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THE SEARCH FOR A GREATER TRUTH: RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN
ROMAN EGYPT

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF
ARTS

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THE SEARCH FOR A GREATER TRUTH: RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN
ROMAN EGYPT

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THE SEARCH FOR A GREATER TRUTH: RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN ROMAN EGPYT

An Abstract of the Thesis by
Dana F. Michael

When Cleopatra VII Philopator took her own life after Egypt's defeat at Actium an empire died as the legend was born. Egypt, ruled by the Macedonian Ptolemys for three hundred years, was now a province of the Roman Empire. This death is more a political fiction of Rome's, however, than any kind of real defeat. For while the government ran as that of a Roman territory, Egypt's influence on the Mediterranean world and beyond was extensive.

Egypt was the grain basket of Rome, so the Emperors kept a close eye on the country. Romans of all classes, from governors to soldiers, travelled in and out of Egypt's borders. All these travelers took Egyptian ideas out with them, and it is in this fashion that Egyptian influence spread as far as Britain.

I argue in my thesis that the most vivid example of Egypt's sway can be seen in the areas of religion and philosophy. These areas of influence manifest in three ways Hellenistic/Egyptian Paganism, Christianity/Judaism, and Philosophy. This thesis rests on four types of sources. The two largest sources are papyrus fragments (including, but not limited to, official decrees and correspondence) and classical sources (including but not limited to Herodotus, Plutarch, and Socrates). Building inscriptions, e.g. those found on the walls of temples, are the third form. Finally, secondary sources, for example, contemporary historians like Jean Bingen, Sir William Tarn, and David Frankfurter.

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INTRODUCTION

Egypt has been a constant in history since time immemorial. It is beautiful, enduring, and site of the only surviving ancient wonder. Egypt experiences few changes to the land and nothing is completely erased from those shifting desert sands. It is this constancy that gives Egypt its worldwide appeal, as true today as in ancient times, and this appeal is what gives Egypt its considerable influence on history. This thesis argues that the sway Egypt held over the ancient world can be seen most clearly in the spheres of religion and philosophy.

The first chapter consists of a brief political history, beginning with Alexander's conquest of Egypt and ending with Cleopatra and Marc Antony's defeat at the Battle of Actium. The political history serves to set a base to my central argument, despite the political turmoil throughout the history; Egypt remained, at its core, Egyptian. This fact is seen most clearly when one views Egypt's influence on religion and philosophy during the Ptolemaic and Roman period against this political backdrop. It manifests itself in three different ways, Hellenistic/Egyptian paganism, Christianity/Judaism, and philosophy.

In the second chapter, "Egypt: Conqueror of Conquerors", I examine the remains of the traditional pharaonic religion, the merging of Hellenistic paganism (under the Ptolemys) with pharaonic paganism, and how parts of it were adopted by the Romans living in Egypt. For example, traditional funerary practices such as mummification were embraced by some of the Romans living in Egypt. This assimilation of the conquerors can be seen in the Bahariya Oasis, where a fairly recent discovery of a cache of "golden mummies" with Roman faces on the sarcophagi has been found. Next I will look at how

Hellenism and Egyptian practices/thoughts merged, especially in the case of the Ptolemaic invention Sarapis and the Hellenization of the Mother Goddess Isis.

The third chapter looks at the long history of Christianity in Egypt. Egypt has exerted so great an influence on the writers of the Bible that it is named as the safe haven to which the Holy Family fled. The tradition of monasticism is generally held to have begun in Egypt as well. I look at the monastic society as a whole as well as two well-known Church leaders St. Antony (widely recognized as the founder of the hermit/monastic tradition) and Shenoute of Atripe, father of the White Monastery beginning in 385 CE. Egypt was also the home of some Gnostic groups.

I also include Egypt's history with Judaism in chapter three. The presence of Jews in Egypt has been documented since approximately 650 BCE; papyri document a contingent of Jewish soldiers that lived on Elephantine Island. They kept their own temple next to the Egyptian god Khnum's temple. Jews were also to be found living in the capital city of Alexandria. Documentation of their living in their own quarter of the city abound, especially when the bishop of the city, Cyril, went about his prosecutions in the fifth century C.E. The Jewish community even sent its own embassy to the Roman Emperor, in order to secure Jewish rights in Alexandria.

In chapter four, "Center of Thought" I look at philosophy's role in Roman Egypt, especially in Alexandria. During the Roman period, the writings of an ancient Egyptian, Hermes Trismegistus, were popular thus spurring a movement known as Hermetism. The murder of the female philosopher Hypatia is also included, as it occurs against a backdrop of intense spiritual tension in Alexandria. It is therefore a perfect example of the violence that could break out so quickly.

The religious and philosophical influence of Roman Egypt has not been examined much throughout the years. Historians have mainly focused on the government workings of the age, viewing it through a Roman-centric lens that limits how much of the native influence and everyday workings can be examined. The goal of this thesis is to throw light on this aspect of Egyptian history, and show how much Rome actually assimilated to Egypt rather than the other way around.

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY

The politics between Egypt, Greece, and Rome respectively have been well documented by historians. Much as Egypt was a vacation destination for wealthy British and French personages in the early twentieth century, it was a favorite spot of ancient Greeks and Romans as well. Many traveled to the deserts of Egypt to gaze upon the fantastic monuments that dot the landscape, others to soak up its knowledge. The history and mythology of Egypt fascinated writers of the Classical period much as they fascinate those of today. It is not surprising that as Mediterranean power grew, either Greece or Rome would look to Egypt as a possible ally. Eventually, these initial contacts would lead to a political clash, which ended with Egypt becoming a Roman province.

As the purpose of this thesis is to examine a typically overlooked topic, that of Egyptian religious and philosophical influence, the writer has chosen to only give a brief political history to serve as background information. The political history also serves to form a backdrop for the overall argument of the thesis. For in all of Egypt's history, the political maneuverings of rulers have rarely affected the core of Egyptian belief. That core of belief has continuously exerted an influence on foreign peoples.

Part 1: Alexander the Great and Ptolemy I Soter

For the majority of Egypt's time as a united country, it has been ruled by foreign peoples with periods of intermittent native rule. In the 330s BCE, it was ruled by the Persian king Darius the Great. This political situation put Egypt directly in the path of Alexander the Great's campaign against the Persians. The Egyptians chafed under Persian rule, and Alexander was welcomed as a liberator when he came to the country after defeating Darius. He is known to have sacrificed to the sacred Apis bull and soon took the title of Pharaoh¹. He was crowned in the temple of Ptah at Memphis, exactly as the pharaohs before him.² Alexander spent very little time in Egypt. He was named pharaoh, marked out the lines for Alexandria (which would serve as the capitol of Egypt until the Arabic period), travelled to the temple of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis, and left the country. He never returned to Egypt.³

Alexander's empire, so briefly united, was divided upon his death into four parts: Babylonia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Egypt.⁴ The proposed plan was for his most trusted generals to hold the territories until Alexander's heir was of age. His long-standing friend, Ptolemy, took control of Egypt. Infighting, however, led to either the death or banishment of most of Alexander's heirs within a short amount of time. Fighting erupted over his body almost immediately after his death. Macedonia was in such turmoil directly after Alexander's death that his soldiers and generals in the East refused to send the body back to Macedonia. After approximately two years, things had settled down

¹ Pharaoh means "Great House". It initially referred to the home of the Egyptian ruler, but gradually came to be interchangeable with the person.

² Lloyd, Alan B. "The Ptolemaic Period". *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: University Press, 2000. p. 388

³ Fox, Robin Lane. *Alexander the Great*. New York: Penguin Books, 1973. p. 196

⁴ Bingén, Jean. *Hellenistic Egypt: Monarchy, Society, Economy, Culture*. California: University of California Press, 2007. p. 19

enough there that transportation was arranged and his funeral procession started for home.⁵

By this time, Alexander's body had become a unique sort of status symbol. Ptolemy, recognizing this, befriended the head of the procession, and turned the caravan towards Egypt. Ptolemy would later use possession of the corpse to help secure his independence and claim to the throne of Egypt.⁶ The Macedonian general Ptolemy became Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter, and with the beginning of his dynasty he cemented a Hellenistic presence in Egypt.

Ptolemy I Soter was a strong king, who firmly established his legitimacy to the throne in a variety of ways. The strength of the Ptolemaic state did not rest on the Greek-model city, as the Seleucids' power in Asia did. Ptolemy I Soter founded only one city in his time, Ptolemais, located in Upper Egypt. He did, however, expand Egyptian borders; the Cyclades, Samos, and most of the coast of Asia Minor were just a few of the territories Ptolemy Soter added to his empire.⁷

Ptolemy Soter took swift measures to ensure his economic security as well. The main staple of Egypt was grain and this is the main area where Ptolemy made his money. He divided each section of wheat planting into tracts of land known as "corn-land". Every owner of "corn-land" paid a tax in kind directly to the King. If the King owned the land no peasant could claim his harvest until the King had received his share and transported it to the King's granary. One should note that the King received the larger share of the harvest than the peasant.⁸ Next, the newly crowned pharaoh monopolized

⁵Fox, Robin Lane: 474-477

⁶ Fox, Robin Lane: 478

⁷ Tarn and Griffith. *Hellenistic Civilization*. London: University Paperbacks, 1977. p. 181

⁸ Tarn and Griffith: 189-91

papyrus, mines, quarries, saltworks, and oil made from seed plants (including sesame, croton, linseed, safflower, or colocynth). Oil was by far the largest monopoly, being completely nationalized from production, fabrication, and distribution. The King decided how much land the peasants had to plant with oil-producing plants and bought it at a fixed price. The oil was then manufactured in state factories staffed with serfs and sold to retailers, also at a fixed price.

Ptolemy Soter then turned his attention to the actual governing of his new kingdom. He abolished the existing *nomarchs*⁹ and installed a Greek or Macedonian governor in his place in the existing nomes. This practice was standard operating procedure for Macedonian kingdoms.¹⁰ He then created separate law systems, one for the Greeks and one for the Egyptians. This separation was actually more sympathetic to the Egyptians than one might think. Under this dual system, Egyptians kept their old native land law system (translated to Greek) and their old judges. Greek law was based on the idea of personal, rather than territorial law, hence the creation of the two systems. Sometime in the third century, a special tribunal was created to settle disputes between the two groups which took both systems into account.

This is not to say that the Ptolemys did not embrace certain aspects of Egyptian culture. The idea of the ruler cult, acting as intermediary between mortals and gods, and sibling marriage were all practiced by the Ptolemaic dynasty. Ptolemy II Philadelphus was the first to adopt the practice when he married his full-fledged sister Arsinoe II. This precedent was followed by many of the Ptolemys that came after him. Egyptian temples

⁹ Harmon, Stephen. Personal Communication. March 18, 2013. *Nomarchs* were rulers of the territories or nomes in Egypt. Ptolemy replaced Persian *nomarchs*; it had been several generations since a native Egyptian had held any bureaucratic position.

¹⁰ Tarn and Griffith: 182, 196

were also frequently either repaired or rebuilt by the Greek rulers.¹¹ After Alexander's conquest of Egypt, the Greeks also began identifying their gods with Egyptian ones. For example Horus was equated with Apollo, Thoth/Hermes, Ammon/Zeus, Hathor/Aphrodite, Athena/Taweret, and Pan/Min.¹²

Ptolemy I Soter's style of government flourished under a strong king who could keep the officials honest. The influx of Greek settlers able to enlist in the army insured military dominance. This type of government also depended on keeping the two groups of peoples, Egyptians and Greeks,¹³ relatively separate. Egyptians were not allowed to serve in the army nor did they serve in bureaucratic positions.¹⁴ Within a couple of generations this system started to splinter, as most of the Ptolemaic kings did not have the same strong hand their patriarch possessed.

By the early third century BCE, native troops were to be found in the army. It was their presence that turned the tide to Ptolemaic victory against the Selucids at the Battle of Raphia under Ptolemy IV Philopater; out of 3,000 cavalry present at the battle 2,000 were a mixture of Egyptians and Libyans.¹⁵ Graeco-Egyptian intermarriage began around the second century BCE. Under Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II the Macedonian calendar gave way to the Egyptian one.¹⁶

More significant is the evidence of intermingling between the two cultures.

Names were no longer an indication of race, as Egyptians who moved up the scale took

¹¹ Lloyd, Alan B: 403-4, 406

¹² Peacock, David. "The Roman Period (30 BC-AD 395)". *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: University Press, 2000. p. 429

¹³ Greeks will henceforth be used to refer to both groups of people, Greeks and Macedonians, which of up to this point have been treated as two different peoples.

¹⁴ Tarn and Griffith: 204

¹⁵ Lloyd, Alan B: 395

¹⁶ Tarn and Griffith: 186, 206

Greek names and Greeks who had married into native families took Egyptian ones. Greeks also started adopting many Egyptian practices, including the funeral rite of embalming and mummification. Numerous other examples of this intermingling will follow in Chapter Two.

This Egyptianization of the government led to more outbreaks of peasant unrest as the Egyptians began to realize their importance to the dynasty. This realization manifested itself as an unrest that the Greek pharaohs were beginning to have trouble controlling.

Part Two: The Ptolemys and Rome

Greek rulers in Egypt opened the door for Rome's entrance. Official assurances of friendship between Rome and Egypt were exchanged during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, son of Ptolemy I Soter, in 275 BCE.¹⁷ Several men from his court traveled as ambassadors to Rome to exchange the gestures of friendships. The diplomatic trip was an effective political move on the part of Ptolemy II, as Rome had just emerged the victor of the Second Punic War and was now the greatest power in the Mediterranean. The friendship also benefitted Rome during her various struggles with Carthage, as it kept Egypt from intervening on behalf of Carthage.¹⁸

Within a century of Ptolemy II's friendship embassy, Roman merchants and tradesmen were settling in Egypt. By the 200s BCE, Roman officials were making inspection tours throughout the country. The onset of Roman settlers allowed the more

¹⁷ Lloyd, Alan B: 412

¹⁸ Burstein, Stanley M. *The Reign of Cleopatra*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. p.

secure Roman ruler¹⁹ to swoop in and save the pharaoh whenever Ptolemaic power was threatened, tightening the bonds between the two governments.²⁰ Alliances with Rome did not come without their price, which was to be paid within three generations of initial contact.

The Ptolemaic dynasty became permanently indebted to Rome's power upon the death of Ptolemy IX Soter II, who died in 80 BCE without a legitimate heir. Sulla placed his protégé, most likely a son of one of Ptolemy IX's other wives or concubines, on the throne. When Ptolemy XI Auletes' very life was threatened, he fled to Rome for safety and to gain support. He was given it, and Gabinius, the Roman governor of Syria, invaded Egypt and placed Auletes securely back on the throne. The kingdom of Egypt became the reward when the grateful pharaoh was unable to pay the 10,000 talents of silver agreed upon. In his will, Auletes named his children joint rulers of Egypt and Rome their guardians. These children were Cleopatra VII Philopator and Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator. Within two years trouble brewed between the royal couple²¹ and Cleopatra had fled into exile.²²

At the same time, Caesar and Pompey were embroiled in civil war in Rome. Pompey sought sanctuary in Alexandria, choosing to appeal to the young Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator's camp of the warring siblings. Pompey's death at the hands of Ptolemy XIII, a miscalculation intended to gain Caesar's favor, angered Caesar instead. Caesar, as

¹⁹ Roman rulers could easily say they were simply acting in the safety of their citizens, should there be any political backlash for aiding Egypt.

