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Arsenius Mikhail, The Liturgy of the Word. Scripture, Song, Prayer, and Preaching in the Coptic Liturgy of Medieval Egypt (Studies in Eastern Christian Liturgies 7), Münster 2026

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Review

Arsenius Mikhail, The Liturgy of the Word. Scripture, Song, Prayer, and Preaching in the Coptic Liturgy of Medieval Egypt (Studies in Eastern Christian Liturgies 7), Münster 2026

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The history of the Eucharist has inspired classics of liturgical scholarship, such as Joseph A. Jungmann's *Missarum Sollemnia*[1] and Robert F. Taft's *History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*.[2] Yet, for the Coptic Eucharist, no such detailed studies have been available, and Western liturgical scholarship had to rely on short summaries such as Heinzgerd Brakmann's *Le déroulement de la messe copte*.[3] This is now changing thanks to the ardu-

1 Cf. Joseph A. Jungmann, The Mass of the Roman Rite. Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia), 2 vols. [trans. by Francis A. Brunner], New York 1951.

2 Cf. Robert F. Taft, The Great Entrance. A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Pre-Anaphoral Rites in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (OCA 200), Rome 1975, second edition published as vol. 2 of A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (OCA 200), Rome ^{2}1978; Stefano Parenti – Robert F. Taft, Storia della Liturgia di S. Giovanni Crisostomo, vol. 2: Il Grande Ingresso. Edizione italiana rivista, ampliata e aggiornata (Ἀνάλεκτα Κρυπτοφέρρης 10), Grottaferrata 2014; Robert F. Taft, A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, vol. 4: The Diptychs (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 238), Rome 1991; vol. 5: The Precommunion Rites (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 261), Rome 2000; vol. 6: The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 281), Rome 2008.

3 Cf. Heinzgerd Brakmann, Le déroulement de la Messe copte. Structure et histoire, in: Achille M. Triacca – A. Pistoia (eds.), L'eucharistie: célébra-

ous work of Father Arsenius Mikhail, who has recently published the second volume of his planned series on the Bohairic Eucharist.

Unlike Taft's *opus magnum*, Mikhail proceeds with his project in a systematic way. His PhD dissertation, defended in 2017 and published in 2020 as *The Presentation of the Lamb* in the same series,[4] covered the beginning of the liturgy, the rite of the *prothesis*, up to the *prothesis* prayer. The second volume, which appeared merely six years after the first one, discusses the liturgy of the word from the first incense circuit to the post-Gospel prayer. Needless to say, these are artificial boundaries that are hardly noticeable in the modern-day unfolding of the rite (unless one follows the service from the popular application *The Coptic Reader*).[5] The *prothesis* and the liturgy of the word are furthermore historically intertwined: because of the seismic shift caused by the move of the transfer of the gifts to the beginning of the rite (which was explored in detail in Mikhail's first book), the *enarxis* prayer ended up in the *prothesis* rite, while other remnants of the entrance rite came to be part of the liturgy of the word. A similar complication marks the boundary between the liturgy of the word and the preanaphoral rites: since in the Alexandrian liturgy the *oratio universalis* was split by the dismissal of the catechumens, it was consequently grouped into two separate units, one of which was incorporated into the post-Gospel prayer, and the other formed the Three Great Prayers. Mikhail chooses to end his book with the post-Gospel prayer, which once marked the dismissal of the catechumens, even though this means separating the two halves of the *oratio universalis*, a decision he argues at length (473–477).

A recurring dilemma of liturgical scholarship is whether to take the received practice as a point of departure and explain the history behind it, or to focus on a pivotal period in the development of the rite. Mikhail's solution, as he explains in the Introduction, is to place the Northern Egyp-

tions, rites, piétés. Conférences Saint-Serge XLI[e] Semaine d'Études Liturgiques, Paris, 28 Juin – 1 Juillet 1994, Rome 1995, 107–132.

4 Cf. Ramez Mikhail, The Presentation of the Lamb. The Prothesis and Preparatory Rites of the Coptic Liturgy (Studies in Eastern Christian Liturgies 2), Münster 2020.

