

St Mark, the Apostle and Beholder of God

Written by: Dr. Medhat Ibrahim
Seminarian Deacon, Theological College, El-Mina, Egypt

St Mark is recognized by all Christians world-wide as one of the four Evangelists who wrote a Holy Gospel. In addition, for our beloved Coptic Church, St Mark is also our preacher, our founder of the Coptic Church, and our first Pope of the See of St Mark. Through St Mark, the prophecy spoken of in the Holy Book of Isaiah the Prophet has been fulfilled, “...*there will be an altar for the Lord in Egypt and a pillar at its boundaries...*”

St Mark was also one of the seventy apostles; therefore our Coptic Church can be rightly termed “apostolic” as it was indisputably founded by one of the original apostles. Although the disciples and the apostles are considered ecumenical or universal bishops for the Church in general, every church refers to her initial preacher as her first bishop and as such, St Mark is the Coptic Church’s first bishop of the See of Alexandria.

St Mark attended the first ecumenical council held in Jerusalem in 51 AD to discuss the topic of the relevance of circumcision prior to baptism. The holy apostles agreed at this ecumenical council to accept the Gentiles into the Church without circumcision before baptism (Acts 15:23-30).

Following the council held in Jerusalem, St Mark and St Barnabus journeyed to Cyprus (Acts 15:36-40) and there the Holy Spirit led St Mark to preach in the Five Western Cities in North Africa. Following St Mark’s ministry in North Africa he then journeyed to Egypt. The date of this founding saints’ arrival into Egypt was 55 AD.

Egypt during the Period of St Mark’s Ministry:

When St Mark came to Egypt, many pagan gods were being worshipped by the Egyptians. Some of the gods were considered to be national gods and other idols originated from Greece, Rome, Persia, Syria, and Babylonia. These gods included:

- Rua: The god of the sun. Rua was considered by the pagans to be the source of light and warmth. Heliopolis “Ainshams” was the center of its worship and from this center gradually its false teachings were spread throughout all of Egypt.
- Amon: The invisible god. Tibha was the center of worship for this particular god. Later during the Egyptian state, Amon was combined with Rua and the combined worship came to be termed Amon Rua.
- Osiris: The messenger god of love and peace among the people. This god of peace and love originated from Syria.
- Diana or Artamis: The god of hunting.
- Khnoum: The creator god. Tibha was also the center of worship for Khnoum.

--Anhita: A popular god which came from Persia.

Also when St Mark journeyed to Egypt, Egypt was considered the second greatest city in the world. Second only to Rome, was Egypt. Egypt was widely accepted though as first in the world for science, art, philosophy, and architecture. Its school was recognized world-wide as well as the professors who taught within it. For all those seeking knowledge and philosophy Egypt was the place to come.

In Alexandria there were Greek philosophers and scholars, Jewish scholars and teachers of Scriptures, and Persian wise men. In addition to all this were the priests. In Alexandria, there was the famous Alexandrian Library considered as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. This famed library contained millions of volumes of books of the greatest philosophers and scholars in the world for that time frame.

The Alexandrian population was approximately 600,000. The most famous temple in Alexandria among the School and Library was Serabium. In this temple the idol Serabis was worshipped by most of the population.

The Holy Book of Acts 6:9 tells that St Stephen went in dialogue with a Jerusalem Council and that some of the council members were from the City of Alexandria. Also, Apollos, one of the greatest preachers in the early Church was from the City of Alexandria as denoted by the Holy Book of Acts 18:24.

Not only was Alexandria the center of civilization for the world, it was also the center for moral corruption.

Politically, Egypt was a Roman state under the direct control of the Roman emperor. Alexandrians revolted against the Roman authority of Augustus Caesar. Caesar sent a Roman military army of 20,000 to Alexandria to put a halt to the revolution. The emperor was in dire need of Egypt's wheat. Putting an end to the revolution would not be the only act of Augustus Caesar. He also gave social and religious freedom to the Jews residing in Alexandria. This inequality gave rise to many disputes and fights among the Jews and Alexandrians.

This is the state of the wonderful City of Alexandria, founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC, when St Mark arrived to preach and teach the message of salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Upon the first day of his arrival, St Mark wandered about the streets of Alexandria until his worn shoes fell apart. St Mark stopped at the first shoemaker shop he approached to have his shoes repaired. The shoemaker's name was "Anianos" and this shoemaker would later become the second pope of Alexandria.

While Anianos was working to repair St Marks' worn shoes, the needle in which he was using to repair the soles of St Mark's shoes injured his hand and Anianos cried out, "Oh God, the only One!" At this exclamation, St Mark spit upon the ground, made mud, and placed the mixture upon Anianos finger and healed it immediately. Discussion ensued between St Mark and Anianos related to his One God. Anianos confessed to St Mark that he had only heard of such God but did not actually know of this One God.

St Mark begins to preach to Anianos about the One God, the Lord Jesus Christ. The message of salvation through the Holy Cross was taught and welcomed by Anianos and his family. Anianos home is considered the first Church in the land of Egypt.

