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Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E. C. Wilfred Griggs

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Reviewed by Keith E. Norman, who earned his Ph.D. from Duke University in early Christian studies.

Wilfred Griggs, a long-time Brigham Young University faculty member, has established his credentials among the world’s leading Coptic scholars with the publication of *Early Egyptian Christianity,* a thoroughly researched and carefully argued study of the historical development of formative Christianity in one of its most important but largely neglected areas. Although he perhaps promises more than he delivers, the book will be welcomed as the most up-to-date and comprehensive volume on the subject by scholars and students of the early church who are interested in more than just the genesis of orthodox Catholicism.

Griggs’s major thesis, that “early Egyptian Christians were not bound by a centralized ecclesiastical organization nor did they have a stringent and well-developed doctrinal position” (vi) is not a revolutionary one, since the startling diversity of doctrine among early Christians was posited half a century earlier by Walter Bauer in his pathbreaking *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity.* However, because Bauer looked at a much broader area than just Egypt and because numerous manuscripts have been discovered and scholarly studies written since then, Griggs’s development of this thesis is much deeper as well as more extensive in time. Griggs portrays and develops the tension between various Christian groups, which culminated in the separation of the Coptic Church from Catholic Christianity following the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Griggs’s audience seems to be primarily a scholarly one, as evidenced by the steep price, de rigueur with this prestigious publisher of scholarly tomes, as well as by the plethora of footnotes (up to 371 per chapter!), and by Griggs’s usual (though not consistent) practice of quoting manuscripts and scholarly studies in the footnotes in their original language, without translating them into English. If you are fluent in Greek, Latin, and Coptic and have a smattering of French and German, you should feel quite at home here. Fortunately for those of us who may be a little linguistically rusty, Griggs does translate source citations in the text proper, and he takes pains to write clearly and largely jargon-free, providing explanations of technical terms as they are needed. Although previous familiarity with the names and issues in the early centuries of Christianity helps, it is not essential for understanding the book.
The Latter-day Saint reader, used to the polemics of a Talmage or a Nibley on the topic of post–New Testament Christianity, will be both intrigued and challenged by Early Egyptian Christianity. Griggs’s account usually avoids sectarian polemic, and few — other than sharp-eyed Latter-day Saints — will suspect a hidden agenda. Note, for instance, that he avoids the temptation to Mormonize the term presbyterate (61) into elders (or, worse yet, elders quorum). Not surprisingly, however, he does tend to the conservative end of the Biblical scholar spectrum, although this tendency is usually kept low-key. Pronouns referring to Jesus are capitalized (3); accounts widely questioned by more liberal scholars, such as the great commission to do missionary work or the manifestations at Pentecost, are assumed to be historical (4, 15); and Griggs protests that the “lack of evidence supporting [Herod’s slaughter of the innocents] does not by itself invalidate Matthew’s historical credibility” (35 n. 2). Scriptural literalists need not fear that their faith will be shaken. At other times, Griggs seems to want to straddle both camps without taking a stand on controversial issues. In a cautiously worded explanation, he concedes that the modern trend in scholarship is away from accepting the historicity of Acts (9 n. 6; see especially 13) and that the development of Old Testament themes in the New Testament generally leads scholars to doubt the accuracy of the historical narratives in the latter (35 n. 1). The aloof tone distances him from this fray. 

Nevertheless, the book is not about the New Testament per se, and when he gets beyond its confines, Griggs is free to be more critical and creative with respect to traditional interpretations. He is openly skeptical of post–New Testament traditions (20, 35 n. 5). His point that the effort to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy in early Egyptian Christianity is anachronistic follows Bauer’s lead, but Griggs expands the field of sectaries, arguing that Bauer overemphasized Gnosticism (32–33). Not only is there no contemporary evidence for a struggle against the early “so-called heretics” (a term overused here by Griggs [46]), but Griggs contends that the charges against such early Egyptian heresiarchs as Cerinthus, Carpocrates, Basilides, and Valentinus were largely unfounded and depend on the corrupted teachings and morals of their later disciples (47ff.).