5 URL: https://copticreader.org.

tian rite of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries in the spotlight, as it was in this time that the local diversity, which characterized worship in Egypt for the first millennium, "[coalesced] into the official worship system or rite of the Coptic patriarchate" that is celebrated with some variation up to now (5). This is also the period from which most of his sources originate: the earliest Bohairic liturgical manuscripts as well as the Copto-Arabic homiletic collections and liturgical commentaries. Given the variation in contemporary practice, which departs at points from medieval and early modern performance and even from authoritative printed liturgical books, this is a reasonable solution. This approach explains the attention that Mikhail devotes to the historical context, medieval Old Cairo and Wadi Natrun, including a discussion of the linguistic situation in the period (which has special significance for a rite revolving around the proclamation of Scripture).

Yet, Mikhail casts his net wide. For the general history of the liturgy of the word, as well as for the analysis of each liturgical unit, his study takes its point of departure in the late antique and early medieval period. For this period, he relies on a wide range of sources, including papyri and Sahidic manuscripts from Southern Egypt (even though they represent somewhat different liturgical systems than the Alexandrian/Northern Egyptian one), as well as on comparative evidence from other rites. On the other end of the scale, he includes variation found in early modern and modern manuscripts as well as a discussion of the current practice. He also regularly reflects on the choices made by Hegumen ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ṣalīb, the editor of the 1902 print euchologion, which forms the basis of contemporary editions of the Bohairic euchologion. This way, the book covers the whole of the history of the Coptic rite with ample details from each period – though this also leads to some inevitable tensions between the focus on the Middle Ages and the wish to explain the current practice (e. g., in the choice to comment on homilies extensively, even though they were probably not a prominent feature of the medieval rite).

After the historical background, an outline of the rite, a concise presentation of the sources, and a summary of previous scholarship, Mikhail begins chapter 1 with an overview of the origin of the liturgy of the word (39–82). Since for the earliest period there is limited evidence from Egypt, this section consists of a summary of previous research on the question

in a comparative perspective. Then the author proceeds to evaluate the four consecutive elements of the rite individually: the scriptural readings, the chant, the common prayer, and the preaching. These four are treated somewhat unevenly; while for hymns and readings a comparative perspective is provided, the section on prayers remains succinct. Nonetheless, the division fruitfully lays the ground for the later analysis, which discusses these units separately in chapters 3–5 and 7 but also illuminates how they are woven together in the course of the celebration.

The remaining chapters are dedicated to an in-depth analysis of these units in their sequence. Chapter 2 (83–141) deals with the incense circuit. After a brief analysis of the ritual for blessing the incense, Mikhail reflects on the use of incense in Eastern Christian ritual in general and in the Coptic rite in particular, including its history and symbolic interpretations. For the prayer of incense, the *textus receptus* is given from the 1902 euchologion, followed by an analysis of the title, parallels in other rites, and its theology. A short section is dedicated to the Three Prayers, short intercessions for the peace, the patriarch, and the congregation, that appear at this juncture, then the incense circuit is evaluated, with a long exposé on the medieval controversies around the practice of the confession to the censer. The chapter closes with a reflection on the hymn of the censer, a short composition with only three options in the repertoire, all interpreting the censer as a symbol of incarnation.

Chapter 3 (143–222) focuses on the scriptural readings. This is divided into two parts. The first investigates the origins of the peculiar Bohairic system of readings, which consists of four New Testament excerpts (the Pauline letters, the Catholic letters, the Acts, and the Gospel). In the sources this alternates with a two-readings system (Paul and Gospel) and occasionally with a three-reading system (Paul, Acts, and Gospel). It is hard to know whether these variants were chronological (i. e., a development from two readings to four), geographical (two in the South, four in the North), or coexisted in a festal-ferial distinction, as in Upper Egypt in the liturgical system of the White Monastery around the turn of the millennium. Mikhail concludes with a discussion of possible hints at the practice of reading from the Old Testament during the Eucharist, which is however nowhere attested clearly in the Egyptian sources. The second part of the chapter, over fifty pages long, contains an analysis of the lectionary