²⁰ Lewis, Naphtali. *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule*. Oxford: University Press, 1999. pp. 10-12

²¹ Cleopatra followed the Egyptian custom of marrying siblings when she married her brother, Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator, upon the death of their father.

²² Lewis, Naphtali: 12-13

their guardian, interjected himself as mediator between Cleopatra and her brother-husband.²³

Cleopatra VII and Ptolemy XIII each had one chance to make an impression on Caesar and gain his sympathy, and it is at this point that Cleopatra threw all her cards on the table at her meeting with him. Cleopatra emerged the winner of Caesar's goodwill and much of the negotiations were in her favor. Caesar reconciled the couple, and reinstated Ptolemy XIII as King of Egypt. However, his position was conditional upon Cleopatra acting as equal co-ruler of the kingdom.²⁴ As soon as the couple agreed to this settlement, Egypt became a Roman province in all but name.

Despite this apparent submission to Roman will, Cleopatra VII was the most Egyptianized ruler of her dynasty. For example she was the only one who troubled to learn the Egyptian tongue, Demotic.²⁵ After Caesar's assassination, Cleopatra had to worry about her country and what would happen to it without the assistance of the powerful Caesar. She decided on an alliance with Marc Antony, one of Caesar's more trusted confidantes, over Octavian, Caesar's nephew.

Part Three: The Fall of Ptolemaic Egypt

Cleopatra's relationship with Antony was a contributing cause to Egypt's formal annexation as a Roman province. During the power struggle that ensued after Caesar's assassination, the affair would prove to be valuable propaganda Octavian could use to rid himself of his rival without actually declaring war on a countryman. Reports came in that painters and sculptors depicted the couple as Osiris and Isis, or Dionysus and Selene.

This portrayal of the couple as Greek or Egyptian gods interchangeably further illustrates

²³ Plutarch. *Life of Pompey*. John Dryden translator. New York: Modern Library, 2001.

²⁴ Plutarch. *Life of Ceaser*. John Dryden translator. New York: Modern Library, 2001.

²⁵ Plutarch. *Life of Antony*. John Dryden translator. New York: Modern Library, 2001.

the spread of Egyptian influence to the Greek and Roman world. Octavian read the contents of Antony's will in public, which enraged the Roman populace. From there, it was not hard for them to believe the rumors that Antony planned to hand Rome over to Cleopatra and move the seat of government to Egypt. Octavian got his declaration of war, which was officially against Cleopatra, but in reality against Antony.²⁶

Octavian's reason for declaring war on Cleopatra rather than Antony was purely political. He and his supporters feared to declare Antony a public enemy, lest they had to do the same for Antony's friends. This declaration would put a good majority of the Senate on the wrong side of Roman public opinion. So the Senate offered a pardon to everyone that deserted Antony.²⁷ Without a formal declaration of war against Antony, Octavian could level a charge of treason. Octavian knew Antony would not desert Cleopatra, so in effect any war against her was against Antony. However, not formally declaring war on Antony gave Octavian the opening to say that Antony had himself declared war on Rome for the sake of a foreign woman.²⁸

The tense situation came to a head in a fierce naval battle at Actium in 31 BCE. Octavian's forces defeated those of Antony and Cleopatra. The couple fled back to Alexandria. Antony committed suicide as did Cleopatra, thwarting Octavian's plans to take her back for a Triumph into Rome.²⁹

Part Four: Conclusion, Egypt as a Roman Province

²⁶ Cassius Dio. *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*. Ian Scott-Kilvert translator. New York: Penguin Books. Book 50, Verses 3-5

²⁷ Cassius Dio: Book 50, Verse 5

²⁸ Cassius Dio: Book 50, Verses 5-6

²⁹ Plutarch. *Life of Antony*.

Within a month of Cleopatra's suicide, in 30 BCE, Octavian (by then renamed Augustus) had formally added Egypt to the Roman Empire.³⁰ Augustus, though he executed some of Antony's supporters in Egypt, issued a decree sparing the Egyptians and Alexandrians. A master propagandist, he explained his actions by claiming to have been influenced by the Alexandrian god Sarapis, their founder Alexander the Great, and a third man named Areius whose learning had impressed Octavian.³¹ In many ways this mercy was simply practical; such a large population would prove to be beneficial to Rome.

The mercy of Augustus did not extend much past sparing the lives of the Alexandrians. Augustus took swift measures to ensure that the Greeks knew they were now part of a Roman province. Greek citizens would no longer have the special privileges they had previously enjoyed under the Ptolemaic rulers. These measures came in several different ways. First, he abolished their Senate (granted to them under the Greek Ptolemy rulers). Next, Augustus gave the Jews of Alexandria all the rights and privileges previously enjoyed by the Greeks alone. His third step was to found a city, Nikopolis, just a few miles east of Alexandria. In founding this new city, Augustus was attempting to remove the seat of government and official religious celebrations from Alexandria. The city stood to lose a lot of power and prestige if Nikopolis flourished. In this aspect Alexandrians were lucky. Nikopolis did not thrive and mainly existed as a Roman garrison camp.³² Relations between Rome and Alexandria never really improved; Alexandria continued to be the seat of rebellions and contenders for the Roman throne.

³⁰ Lewis, Naphtali: 9-15

³¹ Cassius Dio: Book 51, Verse 16

³² Milne, Grafton J. *A History of Egypt Under Roman Rule*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1913 pp. 16-17

As discussed earlier, Egypt's main economic staple was grain and it served as the main source for Rome. However, it was this important contribution to Roman society that made Roman emperors keep such a tight rein on the country. Whoever was the prefect of Egypt had to be loyal to the emperor, because he could in effect starve Rome into submission. Therefore, emperors usually sent governors, of whose loyalty they were assured, to Egypt. Roman senators were not allowed to enter Egypt; such was the possibility of launching a successful coup from the province, especially Alexandria, as noted above.³³

Egypt would be a Roman province until the seventh century.³⁴ However, this thesis will demonstrate that while the government of Egypt changed, as one would expect of a conquered country, in many ways Egypt continued as it had for centuries. The average Egyptian's life did not change on most levels; there was simply another foreign pharaoh on the throne. Temples were built in the old style; the Roman Emperor was shown on walls with the same Egyptian elements which always accompanied the pharaohs of old.³⁵ The citizens of Egypt, through their religion and philosophy, continued to exert a strong influence on the world.

³³ Peacock, David: 415

³⁴ In 642 BCE, Egypt was conquered by the Muslims

³⁵ Lewis, Naphtali: 9-15

CHAPTER II

EGYPT: CONQUEROR OF CONQUERORS

The religious landscape of Egypt is varied, dynamic, and unique. Its myths and gods have fascinated other cultures for millennia. Perhaps this fascination explains why invaders tended to adopt Egyptian practices. The institution of pharaohs was adopted by all of Egypt's rulers, whether foreign or native through the Roman era. The adoption of not only the Egyptian word for ruler but also pharaonic trappings is significant. It indicates a willingness on the part of foreign rulers to accept, in addition to pharaonic rule, Egypt's divine pantheon, mythology, and religious rites as well.

When a ruler took the title of pharaoh in Egypt, he took the responsibilities that came with the office as well. These responsibilities were largely religious in nature, as the pharaoh was the mediator between gods and mortals. In fact, he was considered a living god in his own right. Therefore, to become pharaoh was to become a living god. Generally, during his lifetime, the pharaoh was identified as a manifestation of Horus and would assume the role of Osiris upon his death. Much of the pharaoh's time was spent as the go-between for his subjects and his gods. It was necessary that the ruler make offerings and lead ritual processions during the gods' festivals in order to maintain

maat.³⁶ It was not unusual for a ruler to be venerated as a god³⁷ in ancient times; however, the idea of the ruler also being the servant of the gods is relatively unique. Also, it was unusual for a ruler to be considered a *living* god. It is a dual role that the pharaoh lives from birth to death, and in the afterlife as well.

The Greek pharaohs not only adopted the classic pharaonic role and Egyptian pantheon, they embraced the concept and expanded the pantheon with the creation of Sarapis. Before a discussion of Ptolemaic Egyptian paganism, however, one should realize that Egypt had wielded considerable religious influence before Alexander the Great became pharaoh.

Part I: Egypt's religious influence before the Ptolemys

Egypt's rites, myths, and rituals as practiced by the pharaohs for centuries exerted an influence on the ancient world long before Egypt became part of the Graeco-Roman territory. For example, Philip of Macedonia, after consulting with the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, was commanded to perform a sacrifice to Ammon and ever afterwards pay special honor to him above all other gods years before his son conquered Egypt.³⁸

Ammon is just one of the gods that had travelled outside of Egyptian borders before Alexander the Great conquered Egypt.

³⁶ *Maat* was the ancient Egyptian concept of balance and justice. Every person had to maintain balance within his/her life, through avoiding doing harmful things and living a good life. The ancient Egyptian believed that if *maat* was not maintained then the world would descend into chaos.

³⁷ The Romans often instituted a cult for a dead Emperor. Persian rulers were also considered living gods and worshipped throughout their lifetime.

³⁸ Ammon started as a local deity of Thebes and was later fused with the sun god Ra into a national deity Ammon-Ra; Plutarch. *Life of Alexander*.

Ammon arrived in Athens, via the Cyrenian³⁹ Greeks, long before any other Egyptian god; his cult became public around 370 BCE. Delian⁴⁰ temple records show that Athenian generals were sacrificing to the god when the cult of Isis was still limited to immigrants. The high status of those performing the sacrifices proves that Ammon had been in Athens long enough to have climbed the social scale. Ammon was not the only Egyptian god who had a shrine on the island of Delos. These shrines were very wealthy and had a considerable income. In the second half of the second century, temple inventories recorded a large number of votive candles given as offerings to the Delian Egyptian temples. By 146 BCE, the number of votives in the Egyptian temples was second only to those in the temple of Apollo. The large number of offerings is significant, as there were other Greek gods' temples located on the island and Apollo's was the main one. Delos was known as the birthplace of Apollo and his sister, so a foreign god's temple receiving as many or more offerings as that of Apollo is very telling of Egypt's reach in the Greek world even before Alexander and the Ptolemys.⁴¹

As for Egypt's historical influence, the Father of History, Herodotus, spent much of his career gathering information about the country. When he wrote his *Histories* in the mid-fifth century BCE, he stated, "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."⁴² He had traveled through the country at length and spent many hours talking with the priests of different cults by the time he wrote his books.

³⁹ Cyrenian Greeks came from a Greek colony called Cyrene located in modern day Libya.

⁴⁰ Delos was an island off the coast of Greece and the site of several temples.

⁴¹ Dow, Sterling. "The Egyptian Cults in Athens" *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 30, No.4 (Oct., 1937) pp. 183-232. pp. 184, 202

⁴² Herodotus. *The Histories*. George Rawlinson translator. New York: Everyman's Library, 1910. Book 2, Chp. 35.

Herodotus claimed these priests told him that it was the Egyptians who were the first to use the names of the twelve gods and that the Greeks had adopted those names from them.⁴³

Herodotus later affirmed that the majority of the Grecian gods came from Egypt. Poseidon was a notable exception, as were Hera and Hestia. Poseidon was a natural exception as a God of the Ocean would not serve any function in a desert pantheon. However, the Nile was itself considered a god and worshipped in its own right. There were a handful of other minor divine groups, such as the Graces, that Herodotus believed came from somewhere else but he credited Egypt with knowing of the other divines from the beginning of time.⁴⁴

When Plutarch wrote of Osiris' birth in his treatise *Of Isis and Osiris*, he spoke of a temple of Jupiter, located at Thebes in Greece. The scene where his birth was announced to humankind is very suggestive. He wrote,

There are others that affirm one Pamyles, as he was fetching water at Thebes, heard a voice out of the temple of Jupiter, bidding him to publish with a loud voice that Osiris, the great and good king, was now born; and that he thereupon got to be foster-father to Osiris, Saturn entrusting him with the charge of him, and that the feast called Pamyliia (resembling the Priapeian procession the Greeks called Phallephoria) was instituted in honor of him.⁴⁵

Plutarch's description of Osiris' birth is rife with evidence of synergetic elements while Egypt was independent of any Greek or Roman rule. Most telling is the announcement itself. That a Roman god felt it necessary to announce the birth of an Egyptian one, with praises and a feast day instituted in Osiris' honor is an intriguing point.

⁴³ Herodotus. *The Histories*. Book 2, Chp. 4

⁴⁴ Herodotus. *The Histories*. Book 2, Chp. 50

⁴⁵ Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*. William Baxter translator. Calgary: Theophania Publishing, 2012. Chp 1, verse 12. Also note that the parenthetical statement is not the authors, but Plutarch's insertion.

The Egyptian influence exerted upon invaders of Egypt was even greater, for Egypt had a habit of forcing conquerors to assimilate to its culture rather than adopting that of the invader. After Alexander finished drawing out the lines of Alexandria, he left the workmen to proceed while he undertook an extremely arduous pilgrimage to the temple of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis. This was a journey of several days into the desert.⁴⁶ Upon his arrival he was greeted by the priest who bade him welcome in Greek from his father, the god Ammon. While some of his contemporaries saw it as a slip of the priest's pronunciation, Alexander was pleased with the idea and left splendid offerings at the temple. It is interesting to note that in this story, Plutarch used the words Ammon and Jupiter interchangeably; demonstrating how much the Romans had identified their religion with Egypt's.⁴⁷ One should also note that Alexander being pleased is important of itself, if he held Ammon in low regard, it would not have meant so much to be called Ammon's son. He also would not have perpetuated the story if he did not think the priest's opinion would matter. The idea that Alexander held the Egyptian pantheon in high regard is supported by the fact that rather than holding a Macedonian crowning ceremony, he chose instead to follow the traditions of the pharaohs. Recall that he was anointed at Memphis at the Temple of Ptah, just as many pharaohs were before him.⁴⁸

Part II: Egyptian Paganism, the Ptolemys, and Rome

After Ptolemy assumed rule of Egypt upon the death of Alexander, he not only adopted the title "pharaoh" he conformed to many of the native practices. This conformity included the religious role that was inherent in the life of an Egyptian ruler.

⁴⁶ Alexander undertaking this journey is noteworthy, as it took him several days' journey out of the way of his destination, Persia. Thus, it was motivated by religious factors rather than a stop on the way.

⁴⁷ Plutarch. *Life of Alexander*.

