Egypt Is Africa
by Shirley Graham DuBois

SHIRLEY GRAHAM DuBOIS, widow of the distinguished scholar Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, is renowned in her own right as the author of many books for children, including biographies of Paul Robeson, Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver; as a composer of children’s operas; and as the author of His Day Is Marching On, a memoir of her husband. An authority on the Mideast and African liberation struggles, Mrs. DuBois has also been published frequently in The Black Scholar. Currently a resident of Accra, Ghana, she was denied entry into the United States, her native land, in 1970, but after intensive black pressure the State Department lifted its ban, and Mrs. DuBois visited the US in 1971. Her education was extensive, pursued at Oberlin College; Yale University, where she was a Julius Rosenwald Fellow; New York University, where she carried a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1946; and at the Sorbonne. Forty years younger than her husband (whom she married secretly on Valentine’s Day in 1950), Shirley DuBois shared in her husband’s work. Said DuBois, “Her work had long been close to mine. The faith of Shirley Graham in me was received as a joy and not merely a duty. She has made these days rich and rewarding.”

Part I

Let us begin with the observation that the Greek word from which our word “history” is derived originally meant research or investigation. Stemming from this, we declare with certainty that Herodotus, the Greek, must be considered a true historian. He was an intrepid and inquisitive traveler and investigator. His research carried him into places hitherto unknown to the peoples of the Mediterranean, his observations went far below the surface, his conclusions were based on facts.

Herodotus’ findings frequently ran counter to the views of his peers in Greek ruling circles. Though having no interest in politics, he was criticized for his “unorthodox” political ideas. Were he going out from Athens today, his writings would undoubtedly be censored, and he, perhaps, jailed.

It is to this Greek historian that we turn for our earliest descrip-


tion of Egypt. Since the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in 1822, papyrus, parchment and funereal inscriptions account for Egypt as far back as the first Pharaohs, but these records usually must be gazed at in glass cases in museums. Fortunately, however, much of the early history of Egypt is sculptured in monuments of stone and carved and painted on walls which the sands and dry air of Egypt have preserved. One must come to the Valley of the Nile to see them; they are well worth the journey.

It was about 300 B.C. that Herodotus traveled from one end of the Nile Valley to the other. And, having spent some time with the priests and scribes of Thebes (the original Thebes in upper Egypt), who instructed him on the exploits of the first three hundred rulers of Egypt, he crossed the Red Sea and followed in the footsteps of one Sesostris, a Pharaoh who in those dim and ancient days became master of Scythia and Thrace and left a colony called Colchis on the bank of the river Phasis. Of this colony Herodotus writes:

There is no doubt that the Colchians are an Egyptian race. I made inquiries. My own conjecture was founded, first, on the fact that they are black skinned and have woolly hair, which certainly amounts to but little, since several other nations are so, too; but further and more especially, on the circumstances that the Colchians, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians are the only nations who have practiced circumcision from the earliest times.

I quote from Herodotus’ book on the First Peloponnesian War, which he begins with these words:

These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory.

Follows an account of the Phoenicians who "formerly dwelt on the shores of the Red Sea...freighting their vessels with the wares of Egypt and Assyria." Then:

Concerning Egypt itself, I shall extend my remarks to a great length, because there is no country that possesses so many wonders nor any that has such a number of works which defy description. Not only is the climate different from that of the rest of the world, and the rivers unlike any other rivers, but the people also, in most of their manners and customs, exactly reverse the common practice of mankind. The women attend the market and trade, while the men sit at home at the loom.

Women carry burdens on their shoulders, while men carry them on their heads.

When they write or calculate, instead of going like the Greeks from left to right, they move their hand from right to left. They
have two different kinds of writing—one sacred, the other common. They are religious to excess far beyond any other race of men. ... They drink out of brazen cups which they scour every day. They wear linen garments, which they are careful to have freshly washed. They practice circumcision for the sake of cleanliness, considering it better to be cleanly than comely. ... Religious ceremonies came to Greece from Egypt. ... Almost all the names of the gods came into Greece from Egypt.

Herodotus discusses these religious ceremonies at length and gives one of the traditional beliefs:

Two black doves flew from Thebes (Egypt)—one to Libya and one to the Oracles of Zeus in Greece. ... By calling the doves black, the Dodomaens indicated that the woman was Egyptian.

It was Herodotus who called Egypt “the gift of the Nile.” Rivers and streams were always the highways of primitive man; flowing water cuts through the thick forests, finds its way through caverns and over rocks. Mammals followed the course of the river by whatever means could be devised.

Early twentieth-century German explorers discovered in East Africa evidences that man existed there as long ago as 600,000 years.

This research was halted by World War I. But in 1925, Dr. Louis B. Leakey, the British archaeologist, went to Tanganyika and confirmed these findings. The possibility was raised that here had been the habitat of earth’s “first man.” Extended exploration of the regions surrounding the sources of the Nile produced indisputable evidence that thousands of years ago, people from this section of the interior of Africa followed the course of the Nile River and at some very early time settled on its banks. Other early men trekked across northern Africa and came into the Nile Valley. Some coming from the other direction in the Arabian peninsula found their way to the “big river.”