system, especially the standard "K-lectionaries", the most common variant "Samuel lectionaries", and the eighth-ninth-century lectionaries of the monastery of the Archangel Michael in the Fayum. The goal of this lengthy section is to uncover the theological message behind the selection of pericopes, but, on the side, Mikhail has also written a study of the Coptic calendar, with interesting observations on its saturation between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. As an appendix, he includes a brief excursus on the Synaxarion, though the practice of reading from it in the Eucharist became established only in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 4 (223–266) revolves around the three prayers associated with the scriptural readings (the prayer of the Pauline, the prayer after the Catholic, and the prayer of the Acts), as well as the associated second incense round, which is a clear reduplication from the first. These are relative latecomers in the development of the rite, in the spirit of the common drive to keep the priest busy at all times. Mikhail presents each of these prayers and their alternatives, then proceeds to analyze the second incense round with its accompanying chants, which developed their festal propers at only a late period. He devotes the rest of the chapter to explaining how this complicated arrangement came about. Key to understanding the development is the reduplication of the readings in Arabic, a pastoral necessity based on the linguistic situation in medieval Old Cairo. This overcrowded the ritual and relegated the prayers, once composed "to verbalize the community's relationship to Scripture" (260), to silent recitation, while dislocating the prayer of the Acts in the proximity of the Catholic reading.

Chapter 5 (267–320) is devoted to an important hymnographic genre of the Bohairic rite, the so-called *bōhem/parallax* hymns. These were sung in various liturgical contexts in the medieval period, including after the reading of the Acts, and they served as a sung commentary on the content of the feast. As Mikhail observes, the genre likely derives from "oral performances by gifted singers" (287) in paraliturgical settings, which was only gradually (and never completely) canonized, and it draws extensively on Coptic hagiographic and apocryphal traditions. The same author has published a corpus of these hymns in 2023 as *Analecta Hymni-*

ca Coptica.[6] While that study elaborated on the genre, its liturgical position, and the manuscripts, here Mikhail provides an overview of the genre according to the Coptic calendar, with a focus on the hymns' theological content, rhetorical strategies, and connections with earlier homiletic traditions. Yet, the reader will also find extensive extracts from the texts and translations to illustrate these points.

Chapter 6 (321–390) explores the complex ceremony surrounding the reading of the Gospel, which is the climax of the liturgy of the word (the Gospel propers having already been discussed in Chapter 3 alongside the other pericopes). The chapter begins with an analysis of the Trisagion hymn in Egypt, including the prolific Southern Egyptian genre of the so-called "developed Trisagia". This is followed by a short exposé on the accompanying hymns that used to be drawn from a small repertoire of seasonal items but have fallen out of use in today's practice. For the prayer of the Gospel, three variants are recorded, one of which is linked with Alexandria and another with Old Cairo; this is noteworthy as the only clear case of regional variation in the Bohairic euchologia. The brief section on the lectionary Psalm focuses on the modalities of performance and the question of whether this may once have been an entire Psalm. Finally, the Gospel veneration, procession, and reading is analyzed, with attention to practicalities such as who can read the Gospel and from where. As Mikhail demonstrates, the goal of the whole ceremony was to showcase the Gospel book alongside the proclamation of the message as instantiations of the Logos in the church. Indeed, the belief that Jesus Christ is present among the congregation from the Gospel procession onward is attested already in Sahidic homilies of the first millennium.

Chapter 7 (391–436) focuses on the liturgical reception of the Gospel in two forms: the homily and the Gospel response hymn. As for the homilies, it is not clear whether a homily was routinely delivered at this point of the service in the medieval period—indeed, most sources suggest the contrary, and the evidence for homilies at this juncture is limited for late antique and early medieval Egypt as well. Nonetheless, inspired by

[6] Cf. Arsenius Mikhail, Analecta Hymnica Coptica. Bohairic Hymns for the Liturgical Year from Medieval Chant Manuscripts (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 705 / Scriptores Coptici 56), Turnhout 2023.

both comparative evidence and contemporary practice, Mikhail provides a cross-section of medieval Copto-Arabic homiletics, based on still unedited homiletic collections for the liturgical year. By necessity, his analysis only gives us a taste of the genre, but it successfully highlights a treasure awaiting exploration. The Gospel response, which is currently restricted to a few common stanzas but used to have a well-developed repertoire, is another little-known corpus of texts. Mikhail highlights in his analysis the rhetorical strategies through which these hymns provide a chanted exegesis to the Gospel pericope of the day, and he points to occasional divergence from the lectionaries, which provide information for the study of the pericope system.