⁴⁸ Lloyd, Alan B: 388

He sacrificed to the Egyptian gods. He also built temples in their honor and funded their cults. This assimilation is well documented on papyri fragments from the Ptolemaic era. The Ptolemaic pharaohs often used the Egyptian naming systems, following their surnames with such titles as “benefactor gods” “savior gods” or “brother-sister gods”.⁴⁹ They also adopted the practice of marrying siblings – this custom being based on the sibling marriage of the parent gods Osiris and Isis. As mentioned in Chapter One, Ptolemy II Philadelphus married his sister Arsinoe II Philadelphus, and the precedent was followed by most of the dynasty after him.⁵⁰ Cleopatra VII, the last Ptolemaic pharaoh, married two of her brothers, Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator and later Ptolemy XIV, before assuming independent rule of Egypt.⁵¹

Ptolemy II Philadelphus embraced the development of the ruler cult throughout his rule. Early in his reign he established a dynastic cult in Alexandria for himself and his sister-wife Arsinoe II Philadelphus, which he then linked to the cult of Alexander. Upon his wife’s death, Ptolemy II also instituted a temple served by a priestess in her honor, making her the first Ptolemaic queen to receive her own cult in Egyptian temples. This cult was regularly joined to the cults of the local god or goddess.⁵²

Their son, Ptolemy III Euergetes and his wife⁵³ Berenike II, built upon this traditional ruler cult, often bestowing great privileges and gifts to the temples. These acts prompted the priests to increase the honors of the family throughout Egypt,

⁴⁹ Unknown. *The Canopus Decree*.

⁵⁰ Lloyd, Alan B: 403-4

⁵¹ Burstein, Stanley M: 14, 19

⁵² Rowlandson, Jane. *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt*. Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 30

⁵³ Berenike was the daughter of the Cyrenian monarchs and one of the few examples of the Ptolemy males marrying outside of the family.

With good fortune, it has been decided by the priests throughout the land to increase the existing honors in the temples to King Ptolemy and Queen Berenike, the benefactor gods, and their forebears, the brother-sister gods, and their grandparents, the savior gods. The priests in the temples in the land are to be further named priests of the benefactor gods and this title is to be recorded in all official deeds and the additional priesthood of the benefactor gods is to be engraved on the rings which they wear. To the existing four tribes of the community of priests in each temple there shall be added a fifth tribe, to be named the fifth tribe of the benefactor gods[.]⁵⁴

When Ptolemy III and Berenike II's young daughter died, there was an immediate movement of the priests to name the maiden a goddess and institute a national cult in her honor. The decree issued illustrates the mixing of the two cultures as the language of the decree mixes both Egyptian and Roman names. The younger Berenike died in the month of Tybi, which according to the decree, was also when the daughter of Helios, known as Tefnut, died during creation.⁵⁵

The importance of such decrees from the priestly castes of Egypt is multi-fold. In a contemporary context, there are two things of which to take note. First, the decrees gave Ptolemaic rule legitimacy. Second, it shows that the priests were eager to gain the approval of the new dynasty. Both groups benefited from a willingness to cooperate. When Ptolemy I Soter was new to the throne, he needed the aid of the priests to secure his hold on power. After the throne was secure, the dynasty continued to adopt the religious traditions of Egypt. The priests not only accepted this adoption, they encouraged it, as they would reap the benefits of imperial favor. For the historian, the decrees are effective examples of the influences at work in Egypt at the time. The cooperation between the Ptolemys and the priestly caste reveals a willingness on the part of the Greeks to assimilate the religious practices held by the Egyptians, as well as the acceptance by the Egyptians of non-natives as incarnations of their gods. Here, then, is a

⁵⁴ Unknown. *The Canopus Decree*.

⁵⁵ Unknown. *The Canopus Decree, third century*.

compelling example of the religious influence and syncretism taking place in Egypt that is the thesis of this paper.

The Ptolemaic dynasty left its mark on the Egyptian pantheon as well, most notably when Ptolemy I created the god Sarapis. Sarapis was essentially the manifestation of Ptolemy's desire to unite the Greeks and Egyptians in a common worship. Sarapis was basically the god Osiris (worshipped in bull form as Apis) combined with Greek elements, presented in Greek attire, and took the place as consort of Isis. Isis was well known at the time. The famous Egyptian priest, Manetho, wrote most of the Sarapis liturgy, in conjunction with Greek scholars.⁵⁶

Ptolemy's creation had limited success as a unifying element. While the Alexandrians seemed to accept him to a degree, those Egyptians outside the Greek city maintained their indigenous deities. Documentation from up to the third century illustrates how the cults of the crocodile god Sobek flourished throughout Egypt. Iconography and inscriptions also contain references to Taweret, Montou, Tutu, and Bes.⁵⁷ Despite these signs of resistance, Sarapis continued with Osirian characteristics and as Isis' consort (though he was never equal to her) throughout the Ptolemaic period.⁵⁸ Worshippers gave some nominal acceptance however, as Sarapis was called upon to answer oracle questions. In one example he was called upon as "Zeus Helios, great Sarapis". The occasional child was named after him, as an example Serapion, Cleopatra

⁵⁶ Gabriel, Richard A. *Gods of Our Fathers: The Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity*. London: Greenwood Press, 2002. p. 134

⁵⁷ Frankfurter, David. *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000. p. 106

⁵⁸ Tarn and Griffith: 356-357

VII's governor of Cyprus.⁵⁹ Celebrations of his national festival, the Serapia, are documented until the early fourth century.⁶⁰

Egypt also apparently accepted Sarapis enough to export him to the other Greek and Roman territories. Sometime in the third century Pausanias mentions a temple of Sarapis in Athens. However, it is only a passing mention; he does not give any description of the décor or style of architecture. The temple was unlikely to have been ornate or large, but it was new enough that its origin was sufficient to cause note. The hybrid god also commanded a small cult group, the Society of the Sarapiastai, at approximately the same time as Pausanias' mention of the temple in Athens. Its numbers ranged from fifty to eighty, with members both male and female.⁶¹ Sarapis even made a limited appearance in India.⁶²

The Greek/Egyptian god also had a temple in Rome itself. Construction began under the Emperor Hadrian and was finished under Antonius Pious. Hadrian was one of the few emperors to visit Egypt.⁶³ Of the few that did travel there, he seems to be the most favorably impressed. He constructed an Egyptian-inspired landscape at his palace in Tivoli and initiated construction of a Serapeum in Rome. Hadrian devoted much attention to Alexandria, and committed himself to both the country and its two supreme deities, Isis and Sarapis, as evident from coins issued in both Rome and Alexandria. Construction of the Roman Serapeum began after the Jewish rebellion of 115, known as the Diaspora

⁵⁹ Burstein, Stanley: 24

⁶⁰ Nike. *Oxyrhynchos papyrus, second century*; Frankfurter, David: 162

⁶¹ Dow, Sterling: 187-192

⁶² Tarn and Griffith: 355

⁶³ Roman emperors had an almost superstitious fear about traveling to Egypt. Augustus set the precedent upon conquering Egypt, though his motive was most likely political. Only a handful of Roman rulers visited the country while Roman Senators were expressly forbidden to enter its borders. In part, this is due to Egypt's importance as a grain basket. Anyone who controlled the city could conceivably starve the city of Rome into submission at any point.

Revolt, which spread to Egypt and destroyed the all-important grain crops. The rebellion was finally suppressed during the first two years of Hadrian's reign and it is likely that his decision was based on political as well as religious motives. The author says political as well as religious purposes for good reason. Political reasons are apparent because he chose to build the Serapeum in thanks for the end of the revolt and the return of the grain crops. However, it could not have been purely political because of his choice to build it in Rome. The location suggests that Hadrian identified with Sarapis enough to build an accessible temple in the capitol city. Emperor Trajan also visited Egypt and built a traditional pharaonic kiosk at Philae. Strikingly, two of the fourteen columns located at Philae are decorated with scenes of Trajan making offerings to Isis, Sarapis, and Horus.⁶⁴

Sarapis was popular in Alexandria and with the Greek settlers in the districts surrounding the city. A temple of Sarapis housed a popular incubation cult⁶⁵ in the nearby city of Canopus. Strabo writes of it in the late first century BCE:

[T]he temple of Sarapis, which is honoured with great reverence and effects such cures that even the most reputable men believe in it and sleep in it – themselves on their own behalf or others for them. Some writers go on to record the cures, and others the virtues of the oracles there.

Sarapis was accepted more among the urban populations, which consisted of Greeks or Egyptians who had adopted a Grecian identity. The rural populations resisted him, and they required something to help ease the transition from the ever popular Osiris to Sarapis.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Peacock, David: 415, 431; Taylor, Rabun. "Hadrian's Serapeum in Rome" *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (Apr., 2004), pgs 223-266. pp. 223, 251-253

⁶⁵ Incubation cults involved the supplicant putting the question to the oracle and then sleeping in a temple chamber in hopes of receiving an answer via dream.

⁶⁶ Frankfurter: 162

The Egyptian god Anubis became prominent at this time, and served to tie the Sarapis deity to Osirian traditions in order to make Sarapis more palatable to the local populace. In a Roman work of fiction, a procession of Isis is described in great detail. It is mentioned that numerous gods were in attendance, but only Anubis is described at length. He was the divine messenger between gods and mortals, and in the Ptolemaic dynasty he was the go-between of Sarapis and Egyptians.⁶⁷ Sarapis needed this connection because, as stated above, there was some popular resistance to the Grecian/Egyptian amalgamation. The Ptolemys hoped to use Anubis to create a parallel between Osiris and Sarapis, in order to legitimize further Sarapis' place as Isis' consort.⁶⁸ A somewhat similar strategy was employed by European Christians when they grafted their traditions and stories onto known pagan holidays, for example Christmas (Saturnalia) or Easter (Imbolc), in order to make the transition easier for new converts.

Another way Ptolemy I tried to endear Sarapis to the Egyptian people was by building a grand temple, the Serapeum. Monument building had always been a crucial aspect of a pharaoh's reign. Monuments proclaimed his divine role, exhibited his authority, and told of his military victories, among other things. Spectacular temples and tombs also helped to ensure the pharaoh's afterlife. Being remembered and having one's name and body preserved were necessary for the journey to the afterlife. Ptolemy I added three major changes to the Alexandrian landscape: his palace, the Museum/Serapeum, and the Pharos lighthouse (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). He also built temples throughout Egypt. He also either rebuilt or restored older temples.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. P.G. Walsh translator. Oxford: University Press, 1995. Book 11, verse 11.

⁶⁸ Frankfurter, David: 54, 162

⁶⁹ Lloyd, Alan B: 406

Ptolemy III and his sister-wife Berenike, known as the “benefactor gods”, bestowed many privileges on the temples and increased the honors paid to all the gods. They also reputedly showed great concern for the Apis bull and other sacred animals. The priests of the land repaid their kindness by increasing the honors accorded to the couple and their ancestors throughout Egypt.⁷⁰ Ptolemy VII Euergetes II followed his predecessor’s example by sponsoring numerous temple-building projects in Upper Egypt. Cleopatra continued that pattern in 51 BCE when the Buchis bull⁷¹ died. She participated in the animal’s installation process, and rowed the animal to the temple herself. The story was told by the citizens of Hermonthis long into Augustus’ reign.⁷²

Some of the honors paid by the Ptolemys to the priestly caste and temples were probably purely political. After all, the priests were second in power only to the pharaoh and wielded enough influence to potentially bring about the fall of a monarch. However, the continued practice of paying honors to the temples confirms more than just surface assimilation. Once Ptolemaic legitimacy was solidified and the throne relatively secure, there was not nearly as much need to pay so much attention to the Egyptian pantheon. Yet, they continued to maintain Egyptian religious customs and pay honors to the Egyptian gods/goddesses, which indicated a more personal acceptance of Egyptian religion.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Cleopatra VII was probably the most Egyptianized of the Ptolemaic dynasty. She learned the Demotic Egyptian tongue, which none of her Macedonian ancestors spoke. Demotic was just one of several languages she spoke,

⁷⁰ Unknown. *Canopus Decree*. pg 31

⁷¹ The Buchis bull was believed to be the manifestation of the solar god Montu of Hermonthis. Upon his death, the search for the next Buchis bull was started and he was brought to the temple amidst much fanfare.

⁷² Burstein, Stanley: 15-16

however, and it is one of the least of the signs of Cleopatra's Egyptian nature. She followed marital traditions, presented herself in the Egyptian pharaonic style, and used Egyptian titles in her royal name. Cleopatra also went to great lengths to appeal to her people and keep Egypt independent. Just like her father, she enjoyed putting on large religious spectacles and festivals. These various celebrations would have certainly endeared her to the native Egyptian people.⁷³

When Cleopatra first met Antony it was in the guise of Isis, masquerading as Aphrodite. Plutarch identifies Antony's role as Osiris, in the Osirian manifestation of Dionysus. Cleopatra often portrayed herself as Isis incarnate on earth, thus showing she had embraced the religion of her subjects. Pompey described a public ceremony performed in which she participated as the goddess, "Cleopatra was then, as at other times when she appeared in public, dressed in the habit of the goddess Isis, and gave audience to her people under the name of the New Isis."⁷⁴

The above quote is from a crowning ceremony in the last years of Cleopatra's rule, when she and Marc Antony divided their lands between Cleopatra's children. It is yet another example of Cleopatra embracing the customs of her adopted land. Cleopatra had begun extensive temple building in Upper Egypt, honoring her and Caesarian,⁷⁵ in the traditional pharaonic manner in the last decades of her reign. Following pharaonic tradition, she also named her son as her co-ruler during her lifetime in order to ensure a smooth transition upon her death. After the concessions of Antioch in 37 BCE, Cleopatra ruled over the largest Egyptian territory since her third century ancestors. She returned to Egypt and assumed two new titles. She added Thea Neotera, the younger goddess, in

⁷³ Burstein: 12

⁷⁴ Plutarch. *Life of Antony*.

⁷⁵ Cleopatra and Caesar's son

honor of an ancestress. The second title was Philopatris, the lover of her country, which reaffirmed her commitment to Egypt and its traditions.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, Cleopatra's struggle to keep Egypt independent would end in failure. She and Antony were defeated at the Battle of Actium and both committed suicide. Augustus made Egypt a province of Rome and kept a close eye on the country throughout his reign, ready to crush any rebellion. He also worked to limit Egypt's influence over the world, which he largely succeeded in doing in regards to the political realm. The spiritual allure of Egypt could not be eradicated however. Many of the Emperors left religious matters alone, if they did not outright adopt them. The Roman soldiers, their families, and other settlers also began to have just as many Egyptian practices and rituals as they did Roman. A good example of a Roman adopting Egyptian customs emerges in a papyrus letter from the second or third century,

Marcus Aurelius Apollonios, hierophant, to the ritual basket-carrier of [the village of] Nesmeimis, greeting. Please go to [the village of] Sinkepha to the temple of Demeter, to perform the customary sacrifices for our lords to the emperors and their victory, for the rise of the Nile and increase of crops, and for favourable conditions of climate. I pray that you fare well.⁷⁷

Note that Marcus Aurelius Apollonios is sending the basket-carrier to a temple of the Greek goddess Demeter, to pray for the rise of the Nile. Egyptians had long worshipped the Nile as a god in its own right and the coming of the Greeks had changed that idea little. The Romans, ever a practical people, continued the ritual as well. High ranking Roman officials even adopted Isis into their titles. As late as 376 CE, an inscription gives "priest of Isis" as one of the titles of the auger of Rome.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Burstein, Stanley: 25-26

⁷⁷ Apollonios, Marcus Aurelius. *Ophiate papyrus*.