Evidently these prehistoric peoples found the Valley of the Nile a good place. Certainly the soil was fertile, and there is no doubt that they regarded the Nile as a life-giving force. But it quickly became evident that they must protect themselves from the hazards of floods, while at the same time taking full advantage of the rich soil which the floods brought. There was neither time nor need for the first settlers to fight among themselves. Thus, from the beginning their manners and customs were based on the demands and the disciplines exacted by the river. Had the Nile been more fero-cious, it might have crippled the civilization emerging on its banks. Had it been a mild, placid stream, it might have lulled the people into a contented torpor. As it was, the river was the ideal disciplinarian—neither too stern nor too lenient.

Here we must point out that the original designation “Egypt” included the entire Valley of the Nile—whether it was in present-day Egypt, the Sudan, Nubia or Ethiopia (“burnt-skinned”). And the civilization which emerged in Egypt must be understood as rising from the entire Valley of the Nile.

Adolf Erman (Handbook on Egypt, the Berlin Imperial Museum) declares:

From time immemorial, the narrow valley of the Lower Nile was inhabited by peoples of the African race, who pastured their cattle on the marshes of the delta and grew their corn in the cultivated land of the upper country, and in consequence of their peaceful pursuits attained earlier than other nations to an advanced stage of civilization.

Thus, while Western historians and philosophers have been trying to explain away Egypt and all it stands for through some mysterious Aryan strain, mingled with Semitic and Asian, travelers, archaeologists and geographers have frankly recognized that Egypt is African. Geographers saw the Nile River from its two sources, one in Ethiopia and the other in Uganda, as the mighty artery carrying its stream of rich blood, black with fertile soil and hot passions, to Egypt from the interior of Africa, after passing through two thousand miles of tropical forests and mountains. The art of Egypt draws from this river, speaks of the forces of nature, makes hymns to its waters, depicts man calling on the river for succor and in praise. At the gateway to the Sudan, on the banks of the Nile, a splendid mountain is turned into a temple and decorated with Hamitic imagination and virility. Once the Aswan Dam is completed, not a drop of water from Lake Tana, at one source, or Lake Victoria, the other, will reach Kessett or Darmietta, where the sea pushes back into the river. The Nile waters, entirely canalized, redistri-buted, employed, passed through turbines and filtered through dams, will be absorbed into Sudanese and Egyptian soil. Thus, Egypt definitely turns her back on the Mediterranean and Europe, folding in on her river and Africa.

While few people have read Herodotus, millions probably first came across the word “Egypt” in the Bible. I quote from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2:

And the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word—for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night and departed into Egypt.

And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

Perhaps these three verses give fundamental and cogent reasons
why the modern white Christian world has so persistently and resolutely ignored and even denied that Egypt is Africa. Perhaps it was too much for them to acknowledge that their Christ had to be taken to Egypt to escape death—that in this part of Africa he was safe—and that it was from Africa that he was called forth to save the world!

There was no hiding the fact that from the Valley of the Nile man first lifted his eyes to the stars and made calculations on them; first grasped the perfection of the triangle and constructed his pyramids on its principle; that in Egypt science and art were born, and in Egypt death was but a door to eternal life. No one could dispute the records which have come down from antiquity. And so they placed Egypt in some dim and hazy sphere, vaguely connected with white Europe, obscurely outlined. Never, during my rather extensive schooling in the United States, was Egypt related to anything black or to any part of Africa.

Now that black students have forced colleges and universities in America to include black studies in their curricula, those who would may become familiar with the map of Africa and see that Egypt is definitely within the clearly defined boundaries of this largest of continents. But with this established, various "authorities on Africa" write at length about "Africa, South of the Sahara," "Africa, North of the Sahara"; of "Black Africa" and "Arab Africa," as if there were long dividing and confining walls stretching in every direction. I must tell you that there are black peoples all over Africa; there are Islamic peoples—sometimes Arabs, but more often not—all over Africa; and reluctantly, I must add—there are white people all over Africa.

I had not read Herodotus when I first saw Egypt in December, 1958. From Athens I flew to Cairo, across the Mediterranean, not in a huge jet plane, which is the only means of air travel today (jets flying so fast and so high that passengers see nothing but sky and clouds, except in the few minutes of ascent and descent—and then what one sees is an airport!). In 1958 my Greek plane flew low enough for me to see the choppy waters of the Mediterranean tossing an occasional ship—like a child's toy. I pressed close to the window to catch my first sight of Africa. It was late afternoon and the sun was throwing long rays across the water when I saw it—outlined by a rim of white foam—waves dashing against that old and indestructible shore.

In a few minutes the stewardess was pointing out the city of Alexandria curling around its bay and, on the other side, the ruins of old Alexandria, sacked hundreds of years ago in a succession of wars. Then we were over the delta and could plainly see the spread-out fingers of the Nile which, from time immemorial, has held in its palm rich farmlands—once designated the "Bread Basket of the Roman Empire." Suddenly, I saw a winding ribbon of gold! It was the Nile reflecting the last rays of Egypt's powerful sun. We followed the golden ribbon, and gradually the green stretches on either side narrowed. I was straining to see into the gathering gloom beyond the still shining river when we landed at Cairo. I came out of the plane and stood motionless before a black sky dripping with crimson and gold—fading off into rose and green and purple. Never had I seen such a spectacular sunset.