The last chapter (437–477) focuses on the post-Gospel prayer. This composite text combines a prayer for the worthy listening of the Gospel with short petitions for various topics and a lengthier one for the catechumens. Once again, there is an alternative prayer that lacks the petitions and gives thanks for the worthy listening of the Gospel instead, thereby capturing this juncture of the service well. The focus of the rest of the chapter is on the petitions, which belong to the genre of *oratio universalis* and are characterized by a remarkable fluidity of their texts. Mikhail traces some late antique and early medieval parallels, including the intercessory diaconal sequences of the White Monastery, which receive their first edition here (457–460). Mikhail notes the intrinsic connection between these short petitions, the Bohairic Seven Great Prayers (full-blown intercessions for similar topics used in various services), and the Three Great Prayers that appear in the pre-anaphoral rites, and he links them to the 'independent' forms of these intercessions in various late antique sources. However, he leaves it to further investigation to decide whether this intercessory sequence is an abbreviation of earlier sequences of full prayers. This complex question indeed requires further attention.

The volume is complete with five appendices (489–552), four of which contain the text of the Gospel responses juxtaposed with the pericopes of the 'K-lectionary', whereas the fifth is a useful list of all manuscripts, including the Sahidic manuscripts and those of other rites, sorted by century. Extensive indices for biblical passages, manuscripts, and general topics (including names and places) were compiled for the aid of the reader.

This book is the work of an immensely erudite scholar. Mikhail's command of the sources is impressive. Besides familiarity with the early sources and parallel traditions, he resorts to a large number of unedited Bohairic and Copto-Arabic manuscripts, many of which he has studied in autopsy. As a byproduct, he provides overviews of manuscript types and genres, and he makes obscure sources accessible in both the source language and English translation. At the same time, Mikhail does not stop at exploiting them for information concerning the history of the rite. In the best tradition of liturgical scholarship, he is constantly searching for meaning, be it the theological meaning encoded in the symbolic system of liturgy that the attentive scholar can extract, or the meaning that the medieval commentators and audience attributed to them. This fosters a deeper understanding of the rite beyond the historical developments that aids liturgical catechesis and can inform practices.

At the same time, this book is not an easy read. This is partly due to the nature of the liturgy of the word with its high concentration of variable propers. While it is comparably straightforward to explain in a stable prayer or a procession, it requires a lengthy and somewhat repetitive analysis of a large number of texts to look for meaning in the pericope system or variable hymnography. In such cases it is hard to strike a balance between providing as much information as possible (which is very useful, given the obscure nature of the sources) and keeping the focus. Yet, despite some unavoidable unevenness in the presentation of the material, the clear structure, the thematic groupings, the clear and elegant style, and the succinct and lucid conclusions make the book easy to navigate.

This said, the book is a most rewarding read, and not only for the few specialists of the Coptic rite. Besides delivering, as it promises, a comprehensive study of the Bohairic liturgy of the word, it introduces the reader to the sources and central questions of the Bohairic liturgy and contains clever observations on various topics, such as the differences between Northern and Southern Egypt, the calendar, the cult of saints, or even modern practices and abuses, and it highlights further avenues for research on hitherto unexplored material. It is also a prime example of liturgical methodology, as it has its solid foundation in a thorough knowledge of manuscripts, but also takes into account the non-textual features of the rite, the role of orality, and the agency of various actors, such as

cantors, deacons, and liturgical commentators, in shaping the tradition and its interpretation. It is without doubt that this will be the manual on the Coptic liturgy of the word for decades to come, and Arsenius Mikhail is to be congratulated for having delivered a manual of such a high quality. We eagerly await being treated to a similarly excellent next installment.