⁷⁸ An auger was the official soothsayer of a city and a place of high honor. Bowden, Hugh. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010. pp. 199.

A stele in the Ophiate region further illustrates this Roman-Egyptian cultural mix. One Agathapous, a freedman, dedicated a shrine of the god Pan to his previous master, Publius Juventius Rufus. The freedman, who has a Greek name, dedicated the shrine of a Greek god, to his master who has a Roman name. The depiction of Pan on the stele, however, is in the traditional profile stance of the Egyptian god Min.⁷⁹ This mixing of Greek or Roman names with Egyptian poses is common and presents some of the most solid evidence for the mixing of the two religions. Consider as well the dedication of a chapel by the wealthy widow Petronia in the town of Kom Ombo in 88 CE. The façade is decorated with scenes of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, but the Greek inscription refers to “Aphrodite, the greatest goddess.”⁸⁰ Another example of religious assimilation is the graduation ceremony from the gymnasium: by the end of the Ptolemaic period, Greeks marked their graduation ceremony with oaths to Egyptian gods. Also, by this time period Demotic was again the official language of Egypt.⁸¹

The most significant evidence of Romans assimilating to Egyptian culture was discovered, as so often happens in Egypt, by accident in the 1990s at the El Haiz settlement, near the Bahariya Oasis. The settlement had served as a caravan station for years for Bedouins, traders, merchants, soldiers, and foreign settlers living between the Bahariya and Farafra Oasis. A large Roman era fortress, which most likely served as a garrison for Roman soldiers, dominates the settlement now. El Haiz represents a cross section of cultures throughout history. As such, it and the Bahariya Oasis are prime examples of Roman assimilation. Bahariya is the site of a Greek temple to Alexander the Great, built in 332 BCE. It is the only example of a temple built to a living pharaoh that

⁷⁹ Lewis, Naphtali: 85.

⁸⁰ Petronia. *Chapel dedication*.

⁸¹ Garbriel, Richard A: 132.

has been discovered in Egypt thus far. The temple contained statues of Ra, scenes of Alexander presenting offerings to Ammon, and a cartouche⁸² of Alexander the Great. Graeco-Romans chose the area as a burial site because it was close to the temple. Research indicates the cemetery was in use until the fourth century CE. Archeologists have discovered dozens of mummies in a variety of tombs. Many of them were Roman settlers. Their sarcophagi were beautifully decorated with Egyptian religious iconography and are richly gilded.⁸³ Mummification is directly linked to the Egyptian afterlife and has no Roman counterpoint. These Romans, therefore, had completely assimilated to Egyptian funeral practices.

The Valley of the Golden Mummies provides the most direct evidence of Roman assimilation, at least with Egyptian funerary practices, but it is not the only example. At least two tombs in Alexandria itself also contain pictorial evidence of local assimilation and syncretism. The Stagni and Tigrane Tombs incorporate several Egyptian elements, arguably iconography usually associated with the protection of a tomb and the deceased within. Both tombs incorporate Greek, Roman, and Egyptian influences in a style that is uniquely Alexandrian, in terms of their architectural and decorative elements.

The Stagni Tomb was discovered in 1996. It consisted of several different chambers, all incorporating various Egyptianized elements in their decoration and iconography. From the entrance to the inner chambers, these elements are found throughout. The front of the tomb is protected by a pair of sphinxes with a basileion⁸⁴

⁸² A cartouche is an oval with a horizontal line at one end, usually indicating that a royal name is contained within. The symbol was used by Egyptian royalty for centuries and continued under the Greeks and Romans.

⁸³ Hawass, Zahi. "The Discovery of the Valley of the Golden Mummies at Bahariya Oasis". http://www.guardians.net/hawass/Valley_of_the_Golden_Mummies.htm. Oct. 17, 2012.

⁸⁴ One of the crowns worn by Isis.

while another sphinx is painted in the center of the frieze. As one progressed through the tomb, one came across the image of Eros while on the opposite wall Anubis⁸⁵ stands garbed as a Roman soldier. Within the same room, a pair of Horus falcons sits atop pier capitals. Several female figures are readily identifiable as Isis from the crowns and accoutrement (e.g. her staff) portrayed. At some point, a mummy lay in the tomb, as is evident by the painted sarcophagus that remains. This tomb has an overall Isiac theme, incorporating iconography (e.g. the sphinxes and her crown) as well as featuring gods that are traditionally associated with Isis.

Another tomb discovered in 1952, called the Tigrane Pasha tomb, contains many examples of the above mentioned iconography and scenes, with the addition of the Apis Bull. Marjorie Susan Venit compares the tomb with two others located outside of Alexandria, the Ramleh Tomb and the Sieglin Tomb located at the Great Catacombs of Kom el-Shoqafa. The tombs contain the same architectural elements and include the same deities as, and some additions to, the Stagni Tomb. The Ramleh, Sieglin, and Tigrane tombs include Thoth, Ptah, and two of the Canopic gods in their decoration.⁸⁶

A tomb was personal in ancient times, as much a home for the deceased as a house is for the living. For a Greek or Roman citizen to include Egyptian (or Egyptianized) elements in their tomb is very telling. It shows more than just a surface assimilation to Egyptian practices. Incorporating those Egyptian elements of Isis and other protectors of the undead emphatically demonstrates that both Greeks and Romans

⁸⁵ Remember that Anubis' role was as guide to the Underworld, protector of the dead.

⁸⁶ Venit, Marjorie Susan. "The Stagni Painted Tomb: Cultural Interchange and Gender Differentiation in Roman Alexandria" *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 641-669. pp. 647-657; Venit, Marjorie Susan. "The Tomb from Tigrane Pasha Street and the Iconography of Death in Roman Alexandria" *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (Oct., 1997), pp. 701-729. pp. 701-708

had embraced many aspects of Egyptian funerary practices; this also illustrates how much they had embraced the Egyptian pantheon in general, as Egyptian religious practices were directly linked with preparing for the afterlife.

Part III: Isis in the Greek and Roman world

Of all the Egyptian gods that refused to fade into obscurity, Isis fought the hardest and travelled the farthest. In fourth century BCE Egyptians were given permission to acquire land in Athens to build a temple to Isis, which is the earliest evidence of her worship in the Greek world. Her cult subsequently rivaled that of Christianity in the first centuries of the Common Era.⁸⁷ When Augustus conquered Egypt in 30 BCE her cult spread beyond Egyptian borders throughout the Roman Empire. It even reached as far as Britain, travelling with Roman soldiers as they marched across the island. It was eventually accepted by emperors, merchants, and peasants making it one of the more inclusive religions of the time. Temples to the goddess can be found in Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, Gaul, the Balkans, and Spain.⁸⁸

It is important to remember that the Isis of the Graeco-Roman world was greatly changed from the original conception. For example, the interpretation of Isis as described by Plutarch relies heavily on a type of Romanized mysticism. Plutarch equates her once with the goddess Minerva and another time with the Greek goddess Persephone.⁸⁹ In his third century fictional work, Apuleius wrote that Isis, the heroine, told the antagonist,

In one land the Phrygians, first-born of men, hail me as the Pessinuntian mother of the gods; elsewhere the native dwellers of Attica call me Cecropian Minerva; in other climes the wave-tossed Cypriots name me Paphian Venus, the Cretan archers, Dictynna Diana; the trilingual Sicilians, Ortygian Proserpina; the Eleusinians, the ancient goddess Cere;

⁸⁷ A discussion of the parallels between Isis and Christianity will take place in Chapter Three, Egypt's influence on Christianity. This section is devoted to the blending of the Egyptian goddess with those of the Mediterranean world.

⁸⁸ Bowden, Hugh: 160

⁸⁹ Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*. Chp 1 verses 9, 27.

some call me Juno, others Bellona; others Hecate, and others still Rhamnusia. [T]he Egyptians who flourish with their time-honoured learning – worship me with the liturgy that is my own, and call me by my true name, which is queen Isis.⁹⁰

The fact that Apuleius, a Roman, wrote such praise of Isis demonstrates not only Roman acceptance of Isis, but the inability of the Romans to equate her with a specific goddess of their pantheon. It also shows how much Isis had pervaded the Mediterranean world, in that she was the heroine of Apuleius' work, rather than a god or goddess from Olympus. The Egyptian roots can be found in the Roman version of Isis and it is the Egyptian goddess that first captured the imagination of both the Greeks and Romans. The most significant of these roots is the very nature of Isis. This nature made her accessible and inspired loyalty in her worshippers. Her mythology portrayed her as the ideal wife and mother, and as such she was the goddess of family in Egypt and later took that role wherever her worship appeared. She possessed the *ankh*, as her father did before her, and "in the Graeco-Roman world could be regarded as herself the source of all that lived, 'Lady of the House of Life'."⁹¹ She is unique when compared to the Graeco-Roman gods in that she was known for her compassion and affection, both to her divine family and mortal man.

The closest parallel to the Isis mythology in the Olympian pantheon is that of Demeter. In the Isis/Osiris myth, Osiris was slain by his evil brother Seth; his body cut into pieces and scattered throughout Egypt. Isis traveled all over the land seeking the pieces of her husband and eventually she found all except the phallus. Using her magic, she reassembled Osiris and brought him back to an afterlife, and conceived her son Horus

⁹⁰ Apuleius: Book 11 verse 5.

⁹¹ Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Ancient World*. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1971. p. 27.

through magical means as well.⁹² Isis' search brings to mind Demeter's search for Persephone. This story illustrates another reason that Isis was so endearing to the Graeco-Roman world. She suffered and grieved for her lost husband, as Demeter did for her daughter, but the stories demonstrate the difference between a god's and a human's grief. In Demeter's story, she withheld the bounties of the earth in her despair, thus in a way punishing the human race for something that another god had done. Isis showed no such inclination; she grieved for Osiris in a very human way and searched for justice on his behalf. Her rage was directed against Seth for his crime of killing Osiris.

The Isis cult, like that of Demeter, falls into the Mystery Religion category. Mystery Religions have several characteristics. Samuel Angus states first that a mystery religion is one of symbolism, myth, allegory, and redemption. It is a religion in which membership is decided by a spiritual rebirth, rather than relying on an accident of birth.⁹³ These religions also usually feature a strong feminine figure (usually a Mother Goddess) who in some way loses a beloved person. The female then regains her beloved one after many trials. The beloved is usually restored to a form of afterlife. These religions also have a strong reliance on a personal relationship between devotee and deity. The resurrection of the beloved also gives comfort and the promise of some form of life after death for mortals.⁹⁴

Isis' appeal also lay in her uniqueness. Most of Egypt's gods had a clear parallel within the Greek and Roman pantheons. For example, Osiris was equated with Dionysus and Sarapis with Zeus or Jupiter. Horus found his equal in Apollo and Pan with Min. Isis

⁹² Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*. Chp 1, verses 14-20.

⁹³ Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery Religions*. New York: Dover Publications Incorporated, 1975

⁹⁴ Harmon, Stephen: March 18, 2013; Case, Shirley Jackson. "Christianity and the Mystery Religions". *The Biblical World*. Vol. 43, pp. 3-16 (Jan 1914) p.8

was harder to pigeon-hole, for her dominion was so multi-faceted. In an Oxyrhynchos papyrus, listing her praises, she is hailed as

[T]he first of all interpreters of the fifteen commandments, ruler of the world; (they call you) guardian and guide, lady of the mouths of seas and rivers, skilled in writing and calculation, understanding, the one who also brings back the Nile over the whole land, the beautiful animal of all the gods, the glad face in Lethe, the leader of the Muses, the many-eyed, the fair goddess on Olympus [.]

In the same praise list, Isis is said to have made the power of women equal to men. The author hails her as the greatest of deities and first of names. In this part of the papyrus Isis is equated to Io.⁹⁵ She is the lady of light and flame, mistress of all things forever. She has dominion over weather, war, and life-giving waters.⁹⁶

Note not only the mix of Egyptian and Greek names but also the many different Grecian mythological images that are used to describe Isis. Isis is a powerful figure as a Mother Goddess; many of the attributes distributed among several goddesses and demi-goddesses were within Isis's purview. Hers was the foremost mystery cult in Egypt. The air of mystery which surrounded her, her powerful role in the mythology, combined with her loving nature, made her irresistible to her converts.

The methods of cult diffusion and the nature of Isis made her cult both popular and accessible throughout the Empire. These two features also helped to spread her cult as far as Britain. Merchants, sailors, and soldiers were also continuously going in and out of Alexandria and had accepted Isis in her full capacity. These groups are primarily responsible for the diffusion of the Isis cult as they must have spoken of the goddess during their travels. The professions of the men responsible for the spread of Isis most likely explains why her cult emerged earlier in larger cities and then spread to smaller

⁹⁵ Io in Greek mythology was a lover of Zeus, turned into a cow by Hera. This is likely why Isis is at times matched to her, as Isis' sacred headdress was shaped into the horns of a cow.

⁹⁶ Unknown. *Praise list of Isis*.

town and villages, as did Christianity.⁹⁷ When Isis travelled with the soldiers of Rome, she traveled to the farthest reaches of the Empire, including as far as the Germanies. This assertion is supported by a dedication at Marienhausen by a centurion in the third legion.⁹⁸

Italian merchants brought Isis from Delos to Italy, Delos served as a link between Alexandria and Italy in the ancient world. By the first century CE the cult had advanced to a sacred, public, and officially sanctioned residence in the *campus Martius*.⁹⁹ Despite the fact that in Rome she was at first associated with the failed rebellion of Antony and Cleopatra, leading to the Alexandrian gods being forbidden in Rome by Augustus, later emperors took up the cult. For instance, Caligula erected a temple to her in 38 CE, while Commodus was initiated into the cult during his reign, and later Caracalla built a temple to her in Rome in 215 CE.¹⁰⁰ R.E. Witt claims that the elevation of the Ptolemaic kings and then later the *princeps* in Rome was “greatly assisted by the practice of the Isiac faith.”¹⁰¹ Here again, we see the most powerful deity in Egypt being embraced by the Greeks and later the Romans after they had conquered the country.

Isis appealed especially to sailors, as she was the “Lady of rivers, winds, and ocean. She is mistress of the weather and all seafaring. She can change the navigability of

⁹⁷ Wortham, Robert A. “Urban Networks, Deregulated Religious Markets, Cultural Continuity, and the Diffusion of the Isis Cult” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. Vol. 18, (2006) pp. 103-123.

⁹⁸ Moore, Clifford H. “The Distribution of Oriental Cults in the Gauls and the Germanies” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. Vol. 38, (1907) pp. 109-150 p. 127.

⁹⁹ Takács, Sarolta A. *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, 1997. p. 18

¹⁰⁰ Wortham 2006: 110.

¹⁰¹ Witt 1971: 50.

the sea as she pleases.”¹⁰² Isis also created seafaring and ruled over fresh and sea water, qualities which were sure to endear her to any sailor. One should note that aspect of Isis in comparison to the god Poseidon, whom Herodotus believed was exported from a different country. Herodotus’ assertion makes sense, as Egypt is largely a desert nation and thus had no need of an oceanic god. However, it is interesting that although she had some of the same functions, Isis is never compared to the god in Rome.

