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## SITT RIFQAH AND HER FIVE CHILDREN

By

Dr. Otto F. A. Meinardus

Among the lesser known saints of Egypt is Sitt Rifqah or St. Rebecca who together with her five children is said to have suffered martyrdom during the late third century Diocletian persecutions in Egypt. We call attention to this saintly mother with her children because she happens to be the one and only Coptic "mother-saint" in whose honour an annual cult has emerged over the past few hundred years. Neither the 13th century church historian Abū Sālih the Armenian nor the Islamic historian al-Maqrizi (15th century), who have provided us with inclusive lists of churches and monasteries in Egypt, mention the church or the *mūlid* of Sitt Rifqah. Her name does not appear in either the Latin or the Greek lists of saints.

Generally speaking we notice that Coptic hagiology and iconography, following certain Byzantine models, emphasize the heroic or ascetic virtues and deeds of individual saints, e.g. Sts. George, Demetrios, Theodore, Mercurios (Abū 's-Saifain) or those of the anchorites or coenobites. For our purpose, we shall distinguish two types of martyrologies which are recorded in the Coptic Synaxarion.<sup>1</sup> There are those *vitae* of individual martyrs, who may be laymen, shepherds, peasants, soldiers, or monks, priests, bishops and patriarchs. However, there exists also a second category, which includes various combinations of family members, who in loyalty to Christ and their family sought to offer themselves and to suffer the consequences of their faith. Thus we find two brothers as in the case of Piroou and Athom (Abīb 8, July 15), who witnessed for their faith together. More common seems to have been the constellation of brothers and sisters, who selected martyrdom rather than apostasy. There are several such instances recorded, e.g. Apatar and his sister Eirene (Tūt 28, October 8), Athanasius and his sister Eirene (Hātūr 3, November 12), Benjamin and his sister

Eudoxia (Masrī 28, September 3) and Paisus and Thecla (Kihak 8, December 17).

In this study we shall dwell upon the hagiological traditions of Christian mothers who together with their children sought after the crown of martyrdom. Whereas in many instances the early Christian martyrs had their pre-Christian cult-prototypes in either the Hellenic or the Pharaonic pantheon, whom they replaced in Christian garb, this cult adaptation could not be said to have taken place in this particular case. Indeed, it is fanciful to argue that the martyrdom of the faithful Jewish mother and her seven sons<sup>2</sup> would have served as inspiration for St. Rebecca or as a model for the later Coptic hagiographers. True, St. Solomone, as she is known and commemorated in the Byzantine tradition on August 1, lived during the persecutions of the Jews by the infidel Antiochos Epiphanes and died together with her seven sons in or around 186 B.C. Her cult is still alive in the cave-church outside the town of Paphos on the island of Cyprus. A cross-fertilization of this cult seems quite improbable.

Another question is raised by the rather uncommon Coptic name of the saint. Only in two Coptic martyrologies of "mother-saints" are the principal actors named after Old Testament women. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, gave her name to St. Sarah, mother of two sons, and Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel, sister of Laban and wife of Jacob, gave her name to St. Rebecca or Sitt Rifqah. The names of her five children provide us with no further information as to the origin of the story. Two names are clearly of Egyptian origin, namely Amon and Amona, Peter and John are New Testament names and Agathon falls into the Byzantine heritage.

The Coptic Synaxarion records several accounts in which Christian mothers with their children sought after the crown of martyrdom. These commemorations are noteworthy since they demonstrate the fact that the honour of martyrdom and the attending

1. *Kitāb as Sadiq al-Amin*, Cairo 1912. Malan, *The Calendar of the Coptic Church*. London 1873. Basset, R., «Le Synaxaire Arabe Jacobite», *Patrologia Orientalis*, I, III, XI, XVI, XVII.

2. See: 2. Macc. 7: 1-42.

blessings were not merely reserved for men or female ascetes. In this connexion it is noteworthy to state that there are no stories that report of a father and his children confessing and suffering martyrdom. This is, of course, understandable since it was the mother's role to look after the religious upbringing of her children. Not only the cultural and religious significance of womanhood, but also of motherhood finds its liturgical and hagiological expression in the veneration of the "mother-saints" and their children. The following accounts are better known among the Copts: There are the stories of Amâdah and her sons Armâniûs and Amah (Baûnah 8, June 15), Theodora and her five sons Cosmas, Damian, Antimus, Leon-

Rafiqâ (Rebecca). They were from the district of Mamuniyah<sup>3</sup> in the province of Qos. Our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to them and told them that they should obtain the crown of martyrdom at Shubra near Alexandria, and that their bodily remains would be taken to Taqrahâ (or Naqrahâ) in al-Buhairah (Lower Egypt). The saints followed the vision which they had seen and they distributed their belongings among the poor. Their brother Agathon was their beloved leader and he was admired and loved by all. They went to the town of Qos and publicly confessed Christ in the presence of the governor Dionysios (Dyounâsiûs).<sup>4</sup> He inflicted upon them terrible pain and began to torture the mother, but she demonstrat-



Icon: Church of St. George.  
Hârat Zuwaitlah, Cairo.

tius and Euprapius (Hâtûr 22, December 1), Athanasia and her two sons Cyrus and John and her three virgin-daughters Theodora, Theodosia and Theopiste (Amshîr 6, February 13), Sarah and her two sons (Barmûdah 25, May 3) and Sophia and her three daughters Pistis, Elpis and Agape (Tût 5, September 17).

