

“Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.” (Prov 31:29)

✠ Lecture III: St. Mary’s Dormition & Assumption ✠

The Coptic (Boheric) discourse of St. Theodosius, the 33rd Patriarch of Alexandria, “*On the Falling Asleep of Mary*” differs from the account recorded in the current version of the synexarion. However, it is the only account that explains the fact that the Coptic Church has always celebrated two separate feasts; one for the Dormition of St. Mary (21st of Touba – 30th of January) and another for her Assumption (16th of Messra – 22nd of August):

✠ St. Mary’s Dormition Story:

According to St. Theodosius, Virgin Mary comforted the grief of the apostles saying, “My children, why do you cry and sadden my spirit? Is it not written that it is necessary that all flesh go through death? I also must return to earth like all inhabitants of this world.” – The Coptic text gives another reason for her death that is an argument for the reality of the Incarnation. According to this text, Lord Jesus Christ said to His blessed mother, “I did not want you to go through death, I wanted to raise you like Enoch and Elijah but even they must also know death at the end. But if what happened to them happened to you, wicked men will think that you are a celestial power that came down on earth and that the Incarnation’s plan, the way it has been carried out is but an illusion.”

Having said that, the Savior, turning towards the apostles said also, “Trust Me My companions the apostles, I will not keep her away from you for a long time. Soon she will reveal herself to you. When two hundred and six days would have elapsed, counting from the day of her Dormition to the day of her holy Assumption, I will lead her to you in the same body, the same you are seeing now with you, to take her to the highest heaven, by My father and the Holy Spirit, to remain there praying for you all.”

→ Fr. Athanasius Iskander comments on these words saying, “This is echoed in the ‘Doxology of the Virgin’ sung during Vespers, ‘The adornment of Mary in the highest heaven, at the right hand of her beloved, asking Him on our behalf’ (Coptic: Ere psolsef em Mariam Khen nifiowi etsa epchoi)”

✠ St. Mary’s Burial:

The apostles carried her holy body and went out with it accompanied by all those who had joined them. They took her away solemnly and calmly to Josephat’s field. They came near a group of Jews that had gathered. When they saw them marching calmly and in silence they said to one another, “Who is that dead person and who are those that carry the body in such an orderly manner? It must be a new custom in Israel.” But one of them, a Galilean having a good knowledge of the apostles and upon whom the Holy Spirit had come, said to them, “That body they are carrying is Mary’s body, Joachim and Anna’s daughter, who gave birth to the Messiah, the Christ; He who healed your sick ones, who gave light to your eyes, who brought back to life your dead. We believe that as He raised the dead, He will also raise His mother from death and take her to heaven with Him.”

When the Jews heard him, they were filled with confusion and said, “What are we going to do? The error is still among us as it appears from the words of the one who spoke to us; but hurry up, let us light a fire to burn that body, or else, if we let it be buried in the vicinity, we will have evidence of miracles, because of it; crowds believing in Him will gather together and joining forces with the Romans will rule over our cities and humiliate our race.” Having said this, they quickly lighted a fire by means of lamps and went after the apostles to burn the holy body of the blessed Virgin. As to the apostles, seeing what was happening, human fear took hold of them, they put down the stretcher on which was the body and ran away. But as the Jews were about to reach the stretcher, they were plunged into obscurity and darkness, having become blinded. The fire they had prepared to burn the Virgin’s body hurt a number of them. When sparks of fire fell down on them they screamed saying, “Woe betide us O Christ our Master. We have sinned against heaven and against Thee. Forgive us, for we are Abraham’s children. If Thou grant us our eyes’ light, we will come to

know Thy Divinity's glory and we will believe in Thee and in Thy mother the Virgin, for she is our sister." Then, having thus spoken, Lord Jesus Christ had pity on them. He relieved them of their blindness and their error. As for the apostles, they went back to Jerusalem praising God for all His marvelous graces. They often went back to the place where they had left the stretcher and sang songs and hymns as is suitable to God and went on doing this until the Virgin's glorious Assumption.

✠ St. Mary's Assumption:

Now, it came to pass that when the 206 days were completed, the apostles and the virgins from the Mount of Olives all got up and went by her holy mortal remains. It was the night of the 15th of Messra and the morning of the 16th. They spent all night awake, vigilant and praying.

→ Fr. Athanasius Iskander said, "This is probably the root of the Coptic Tradition of holding an all night vigil on the eve of the feast of the assumption of the holy Virgin. It is interesting to know that the same Tradition is observed by the monks of the Monastery of St. Maurice in *Valais, Switzerland*, the oldest monastery in Europe, which adopts many of the Coptic rules, and is adorned by Coptic crosses."

At 10 o'clock that night, they heard thunders and shrieks of jubilation. It was a choir of angels going down on the grave, then the Psalmist David, playing on the harp, said, "Arise O Lord into Thy rest, Thou and the arc of Thy holy resting place." At this very instant, the place became full of fire; the Lord revealed Himself on the Cherubim's chariot, with the Virgin's soul in His bosom, adorned with her heavenly garment. Full of fear, the apostles fell like dead on the ground. When He had helped them on their feet, banishing their fear, He said to them, "Hail my fellow brothers and the virgins, rise to see My mother's glory." Then He shouted over the tomb saying, "Arise, O holy body that has been for me a temple, take this soul that has been my every day tabernacle. Arise O mortal body according to your nature, take your immortal soul to be altogether immortal, so that I take you to the abode of the living. Arise, O corruptible and perishable body according to nature, take your imperishable soul and be altogether everlasting imperishable and eternal. Arise! Why are you lying in the grave? Array yourself in your soul in order to come with Me to My Father, Goodness itself, and the Holy Spirit, as they yearn fervently for you. Arise, O body that had built up within you My flesh, without knowing it, take your soul that has been for Me a dwelling place. Arise, you who are free, go and proclaim to the whole world that liberty with which I bought all my creation. Arise, O holy body, get united to that blessed soul, regard her as your resurrection in the face of all creation..."

After He said these words upon the tomb of stone, that tomb opened at that very moment. It had been closed, as was Noah's Ark, which nobody could open save God who had previously closed it. Soon after that, the venerable Virgin's body rose, embraced her soul, like two brothers coming from foreign countries, they were united and became one. Then the Lord and His blessed mother ascended into heaven.

→ Fr. Athanasius Iskander comments saying, "Some people are scandalized by the notion that the Virgin's soul and body were united and that she was taken alive to heaven, but the Holy Book of Revelation tells us that this will happen to the two witnesses (Enoch & Elijah), who, three and a half days after their death, will be resurrected and will ascend into heaven (**Rev 11:11,12**) - Both the Roman Catholic and Greek orthodox Churches—teach this Tradition without hesitation.

* This lecture is adapted from 'The Assumption of the Virgin – According to St. Theodosius' by Fr. Athanasius Iskander.