The Mother Goddess embraced all races and made no social distinctions among her worshippers; she claimed to break down national barriers. Isis was poised to become a leading religion in the Graeco-Roman world, and would have done so if Christianity had not become popular during the era. This fact is evident in the broad range of lands and peoples who accepted her faith. Her temples were found from England to Asia Minor; her creed was spoken by both emperors and peasants alike.¹⁰³ Her main rival was Christianity, against which she would later lose as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Part IV: Conclusion

Egypt may not be the oldest of the known cosmopolitan societies, but it has always held a tremendous appeal for other civilizations. Whether it was travelers, historians, philosophers, or conquerors, foreign peoples have been traveling in and out of Egypt since, and probably before, the Two Lands were united. This fascination with Egypt naturally led to the country having a significant amount of influence on other cultures. During the height of pharaonic rule, that influence could be seen in many different ways, culturally, politically, and architecturally.¹⁰⁴ As for the religious sphere,

¹⁰² Witt 1971: 101.

¹⁰³ Witt 1971: 129.

¹⁰⁴ The best example of architectural influence is the pyramid. While development of the pyramid cannot be claimed by Egypt alone (refer to the Mayan pyramids which most likely developed

Herodotus believed that the Mediterranean pantheons owed a debt to Egypt, as he claimed most of their gods came from Egypt.

Historians have largely overlooked the role that Egypt played in world affairs after Alexander conquered it. Scholarship becomes even narrower after Augustus defeated Cleopatra VII and Marc Antony. Its vital role as grain-basket has always been acknowledged, largely because Rome itself was very aware of the power Egypt still held in that respect. Volumes have been written concerning the Roman government in Egypt, but few mention that life for the average Egyptian did not change much under the Ptolemys or the Romans. Those historians that do concern themselves with Egypt beyond the government under both groups rarely touch upon the active role that Egypt played in religion and philosophy.

It is an injustice to the Egyptian civilization to not acknowledge that despite being an occupied territory it still exerted considerable influence on the surrounding world. Ptolemy Soter conquered many of the neighboring territories, acquiring Cyrenaica (in Eastern-most modern day Libya), Cyprus, Syria, and Cyrene during his reign.¹⁰⁵ Therefore Egypt exerted considerable political influence in that fashion. The entire Ptolemaic dynasty embraced Egyptian religion. While some of the reasoning for the Ptolemys embracing Egypt's pantheon was most likely political, by the second or third generation of the dynasty it is obvious that they were embracing Egypt's gods as religious icons rather than political pawns. They demonstrated this acceptance in a variety of ways. Ptolemaic rulers were shown in the pharaonic fashion in art, they adopted pharaonic titles

independent of Egyptian contact) it is almost a certainty that Egyptian architects were among the first to perfect the shape and exported the idea to surrounding territories, the kingdom of Nubia for example.

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/482132/Ptolemy-I-Soter> "Aug. 11,2013".

such as “benefactor gods”, and spent a substantial amount of money on building or rebuilding Egyptian temples.

Under Rome, Egypt was no longer a political player in the world, but it still held a place on the world stage. In fact, since the religious influence did not appear to be as dangerous to Rome as political influence, Egypt in many ways had more power in the world because Rome was not as vigilant about keeping the religious influence contained. Egypt was able to export many of its gods because of this fact. Isis was the main such export and travelled the farthest, but she was not the only Egyptian deity embraced by the Romans. Also, by embracing the various gods of Egypt, the Roman world was tacitly embracing the values of Egyptians as well because a nation’s gods will always reflect a nation’s values. Isis is the perfect example of this reflection, for there was never another goddess like Isis, one who penetrated national barriers and accepted converts from all walks of life. She was a personification of one of the most dearly held beliefs of Egypt, that of the importance of family. Neither Greece nor Rome had a goddess in their pantheon to which humans could relate on such a personal level. Isis was one who not only shared the grief of mankind because she had suffered as man had, but also offered consolation and understanding also.

Did Egypt’s religious influence end when Christianity began to take over the religious world? As will be seen, Egypt not only embraced Christianity, it contributed much to the religion. It occupied a prominent place in Scripture, was a hot seat of debate, and was the birthplace of monasticism, one of the most prolific institutions of the Christian world.

CHAPTER III

EGYPTIAN INFLUENCE ON CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

Egypt has played a pivotal role in Christianity and Judaism, both historically and in Scripture. It is mentioned in the Bible more than 550 times.¹⁰⁶ The country and its rulers represented, at different times to Christians and Jews, both a haven and threat within the Biblical context. One could say that Egypt has served as a godparent to both Christianity and Judaism as it has been interwoven with the two throughout their history.

Egypt acted as refuge several times in Judaic and Christian Scripture. Abraham fled to Egypt with his family when famine and drought hit Canaan, the chosen land.¹⁰⁷ When Herod the Great threatened the infant Jesus' life, Joseph was warned in a dream by an angel of the Lord and ordered to flee into Egypt. The family was to live there until the death of Herod, at which time it would be safe for them to return home.¹⁰⁸ In the Book of Exodus, Egypt is represented a place of hostility and bondage to the Jewish people. They are slaves, working for the glory of pharaoh. Moses, a Hebrew raised by the pharaoh's daughter, was aided by God in freeing his people and leading them out of Egypt.¹⁰⁹ However, Moses was noted for being instructed in the wisdom of the Egyptians in Acts

¹⁰⁶ Unknown.

http://archangelmichaelchurch.net/Home/Who_are_copts/Diversity%20day%20presentation.pdf. April 4, 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Genesis 12:10.

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 2:13-20.

¹⁰⁹ Exodus 2:10. 5:1-10:31.

and for being mighty in his words and deeds due to that instruction.¹¹⁰ The reference in Acts is significant, as it shows that Egypt was still considered a source of wisdom despite the Hebrew's experience of bondage and the actions of the Pharaoh.

Early legend states that Mark, the Evangelist, brought Christianity to Egypt. Mark was reported to be Paul's companion on his first mission journey. Mark was later sainted in the Coptic Church.¹¹¹ Egypt's early Christians contributed much to the various theological debates raging in the first centuries of the religion being legal. One of the more well known and fundamental institutions of Christianity, the monastery, was born in its deserts. Groups of Gnostics, a well-known Christian school of philosophy resided in Egypt. Some of them would later be condemned as heretical, but their writings were preserved, which showed the Gnostics had an entirely different perspective on Christianity. Even in modern times, papyrus finds in Egypt, such as the Nag Hammadi documents, have an influence on Christianity.

Part I: Land of Discussion, Dissent, and Discovery

Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.¹¹² This edict brought a whole new belief system into open discussion on the world stage. Before the Edict, Christians in parts of the Empire risked persecution and death to meet in house churches, cemeteries, catacombs¹¹³, or other secretive places. With one stroke of his quill, Constantine made it legal for them to openly preach/discuss their doctrine throughout the

¹¹⁰ Acts 7:22.

¹¹¹ O'Leary, De Lacy. *The Saints of Egypt*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1937

¹¹² The Edict of Milan made the practice of Christianity legal. It also gave Christians back their property *if* it had been confiscated solely because of the property holder's religion.

¹¹³ A gathering of Christians in the Roman catacombs or abandoned buildings is a perfect example. When caught, it was not unusual for Christians to be put into some sort of sporting event in the Coliseum where a variety of deaths awaited them.

Empire. It soon became apparent that there were many different interpretations of the Scripture.

Alexandria had by this time become a center of learning, thanks in large part to Ptolemaic efforts in establishing the Library and Museum. They were also active in the collection of knowledge, in order to attract scholars.¹¹⁴ It is not surprising, then, that Alexandria became a hub of Christian theological debate. The men and the materials were already there, and the Edict of Milan released a tide of discussion that flowed from Rome into Egypt and then back again.

One of the most heated debates was the nature of Jesus Christ. Arius of Alexandria argued against the divinity of Jesus. Arius contended that he was a created being. Therefore, he did not share the essence of God and was not divine. Arius' pantheon included the accepted Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but he placed Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit as inferior to God. The Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, eventually gathered nearly one hundred bishops from Egypt and Libya and excommunicated Arius. Arius fled to Palestine, where he found support with several bishops. The situation grew so heated that it threatened to split Christians into two groups.¹¹⁵

Constantine, as newly-crowned Emperor of all of the Roman Empire,¹¹⁶ found the discord between the two theologians intolerable. His hold on the crown was hard won

¹¹⁴ The efforts of the Ptolemys to gather scholars to Alexandria will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

¹¹⁵ Bauer, Susan Wise. *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusade*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd., 2010. p. 9; Grant, Robert M. "Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea" *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Jan., 1975), pp 1-12. p. 2.

¹¹⁶ The Roman Empire had been split into four different parts with two junior rulers called Caesar and two elder rulers called Augustus since the reign of Diocletian.

and precarious. He could not afford to have such a schism tear through the Empire. Settling the Arian controversy was Constantine's main motivation for ordering the Christian leaders to meet at Nicaea. Essentially, the bishops at the Council were ordered to settle their differences and spell out exactly in what the Christian doctrine consisted.¹¹⁷

From the Council of Nicaea came some of the most famous words in Christian history,

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.¹¹⁸

Those are the opening lines of the Nicene Creed, which consists of several more declarations of what orthodox¹¹⁹ Christians believe to be truth. Including, for example, affirming Mary's virginal state when she gave birth to Jesus. Note the phrasing of the lines concerning Jesus Christ, that he is begotten, not made, and of one substance with God. Every congregation that recites the Nicene Creed is reaffirming Athanasius' stance against Arius of Alexandria and his interpretation of the Trinity.

Not long after the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicaea, Egypt was the scene of another heated theological debate. In the second century, Origen of Alexandria had stirred up a minor controversy with his idea that all souls had existed before creation and would ultimately be saved. He also contradicted the idea of a God Incarnate. In the

¹¹⁷ Grant, Robert M: 5-9.

¹¹⁸ Memorization of the Nicene Creed is a requirement for confirmation for most churches. The Creed is found in most Bibles.

¹¹⁹ Orthodox in this context refers to Christians who follow the doctrines laid down at the Council of Nicaea. This definition excludes groups such as the Gnostics, which will be discussed later in this section.

fourth century, some bishops would expand on Origen's ideas and develop a theology called Anthropomorphism, which attributed the characteristics of man to God.¹²⁰

In 399 the Bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, wrote a letter to the monasteries of Egypt endorsing the theories of Origen. Origen's theories went against the very core of many Egyptian monks' beliefs, and it was fairly easy to fan smoldering ashes into flames of tempers between those in Egypt who preached Origenism and the monks that condemned it. Many of the monks¹²¹ traveled to Alexandria from the desert and mobbed the Bishop in the city. Theophilus was forced to issue another letter denouncing Origen and those who preached this theory. The monks' reaction stemmed from a basic difference in worship. Most of the desert fathers' worship consisted of quiet contemplation upon God. Their method of worship and their belief system was dependent on an incorporeal deity, which was in direct contrast to Origen. While Origen was not declared heretical in his own lifetime, by the fifth century he had been so condemned.¹²² The late condemnation of heresy most likely stems from the fact that until the Council of Nicaea, the concept of a heretical theory had not been a factor in Christian theology. It was not until orthodox Christianity was defined at the Council that the idea of heresy entered Christian vocabulary. Origen wrote before the Council of Nicaea and bishops were not quite as quick to condemn him as they had been Arius.

When the idea of heresy entered the vocabulary, not only ideas could be deemed heretical, but people as well. Some of the people that followed the Gnostic though are an

¹²⁰ Castellano, Daniel J. "Origen and Origenism"
www.arcaneknowledge.org/catholite/origen.html.

¹²¹ The birth and influence of Egyptian monasticism will be discussed in Part II

¹²² Shepherd Jr, Massey Hamilton. "The Anthropomorphic Controversy in the Time of Theophilus of Alexandria" *Church History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Sep., 1938), pp. 263-273. pp. 263-266. In the records of the Synod of Constantinople in 536, Origen is listed in a group of men who had already been named heretics.

example of such. Gnostics taught a doctrine of reincarnation as well as one that supported the dual nature of Jesus. They believed that a divine and human Christ existed united within one body for a brief time to save a materialistic world. Gnosticism was not limited to Egypt and had different interpretations. The teachings of Basilides, Valentinus, and Carpocrates flourished in Alexandria during the second century. All Gnostic teachings were supposed to be secret which likely led to misunderstandings by outsiders and to some of them being deemed a heretical in parts of the Empire.¹²³

Gnostic teaching included gospels that were not as widely known. These books included the Gospels of Thomas and Philip, The Acts of Peter and James, as well as the Gospel of Truth. The Gospel of Philip is especially intriguing because it presented a contradictory view of Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene. Philip writes, "[t]here were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene *the one who was called his companion* [.]"¹²⁴ Philip also claimed that Jesus would often kiss Mary Magdalene upon the mouth.¹²⁵

Gnostics were found all over the Roman world, and flourished both in the cities and rural areas of Egypt. However, the deserts of Egypt belonged to the orthodox Christian hermits. Since the first century, ascetics had eschewed civilization in favor of the remote reaches of the desert, sometimes in caves, others at times in crude shelters out in the elements. Devout people would often travel to visit the men; some would find the way of life very appealing and stayed, while others returned to society and told townspeople of the ascetics. In this way, the idea of a hermit life began to spread through

¹²³ Doresse, Jean. *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*. Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1986. pp. 136-137; Bauer, Susan Wise: 8.

¹²⁴ Italics are the authors.

¹²⁵ The Gospel of Philip. <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>. June 19, 2011.

cities attracting the interest of others. The act of retreating to the desert could be linked to ancient Egyptian pagan practices. It was not unusual to find a temple in the desert, remember the Temple of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis was a remote temple, one that required a journey of several days. Tombs were often built in the western desert, some of which were very elaborate and had rooms built into them for the cult that would be attached. Small monasteries and hermits' cells were often established in ancient ruins of remote temples and tombs that often had rooms built in for a cult to practice in them, e.g. the Monastery of Epiphanius used the courtyard and rooms of a tomb which belonged to an Eleventh Dynasty vizier and another small monastery was constructed in the upper terrace of Queen Hatshepsut's temple in the desert.¹²⁶

In the late third century, a man named Antony sold all of his considerable possessions, made arrangements for his dependents, and retreated to the desert in order to embrace the life of an ascetic. While his original intent was surely to live the life of a simple desert hermit, his fame would eventually spread and he became a respected member of the Christian community. He had such an impact on Christianity that he was later made a saint. Constantine himself wrote to the monk, asking for his prayers. Men flocked to his side and a community gradually sprung up in the remote reaches of the desert. Antony, then, in a very real way is the father of monastic communities. He wrote no theological treatises, but his seven letters to his disciples were translated into Coptic,

¹²⁶ Mercer, Samuel. "The Religion of Ancient Egypt". *Ancient Religions*. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950. p. 89; Unknown. "Monastery of Epiphanius, Thebes" www.metmuseum.org/met-around-the-world/?page=10154. Dec. 7, 2013.