I was one of a group taken to the Continental Hotel in the heart of the city. Everything about the place was big: wide corridors, big rooms with high ceilings, and big bathrooms. (This hotel has since been remodeled along more modern lines.) I awoke next morning to a sound I recognized as the call to prayer from some nearby minaret. When I threw back the shutters I found that my room overlooked an inner courtyard where vivid flowers and dwarf trees in huge tubs were already flooded with sunshine. Surrounding walls and irregular blocks of buildings seemed etched against a blue sky. I could not see the street, though I could hear the rumble of traffic. A telephone call brought a pertly white-robed waiter with orange juice (fresh), coffee and hot croissants. His round brown face was wreathed in smiles of welcome.

I had just left the ice and wintry blasts of Russia, so I hurried to get out into the warm, bright sunshine. In a short time I was down on the portico of the hotel. The street before me was wide, divided into two lanes by a strip of flowers and green shrubs. Across the way was what appeared to be a park rising in terraces, where winding walks disappeared among towering old trees. Along the two lanes of the street, automobiles, trucks and buses crowded bicycles and small carts heaped with farm products, and pedestrians darted in and out. I joined the throng on the sidewalk going toward the corner. There—miraculously, it seemed to me—one small, very straight, white-clad, beltled traffic cop channeled all the jumble of traffic safely on its way. As I stood there waiting for the signal to cross, my face must have reflected my delight. For I found myself being greeted with smiles and nods and soft words from these perfect strangers. And I responded cordially in kind because they did not seem like "strangers." For these people on the Cairo street were colored. Not all blacks—though there were plenty of blacks among them—but so far as complexions went, I might just as well have been walking along a street on the South Side, Chicago! Later in the day I would have seen some whites. But at this early hour, Europeans, Americans and remnants of past nobilities and feudalism were not yet moving about. I was seeing a representative portion of the masses of Cairo: old and young, men and women, shopkeepers, clerks, market folks, students—all going about the business of the day. And I felt an instant kinship with them.
We do not here raise the issue as to where, on earth, man as we know him first existed. After seeing the skull of the Peking man, who the Chinese declare was the "first man"; after visiting excavations in Central China which uncovered human habitations built in some dim long-ago age, being shown the weapons, tools and utensils these inhabitants used—I am convinced that claims for the "first man" as well as for the "first civilization" may always be clouded with uncertainty. But, because the advanced stages of civilization in China or even in Mesopotamia had no effect on the dawn of civilization in Europe, we must trace Western civilization and learning from the Valley of the Nile through Greece and Rome to Europe and to America.

Of what "stock" then were the ancient peoples who made the first contributions to Western civilization?

We are aware of how ridiculous, how unscientific, how unsocial it is to separate mankind categorically into blocks and to put racial tags on each grouping. The discovery of indigenous peoples with very dark skins near the North Pole and of indigenous peoples with very white skins on the equator upset many calculations of the anthropologists. But, since we live in a world where peoples of white skins insist on their superiority over peoples of dark skins, since these whites unite in aggression and attempts to dominate the world:

- where, after annihilating Indian nations of North America, they now seem bent on wiping out the dark-skinned nations of Southeast Asia;
- where Great Britain explains her failure to prevent 220,000 of her colonists in East Africa from taking over the lands and lives of four million blacks by saying Englishmen cannot fight their "kith and kin";
- when only empty gestures are made against a handful of whites seizing and appropriating to themselves the rich lands and boundless wealth of the southern portion of Africa, while its millions of blacks remain little more than slaves;
- in a world which today activates the pronouncements of Adolf Hitler far more effectively than he ever did; in this world it is expedient to take the classifications which the "master people" themselves have made and to employ their own theories to expose distortions and lies—even as the guerrilla fighter takes up the weapon dropped from the hands of the enemy and plunges it into his back!

Let us then examine the "race" of those peoples who first came into the Valley of the Nile: (a) the smaller numbers coming from the Arabian peninsula; (b) others coming from northern Africa; (c) the larger and apparently earliest, coming from the interior of the continent by way of the Nile.

(a) This group may be designated as "Semites"—defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: members of any race supposed to be descendants from Shem, son of Noah, including Hebrews, Armenians, Phoenicians, Arabs and Assyrians. It must be remembered that the people of whom we speak here came long before the establishment of any of those empires.

Before naming the peoples from the interior and northern Africa as "Hamites," I checked three dictionaries.

Oxford's and Cassell's agree that a Hamite is a descendant of Ham, son of Noah: one belonging to the Hamitic stock, comprising the Egyptians and other African races.

But Webster's Dictionary defines a "Hamite" as being a descendant of Noah's second son; a Caucasian of the native stock of North Africa.

Astonished, I then looked up "Semite" in Webster's Dictionary and read: Semite—a member of the Caucasian race, now chiefly represented by the Jews and Arabs, but in ancient times including the Babylonians, Assyrians, Phoenicians, etc.

Thus—according to Webster—Caucasians comprised the bulk of the people who first came into the Valley of the Nile. And all peoples who produced any ancient civilization or built empires anywhere—were Caucasians!

(Of course, the Chinese do not exist.)

However, may I say that when in the context of this paper I use the term "Hamite," I am not referring to Caucasians from North Africa or from anywhere else. I am referring to blacks.

