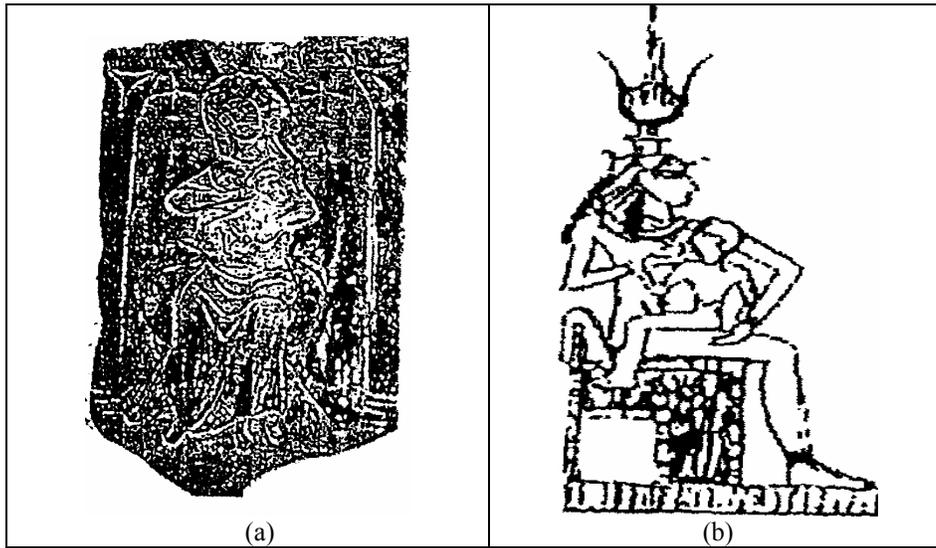
According to many historians, the Copts are the descendents of the ancient inhabitants of the Nile Valley. Nabil Selim Atalla mentioned in his book that the term Copt is equivalent to the word Egyptian [1]. It is derived from the Greek word 'Aigyptos' and when the Arabs came to Egypt since 639 A.D. it became known as 'Dar-Al-Qibit' home of Copts [2].

Regardless of the distance that divided the Copts from their ancestors, they have sustained throughout time the traditions and customs inherited by their forefathers. As a consequence, Coptic artists preserved the religious ways of ancient Egypt on objects of stone and wooden icons [3].

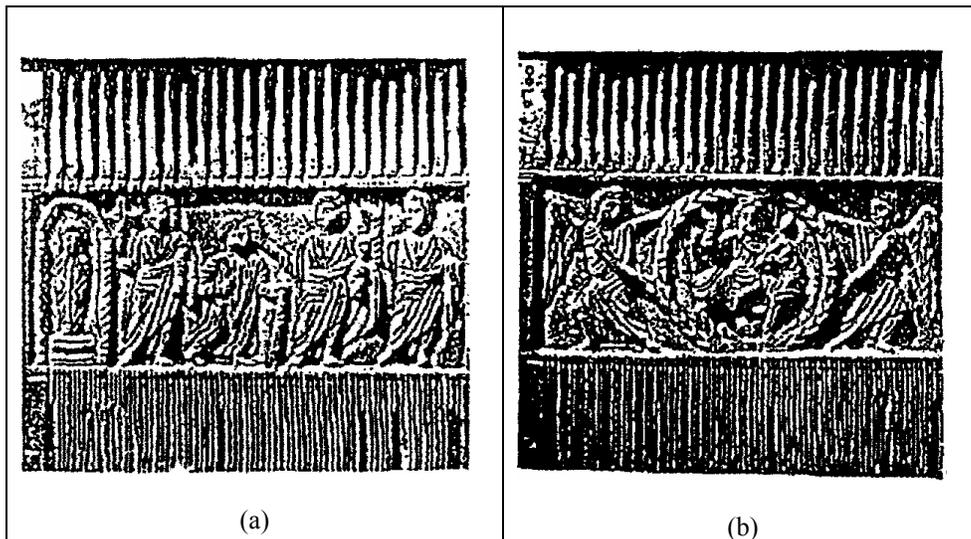
#### ***1.1. Egyptian influence in Christian art***