Syriac, Georgian, Latin, Arabic, and Greek. Several of them have survived, though some are in fragments.¹²⁷

Antony (251-356) was strongly influenced by Platonic philosophy and was somewhat sympathetic to pagan thought. He continuously exhorted his disciples to know themselves and to use knowledge as a path to the divine. In his third letter he tells his followers,

A sensible man, who has prepared himself to be freed at the coming of Jesus knows himself in his spiritual essence, for he who knows himself also knows the dispensations of his Creator and what he does for his creatures. . . . But you, my beloved in the Lord, know yourselves, so that you may know this time and be prepared to offer yourselves to God as a pleasing sacrifice. Truly, my beloved, I write to you as to wise men, who are able to know themselves.¹²⁸

The command to his disciples to know themselves is found in every letter Antony wrote, and is one of the basic tenants of Greek thought. Also the idea of a platonic or brotherly love towards the other monastic members is prevalent in his letters, as he repeatedly called his disciples “beloved”.¹²⁹

Antony’s views are in direct contrast to those of Shenoute of Atripe¹³⁰ (384-466), the leader of the White Monastery in Upper Egypt. While Antony embraced Platonic philosophy and took a more lenient view towards pagan thought, Shenoute was clearly anti-pagan. His anti-pagan frame of mind was demonstrated by his many invasions of pagan homes in order to destroy pagan icons. In Shenoute’s early canons, he proposed that the communal life of an ascetic –male or female- was interdependent. That is, he believed that the spiritual status of all the members of the community was affected by the

¹²⁷ Peacock, David: 431; Rubenson, Samuel. *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*. Minneapolis: Trinity Press International, 1998. pp. 10-11.

¹²⁸ Antony. *Third Letter*.

¹²⁹ Antony. *Letters One – Seven*.

¹³⁰ Shenoute is considered a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church, but not so in the Roman Catholic Church.

actions, most especially the sins, of the other monks. He repeatedly refers to the monastery as a singular feminine entity that was extremely susceptible to the sins of desire, sexual temptation, and pollution. He viewed it as one that was prone to disobedience and in need of strong masculine discipline, which Shenoute felt he could best provide.¹³¹ This strict outlook on an ascetic's life and responsibilities left little room for human error. Shenoute often demanded harsh penalties for any infraction, sometimes even insisting on the exile of one who had broken his rules.

Both Antony and Shenoute's monastic lifestyle would greatly influence Christianity. Monastic sects, both male and female, appear throughout Christian history, most famously in Europe. The Benedictine monks were certainly influenced by both Antony and Shenoute, especially by the strict monastic rules that dominated Shenoute's community, and the idea of isolation to avoid sin is pervasive in most European monastic thought. European monasteries and nuns also embraced the idea of separate communities for males and females. It is a rare monastery that allows the two sexes to live together or even socialize.

Egypt played a part in the development of Christianity far beyond what can be found in Scripture. Egypt's theological debates often spilled over its borders. In the case of Arius and his beliefs, debate led to an overhaul of the Christian faith. The Council of Nicaea probably would not have been held had it not been for the intense debate that sprung up around Arius and his followers.¹³² That single moment can be linked to any persecution of Christian heretics in the years to follow, as it was here that orthodox

¹³¹ Schroeder, Caroline. *Monastic Bodies: Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. pp. 133, 158

¹³² There were other ecumenical councils held to debate Christian doctrine, but the Council of Nicaea was held because of the Arius' beliefs.

Christian belief (and therefore what was considered unorthodox or heretical) was solidified.

There is some evidence that the European tradition of monasticism had roots in the pagan desert temples and tombs that had cults attached to them. Monasticism influenced Christian habit and practice in the Mediterranean world and eventually Europe. The Benedictine monks almost certainly modeled their strict ascetic lifestyle after the White Monastery of Shenoute. The writings of Egypt's most famous heretical group, the Gnostics, still spark debate today. Their impact on Christian history cannot be denied, for the ideas found in Gnostic documents go against the very fabric of Christianity's accepted doctrine and are the source of much debate. Egyptians also imported indigenous religious practices and even magic into their practice of Christianity. Papyri documents reveal that people still went to magicians to cast spells and provide Christian amulets modeled after ancient, pagan charms.¹³³

Part II: Christianity's battle with Isis and Sarapis/Osiris

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Isis was a persistent, powerful, and far reaching goddess. Given the expansive and inclusive nature of the Isis cult, it could have assumed the role that Christianity eventually played in the world. Isis was popular wherever she traveled and gathered converts to her worship with ease. Wherever Rome marched, Isis followed. Temples to the goddess were found throughout the Roman Empire, even in remote Britain. Her followers ranged from emperors to sailors, for she appealed to so

¹³³ Palladius. *Lausiaca History*. Saint Makarios is asked to release a woman of free birth from a spell, cast by an unwanted lover, which made everyone perceive her as a brood mare. Unknown. *Oxyrhynchos Papyrus: Christian Amulet*. The amulet consisted of a papyrus, with a mixture of biblical and liturgical passages. It was tightly folded and worn around the neck with a string, sometimes inside a small container, at others just the papyrus. Such amulets are also found in the practices of West African Muslims, who write verses of the Qur'an on a piece of paper folded tightly and worn about the neck.

many different aspects of humanity. She was especially loved by women, because women could relate to Isis in a way that they could not with their Graeco-Roman goddesses. Isis was also a powerful example of a woman who claimed equality, if not superiority, to the gods in the Egyptian pantheon. The methods of cult diffusion and the nature of Isis made her both popular and accessible throughout the Empire, while there are parallels with Christianity which would have made the appeal of both religions relatively equal. So, the Isiac religion, the foremost Mystery Religion of Egypt, would be Christianity's biggest competition for converts and could have been one of the three largest religions in the modern world in its place.

The parallels between the Isiac religion and Christianity begin with her family. The trinity of Osiris, the Father, Isis, the Mother, and Horus, the Son was cemented under the Ptolemaic rulers. It provides historians with the first example of similar ideas in both religions. Their mythology was one of resurrection, eternal life, and judgment of life after death. Judgment after death naturally leads one to worry about how one lives his/her life; ergo an ethical element was added to the religious one. In this scenario, Horus interceded on behalf of humanity with his father. Isis also offered humanity something that no other deity had before: she not only cared about what happened to humans, she also had the capacity and desire to console mortals. Apuleius chose her as his heroine in *The Golden Ass* for just that reason.¹³⁴

Here, then, are the commonalities between the main figures and ideology of the two religions that challenged each other. The above paragraph could have been written about the Christian Holy Family and its' message. The only difference between the two

¹³⁴ Gabriel, Richard A. *Gods of Our Fathers: The Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity*. London: Greenwood Press, 2002. pp. 135-138; Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*.

families is one of the members of the trinity. In Christianity, Isis is replaced with the Holy Spirit. Other than that, they both offer resurrection, consolation, eternal life, judgment in the afterlife, and the need to live an ethical life in anticipation of that judgment. Even Horus acting as intermediary between mortals and Osiris is powerfully echoed in Jesus' intercession to the Christian God on behalf of Mankind.

However, there are aspects of Christianity that are specifically analogous to Isis. It is likely that it was these common points that aided Isis in her prolonged fight to retain her position as Mother Goddess in the ancient world. Both religions coexisted up to the moment of active Christian intervention, when they gained political power, namely via edicts in Alexandria and the destruction of the Serapeum/Museum, which was the center of the Isis/Sarapis cult.

The icons and images associated with Isis represent the most powerful individual parallel to Christianity. Many of Isis' statues show her seated suckling the babe Horus at her breast. This image is almost exactly duplicated in later images of the most powerful female in Christian mythology. One need only look to the many early statues of the Virgin Mary suckling the baby Jesus to see the Egyptian inspiration. The second similarity in the icons of Isis and Christianity is that of the *ankh*, which as stated earlier was associated with Isis as she was known as the Lady of the House of Life in the Graeco-Roman world. When the followers of the Archbishop Theophilus destroyed the Sarapeum at Alexandria, they eagerly interpreted the *ankh* to be an "unconscious anticipation of the crucifix and of their own doctrine of a future life."¹³⁵ The gargoyles that grace many gothic churches are a descendant of the animal-shaped water spouts that were worked into many of Isis' temples, as seen in her temples in Pompeii.

¹³⁵ Witt: 32

In the XVIII Dynasty, Isis was represented as kneeling at the foot of a sarcophagus or coffin with outstretched arms or wings in order to protect the dead from harm. This image is echoed in the representations of the Guardian Angel of Christianity, as well the description given for the Ark of the Covenant; which had two angels with outstretched wings guarding the relic.¹³⁶

Some of the prayers, stories, and titles associated with Isis could be viewed as comparable to those associated with Christianity. In an inscription from Asia Minor, second century CE, Isis was addressed as “lord” as well as “savior”. While these addresses are associated with the Emperor Cult of Rome, they are also later associated with Jesus.¹³⁷ Certain words of the Old Testament attributed to Moses, such as “The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms”, are strikingly similar to the Egyptian portrayal of Isis.¹³⁸ In the same praise list cited in Chapter Two, Isis is described as follows.

[Y]ou established your son Horus Apollo everywhere as the youthful lord of the whole world. And in the sanctuary you. . . lady [you protect] every country with your wings. [Y]ou are also the mistress of all things forever[.]¹³⁹

Plutarch also wrote of an inscription on a temple in Sais, where Isis claimed, “I am whatever was, or is, or will be; and my veil no mortal ever took up.”¹⁴⁰ The description of Isis establishing her son as the lord of the entire world has parallels in the story of the Virgin Mary nursing her son Jesus through his trials in order to become the Lord of the world. The lines concerning her protecting her country with her wings and being eternal is akin to the quotes from Moses mentioned above.

¹³⁶ Witt 1971: 32-3.

¹³⁷ Wortham 2006: 104.

¹³⁸ Witt 1971: 33.

¹³⁹ Unknown. *Praises of Isis*.

¹⁴⁰ Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*. Chp 1, verse 9.

In literary works, Isis is represented as a sympathetic goddess, one who heals the sick and casts evil spells from humans. Apuleius' story is one such example. His protagonist Lucius is transformed by magical means into a donkey. After going through numerous trials and tribulations, he escaped his keepers and found himself on a beach where he fell asleep and woke to the sight of the goddess. Isis tells Lucius that she will restore him to human form but for the rest of his days he would be her priest. She demanded both absolute faith and unwavering, even blind, obedience in her service, but therein eternal salvation was to be found. The command of unwavering obedience is echoed in several stories of the Bible including the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Job, and Jesus. Abraham was commanded to offer his only son as sacrifice, he initially argued with God. However, he eventually conceded and prepared to sacrifice his son. At the last moment, the Lord stilled his hand and rewarded him for his obedience. Jesus followed all his Father's commands, again with some trepidation, even when those commands led to a brutal death. He was rewarded with an honored place in the afterlife when he accepted his Father's plan for him. Much as Isis pledged to Lucius that he would grow in fame during his lifetime and would spend his afterlife blessed in the Elysian Fields.¹⁴¹

Perhaps the strongest commonality Christianity has with the Isiac religion is that it has some of the characteristics of a Mystery Religion as defined by Angus.¹⁴²

Christianity drew from several different religions throughout the world. Mystery Religions had gained popularity in the ancient world,¹⁴³ so that is the context in which

¹⁴¹ Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*; *Book of Genesis 22:1-18*; *Book of Job*; *Gospel of Matthew*. The Elysian Fields in this case is another mixing of the two religions. In Egyptian myth, the afterlife was spent in the Field of Reeds. It is a similar vein to the Elysian Fields, but that name is from Graeco-Roman mythology.

¹⁴² For Angus' definition of a Mystery Religion, refer to the Isis section of Chapter Two.

¹⁴³ Demeter, Mithras, and Cybele are some examples of other Mystery Religions.

Christianity emerged. In the Isis cult, Isis the Mother Goddess lost her brother-husband Osiris through the trickery of their brother Seth.¹⁴⁴ She travelled throughout Egypt and restored Osiris with her magic. She also conceived her son Horus through magical means. Osiris is restored to an afterlife and became the God of the Dead – and sits in eternal judgment upon the dead. Hers was a message of redemption after life. The relationship between Isis and her devotees was personal. As seen in Chapter Two, those devotees came from all walks of life, the circumstances of birth were not a factor in becoming a member of her faith.

Christianity also promised redemption and a personal relationship with God. Its' lessons were taught using symbolism and allegory. Christianity has somewhat downplayed the role of the female and yet, there is the Virgin Mary. Though she is not considered divine, Mary still plays a big part in early Christianity and modern day Catholicism. Her story reflects the different influences on Christianity, but the idea of losing the beloved one, and the said person being restored to an afterlife is present. These religions also promise a form of life after death for one who leads a moral life. The two differ slightly on the ideas of resurrection. Christianity promised resurrection of the body to life for those who led a good life, and resurrection for condemnation for those who led an immoral one. In the Egyptian religion, the mummy was essential for the soul to survive and be resurrected in the afterlife. It was the *soul*, not the body, that was resurrected, but it was necessary for the body of the deceased to be well preserved.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*; Case, Shirley Jackson: 3-16.

¹⁴⁵ John 5: 25-29; Unknown. "Egyptian Mummification."

<http://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/explorations/online/mummification/Pages/rituals1.html>. Dec. 7, 2013

Isis set out with her family across the Roman world with the message of salvation and acceptance. Christianity, once it was legalized, also spread throughout the Empire. Both Isis and Christianity gained their initial foreign converts from the lower social classes before gaining converts from the upper classes. Isis' followers were initially merchants, sailors, and soldiers. It is likely that it was soldiers who spread the word of Isis to Britain. Garrisons were posted throughout the country during the Roman period, especially along Hadrian's Wall. Remember that Hadrian championed the Isiac faith; therefore it is not unlikely that several of the soldiers in his army at least knew of Isis.¹⁴⁶

The parallels between the two religions are part of the reason both gained popularity and attracted converts from all classes. Both offered salvation without regard to nationality or creed, which made them equally appealing to the people of the Graeco-Roman world. What factors motivated the world to embrace Christianity instead of the Isiac faith? Robert Wortham claims that the main reason was the exclusivity of Christianity. He maintains that when an exclusive group challenges a non-exclusive group, the exclusive one will eventually win.¹⁴⁷

However, the reason could be even simpler than what Wortham suggests. It could lie with the Roman persecutions of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Where the worshippers of Isis were generally left alone, many Christians died for their faith, often in public executions. These persecutions put Christianity in the public eye. They also must have made people wonder what was so compelling about this new doctrine that people were willing to die in a generally gruesome fashion rather than renounce the faith. Such examples of devotion might have induced many people to convert to Christianity. Had it

¹⁴⁶ Gabriel, Richard A: 138-139.

¹⁴⁷ Wortham 2006: 121.

not been for the inclusive nature of Isis as well as Christian persecutions, the goddess Isis, and her converts, might have taken a place among the major religions of the world instead of the followers of Jesus. The Judaic population of Alexandria might have been an influence towards Christianity as well. The Jewish religion was well known to the Egyptians and was similar enough to Christianity that the transition from pagan to Christian might have been easier.