Thousands of times the Nile River rose and fell and the settlers on its banks merged and multiplied. Additional people came, following old trails, and were absorbed into the settlements. And, as men achieved mastery over their environment, they struggled for dominance over each other—and the stronger became masters. With the first great Pharaonic period, seven thousand years ago, the sons of Ham gained ascendency. They built the first capital, calling it Thebes, whose ruins may be visited today in upper Egypt. And this dominance of Hamites is recorded, for all to see, in the mighty monuments of Egypt.

A visit to the Valley of the Kings near that ancient capital, a tour of the museums of Cairo, five minutes' scrutiny of the face of the Sphinx—and you will know what the Pharaonic Egyptians looked like. Their sculptors, engravers, goldsmiths, painters and makers of pottery were masters of the art of realism. And, in the larger than life stone portraits of the brilliant period when Egypt laid the cornerstones for science, art, engineering and architecture—in those portraits you will see, almost without exception, the features of men and women who, in our world today, are designated as Negroes or blacks.

In Western art, a statue always has a certain narrative element,
telling or depicting a definite moment in the life of the model as
the sculptor conceives it. The statue fixes an attitude in passing, a
gesture, or a state in facial expression. For the ancient Egyptians,
a statue had quite a different meaning: it was the fulfillment of an
attempt to find for the perishable body an imperishable presentment
wherein the soul could be reincarnated—it was the material expres-
sion in statuary form of the hieroglyphic symbol of the dead person.
The most ancient statues were therefore images—as exact as could
be made.

Look up at the mammoth statue of Rameses II, which stands
in the center of a Cairo square which bears his name, and in the
bright sunlight you will easily recognize his features as belonging
to a kinsman! Among the finest pieces of Old Kingdom sculpture
found in the Cairo Museum is a superb statue of a seated scribe.
Now, the calling of a scribe was regarded as the noblest of all call-
tings, and in this broad, lifted face with its large eyes and flaring
nostrils one senses a pride, almost arrogance, softened by the full,
slightly curved lips. Nearby is the best preserved wooden statue from
the 4th Dynasty. It is the famous "Sheik el Balad" (the mayor of
the village). This man is standing, one foot advanced, holding a long
staff in his hand. The features are unmistakable.

I offer one more notable example:
The most spectacular archaeological discovery made in contem-
porary Egypt was that of the tomb of Tut-ankh-Amun, opened on
the fourth of November, 1922, in the Theban Necropolis. There this
young king had lain well hidden for three thousand years, deep in
a subterranean palace of colonnaded halls, corridors, antechambers
and storerooms. The treasures taken from that tomb are breath-
taking in their magnificence and fill one floor of the Cairo Museum.
There you may see—I quote from the guidebook—"the wonderful
gold mask that was placed over the head and face of the mummy.
In its delicate, but inspiring realism, it is the most faithful portrait
of the young monarch, at the very moment when death claimed
him." The guidebook further explains that his name—Tut-
ankh-Amun—means "Living Image of the God Amun."

I studied the large golden mask with its jeweled headdress; I
traced the contour and shape of the face with its high cheekbones,
full lips, wide nostrils and delicately hollowed cheeks beneath deep-
set eyes, and I recognized the portrait of a sensitive young black
man who had died before his time.

Man's religion is the core of his being. And the religious beliefs
and observances of Egypt ran parallel in form and expression to the
eye religions of deepest Africa. All were based on man’s depend-
ence on, and therefore his submission to, nature. Just as the Congo,
Niger and Volta rivers and their creatures were venerated and
placated in West Africa, so in Egypt the Nile was worshiped, and,
in times of distress, human sacrifices were made to its crocodiles.
Throughout Africa, certain animals were worshiped either as gods, or
as being the abode or reincarnation of a god. Throughout the con-
tinent, life after death was a fundamental concept—taking different
forms, it is true—but nowhere was a man's death looked upon as
his final end. And everywhere, powerful cults of priesthood
developed. In Egypt, it was frequently the priests who made and
removed the Pharaohs.

In the ancient kingdom of Ghana, in West Africa, the king was
revealed as an incarnation of the god of his clan, worshiped in the
Falcon. In ancient Egypt the Falcon was worshiped sometimes as
Osiris—the god of resurrection—and sometimes as Horus, the
Protector. Today in West Africa the royal symbols of the Aken
peoples are: a crouching Falcon, representing the Mother Goddess,
and the full upright Falcon, representing the Sun God.

One of the most delightful pieces in the Cairo Museum is that
of the infant Rameses II squatting between the protective wings of
a giant Falcon.

When the late President Gamal Abdul Nasser appeared before
the National Assembly to address it and the nation, as he stood on
the rostrum facing the assemblage and the battery of television
instruments and cameras which carried his words throughout the land
and to the outside world—immediately behind and above him, on the
wall, loomed a massive Falcon with outstretched wings. This was
his symbol.

E. A. Willis-Budge says in his The Egyptian Religion of
Resurrection:

It is wrong to class the religion of ancient Egypt with the
elaborate theological systems of peoples of Asiatic or European
origin. I became convinced that a satisfactory explanation of the
ancient Egyptian religion could only be obtained from the rela-
tion of the Sudan. Modern Sudani beliefs are identical with
those of ancient Egypt, because the Egyptians were Africans and
the modern peoples of the Sudan are Africans. And, after
making allowances for ancient and modern, Nilotic peoples give
outward expression to their beliefs in the same way.