'The inquisitive figures when on icons' the Nilotic motives carved on wood, such as fishing scenes, ducks in marshy places and lotus flowers engrave on atones and toilette objects are very much the same as seen in ancient Egypt. Shown in the Coptic Museum is an important picture of two men faces hidden by masks of dogs/monkeys. Halos by circling their heads showed they were saints. In comparison, to the pictures of Egyptian gods on tombs or temples the likeness is clear between the two saint's heads and the 'Anubis'. It represents a

historic legend of the Coptic Church and that Ancient Egypt influenced the Christian time.



**Figure 1.** (a) 'The virgin' suckling the Divine Infant; (b) 'Isis' giving the breast to her son 'Horus' (Coptic Museum in Cairo).



**Figure 2.** (a) 'The-healing of the Blind'; (b) 'Raising of Lazarus' (Coptic Museum in Cairo).

In Figure 1a 'The virgin' sculptured on limestone sitting on the throne suckling the Divine Infant, recalls the ancient type of the goddess 'Isis' giving her breast to her son 'Horus' (Figure 1b).

An iconographic biblical scene is carved on ivory comb (Figure 2) showing the 'Healing of The Blind' and 'Raising of Lazarus'. The Coptic artist figured 'Lazarus' entombed like an Egyptian Mummy. In all of these we see that the echo of the ancient beliefs and customs have been preserved and are still living in Coptic art.

### ***1.2. Hellenic and Romanic influence on Coptic art***

In the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., many fragments appear with a mixture of Christian symbols with Pagan elements that were partly broken and disappearing, leaving the place clear of purely Christian symbols, they were found in the Holy Land into which monasticism had spread. They began to copy the Byzantine style; regardless of the hatred monks had for Greek Roman art.

The great influence of the Metropolis continued. The existence of the decorated fabrics and in objects of ivory and bronze, endures until the late ages of Coptic Art. The one essential trail of Coptic art was the symbolic and figurative painting of Alexandrian art, which was in vogue for all religious building of the East until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, which was inspired by the Bible and then replaced by those of Alexandrian inspiration [4].

## **2. The history of the Coptic icon**

The Ancient Egyptians with the paintings had been known since the dawn of history. "Painting and carving continued under the Greeks and Romans and many beautiful coloured pictures and carvings that belong to these two periods survive, whether in mosaics or painted as frescoes and representing stories and mythological subjects, in the tomb of the priest's pet, Osiris at Jima El Gebel near Mallawi in Middle Egypt, for example, Painting went into the Coptic or Christian era in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., but with different ideas due to the changing beliefs." [5]

Nevertheless artists continued to use images and symbols from ancient Egyptian art, while at the same time they drew their characteristic religious figures.

"All scholars agree in recognizing that the icon dates from the first three centuries of Christianity. Similar icons dating from the first centuries of Christianity have also been found in Alexandria and Roman tombs, which prove their age even though the vagaries of time have carried them to other churches and monasteries. Some specialists believe that they were transported from private houses to places of worship, probably at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and they became abundant in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D." [6]

History relates how the early Christians destroyed all pagan objects of worship and disrupted images in accordance with the first Ten Commandments, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Saint 'Shenuda' in Upper Egypt assisted by the Copts monks (which agreed with him), decided to destroy the ancient temples and idols. Nevertheless, a return to images was necessary when people were not able to assimilate Christianity and its doctrine without the aid of visual means. Representations assisted the faithful in understanding the new religion and at the same time illustrated it.

Al-Makrizi, the famous Arabic historian of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, mentioned that Butler states that it was the patriarch 'Cyril' the 24<sup>th</sup> pope who in 420 A.D. hung icons in the churches of Alexandria, first in the seat of patriarch and then in all the other churches of Egypt [7].