Part III: Judaism in Egypt

Papyri documentation places Israelite settlers in Egypt from at least the fifth century BCE. It is not unusual to find a Jewish presence throughout the known ancient world, as they had been scattered from their homeland for hundreds of years. They settled in Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and thus played a part in the history of all three societies.

Hebrew settlers had staffed garrisons on the borders under the Egyptian pharaohs; they remained under the Persians, and through to Roman occupation. The garrison town of Syene stood at the southernmost frontier of Egypt. It probably was not heavily fortified during times of peace, and under the Romans it is unlikely there were more than 1500 people living in the town.¹⁴⁸ The island of Elephantine, known locally as Yeb, also housed a Jewish staffed garrison, but there are special circumstances associated with it. That is, the settlers at Yeb were allowed to build a Jewish temple alongside the temple of Khum, the ram-headed god of the nome around Elephantine. This garrison was already established by the time Cambyses II, of Persia, conquered Egypt in 525 BCE. Documentation shows that they were allowed to worship according to their own rituals and to observe their holidays.

¹⁴⁸ Karelíng, Emil. *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri: New Documents of the Fifth Century from the Jewish Colony of Elephantine*. Oxford: University Press, 1953. pp. 23-24

While the Jewish people seemed to have lived harmoniously with the local Egyptians for many years, at some point there was tension, as excavations of the temple show signs of destruction. However, much like the pogroms of Alexandria, which will be discussed later, the destruction cannot be viewed as targeting Judaism in the context of a religion or culture. There are two possible reasons for the destruction. The first is that the priests of Khum were offended by the Jewish priests' animal sacrifices, some held sacred by Khum, most notably rams. The second, and more likely reason, is that the priests allowed themselves to become extremely angry about the animal sacrifices, as partial destruction of the Jewish temple served their purposes for expanding their own temple. Permission was quickly granted to rebuild the Jewish temple, on the condition that only sacrifices of incense and grain were to be made in place of animal sacrifices.¹⁴⁹ The thing to note here is that the destruction was not racially or culturally motivated. Egypt continued to be a haven and/or place of gainful employment for most Jewish persons. Jews were also allowed to have a monastery of their own on Lake Mareotis, near Alexandria. The group was known as the Therapeutics, and consisted of both men (*Therapeutae*) and women (*Therapeutrides*). The Therapeutics abbey was different from most monasteries as the group welcomed acolytes of both sexes, though they lived in separate quarters most of the time. In almost all other ways, the group was like any other monastery to be found in the desert. They abstained from meat and wine, and usually cut off all familial ties.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Rosenberg, Stephen G. "The Jewish Temple at Elephantine" *Near Eastern Archaeology*. Vol. 67, 4-13 (2004). pp. 4-13. pp. 4-8

¹⁵⁰ Kraemer, Ross S. "Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt: Philo Judaeus on the Therapeutrides" *Signs*. Vol. 14, 342-370 (1989) pp. 342-370. pp. 343-346.

Other Jewish settlers arrived with Alexander, and more immigrated under the Ptolemys. While the majority of papyri documentation focuses on Jewish soldiers in Egypt, Jews held several different positions in Egyptian society. As iron works had been practiced in Judea since Biblical times, when the early Ptolemy pharaohs introduced iron to Egypt they encouraged Jewish laborers, who were familiar with the metal, to settle in Egypt .

The largest urban Jewish community in Egypt lived in Alexandria and had a distinct set of privileges, though they were not considered full citizens except when they had been granted the status by the Emperor in Rome. Still, Alexandria was the most powerful Jewish settlement in the Greek-speaking world. They were allowed to have synagogues, some of which were granted the right to give asylum, which granted them the same status to pagan temples. Jews were also allowed to sacrifice *for* the Ptolemaic and Roman rulers instead of *to* them as all other people did. Their synagogues had dedications to the ruler, but were ultimately dedicated to the “Most High God.” Jews could be found in all kinds of occupations and walks of life. They served in the army under the Ptolemys, and were shop owners, farmers, merchants, artisans, and traders. Alexandrian graveyards contain stones with Jewish names, some with the old Aramaic language, others inscribed in Greek.

Why then was there a pogrom of Jews in 38 CE? The blame most likely lay with the native Egyptian populace, though again not for the reasons one would normally think. Native Egyptians enjoyed no special privileges under the Roman Emperors and it is most likely the violence that erupted against the Jews was a reaction against the privileges

enjoyed by the Jews but denied to Egyptians. Egyptians were therefore left with only one course, to stir the Greek populace against the Jews.¹⁵¹

The pogrom of 38 CE led to two different embassies, Greek and Jewish, travelling from Egypt to Rome to petition the Emperors Gaius Caesar and Claudius. Both embassies tried to convince the Roman Emperor to make a decision regarding the riots that was favorable to the represented community. The Greeks could have expected a favorable ruling from Gaius Caesar for at least two reasons. First, several of Caesar's advisors were Alexandrian Greeks and he had a great love of the city. Secondly, the city had supported his great grandfather Marc Antony and Gaius Caesar remembered and respected that loyalty. However, before Gaius Caesar could issue a ruling, he was assassinated. His successor, Claudius, should have been just as disposed to the Greeks, as he was also Marc Antony's grandson, but it did not work out in either group's favor. He issued a neutral ruling and instructed both embassies to return to Egypt.

The two embassies and Claudius' unsatisfactory ruling prompted a body of work called the *Acta Alexandrinorum*. The writings concerned the embassies, their arguments before the Emperor and the ruling he issued. They can be compared to other *Acta* from Greece and most likely do not represent a unique body of work. They do, however, give modern readers an idea of the atmosphere in Alexandria at the time.¹⁵² The existence of the *Acta* from Alexandria illustrates the cultural exchange that still existed between Rome, Greece, and Egypt. They also show the relations between the Greeks, Jews, and

¹⁵¹ Gruen, Erich S. *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. pp. 68-71, 82-87; Pearson, Birger A. "Christians and Jews in First-Century Alexandria" *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1/3, Christians among Jews and Gentiles: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday (Jan. - Jul., 1986), pp. 206-216. p. 207

¹⁵² Harker, Andrew. *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt: The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum*. Cambridge: University Press, 2008. pp. 9-11

Egyptians of Alexandria, and why the Emperor felt it necessary to keep such a close eye on the city.

It is clear from documentary evidence that Jews lived relatively happy lives in Egypt. Jewish settlers had made Egypt their home for hundreds of years and in general enjoyed certain privileges, even if they were not considered strictly equal due to their lack of Alexandrian and Roman citizenship. Citizenship was only granted rarely and usually by special Imperial dispensation. One could not be a Roman citizen without first becoming an Alexandrian citizen and that was equally as difficult.

Still, the Jewish quarter of Egypt would play its part. They acted as soldiers and their skilled laborers were sought by the early Greek pharaohs. However, they remained an alien population, one that was never quite accepted by the Greeks or the Egyptians. It made the settlers a somewhat easy target for persecution, and the tensions that began to rise in Alexandria would include that population and would eventually explode into bouts of violence as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Part IV: Conclusion

It is evident that Egypt, whose gods and goddesses were worshipped throughout the Roman Empire, did not lose any religious influence when Christianity came into power. The country adapted to the new religion and actually had considerable influence upon Christianity from its beginnings. The numerous references in the Bible and its dual role as haven and threat demonstrate Egypt's ability to sway religious followers. After Christianity moved into the mainstream, Egypt's theologians and ascetics continued to shape Christian doctrine and practice, the clearest example being the monastic movement. The idea of a secluded group of religious people living together is not

exclusive to Egyptian Christianity in this time period,¹⁵³ but it is clear that Saint Antony and Shenoute, of the White Monastery, had a significant effect on early European monastic life. Shenoute especially influenced the later Benedictines, one of the largest and most powerful monastic orders in Europe during the Middle Ages.

Parallels with Egypt's most prolific cult, that of Isis, can be found in Christianity, as the two existed side-by-side for a brief time. Isis, with her consort and son, provided an alternative, as well as the main competition, to Christianity in the early centuries of the Common Era. Despite the fact that the Isiac religion would eventually be eclipsed by the followers of Christ, many of the symbols and iconography from her faith had parallels with Christianity. One of the most well-known figures of Christian symbology, the seated Virgin Mary suckling Baby Jesus, also could have been influenced by early depictions of Isis with Horus at her breast.

The notion of personal sin could have come from the Egyptian ideal of *maat* as well. *Maat* is the ancient Egyptian concept of truth, balance, morality, and justice; its counterpart was chaos. *Maat*, then, was the responsibility of every person. Sin becomes a personal thing, for which one is held personally accountable at the time of death. The concept was personified in the goddess of the same name, who is sometimes represented as having wings attached to both arms, and a feather (one of her main symbols) always on her headpiece. When the dead arrived in the Hall of Judgment, he/she had to endure a trial called the weighing of the heart. *Maat* was responsible for the ceremony. The heart was placed on a scale and had to balance a feather which the goddess placed on the other side. If the two did not balance, the person's soul was devoured by a great beast, and would have no afterlife. This punishment was an Egyptian's concept of hell, to cease to

¹⁵³ Almost every religion, from China to North American inhabitants, had monastic communities.

exist, in both body and soul. The whole idea of a hall of judgment is echoed in Christian mythology as well.¹⁵⁴

While the influence held by the Hebrew population of Egypt is more circumspect, it is still present. Far from being a downtrodden ethnicity in a foreign land, the Jewish population in Alexandria played a major part in the tumultuous period following the legalization of Christianity. In the battles that erupted during the first centuries of the Common Era, Jews were both victims, antagonists, battling with Christians, pagans, and philosophers. Alexandria would become a battlefield as these different groups fought to find and secure their place in a new religious world.

¹⁵⁴ Gabriel, Richard: 12

CHAPTER IV

CENTER OF THOUGHT

When Alexander the Great founded Alexandria, he intended for it to become one of the greatest cities in the world. It became a trade center, busy seaport, capitol of Egypt, and a seat of scholarship and philosophy. One of Ptolemy I Soter's goals after he ascended the throne of Egypt was to lure philosophers to the new capitol, which he succeeded in doing to a large degree. Athens might have been at the top of the philosophical world, but Alexandria was close behind. As discussed in Chapter Two, Ptolemy I spent the early years of his reign working to legitimize his position on the Egyptian throne. Two fronts had to be addressed in order to secure both his position and that of his dynasty. Ptolemy secured his position by wholly embracing the Hellenistic principle.¹⁵⁵ He was crowned as an Egyptian pharaoh, and embraced all the rituals associated with the role, thus satisfying the Egyptian world. In order to satisfy the Greek world he set about making Alexandria a haven of Greek culture and thought. The most overt symbols of his desire to legitimize his position were the famous Museum and Library.

It is likely that the conception and construction of both the Library and Museum took place under both Ptolemy I and his son Ptolemy II. This idea is supported by the fact

¹⁵⁵ The term Hellenistic here refers to the dissipation of Greek culture (as filtered through Macedonia) throughout a country's indigenous culture.

that both buildings were connected to each other and within the Palace complex. Since both buildings were incorporated into the original palace design, it is almost certain that Ptolemy had the concept in mind from the time he took the throne. Both the Library and the Museum were academic institutions, though the Museum had a religious element in that it was centered on a shrine to the Greek Muses.¹⁵⁶ The scholars associated with the Museum lived at the complex, studied both literature and science, and acted as teachers to younger pupils as well.¹⁵⁷

The Museum was modeled on the schools of Plato and Aristotle at Athens, then the world's leading center of research and instruction. Scholars from all over the Greek world travelled to study at the Museum. Famous personages such as Eratosthenes of Cyrene, Herophilus of Chalcedon, Zenodotus of Ephesus, Aristarchus of Samothrace, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Callimachus of Cyrene flocked to the Museum. One of the most well-known Neo-Platonist philosophers, Hypatia, also resided in Alexandria during the fifth century CE. They came in order to study a variety of topics including science, medicine, literary scholarship,¹⁵⁸ and creative writing.¹⁵⁹

Ptolemy's Library was the second part of his Greek legitimization campaign. While State libraries were not uncommon by Ptolemy's time,¹⁶⁰ the one at Alexandria was a wonder in its own era. Ptolemy seems to have been determined to make his Library the best in the world, having gone to extraordinary lengths to gather scrolls for the

¹⁵⁶ This is how it derived its name, the Museum.

¹⁵⁷ Erksine, Andrew. "Culture and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Museum and Library of Alexandria." *Greece and Rome*. Vol. 42, pp. 38-48. pp. 38-39

¹⁵⁸ Note that most of the literary scholarship that came from the Museum was commentaries on classical works, but some original styles of poetry were also introduced.

¹⁵⁹ Lloyd, Alan B: 400-401

¹⁶⁰ The idea of the state library most likely came from Assyria and Babylon and was fully embraced by the Greek world after the time of Alexander the Great. Tarn and Griffith. *Hellenistic Civilization*. p 269

institution. Agents of Ptolemy observed the traditional methods of gathering by buying up books in the markets of Athens and Rhodes; Demetrius of Phalerum travelled all over the Greek world searching for texts.¹⁶¹ However the Pharaoh authorized further measures than routine buying trips. Galen writes that when ships docked at Alexandria's port, all books onboard were seized and taken to the Library. There, scribes copied the texts at which point the *copies* of the books were returned to the owners on the ships. These books were marked "from the ships." The methods used by Ptolemy must have been successful, if not entirely ethical; at one point, ancient sources report that the Library contained approximately 700,000 scrolls.¹⁶²

Ptolemy even used the organization of the Library to strengthen his ties to Alexander the Great, by modeling it after the personal library of Aristotle, tutor of Alexander. The Librarians who oversaw the Library also acted as tutor to the Pharaoh's children and were thus appointed by the Pharaoh himself. The Library and the Museum served to strengthen Ptolemy's ties to Alexander which in turn legitimized his position on the Egyptian throne.

The Greek pharaohs had created the quintessential Hellenistic city. Alexandria displayed their Greek roots, but also embraced the Egyptian culture in which they resided. The early, strong Ptolemaic kings continued the academic tradition created by their founder, and scholars of all disciplines flocked to Alexandria drawn by the promise of freedom of thought and the vast collection of knowledge found at the Library. A golden era of scholarship ensued, as numerous published works poured out of both institutions. Generations of scholars travelled to Alexandria to live and study at the

¹⁶¹ Lloyd, Alan B: 400

¹⁶² Erksine, Andrew: 39; Gabriel, Richard A: 131; www.iep.utm.edu/neoplato. September 6, 2013.

Museum. Most of these people would spend their time at the institution quietly, while others created works that would forever imprint them on history.