An important point which Dr. Willis-Budge overlooks is that
until comparatively recent times most of the Sudan was Egypt.

Egypt, during the ages of the Pharaohs, was a land of agricul-
tural production, as well as the seat of arts, sciences and manufac-
turing. The existence of the canal connecting the Nile River with
the Red Sea shows the importance attached to trade with the Indian
seas. Ancient authorities testify to trade with the Indian peninsula
and with China. There existed no openings toward the Medi-
terranean. The shores of that sea were, for the most part, inhabited by
barbarous or semi-barbarous nations—and the peoples of Europe were still living in caves.

It was Alexander the Great who opened Egypt to the Mediterranean, though Egypt for him was only a step in his campaign against Persia. The Persians had defeated the Egyptian armies, and though they were unable to occupy any part of the land, they continually invaded and harassed it. When, therefore, Alexander put the Persians to flight, he was welcomed at Memphis, the second capital. There he made thank offerings to the gods of Egypt, and the small port in the delta where his forces had landed was named in his honor.

The death of Alexander was the starting point of a conflict between his generals over the division of his empire. General Ptolemy based himself at Alexandria and, after a long and bitter struggle, drove all contenders away. In 305 B.C., Ptolemy proclaimed himself King of Egypt.

He absorbed, rather than conquered, the remaining Pharaonic dynasty, but although he called himself its successor, Ptolemy knew that neither Thebes nor Memphis, traditional capitals, was suitable for the responsibilities of his new epoch. It was necessary that his capital overlook the Eastern Mediterranean. This coast had to be protected, and it was by way of the Mediterranean that new commercial ties would be established. It followed that the early Ptolemies made Alexandria the most beautiful capital of the ancient world. No other city could compare with it in splendor, wealth and culture. The best of Greek learning and art could be found in its magnificent museum and library. Foremost Greek scholars, including Aristotle, came to Egypt, learned and taught. And through the port of Alexandria came peoples from all the known world, bringing new bloodstreams of every variety into Egypt. Alexandria became a cosmopolitan city in every sense of the word.

Yet, it must be emphasized that the wealth-seekers, pleasure-seekers, European and Eastern foreigners who poured into Alexandria were concerned only with the city and the productive fields of the delta. As Alexandria became richer, its population swelled and the Ptolemaic festivities grew more elaborate, Egypt all along the Nile was ignored, except when additional tribute or slaves were needed to swell the coffers of Alexandria. The last Ptolemaic rulers were symbols of excess, corruption and tyranny. Scipio the African visited Egypt in 100 B.C. and was shocked by the debauchery and degeneration he witnessed in Alexandria.

So, in 31 B.C., Egypt fell before the expanding power of Rome. Its final phase was marked by the bloody conflict on the outskirts of Alexandria when Mark Antony led the forces of Egypt's Cleopatra against the mighty Roman legions.

The last Ptolemaic rulers committed suicide. After the death of Cleopatra and Mark Antony, the Emperor Augustus sent a prefect to rule from Alexandria. Egypt was considered the greatest prize of the new Roman Empire. And from the delta, food was sent out to feed the Roman legions as they continued their conquest of Africa and Asia Minor. But life for the Egyptian masses went on very much as it had been as long as men remembered—and the Nile continued to rise and fall in season. But the ancient glory of Egypt was gone; temples and palaces were left to the encroaching sands; the Sphinx and the smaller pyramids were buried in sand. Old Egypt was to slumber for a thousand years while its science, learning and art, taken by the Greeks, passed on to Rome and thence to the "barbarians" of Europe.
Eventually, Joseph and Mary reached the Jewish community in a village known as Babylon—which is now incorporated into the city of Cairo.

Thus, from the beginning, many common people in Egypt know the story of Jesus. When, after the death of Herod, Joseph took the boy and his mother back to Judea, they remembered his words. News did not travel swiftly in those days, but fisherman on the Red Sea, camel drivers across the desert, scribes coming from Jerusalem and Damascus, told about a Good Man who was followed by throngs wherever he went; the Egyptians heard of the crucifixion of that Good Man and knew that it was the little boy who had lived among them.

It is not surprising, then, that when certain of Jesus' disciples traveled to Egypt “preaching His Gospel,” many people listened. The Apostle Mark accompanied Paul of Damascus to Alexandria, where both preached in the market place. But when Paul went on to Cyprus, Mark traveled up into Egypt proper. It is said that he remained some time in the community of Babylon and then went on into upper Egypt, preaching as he went. His message brought hope and interest to a weary and depressed people living on the mere edge of existence. But when Mark returned to the dissolute ruler city of Alexandria, he was in A.D. 68 killed by an angry mob. His followers managed to steal his body and bury it in a secret grave. Three hundred years later, when the Christian Church of Rome was established, tradition has it that the bones of the Apostle Mark were carried away from Alexandria and deposited in the Vatican. This story, however, does not end here. For two years ago, for the opening of the large, beautiful St. Mark’s Cathedral in Cairo, the “relics” of St. Mark were brought from the Vatican and placed beneath the altar of Cairo’s new Cathedral.