### ***2.1. Developments of the icons. Icons and used materials***

The first Coptic painters drew their icons in the original manner. They used all the known materials. Icons were carved in relief or painted in colour. According to El-Siriany [7, p. 24], wood was widely employed to decorate doors, sanctuaries, the iconostases, (the Icons holder) and the panels of ancient churches. The Coptic museum has a considerable collection of this woodwork, some of which is kept in the churches. It is reported how St. Luke the Apostle was a remarkable painter who initiated the representation of the Virgin and Child in the traditional position adopted by the majority of churches.

Pr. Raouf mentioned, "Religious images were also carved on bone and ivory, on ceramics, various metals and other materials (such as plaster, textile and linen papers). At the same time seems that many walls in churches, as well as 'niches' were decorated with religious figures in Mosaic. Artists began to paint on the walls, domes and columns of churches and monasteries by decorating them with images on plaster, which represented the Christ, the Virgin and the child and saints (from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century). Religious frescoes seem to be the first icons attributed to the ancient Coptic artists". [8]

Remains of these coloured drawings remain on site in the ancient monasteries, At 'Bagawat', in St. Simon's monastery at Aswan, in the white monastery of 'Anba Shenouda' at 'Sohag' in upper Egypt, in the interior of Egyptian temples transformed into churches in upper Egypt and 'Nubia', in the monastery of 'Anba Marcarius' at 'Wadi El-Natrune' in lower Egypt, and in the sanctuary of 'St. Theclas Hayamanout the Ethiopian'. At the 'suspended' Church of old Cairo, some of the frescoes of the monasteries of the 'Fayum' are today exhibited in the halls of the Coptic Museum. Painters continued to practice this art on plaster on the walls with watercolours up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Then they changed their method and drew on wooden panels [8, p. 7].

## **2.2. *Painting on wooden panels***

According to Raouf [8, p. 6], the painting on wooden panels spread after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but that does not mean that there were icons painted before that date. This change of procedure is probably to be attributed to the damage to which the icons on frescoes were exposed during the periods of revolution and persecution. "The riotous crowds profited by these disorders to plunder the churches filled with precious materials, vases, painted chalices and silk curtains. They destroyed and even burned the pictures in fresco on the walls," [9] that led the painters to paint icons on wooden panels that were easier to transport and hide.

The most ancient of these icons are those, which are directly painted on wooden panels. These icons decorated the interiors of the domes above the altars. In the centre of the dome was the icon of Christ enthroned. The dome symbolized heaven and the four columns symbolized the four Evangelists. Sometimes the dome was decorated outside where several panels bore representations of the Apostles, Saints and Martyrs. Until then, icons had been hung on the interior walls of churches in the sanctuaries and on the iconostases. The most remarkable group of these icons exist in the church of 'Abu El-Seifen' in Old Cairo. Among these pictures is an icon that dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is thought to be probably the most ancient. The exactitude of drawing, fineness and beauty of colour, and the perfection of its workmanship distinguish it. The art of painting on these panels began to decline gradually; it lost much of its ability and originality between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The idea of using canvas to cover the panels before drawing on them became common. From this usage Coptic painting fell into decline. S. Skalova noticed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Coptic icons reflect the confusion of this general decline [10]. The westernisation of Egypt resulted in the production of Holy pictures on canvas, which gradually lost the local subjects and iconography, spirituality, style, technology and finally beauty.

## **2.3. *Evolution of coloured icons painting***

Painters employed the colours and dyes, which had been adopted by the Pharaohs artists. The Coptic artists have considerable skills in the formation of different dyes and colours that remain unique and unmatched in mastery.