Although the Coptic Church has honoured the courageous witness of these mothers and their children, only in one particular case has the liturgical commemoration led to the emergence of a special cult. It is the veneration of St. Rebecca and her five children Agathon, Peter, John, Amon and Amona (Tût 17, September 17) in the Nile Delta village of Sunbât.

The following story is from the Coptic Synaxarion of Tût 7. "On this day passed away the saints Aghâtâ (Agathon), Butrus (Peter), Yuhannâ (John), Amûn (Amon) and Amûna (Amona) and their mother

ed joy. Then he continued to inflict pain upon the children. When he was exhausted from his trouble to cause pain and anguish, he sent them to Alexandria. Because of their suffering, a large crowd of people gathered and confessed their faith in our Saviour and also received the crown of martyrdom. When the saints were presented to the governor Armâniûs at Alexandria, he happened to be in a place called Shubra. As he recognized their arrival he ordered that they should be more severely tortured, that the parts of their bodies be cut off and be thrown in a cauldron and that they be finally crucified with the head downwards. Then he ordered them to be decapitated and their bodies to be thrown into the sea. After they had separated the head, they took the bodily remains on a

3. Amélineau, *La Géographie de l'Égypte à l'époque copte*. Paris, 1893, 415.

4. Dionysius was the «logistes» of Asyût, who appears in numerous passions in the cycle by Julius of Aqfahs.

ship to throw them into the sea. But God sent his angel in the person of the leader of the people of Naqrahâ in the province of al-Buhairah in the episcopal See of Masil and he discovered the bodies of the saints. The leader rejoiced greatly at finding the bodies and placed them in a beautiful church where they remained until the end of the persecutions. Later God appeared through the relics and wrought miracles and marvels. At this time, their bodies were translated to the town of Samnoutyah.”<sup>5</sup>

This account is typical of the Coptic passions connected with the persecution of Diocletian. The stages, which we discover in almost all martyrologies of this period, are clearly set forth.

1. The saint is called by an angel, by Christ or has a vision to bear witness for his faith before the pagan tribunal.
2. The saint arises and sets out for the nearest governor and makes his confession of faith before him.
3. He is arrested, questioned, invited to offer incense to the pagan god. The watching crowds are being converted.
4. Then he is tortured and cast into prison.
5. After further rough torture he is sent to another governor and makes the journey in a ship on the river Nile. This Nile journey—in our case from Qos in Upper Egypt to Alexandria—is a standard feature and shows a distinct echo of ancient Egyptian legend in which the Nile journey was a favourite theme.
6. He is brought before another governor, again tortured, but he stands firm. He is visited by an angel, Christ, or another saint, who comforts and strengthens him in his witness.
7. Finally he is decapitated and his remains are thrown away.
8. Pious bystanders gather the remains and transfer them to a church.

We have to accept the findings of critical scho-

larship and we have to admit that many of the passions, including that of St. Rebecca and her children, carry apocryphal elements, though the persecution itself is, of course, a historical fact.

Every year in conjunction with the popular *mûiid* of St. George (Mâri Girgis) on the 16th of Masri or August 22 at Mit Damsis near Mit Ghamr in the Nile Delta, large numbers of Coptic and also Muslim pilgrims from the towns and villages cross in felucas and sailboats from the east bank of the Damietta branch of the Nile to the west bank where they mount donkeys for the 2 km ride to the village of Sunbat. In the old church of St. Rebecca they venerate the relics of the saints which are preserved in cylindrical tubes wrapped in dark red velvet covers. In addition to the relics of St. Rebecca and her five children there are also those of Piroou and Athom (Abib 8, July 15), John and Simon (Abib 11, July 18) and Abuda and Isaac (?). The pilgrims gather in front of the icon of St. Rebecca and her five children and offer prayers for blessings upon their children. Barren women beseech the “mother-saint” to grant them sons, and young mothers repair to the icon in expectation to have enough milk for their children. As in the case of all *mawâlid*, demons are cast out and the possessed are being healed.<sup>6</sup>

There is little doubt that the cult replaced a former Egyptian cult at Sunbat. We know that the village was built on the site of an ancient pharaonic settlement which used to be known as Skhem Perti, namely the city of the god Seth Typhon. St. Rebecca and her five children have assumed cultic roles which may well go back into the pharaonic ages.

6. Viaud, Gérard, *Les Pèlerinages coptes en Egypte d'après les notes du Qommos Jacob Muysier*. Cairo 1979, 25–26. Salamah, Adib Naguib, «Sainte Rifqah et ses enfants», *Marcos*, Cairo, Sept. 1965, 6,6. Hyvernat, Henri, *Les actes des martyrs de l'Egypte*, I, 1886, 135–169.

5. «Synaxaire Arabe Jacobite», *Patr. Orient.* I, 25–26.