Herodotus told us that the Egyptians were the most devout and religious people he had ever encountered. I believe this is as true today as when first described by Herodotus. At certain hours some streets in Cairo are closed to traffic because along them the faithful have spread out their prayer mats, and, facing toward Mecca, worshipers kneel in prayer. And woe be to any foreigner who dares disturb such a one!

Given this quality of the Egyptians and their firsthand knowledge of Jesus, it is not surprising that they were the first people to accept Christianity—and that the first established Christian Church was in Egypt. Before A.D. 200, and in spite of persecution by the Romans, Christianity had spread throughout Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Palestine and Macedonia. These churches were of Apostolic origins, having sprung into existence in the living memory of those who had known the disciples of Jesus. The teachings of these first churches were simple and easy to understand and appealed to the masses of common folk. By the beginning of the third century Egypt had a well-established church—many of whose bishops, having come from the educated of Alexandria, wrote in Greek as well as in the Egyptian language. In monasteries and convents translations of the writings of the Apostles were being made and priests were being trained.

The words “Coptic” and “Egyptian” are identical in meaning, and both derive from the Greek Aigyptos. This word, in turn, was a phonetic corruption of the ancient Egyptian for “Memphis,” which was Hakka-Ptah. In the seventh century, when the Arabs came into Egypt, they called it “El Dar al Quib," the "Home of the Copts." Since the indigenous peoples were Christians, the words "Coptic" and "Christian" became interchangeable. The Coptic Church, therefore, is correctly defined as the "Egyptian Church," and indeed the term should not be applied to any church outside Egypt.

How is it that all of the former Roman Empire in Africa and in Asia Minor is now predominantly Islamic?

In A.D. 330 the Eastern Roman Empire was established in Constantinople. Hence, it was from Constantinople that Africa and Asia Minor were ruled. And when the Emperor at Constantinople decreed that Christianity was to be the religion of the realm, with the Emperor Head of the Church, all other Christian Churches and their doctrines were declared heretical and unorthodox. This meant the wiping out of all the original Apostolic Churches and was aimed particularly at curbing the influence of the Coptic Church with its Patriarch in Alexandria. The Eastern Churches, therefore, attempted to segregate themselves from the ecclesiastical authority of the Romano-Byzantine rules.*

It was at the apex of his power, when the Romano-Byzantine Empire stretched from the Caucasus to the Pillars of Hercules, that the Emperor Justinian, lauded in Western history as “Justinian the Just,” decided to force the orthodox religion on the nonconformist peoples of Northeast Africa and Asia Minor. But when his armies reached Egypt, they were confronted with the armies of another empire which had resurrected itself in the East—the Persian. For years thereafter, these two forces clashed. Fierce battles were fought in Egypt, in Syria and along the Euphrates. Much damage was inflicted on Alexandria by both armies; churches, monasteries and convents were sacked and burned. Bishops, priests and nuns escaped into upper Egypt, taking with them precious documents.

Only after a long and costly struggle did Heraclius, successor

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* I shall not attempt here to set out the theological differences between the Imperial or Court Church and the Coptic Church. During the next century and a half constant theological bickering, plus the political intrigues of the Byzantine emperors, caused the Eastern Churches to put aside much of their original simplicity and fervor for rivalries of domination and efforts to enrich their coffers.
to Justinian, succeed in driving away the Persians. But by this time that part of his empire in Europe was crumbling. This fact increased his determination to keep a tight hold on Africa. And so Heraclius set out to bring the weakened Egyptians to their knees and to eradicate every vestige of the rebellious Coptic Church.

But a force on which he had not at all reckoned stopped him! For while the Persians and the Romans were destroying each other, Mohammed had appeared in the Arabian Peninsula.

The people of Mecca, Mohammed's birthplace, claim to be the direct descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham by his wife's servant. The child and his mother were driven out into the desert to die. But a band of nomads found them and took them in. The inhabitants of Mecca were discriminated against, but the town survived, and Mohammed was born into a fairly prosperous family. He was a mystic whose revelations brought comfort and hope to the people. He became known as a prophet, and in A.D. 622 he led his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, a small state. Within a decade Yathrib had become an empire in Arabia, with Mohammed as its Prophet and political leader. His teachings became the cementing element for all in the area.

In Africa we do not speak of the "conquest of Egypt" by the Moslems. In A.D. 639 a small band of Mohammed's followers crossed from the Arabian Peninsula into Egypt and established a colony near where Cairo now stands. They had only a hundred camels, fifty slaves and thirty horses. They called their tent city Fustat. Their first prayers were made inside a nearby Coptic church. They molested nobody and nobody molested them.

Then, in 672, the year Persia fell, Mohammed sent out letters to all Arabian princes proclaiming an expedition to take Palestine away from Rome. The Byzantine armies—already bled white—could not stand against the determination, enthusiasm and optimism of the Arabs. Having won victories in Syria and Palestine, these armies crossed into Egypt. Even after his death Mohammed and his eloquence were the vitalizing soul of the period. The Copts, who had suffered torture, imprisonment and death from the European "Christians," regarded the Arabs as liberators. In their valor, simple virtues, lack of ostentation and military trappings they contrasted sharply with the armies which had come from Europe. It was said of these newcomers that they had "Turbans instead of diadems, tents instead of walls, swords instead of entrenchments and poems instead of written laws."