The painters used egg white instead of oil in drawing the icon. They started to paint directly on wooden panels, but in later periods, they covered them with a soft layer of gypsum. Then they poured gold-water upon which they drew the elements of the subject, which were frequently delineated. The icons were carved on the gypsum by means of a pointed chisel; this certifies that the icons were transferred from models drawn on paper. Undoubtedly, the artist should have taken care in depicting the face of the person and its expressive features, following the methods of his ancient ancestors; it seems that the icons were often the work of more than one person. The student assistant gilded the

background and painted the cloth but the features and hands were invariably the work of the master craftsman. The artist's name and date of the picture are often inscribed in Coptic and Arabic at the bottom of the icon [8, p. 15].

#### ***2.4. Decline of the Icon painting in Egypt in the medieval period***

From the first centuries onwards there were mixed feelings about the use of icons, particularly the portrait icons. It was stressed that Christ could not be depicted because he was both God and Man. The apologists argued that icons have an educational dimension. According to Langen, “the early church fathers adopted a different attitude towards the representation of Old and New Testament themes in churches as they could be used as instruments of doctrinal and moral instructions for those who were unable to read, that the painted illustration of religions themes could replaced the written word” [10, p. 59]. The divine origin of the portrait images made their existence legitimate. They stressed that Christ could be depicted because he became man and lived among us.

According to Langen, with changing attitudes towards the religions art and the growing number of icons, the arguments between the antagonists and the protagonists were exacerbated [10, p. 63]. The discussions resulted in the outbreak of iconoclasm.

In 736 when an edit issued by Emperor Leo the 3<sup>th</sup> caused all images in the Byzantine Empire to be destroyed. This period lasted until 843 A.D with only a brief interim period from 787-815, in which the painting of icons had to be done according to rules and traditions. Like the image of Edessa and the portrait of the Virgin with the child painted by the Apostle Luke, are examples.

Langen noticed that there was also another problem dealing with the absence of Coptic icons from the 7<sup>th</sup> until 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, no Coptic icon has been preserved from Egypt [10, p. 65]. Apart from the deliberate destruction of churches, was also old and broken icons and of no value that were used for fire in order to prepare the ‘Holy Myron’ (a holy oil, which is used in the sacraments as well as in the dedication of churches, altars and objects like icons are used during the liturgy).

According to Langen [10, p. 63], icon painting did not cease in the countries outside the Byzantine Empire during the Iconoclastic period, which started in 726 A.D. In Egypt the situation was different. The early icons date from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, but no icon from the period immediately, prior to that era has withstood the ravages of time. In fact this icon less period continued till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After 641 A.D. icon painting was still practiced after the Arab arrival since 639 A.D. Several Arabic writers in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, As-Sabusti, among others, took great interest in Christian monasteries and churches near East of Egypt. The Muslims have found many concepts to agree with in the Coptic art, especially in the simplification, abstraction and decorative styles. They were similar to the oriental Hellenistic tradition of art, accepting ideas that don't agree with the concept of Islam.

Cannuyer, says in his book, that architectural and artistic studies of the churches and monasteries have demonstrated that most holy places had been renovated and decorated with paintings in the period of agreement between Copts and Muslims [3]. This is suggested by the fact that there were a lot of Islamic art characteristics in all these renovations, decorations and the paintings on the walls, for example, the paintings of 'Bawet', which is part of the life of the Prophet David in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Also the impact of the Islamic art in designing faces is obvious where a saint has been drawn on a column in the 'Suspended Church'. (It's called 'Moallakah' or suspended because it stands hanging in the rubble of two big towers of the Roman Castle).

We can notice the decoration of the 'Virgin Church' in 'El-Syrian', the repeated crosses in the decoration on the walls of the temple give the religious identity of the way in decoration. We see how the branches become 'Arabesque' and Christian figures take their position in harmony in an abstract environment. The saints with their bodies resembling to primitive figures in which we see them in a mixture of Arabesque and sometimes in abstract frames joined to other abstract frames. Raouf mentioned, "The remarkable groups of icons exist in the church of 'Abu El-Sayfain' in old Cairo. Among these pictures is an icon that dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The exactitude of drawing, beauty of colours and the perfection of its workmanship distinguish it, which so much makes us wonder whether there was a Coptic artist's school contemporary with the art school of Rome" [8, p. 13].

