Characteristics of
Coptic Bible Translation

J. Barton Payne

For the last century, that is, since the discovery of the means of translating the ancient hieroglyphic writing of the Egyptians, the study of Coptic, its Christian descent, has suffered an eclipse. But this is to be regretted, for both linguistically and theologically the literature of the Copts presents an important yet little noticed source of information. Coptic is defined as a generally Hamitic language, the last stage of the development of the tongue of the ancient Egyptians before its final replacement by Arabic. In the fourteenth Christian century it ceased to be used as a living literary medium; and it has not been spoken by the people for over two hundred years, though the northern, or Bohairic, dialect continues as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church. It is thus possible to trace the evolution of Egyptian from the earliest texts through about five thousand years, a phenomenon without equal in linguistic study. This latest form, Coptic, was written in an adapted Greek alphabet with additions of seven symbols from the older Demotic; and, although appearing among the pre-Christian Egyptians, it is primarily the language of Christian Egypt.

One of the great values of Coptic is as a tool for the textual criticism of the Bible. This applies particularly to the southern, or Sahidic, dialect, to which attention is here restricted, and in which one of the oldest Egyptian versions of the Scriptures appeared by at least A.D. 250.1 The Sahidic version thus bears witness to a Biblical text at least a century older than the oldest major Greek manuscripts; but, before this evidence can be applied to the study of the underlying text, the characteristics of Coptic Bible translation must be appreciated and taken into consideration. The following surveys three relevant factors: the Greek influence upon the Sahidic Bible, the influence of the Coptic language, and certain of what one might call rational influences.

First, as to the Greek, it must be noted in general that during the Hellenistic age Greek forms began to creep into the speech of the Egyptians. There were of course certain nouns and technical terms, but soon came common verbs and even such basic units of speech as conjunctions, in which the Coptic poverty was matched by the richness of the Greek. This process commenced even before Alexander, but it was Christianity which at last broke across the native Egyptian antipathy to things foreign and which gave to this movement its great impetus. The Greek influence appeared most strongly in the vernacular Coptic Bible, which had its source in Greek texts descended from the Septuagint, apparently without reference to the Hebrew. This is true at least in I Samuel, from which the following references are drawn.

This Greek influence naturally concerned names, even where the correct Semitic form might have been known: the Philistine city, Ὄσκαλων, (Askelon), follows the Greek, Ἀσκάλων, (Askalon), though Coptic has the "sh" sound; and the Philistine himself is an ἀλλόφυλος, pure Greek.

But further, "peace" in the Coptic Bible is now the Greek ἔλπην or ἐρήνη, a good man is an ἄγαθός, and the Greek preposi-

tion παρά is represented, sometimes by the Coptic erat-, or entoot-, but at other times simply by para! Transliteration is not always exact. One looks in vain for γλυκόδος in either Coptic or Greek lexicons, but it reflects the common pronunciation of κίβωτος. Textual emendations of spelling based upon the Coptic version must be undertaken with caution, keeping in mind the possibilities of Coptic equivalents.

A primary question is always, in any given case of a Greek form in the Coptic Bible, “Is this a Biblical influence upon the Coptic language?” or, “Is this a Hellenized Coptic linguistic influence upon the Biblical text?” For example, in I Samuel 13:4, the Greek reads τέπακεν from παω. The Coptic has afpatasse, from the Greek πατάσσω. This may well be a Biblical influence upon the Coptic language, popularizing a Greek verb, while assuming a confusion between παω and πατάσσω. But elsewhere, for example, for ἔγνως, 20:7, Coptic reads καλῶς, another Greek adverb for “well.” This is no textual matter; the Grecized Coptic is influencing the Biblical text by translating Greek with Greek. Compare 24:5 where the Greek διπλαίς is represented in Coptic as διπλαεῖς; but in verses 6 and 12 the same noun is rendered χλαμύς, another Greek word for “cloak” freely introduced. Any emending of the Greek text on the basis of the Coptic is out of the question; the Coptic translator merely preferred synonyms to repetition! Finally it should be observed that the later the Coptic manuscript, the stronger the Greek influence: an old text reads, 9:6, efsooun, native Coptic for “he knows”; a later one, efnoi, from the Greek νοεω.

Second, there is the influence of the Coptic language itself upon the vernacular Egyptian Bible. Brief studies have been made upon this subject by J. H. Ropes in Vol. III of the Jackson-Lake studies, or Grossou; but much remains to be done. Coptic is not like Armenian, for example, which is capable of representing Greek almost word for word; but rather it must introduce certain changes to reproduce many a given phrase. A thorough knowledge of these is necessary correctly to get at the basic Greek which underlay the Coptic Bible translation. Coptic is an agglutinative, periphrastic, somewhat repetitions language. The position seems to be, “Why use one word to say it, when two will do?” Compare the common English, “I have got something,” though this language is relatively less far down the ladder of decay than was the old Coptic. So additions are frequent: noun subjects are introduced where the Greek had none; the Greek εἴπεν is consistently pejaf naf je, “He said to him, quote”; and Greek may say, “The ephod,” but Coptic says, “The ephod of the Lord,” 14:18. Yet on the other hand the Sahidic translators felt perfect freedom to delete: nouns are changed to pronouns, and possessives and other pronouns are simply dropped. In 29:10, the Greek reads, “Return, thou and the servants of thy Lord, ὁ ἥκοντες μετά σοῦ.” But Coptic omits the final phrase: it’s not a matter of parablepsis, or anything similar; but the Coptic translator knew that of course the servants were the ones who had come with him, why state the obvious? But this is an extreme case. When allowances are properly made, its textual correspondences with the Greek are sufficiently clear to render the Coptic a useful and valuable tool for textual criticism.

Third, one must note the rational influences, psychological and theological, that bear upon Coptic Bible translation. There are, as might be expected, a few cases where the translator did not understand the underlying Greek, or wrongly divided words or sentences, and so forth. For example, 17:6. “And κνημίδες of brass were upon his legs”; Coptic, “And swords of brass were girt upon him.” Did the Coptic translator misunderstand the Greek vocabulary? An intentional change seems a less likely solution. More interesting are little glosses introduced for clarity. 8:19, Greek, “They said to him, ὃς ὅτι”; Coptic, “They said to
him, \textit{entenna go an \textit{hi nai}}," "We will not be content with these things." 17:13, Greek, "Thy servant"; Coptic, "Thy servant, which is I." 31:4, Greek, "And Saul took (his) sword and fell upon it;" Coptic adds, \textit{afmou}, "He died," a logical corollary not left to the imagination.

Finally, did the translator manifest any theological bias in his work? In 12:9 the sinful Israelites are addressing Samuel: Greek, "Pray on behalf of thy servants to the Lord thy God"; Coptic, "Pray thou on behalf of thy servants to the Lord our God." He lets the people feel that the Lord is still their God, not just Samuel's, even though, contrary to His will, they had asked for a king. Yet in 8:19 the Greek, as the people had spoken, is, "A king shall be over us"; while in Coptic they say, "It is, a king, he must be over us!" There is no bias in favor of the people. These appear to be merely matters of the translator's identifying himself with the feelings of the passage; there is seemingly no theological axe to grind, in contrast to what appears in the Septuagint translation of, say, the Pentateuch, where anthropomorphisms of deity are avoided, or of Job, where the complaints of the sufferer are toned down. A final case is 23:26: Greek, "And David was preparing himself to go from the face of Saul"; but Coptic, "And as for David, God was guarding him to save him from the face of Saul." Its only theological bias is that of a people who found faith in God of such practical reality as to dominate their expression of human events. Pray God for more of such bias today!