As it became clear that the Arabian armies were bent on wresting Egypt and all North Africa from the grasp of Roman legions, wherever they went Africans joined their ranks: Egyptians, Libyans, Berbers, Moors, Numidians. In their path going west were the ruins of old Carthage, the rich commercial city on the coast of what is now Tunisia, which Roman legions had attacked in 146 B.C. with orders from Rome not "to leave one stone upon another." This utter destruction was Rome's method of revenge against black Hannibal, who with his Carthaginian army had conquered and held the Italian peninsula from Naples to the Alps—the action which started the Punic Wars.

In the seventh century, as the forces of Mohammed approached the ancient site of Carthage, it was as if out of the rocks and crevices of the ruins long-dead Carthaginians rose to join the soldiers who were hurling themselves against the Roman plunderers. By the time the victorious Muslim armies reached the Atlantic Ocean they could hardly be described as "Arabians." So many Africans, from north, east and west, had been added to their ranks and leadership that the color of the forces had become much darker.

These then were the so-called Arabian hordes which crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain and swept on to the banks of the Loire in France. When, therefore, you read of the empire established by the Arabians' astonishing drive "out of their remote peninsula" between A.D. 640 and 732, consider the part Africans played in that drive. It ushered in the Arabs' Golden Age, when the libraries, scholastic centers and scientific studies of Cordova, Alexandria and Baghdad illumined thinking in Europe. It was from this Arabian-African influence in Spain and southern France that music and art in Europe took on new life—that the Renaissance was born. It was during this Golden Age that Timbuctoo on the Niger River in West Africa became an important center of learning and a commercial port; that over a thousand years ago Cairo was founded and Cairo's largest mosque was transformed into Al Azhur University—now the oldest existing university in the world. Today Al Azhur graduates women students and includes in its curriculum studies of all the major African languages: Swahili, Hausa, Fanti and those of Azania and Zimbabwe. Ponder a moment on these facts. This is what Arabs and Africans did once—when they were united!

Centuries passed before assaults from the west and north, together with internal dissension, reduced the Arab world. Between 1517 and 1566 it fell to the expansion of the Ottoman Turks. For hundreds of years one invader after another came into Egypt, stayed a while and was driven away. From Czarist Russia came the Memelukes, who ruled Egypt for a period. It was they who, from the cedars of Lebanon, built the only wood structures still standing in Cairo. Cairo became the capital of the Islamic world, but its political strength had been drained away.

Yet, throughout the years of decline, of sack, of invasion, of the Ottoman imperial control, some of the extraordinary legacy of the first Arabs survived. They had brought out of Arabia a language already rich in imagery. And because it was the language both of
their empire and of their religion, it had become the veritable storehouse of the whole tradition of the Golden Age. In a manner unequalled in history, Arabic had become rooted among peoples from the Persian Gulf to the Atlantic shores of Africa. And they had brought from Arabia a religion stemming from the Old Testament of the Bible, a religion with little pomp and ritual, which revived the zeal and devotion of the early Christians but which made no distinction in color or class, tribe or clan—a religion which, far more realistically than Christianity has ever done, created a brotherhood of believers. Though the Ottoman Turks and some other Islamic sects which came later greatly debased Islamic faith and practices, the essence of that brotherhood remains in Africa today, so that the larger part of Africa is Islamic.

As the countries of Europe fought among themselves, developed industry and commerce, found gold and cheap labor in West Africa and “discovered” America, they traced their civilization as far back as Greece, but its beginning in Egypt was sunk into obscurity. Old Egypt was hardly more than a myth. Evidences that men had lived and built well stood in the sands of Giza and on the banks of the Nile, but few cared who the builders were or why they built.

Then Bonaparte, the Corsican, seized power in Europe. He saw himself as following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great. And so he led his armies to Egypt.

Napoleon, like Alexander, sensed the greatness of Egypt. He had imagination. He brought into the country engineers, explorers and men of learning. It was during his campaign that in the St. Julien Fort a group of French soldiers discovered what has come to be called the “Rosetta Stone.” After the French fleet was defeated by Great Britain in 1815, the English demanded that the French hand over all the antiquities they had located in Egypt during their occupation. This is why the Rosetta Stone, along with many other valuable Egyptian possessions, is now in the British Museum. But copies of the strange writing on the stone were made and distributed to scholars in Europe.

It was Champollion, the most distinguished French scholar, who recognized that the text was trilingual and that the name of the then ruling monarch was written in a cartouche. It was then found possible to place, more or less exactly, some of the better-known names such as Cleopatra, Ptolemy and so on. Further studies revealed that the Egyptians of the Ptolemies’ day had written the royal names in symbols that were wholly alphabetical. Champollion, after interpreting these symbols, was able to begin his search for the meaning of the syllable. In time this led to identifying the alphabet of phonetic hieroglyphics as used by the ancient Egyptians. Thus, he found the key to unlock writing which had been lost and forgotten for thousands of years. Then from the tombs and temples, from the monuments beside the Nile, from papyrus and reeds long buried in sands, came voices—clear, articulate, precise voices from across three, four, five and six thousand years. And once more, old Egypt lived among the nations!