The paintings on the wall which are found everywhere in the churches of Egypt, are far from the descriptive art looking for the considerate brightness (artists were uninterested in depicting objects in their natural shapes and instead focused on expressing the meanings which represented sanctity with the help of symbols and colours). The Christians subjects took their frame from Islamic art decoration. So we see in 'Al-Anba Maqqar Monastery', how the art of painting has taken its place under the Islamic arches of 'Fatimid style' in 'Deir Alabiad', we see 'the Virgin', sitting on the throne of decorated wood with the Islamic star. In 'Deir Alabiad', the figures have lost the evidence of three dimensions and the colours have lost their graduation, so we have the confirmation of the pure forms, which change the elements to symbols.

Most icons in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries depicted the Virgin Mary with the child on her left arm, and soldier saints piercing the dragon. The most famous soldiers painted are the princes Tadros (St. Theodore), Mar Girgis (St. George) and Abu-Sayfain (St. Mercurius).

There are many Coptic icons without a used signature. Prof. R. Habib noticed in his study: (The Coptic icons [8, p. 78]) that some of the artist's names are:

- The Evangelist and Apostle Luke;
- Anba Marcarius, Patriarch of the 10<sup>th</sup> century;
- The painter Abu Yusr Ibn Yalg, 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The Coptic Art style started to appear gradually before the split of the Byzantine and Coptic Church; this was evident in the mural work of 'Al Khuruj' and 'Dar Al Salam' shrines since the fourth century.

In the 'Al Khuruj' shrine, the execution of topics in the Old Testament is noticeably spread at different levels, unorganised, and with little details. It is also noticeable that the artist became distant from imitation with a tendency steered towards abstraction. Consequently, the impact of the ancient Egyptian Art emerged by using the sign that represents life (ANK) and is in the form of illustrated ships. In spite of that, the Greek influence was apparent in the quality of clothes, the writing and the visual form [11]. There are general common signs between the artistic works of 'Dar Al Salam' shrine and the early Christian art in Egypt, which seemed more developed than the works of the 'Al Khuruj' shrine, even with the evident Hellenic influence, the simple formation, lack of characters and the use of one dimension had no relation with the Hellenic Art.

In the fifth century, artists showed more interest in historical ideals, which led them to paint events from the New Testament. It was apparent that the events were organized chronologically. The painting of the gospel, nativity, escape to Egypt and the Last Supper were placed beside the paintings of some saints.

These works reveal, despite wrong execution, their methods of simplification and colour accord were shown with some differentiation in the artistic character [11].

Since the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. there were steady influences of Persian and Syrian art, distinguished by flat designs of an ornamental rhythm and the interest to picture the Bible event without its details, which replaced the botanical decorative elements and the imitation of nature, which was inspired by the Hellenist realism. This influence developed the Coptic Art and directed it far from the Hellenic roots. The interest in legendary topic decreased, and the direction was aimed at modification and decoration. The imitation of nature and the interest in movement became distant and the pattern lost the balance of relativity. Given the priority to the main character in the topic, and distinguished by the glowing colours and ornamentation and preserving the principle of confrontation mark all those assembled in a specific method. Eyes and faces were drawn in circular forms and along with the patterns were described by strong, obvious lines.

The iconic pattern is normally subject to the design of the 'icon bearer' in the church, which in turn was of Coptic design. The icon is of a rectangular form or with curves. Thus, the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. witnessed the birth of a special Coptic Art method through a journey launched since 451 A.D.