Apparently Griggs, along with several other Latter-day Saint students of early Christian history, sees the Gnostics as preservers of the last remnants of some of the authentic traditions and teachings lost by Catholic/ecclesiastical Christianity. Valentinus, who almost became a Bishop of Rome in the third century, was charged with adding new revelation (53), whereas western Christianity had
already rejected continuing revelation, preferring to philosophize the scriptures (55). Griggs translates ten teleian gnosin as “the perfect knowledge [literally correct], or the gnosticism accompanied by ritual” (53). Such phraseology seems calculated to raise temple associations in the minds of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but Griggs does not support this interpretation from context or from similar usage elsewhere. (Compare the temple motifs in monastic visions on page 200).

Later, discussing the Manichees, Melitians, Arians, monks, and rival archbishops from cities outside Egypt, Griggs gives a generally balanced account of the axial points and turns of Alexandrian ecclesiastical politics and controversies. However, the details are not very flattering to the orthodox tradition, and Griggs’s sympathies for its rivals are not difficult to detect. Despite the skillful campaign of Athanasius, the long-term fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, to co-opt monasticism, Griggs properly cites that ascetic movement as evidence of the church’s inadequacy and thus presents monasticism as a challenge to the ecclesiastical establishment (106). One point of controversy was the language and theological assumptions of the Nicene Creed, which Athanasius championed but which the monks tended to see as “at variance with literal doctrines of the Bible” (146). Griggs is clearly on the side of the dissenters, pointing out that Athanasius was attempting to eradicate old traditions, not an innovative heresy (174). We are reminded that heretical movements are usually conservative and reactionary, a fact equally true in Latter-day Saint history.

Of course, the foremost opponents of Nicaea were the Arians, who rejected the formula that the Son was of the same substance (homoousious) as the Father, i.e., both were fully God. Arian subordinationism has found considerable sympathy among Latter-day Saint students, but Griggs rightly points out that the theological difference between Athanasius and the Arians was less than is generally assumed (146). Both started from the philosophically determined conception of God as infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, having nothing substantial in common with humanity. Arian doctrine was not an early version of Latter-day Saint Church doctrine.

The author’s caution and balance is generally refreshing, as when he avoids the common pitfall of turning initial hypotheses into later assumptions (see especially 178). However, I was a little disappointed by the cursory treatment of the formation of the Coptic Church as a separate entity. A more thorough development of this topic would have rounded out things nicely, even though it would have taken Griggs slightly beyond 451 A.D., the year of the Council of Chalcedon. (He wasn’t very strict about this end point, anyway).
Likewise, the coverage of the theological and political rivalries of the Alexandrian bishopric with its counterparts in non-Egyptian sees in chapter 6 strikes one as less germane to the stated intent of the book; the subject has certainly been adequately treated elsewhere.

At times, the editing seemed a little haphazard. At first, Griggs uses the verb form proselytizing (3) but reverts to proselyting in the very next paragraph (4; see 19 and others). Footnotes are not always treated systematically, as when, on page 222 note 137, J. N. D. Kelly’s Early Christian Doctrines is given with full bibliographic information, despite being cited numerous times earlier in the text, even in the same chapter.

But these are minor quibbles that by no means detract from the value of the book. It is a solid achievement, impressive both for its scholarship and for its readability. I think Latter-day Saint readers will be particularly intrigued by the muddled dynamic between the established orthodoxy, which paradoxically seemed always to be shifting ground, and the dissenting traditionalists who are calling for a return to the good old days but are portrayed as radical innovators by their opponents. Although Griggs never explicitly suggests the parallel, the controversy between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its various “orthodox” Christian detractors has many points of contact with his subject. Anyone who claims to be an informed Christian and any student of religious history will profit from acquaintance with Griggs’s work.