All peoples have come to the Valley of the Nile—the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, the Persians, the Mongols, the Turks, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the British. The great ones came to rule—but in time they passed away. British armies and fleets came—intending to stay forever. But Gamal Abdul Nasser rid the country of them and seized the Suez Canal—built with the sweat and blood and tears of Egyptians. From all the would-be conquerors, Egypt absorbed something, shaped and molded what she wanted for her needs, without losing the essence of her being.

A recent excavation of a Greco-Roman amphitheatre near Alexandria revealed marble pillars and seats on which are engraved Christian texts in Greek and Latin, beginning with the sign of the cross. These engravings are in partially concealed places—evidently placed there during the era when Christians were persecuted in Alexandria. In more open places, evidently engraved at a later period, are Islamic texts written in Arabic.

Egyptians have never been explorers or adventurers; they have seldom gone far from their valley. Egyptians are not aggressive—their battles are fought to preserve their own frontiers—and in this they have not always been successful, for through the years their frontiers have been pushed back. But Egyptians have been content to remain at home and let the world come to them. And through the centuries much of the world has come. Modern Egyptians, therefore, are of mixed strains. But a line from the classics declares, “All those who drink the waters of the Nile—in time, look alike.”

Today, in spite of long ages of absorbing newcomers, there is a remarkable similarity of appearance among Egyptians. And the virility of the Hamitic strain is clearly evident.

EGYPT IS AFRICAN

Why do I emphasize this fact? Because in the struggle in which Egypt, with her allies, is now engaged, she particularly is defending Africa’s most important gates against imperialist aggression.

In his “Philosophy of the Revolution,” written as a guidebook soon after the Revolution in Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser set forth Egypt’s dual responsibility:

Can we ignore that there is a continent of Africa in which fate has placed us and which is destined today to witness a terrible struggle for its future? Can we ignore that there is a Moslem world to which we are tied by bonds forged not only by religious faith but also by facts of history? I have said that fate plays
Pan-Africanism

no tricks. It is not in vain that our country lies in the northeast of Africa, a position from which it overlooks the continent wherein rages today the most violent struggle between white colonizers and black natives for possession of its inexhaustible resources. It is not in vain that Islamic civilization and the Islamic heritage, which the Mongols ravaged in their conquest of the old Islamic capitals, reverted to and sought refuge in Egypt, where it found shelter and safety. . . . We are the Guardians of the continent's northern gate.

At the time Gamal Abdul Nasser wrote those words, in the middle of the 1950s, the struggle against colonialism in Africa was attracting little of the world's attention. Ghana was still the Gold Coast Colony of Great Britain; the Congo was still a colony of Belgium; France thought to have satisfied any aspiration of colonials in Africa by the well-organized “Rassemblement Democratique Africain,” and atrocities being perpetrated in the still enslaved continent were given no publicity. Today some chains have been broken, and the fiercest struggle now being waged is not in the interior of Africa but in its northeast. And the realization of that fact has called forth the recent Tripartite Alliance of the UAR, Libya and the Sudan! The Western inheritors of the Roman Empire once more are trying to bring Egypt to her knees.

For hundreds of years European powers managed to keep some kind of European ruler over Egypt. Gamal Abdul Nasser is the first indigenous Egyptian to head the State of Egypt in two thousand years. The Western powers hate him because he has broken the chain of their power over Egypt. They built the Suez Canal to give themselves easy and quick access to the eastern shores of Africa, as well as to the Indian Ocean. They considered the port of Alexandria their means of entering the Nile River—and, if they thought fit, to penetrate into the heart of the continent. But Egypt has fortified the length and breadth of the Nile River. Now her defenses along north Africa extend into Libya, which has evacuated the military bases so recently occupied by Great Britain and the United States.

Egypt defends Africa. Should her defenses fall, Africa would be in danger of being ground under the heel of those who are determined to dominate and hold in subjugation not only this continent, but the entire colored world.

But—Egypt shall not be moved! She has never been moved. Egypt has time—time which reaches back to the beginning and stretches on into the infinite future. Everything that happens in Egypt today had its beginning in years long gone. And whether or not a successful conclusion is reached today is of minor importance. For all the future lies ahead. A day is but the passing of the sun from one rim of the desert to another; the Nile rises and falls in season; and the stars by which the priests of Pharaoh marked the course of his life still hang like jewels over Giza.

Cairo stands—her back against the timeless pyramids. For years the first rays of Egypt's sun have kissed the face of the Sphinx. Now, each morning, after that kiss it lifts its unfiltered, pure light to turn the irregular pile of stone and cement which is Cairo into antique gold. While, high on the hill, the domes of the ancient Citadel take on the sheen of beaten brass.

Cairo is a city of grandeur through which the Nile flows, broad and placid, with confident majesty. It is a grandeur which defeats hardships and shortages. It stirs the heart and blood of the Cairene, and, if it does not diminish his troubles, it makes every sacrifice worth while.

Cairo is both very old and very new: the most modern fighter planes streak across the sky, heavy traffic rolls along broad, palm-lined avenues and over wide bridges, and reed barges float down the Nile without sail, engine or paddle, exactly as such barges were coming when the pyramids were built. And here and there the minarets of mosques point their fingers to the heavens as if to warn man of his frailty.

In Cairo one walks hand in hand with history. And as I walk the streets of Cairo, I rejoice that:

*Egypt is Africa.*