### ***2.5. Icon painting since 18<sup>th</sup> century and the famous artists***

The 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an enormous production of icons. Icon paintings in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century used the wooden panels as a different technique to those which used canvas to paint in the second half of the

18<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of icons produced in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century are signed by Ibrahim An Nasikh alone or together with Yuhanna Al-Qudsi. The inscriptions on the icons, wrote in Arabic and Coptic, gives information about the theme depicted and the identity of the saint. The icons of these two painters and their followers are to be found throughout the country [10, p. 66].

The painter Anastasiar Ar Rumi Al-Qudsi was responsible for the greater part of icon production in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **3. Biblical elements in Coptic icon**

At one time where the picture reigns deeply as well in master and models our habits of life that our fashion of thought, the picture of our faith that is the icon - of the less what it should be - challenges us, becomes a criterion of truth. We are hit personally by the vigilance of some orthodox to disclose the least distortions of the faith in words, little appreciable, or even indifferent on the other hand to erring ways when it is about the icon.

That she is Byzantine, Russian, Romanian or Coptic, the authentic icon resorts to the same symbols, same theme bill, express the same faith. In relation to the religious picture that resorts to the profane shapes, to the artist's subjectivism that expresses him on a religious theme, the icon is on the contrary the product of the church that gave her shape with the passing of centuries.

Theology in colour, the theological art, finds its justification in the incarnation that it proclaims, because so God was embodied, dressed in our flesh, He can be represented.

This is not then the Christ's only humanity that must be shown, but the fullness of her divine - human person, from where the dangerous task of the iconographer that puts his talent to the service of the shape protected by cannons, guarantee of a symbol safeguard in all their strength and dynamism.

Far from projecting its feelings, conceptions and fantasies, which he would inflict to the other, his 'kenotic' attitude (of 'kenosis' = lowering), returned present mysteriously on the board of wood. Developed in harmony with gospels and the liturgical texts of which visualizes the content with the contest of symbols, the icon appears in the liturgy, play an essential role there, so that it is a liturgical picture.

If the Egypt constitutes with Greece a way of cultural foundation for Christianity, he yet proves to be difficult to put affirmations about the Coptic icon because of the very restricted number of available old icons. Ties with the art of the old Egypt deserve more than a brief mention and from more qualified persons than us to elaborate a research at this level. We signal for example that, in Egyptian art of the antique one showed a winged soul doing acrobatics above in the same way of a body shape [12].

However, the Copts iconography doesn't aim at the first place to paint features of the person's body but its soul.

The disproportionate bodies, as well as the low interest demonstrated for the bodily features, concentrate the vision on the main thing, to know the strength of the Saint's mind that lives them.

The absence of naturalism, emotion and sensuality recalls, indeed, that the icon doesn't represent the world of the flesh, and the reduction of the bodily accent permits the stake in evidence of the spiritual exemplified by the tremendously large eyes, symbol of the interior vision.

Contrary to the Byzantine tradition, the Coptic tradition increases the volume of the head, symbol that God is our head, appreciably and the Christ crucified to the extensively open eyes, sign of his immortality and memorial as his vigilance towards us.

The Coptic icon fundamentally distinguishes itself of the Byzantine icon by its popular art character, simple people work (monks, craftsmen, peasants), the '*simple people*' expression being considered in all its nobility [13].

It is not comfortable to untangle this skein where one observes a constant cleanly overlap between Egyptian influences, then Byzantine and Syrian contributions, notably. It is goodness and the sweetness of looks, the humility and the presence of men already transfigured, that become '*ophthalmos*', '*all eye and all look*' according to the beautiful formula of a holy monk of the desert of Schetos. It is the spontaneity, the freshness and the simplicity of the visual language.

Certainly, the iconography must be embodied in the culture where it develops, but it doesn't impose to synthesize all technical and formal acquirements of it. The art of making Orthodox icons follows certain symbolism that carries a meaningful message. Some of these characteristics are: First, large and wide eyes symbolize the spiritual eye that look beyond the material world, the Bible says "the light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be simple, thy whole body shall be full of light" (Matthew 6.22).