Within a few short years Christianity had spread throughout the land of Egypt. Christianity not only spread and was accepted, through its teachings the behavior and morals of the Egyptian people would also change for the better.

Philon, the Jewish scholar, stated, “St Mark and his disciples did not care about worldly matters, but cared about God’s Glory and His salvation to all people.” The Egyptians became united in true “Agape” love and a heavenly peace. There was no rich or poor classification among the people. Everyone lived an economical life; the rich gave unto the poor so everyone could be considered rich with God. The people ate only one time per day after sunset. Some would fast for three to five days without food.

There is disagreement among scholars about the possible visit of St Peter the apostle to St Mark in Babylon’s fort where there was a great Jewish colony and from which St Peter wrote his first Holy Epistle which concludes with this verse, “...*she was in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you and so does Mark my son*” (*I Peter 5:13*). Some scholars believe this means Rome. Regardless, there is nothing to contraindicate the possibility of St Peter’s visit to Babylon. Further, some scholars suggest St Simeon the Cannite visited Egypt as well.

To establish the newly growing Church, St Mark, ordained Anianos as a bishop and along with this ordained twelve priests and seven deacons. St Mark at this particular time also wrote his Divine Liturgy, now referred to as the “Divine Liturgy of St Cyril.” St Mark first wrote the Divine Liturgy in Greek then it was translated to the language of Behari Coptic. Three of Anianos assistants were Mlios, Kardanos, and Primos.

St Mark founded the School of Alexandria to counteract the idolatrous school in Alexandria which had become world famous for its philosophy, science, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. St Mark wrote the Apostles Teachings, Rituals, and Traditions that were specific for the See of Alexandria. Following all of this, St Mark departed Alexandria in 65 AD to further his ministry in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Five Western Cities in Northern Africa.

After continuing to strengthen the churches in North Africa, St Mark at St Paul’s request joined the apostle in Rome to help in preaching and teaching those there. St Paul stated in the two Holy Books, II Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 1:24 that St Mark was indeed useful for the ministry.

Bishop Anianos, his priests and deacons were known for their honesty, for their ministry, and taught through Egypt. They established the first church in Bokalia now known as “St Mark Church in Alexandria.” St Mark returned to Alexandria around 67 AD, where he wrote his Holy Gospel in Greek for the believers in Alexandria.

The great success of St Mark’s evangelism led to persecution and torture of Christians in Alexandria by the idolatrous governors and people of the city. St Mark was one of the ones who would ultimately be put to death because of his ardent belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

On 29 Baramoudah (April 16) 68 AD, St Mark celebrated the Glorious Resurrection Feast with the believers which coincided with the Feast of Serabis, as previously mentioned, the most famous of idols

worshipped in the City of Alexandria. The idolaters angrily broke into the church and attacked St Mark while the saint was praying the Divine Liturgy of the Glorious Feast of the Resurrection at the altar. The crowds of idolaters tied up St Mark with a band around his neck and dragged him into the streets of Alexandria. From one street to another they inhumanely dragged the saint crying and screaming “Drag him to the bulls’ house.”

The “bulls’ house” refers to the Bokalia area where the Coptic Church was later built in his honor, known as “St Marks’ Church in Alexandria.” They continued to torture the bleeding St Mark until finally he was thrown into prison. The Lord Jesus Christ through a great Heavenly light appeared to St Mark and healed him saying, “Be strong My beloved apostle, your heart will be filled with joy. Be in peace as tomorrow you will have the crown of martyrdom and be with Me in the Heavenly Jerusalem.”

The following day, the idolaters tied up the apostle once again with a neck bond and dragged his body through the streets as they had done before. This time they drug his body until his head separated from his body. Upon this day, St Mark received three crowns, the crown of apostolicity, the crown of evangelism, and the crown of martyrdom. All the while during his torture, St Mark prayed, “Thank you Lord because you have allowed me to suffer persecution and torture for Your Holy Name.” St Mark near his death requested that the Lord forgive those who brought about his death and then departed from his earthly existence.

After St Mark’s martyrdom, the idolaters hurriedly brought firewood to burn his body. A great wind suddenly blew, a great rain suddenly fell and the idolaters in fear scattered. St Mark’s disciples came and affectionately carried his holy body and buried him in the Church which carries his name in Bokalia. St Mark’s blood became the first shed in Egypt and millions of martyrs would follow his example and chose earthly death rather than deny their Lord Jesus Christ.

This is written in the History of Patriarchs by Bishop Saouris; St Mark was martyred on the last day of Baramoudah the year 35 following the Lord Jesus Christ’s Glorious Resurrection on 24 of Nissan. The Coptic Church celebrates his martyrdom in Baramoudah.

A few centuries later, St Mark’s body was stolen by Italian traders and taken to Italy where it remained for hundreds of years. His Holiness Pope Cyril the Sixth succeeded in returning St Marks’ holy body to Egypt on 17 Baounah, June 24, 1969.