Secondly, large ears listen to the word of God; "if any man have ears to hear, let them hear" (Mark 4.23). Thirdly, gentle lips to glorify and praise the Lord: "My mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips" (Psalm 63.5). The eyes and ears on a figure from an icon are disproportionately large, because a spiritual person spends more time listening to God's word and seeking to do God's will. On the other hand, the mouth, which can also be often the source of empty or harmful words, is small.

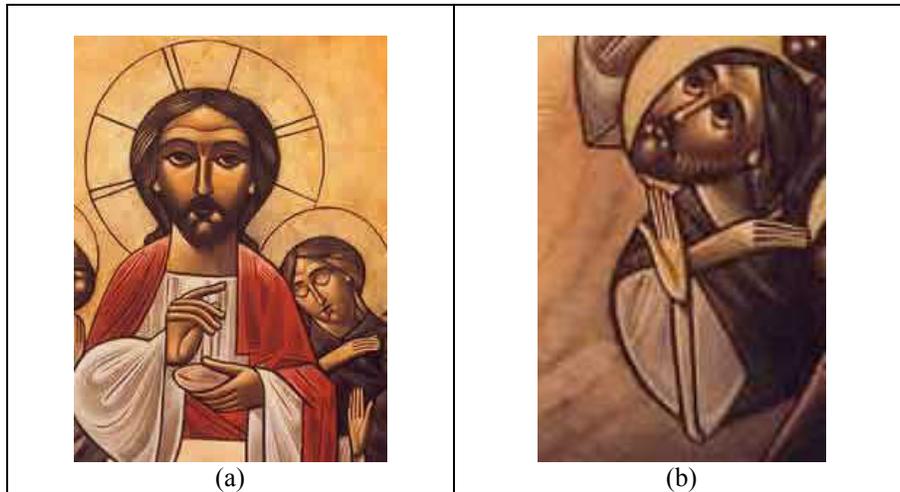
The nose, which is seen as sensual, is also small. Also, when an evil character is portrayed on an icon, it is always in profile because it is not desirable to make eye contact with such a person and thus to dwell or meditate upon it.

Figures in Coptic icons often have large heads, meaning that these are individuals devoted to contemplation and prayer. Icon artists deeply understood the meaning and benefit of icons on the spiritual life of the believers. Not at all the consequence of a scholarly dosage, the icon proceeds a centennial spiritual gestation that expresses himself by the only shapes capable to translate this spur of the mind.

The Coptic icon didn't escape this influence and saint – suffering staleness tinted of emotionalism denature it.

We are honestly surprised by certain elements keys of Dr. Isaac Fanous icons, famous iconographer of whom we greet here the enormous work and the tireless quest of new face (Figure 3) [14].

But what mean these faces of apostles, yet very awake, represented with the closed eyes? Is this not precisely to short-circuit the communion established by the look, primordial in the icon? What to say of these arms crossed on the chest, gesture less natural on behalf of apostles when they coasted the Master? (Figure 3b)



**Figure 3.** (a) Christ risen (Dr. Isaac Fanous); (b) detail.

Christ is introduced as ‘the image of the invisible God’. That He is ‘the image of God’ has been affirmed already by Paul (2 Corinthians 4.4), in a context which appears to reflect Paul's conversion experience. Paul recognized the One revealed to him on the Damascus Road as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Did he, in that same moment, recognize Him also as the image of God? [3]

When Ezekiel received his vision of God, he saw enthroned at the heart of the rainbow-like brightness “a likeness as it were of a human form” (Ezekiel 1.26). Paul had a similar experience when he recognized “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4.6).

He is not merely echoing someone else's form of words here; he is expressing what his own experience confirmed as true.

To call Christ the image of God is to say that in Him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested — that in Him the invisible has become visible. In another letter Paul had declared that since the creation of the world the ‘everlasting power and divinity’ [4] of the unseen Creator may be “clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1.20). But now an all-

surpassing disclosure of His 'everlasting power and divinity' has been granted. 'The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' has shone into His people's hearts through the same creative Word that first called light to shine forth out of darkness (2 Corinthians 4.4-6).

### ***3.1. The flee and return from Egypt***

Moved by the spirit of prophecy, Hosea foresaw the flight from Bethlehem where there was no safe place for the Christ Child to lay his head, and the eventual return of the holy refugees from their sanctuary in Egypt, where Jesus had found a place in the hearts of the Gentiles, when he uttered God's words: "Out of Egypt have I called My Son" (Hosea 11.1).

God's message, also delivered through the prophetic utterance of Isaiah, "Blessed be Egypt, My People" (Isaiah 19.25), was an anticipation of the coming of the Holy Family in Egypt.

The prophecy continues, "Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and will make sacrifice and offering." (Isaiah 19.21) As Christianity in Egypt spread, churches were built throughout the length and breadth of the land, and the sites chosen were, primarily, those which, had been visited and blessed by the Holy Family's sojourns (Figure. 4). The New Testament records the fulfilment of these Old Testament prophecies as they unfold in their historical sequence.

"..... behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, arise, take the young Child and His Mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word, for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." (Matthew 2.13)

Joseph complied. A donkey was fetched for the gentle Mother, still so young in years, to ride with her newborn Child in Her arms (Figure 5a). And so they set out from Bethlehem on their pre-destined journey, the hardened old carpenter, who was Mary's betrothed, striding ahead, leading the donkey by its leash into the untracked paths of a wilderness dark as the desert nights, and unending as the months of never ending horizons.

It was an arduous journey fraught with hazard every step of the way. In those far-off days, there were three routes which could be followed by travellers traversing Sinai from Palestine to Egypt, a crossing which was usually undertaken in groups, for without the protection of well organized caravans, the ever present dangers - even along these known and trodden paths - were ominously forbidding.

But, in their escape from the infanticidal fury of King Herod, the Holy Family - understandably - had to avoid the beaten tracks altogether, and to pursue unknown paths, guided by God and His Angel. They picked their way, day after day, through hidden valleys and across uncharted plateaus in the (then) rugged wastelands of Sinai, enduring the scorching heat of the sun by day and the bitter cold of the desert nights, protected from the threat of wild beasts and savage tribesmen. Their daily sustenance was miraculously provided; the all too

human fears of the young Mother for her Infant were allayed by her faith (Figure 5b).

And so they arrived, at last, safely, for God had pre-ordained that Egypt should be the refuge for the One who was to bring the message of peace and love to mankind.



**Figure 4.** The flee and return from Egypt (anonymous icon, 17<sup>th</sup> century).



**Figure 5.** (a) The flee and (b) return from Egypt (Dr. Isaac Fanous).

The tortuous trails they followed in their passage across Sinai, and their subsequent travels within Egypt, are chronicled by Pope Theophilus, 23<sup>rd</sup> Patriarch of Alexandria (384 - 412 AD). He testifies, in his celebrated annals, that after long prayers, on the eve of the 6<sup>th</sup> of Hathor (the Coptic month corresponding roughly with November), the Holy Virgin appeared to him and, after relating the details of the Holy Family's journey asked him to record all the information.

#### 4. Final remarks

The authentic renewal of the iconography, as Russian, Greek, Romanian or Coptic, is not a matter of talent that knows how to amalgamate the different currents of the contemporary pictorial language, but of an intense spiritual vision, fruit of a deep rooting in the church whose icon represents the liturgical picture.

Channel of grace, place of theophany where the space and the time participate in the new Creation of the eighth day, the icon is an eschatological vision (= of last ends) and presence.

The biblical support of the icon is real, but special elements in Coptic icon appear, as revealed in Christ Risen face and in Flee and Return from Egypt.

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