Part I: The Scholars and Works of the Museum and Library

Scholars from across the Hellenistic world travelled to study at Alexandria. They lived at the Museum under the patronage of the Pharaoh, and were given free rein to think and write upon what they would. The men who worked there created a diverse institution dedicated to academic pursuits. Egypt was a unique breeding ground for these pursuits. It had long been held as a land of knowledge, touted by Herodotus as a land of many wonders. He also stated that the Egyptians were the first to discover the solar year and to divide that year into twelve parts. Solon of Athens borrowed the Egyptian law of appearing before the governor of an area to account for how his living was made.¹⁶³ Discoveries that would change how humans viewed themselves and the world around them emerged from the hallowed halls, encouraged by a lack of constraint coupled with no fear of reproach. Works that affected everything from the inner functions of the human body to poetry were introduced to the world. Some of the most famous philosophers, mathematicians, poets, theologians, and physicians made Alexandria their home.

One of the most influential published works to come out of the Museum was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It was the first Librarian, Demetrius, who suggested to Ptolemy I that a Greek copy of the Jewish Bible would only enrich his developing Library. Legend says Demetrius went to Jerusalem and requested that the High Priest, Eleazar, send men to Alexandria to copy the translation. Eleazar sent seventy-two men who holed up in the Museum to work. Seventy-two days later, each

¹⁶³ Herodotus: Book 2, Verses 4, 35, 177

man had produced a copy of the Bible, each one, according to legend, identical to the other. This translation of the Hebrew Bible was the first one in the Graeco-Roman world. It would be reproduced hundreds of times and would become the basis for most other translations.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps the most famous resident scholars were those who worked in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, and geography. Alexandria was home to the most influential mathematician of the era, Euclid, whose work during the reign of Ptolemy I would make it *the* city in which to study mathematics. Little is known about the man himself, but his study of geometry was unprecedented. It is likely that he worked closely with Egyptian priests in his study of mathematics. It was the priests' duty to re-establish boundary markers that were washed away by the Nile flooding each year and the calculations required a good grasp of mathematics.¹⁶⁵ His work on the subject, *Elements of Geometry*, still provides the basis for study of the subject today. Claudius Ptolemy lived in approximately the second century and agreed with his colleagues that the Earth was a sphere. He also stated that the Earth stood still in the sky and the sun, moon, and other planets revolved around it. Despite the fact he was not the first to put forth this theory, it became known as the *Ptolemaic Theory* until it was disproved by Copernicus. A round Earth was also the basis of Ptolemy's other great achievement, the *Geographia*, in which he embraced the mathematical concept of *projection* – that is taking the round Earth and laying it out flat on paper using *latitude* and *longitude*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Metzger, Bruce M. *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

¹⁶⁵ Harmon: March 18, 2013

¹⁶⁶ Betten, Frank S. "The Knowledge of the Sphericity of the Earth during the Middle Ages". *The Catholic Historical Review*. Vol. 9, No. 1 (Apr. 1923) pp. 74-90. pp. 74-75. Boyd, Andrew. "Ptolemy's *Geographia*". <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2594.htm>. Dec. 5, 2013.

Ptolemy was not the only man who spent his days measuring and defining his planet. Eratosthenes got his start in Athens, but made his greatest discoveries in Egypt. He had been invited by Ptolemy III to tutor his son. Eratosthenes' calculated the length of the 36th parallel. It was also in Egypt that he first developed the idea for measuring a spherical Earth. He used a stick, a well, and a pacer to estimate its circumference. Eratosthenes' contemporary, Archimedes, would also have a profound effect on engineering. While there is little evidence he lived in Egypt, his invention the "Archimedean screw" can still be seen in the delta today and is a useful example of the exchange of ideas between Egypt and Greece. The "Archimedean screw" is used to aid in irrigation; it is made up of a spiral inside a pipe. The bottom of the pipe is placed in an irrigation ditch dug by a field; the top of it protrudes over the field.

Alexandria also had a strong tradition of anatomy and physiology due in part to the Egyptians' knowledge of the human body attained through the mummification rituals practiced for centuries. Since there was a strong taboo against disturbing a corpse in any fashion in the Graeco-Roman world, there was little chance for such an area of study to develop in the Mediterranean. Herophilus of Chalcedon and Erasistratus of Ceos made groundbreaking discoveries about the human body. Herophilus mapped the arteries, established that it was blood (and not air) that runs through the veins, and linked the functions of the body. His discoveries predated William Harvey's "discovery" of blood circulation by centuries. Together Herophilus and Erasistratus would establish that disease and sickness were due to natural causes, not spells or the judgment of a god.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Pollard, Justin and Howard Reid. *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: Birthplace of the Modern Mind*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. pp. 64-123.

Many schools of philosophy flourished at Alexandria, but the main group were Neo-Platonists. Neo-Platonism is a modern construction, given to the different interpretations of Plato's teachings by his successors. Those teachings were so diverse that almost any new interpretation of them after his death could be defined as Neo-Platonic. His descendents arrived at vastly different conclusions based on his teachings, starting immediately after his death, even at the Academy in Athens, the school he founded. Given this wide definition, there is no proper "founder" of the Neo-Platonic school. A more narrow definition is the synthesis of ideas rooted in Platonism into a larger system. With this definition¹⁶⁸ in mind, the third century CE philosopher Plotinus is generally considered the founder of Neo-Platonism. His interpretation of Platonic philosophy would also be merged with Christian and Gnostic ideas, even though in his essay, *Against the Gnostics*, Plotinus denounced the Gnostic sect. However, both support the idea of a central divine being, the notion of some event which caused chaos and imperfection in the universe, and employs the same steps for ascent to the divine being.¹⁶⁹

Egypt's influence in this context is a little more abstract than seen in previous chapters. It has more to do with the environment of free thinking encouraged by the Ptolemaic pharaohs, rather than any direct philosophical influence.¹⁷⁰ The ideas born in Egypt came about because they were *allowed* to be born. It is true that some of these ideas, e.g those of Euclid or Aristarchus, might have developed even if the men had not been in Egypt. However, the discoveries of Herophilus of Chalcedon and Erasistratus of Ceos are certainly linked to the fact they were studying in Egypt. The strong taboo

¹⁶⁸ From this point forward, the author uses this definition for Neo-Platonism.

¹⁶⁹ Neoplatonism. www.iep.utm.edu/neoplato. Sept 6, 2013; Katz, Joseph. "Plotinus and the Gnostics". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr., 1954). pp. 289-298. pp. 289-298.

¹⁷⁰ The exception is Hermetism. This will be examined in the last section.

against tampering with corpses in the Graeco-Roman area would have prevented the necessary observations to make such discoveries.

Neo-Platonism found a strong foothold in Alexandria and flourished until the destruction of the Museum. Many of the last philosophers to go through the doors embraced the new interpretations of Plato's works, while developing their own. It was a high period of Hellenistic thinking, one where few topics were disallowed on the basis of politics or belief and peoples from all disciplines studied and mingled in peace. The world around the city was changing however, and soon the very environment of diverse thinking and teachings would eventually tear the city apart.

Part II: Clash of ideas, violent outcomes

Ptolemy I had set out with his Museum and Library to create a haven of Hellenistic thought. Under his strong leadership (and slightly unscrupulous acquisition of classical works), a plethora of knowledge was gathered in one place. Such an institution was bound to attract scholars from all walks of life to join an already diverse population. This mix of Christians, pagan¹⁷¹ philosophers, and the Hebrew scholars of the Judaic quarter would create a city that was not only a center for thought but one that was rife with the potential to erupt into conflict. While there were flare-ups of discourse throughout the whole of the Ptolemaic era, city-wide violence erupted in the late fourth and fifth centuries CE which led to the destruction of the Museum, and the downfall of Alexandria as a center of learning.

The tension in Alexandria reflected the political and religious tension found throughout the Roman Empire. As Emperors changed so did the political climate. After

¹⁷¹ Pagan is actually a pejorative term, but the author has elected to use it anyway to distinguish them from the Christians of the city.

Christianity was made the state religion of the Empire, the religious affiliation (as well as tolerance of different belief systems) changed with the Emperor. This pattern is found throughout history; however, add tempers and a dense, diverse population and it became dangerous. As seen in the previous chapters, there were several different belief systems present in Alexandria including Jews, pagans, and Christians¹⁷² all of whom lived and worked closely in the city in a very tumultuous time for the Roman Empire. There were several small skirmishes between the groups throughout the Roman era. However, three episodes in the 300 and 400s CE were more than minor flare ups and arguments. They had a significant impact on the future of the city.

Throughout the early years of the fourth century, the patriarchate of Alexandria had been a hotly sought after and contested position. The Arians and Nicenes both used it as a weapon against the other group. One bishop, Athanasius, had been exiled and recalled several times, depending on whether the current Emperor's sympathies were Arian or Nicene, but he does not seem to have deliberately angered either side. In 356 CE, he was replaced by George of Cappadocia, an Arian. George was not known for his kindness, and he often intentionally antagonized non-Arians from all classes. He was forced to flee by one mob in 358 CE, but returned three years later and was soon up to his old tricks. When the pagan Julian the Apostate became Emperor, George's enemies took advantage of the situation to jail him for desecrating a temple. A mob later broke into the

¹⁷² Christians themselves were divided into different sub-sects, some of which would be declared heretical. The most predominant in Alexandria at the time were the Arians, Nicenes, and Gnostics.

jail and killed him. Socrates Scholasticus reported that the Emperor did in fact take some umbrage at the murder and sent a letter berating the Alexandrians.¹⁷³

In 385 CE, Theophilus became the patriarch of Alexandria. He was staunchly anti-pagan, and to him the free thinking atmosphere of the Museum was a threat to be neutralized. In 391 CE he got his chance. The Emperor Theodosius had banned all pagan practices and in Theophilus' extremely orthodox views that included every philosopher at the Museum. Remember that the Museum was centered on a shrine to the Muses.¹⁷⁴ A group of philosophers, poets, and temple priests barricaded themselves inside the Serapeum, fearful of attack after the edict was announced. The Christians, empowered by the Emperor's decision, surrounded the compound. An extended period of thrust and parry between the two groups ensued. It was no idle sit-in protest. Reports of deaths from each side demonstrate how serious both groups were in pursuing their beliefs. This incident could be viewed in the light of minor siege warfare. The occupants of the Serapeum had dug in, and now had nowhere to go. The Christians on the outside, as long as they were willing to sustain the loss of men, simply had to wait. A significant amount of time must have passed, as the Emperor was not only informed of the stand-off but sent orders to his representatives in Egypt. The *praefectus augustalis* and *dux aegypti* were ordered to evict the pagans from of the Serapeum, but he did pardon them from execution. He made the Christians killed into martyrs. Once the pagans had left the

¹⁷³ Kaplow, Lauren. "Religious and Intercommunal Violence in Alexandria in the 4th and 5th Centuries CE". *Hirundo: The McGill Journal of Classical Studies*. Vol. IV. pp. 2-26. pp. 6-7; Scholastics, Socrates. *The Ecclesiastical History*. Book 3 Chp. 3.

¹⁷⁴ The Serapeum was the temple of the Ptolemaic god Sarapis.

Serapeum, the Christian mob flooded in. Everything within the building was destroyed, including the 700 year old statue of Sarapis.¹⁷⁵

As the fifth century CE dawned, Alexandria's reputation as a center of learning and philosophy was rapidly declining. The Museum and Library had been destroyed. Its philosophers had either fled the city or were being extremely cautious about airing their views. Small fights routinely broke out between Christians and pagans or Christians and Jews, similar to the gang wars of today. The confrontations only got worse when Cyril became bishop of Alexandria in 412.

How Cyril became the patriarch was a preview of how he would act in office. When his uncle Theophilus died, Cyril was one of two candidates for the position. A man named Timothy (an archdeacon in the episcopal chair) was the second, and was said to have had more backing within the church than Cyril. Cyril had no compunction about using violence or the Christian mob to ensure that he got what he wanted. Three days of fighting in the streets occurred before Cyril was named patriarch. He remembered that result well and applied it in almost every other situation in which he encountered trouble. Cyril believed that all administration should fall under his purview, secular and religious alike and eventually wielded a power unlike his uncle had ever imagined. How did he get that power? He used the same means to advance his power that he used to achieve it in the first place: the Christian mob which was generally made up of monks from the Nitrian desert. Cyril even targeted other Christian sects.¹⁷⁶ If one did not agree with his interpretation and his rule, then one felt his wrath. Naturally, Cyril's grasping of power did not sit well with the government of Alexandria, especially the prefect Orestes. The

¹⁷⁵ Pollard, Justin: 263-264; Kaplow, Lauren: 9.

¹⁷⁶ Cyril targeted the Novations, a sect who felt that the orthodox Church was too lax in readmitting Christians who had denied their faith in the face of persecution.

struggle between them would result in the death of one of Alexandria's last leading mathematicians and philosophers, as well as the expulsion of the Jewish population from the city.¹⁷⁷

Philosophers no longer gathered at the Museum to study and teach their pupils, but they did still draw pupils to them in their own homes and some taught on the streets as well. One of these who gathered a circle of admirers and students to her person was Hypatia, daughter of Theon.¹⁷⁸ She was one of the most famous Neo-Platonist philosophers of the period. Hypatia most likely followed the tradition of Plotinus as embodied by either Porphyry or Iamblichus. She was reportedly one of the preeminent mathematicians of her time. She taught her own students in addition to working with her father, who was known for his numerous Commentaries on previous mathematical works.¹⁷⁹

Hypatia taught both non-Christians and Christians alike. She taught a philosophy of the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake without affiliation to any particular religious sect. This style of teaching followed the tradition of the free thinking atmosphere encouraged by the Ptolemaic dynasty and the Museum. She differed from the Museum curriculum in that she urged her students not to separate themselves from the real world. Among her students and associates was Synesius, the future bishop of Ptolemais in the Cyrenaica. She was also associated with Orestes, the Christian prefect of Alexandria, though it is unclear whether or not he was her student. Yet, she was a pagan

¹⁷⁷ Pollard, Justin: 272; Scholasticus, Socrates. *The Ecclesiastical History*. London: Bohn's Ecclesiastical Library, 1897. Book 7, Chp. 7.

¹⁷⁸ Theon was last man to head the Museum.

¹⁷⁹ Deakin, Michael A.B. *Hypatia: Mathematician and Martyr*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2007 p. 30; Viney, Donald W. "Remembering and Misremembering Hypatia: The Lessons of Agora" *Midwest Quarterly*. Vol. 54, No. 4 pp. 352-369. p. 356.

philosopher, one who never married and was not ashamed to admit her pagan identity. How then, was she spared from the censure that befell the Museum? It might have been the friendship with Synesius and Orestes that saved her during the patriarchate of Theophilus, but as will be seen, it would not save her from Christian wrath under Cyril.¹⁸⁰ Her influence could not be denied. Synesius sent her pupils even after he became a bishop as well as requesting her to aid him in the acquisition of scientific instruments in his letters. He also called her “mother, sister, teacher, and withal benefactress, and whatsoever is honored in name and deed.”¹⁸¹ He sent her his treatise *On Dreams* for her approval and referred to her as his “august mistress.” Orestes was often found at her home and called her to him to give advice as well. She was so highly regarded that she was often called to attend the meetings of magistrates.¹⁸² It is most likely this high regard of men in high positions, both within the church and government that led to her death at the hands of a Christian mob. However, one must look at the struggle for control of Alexandria between Cyril and Orestes as it is the rising action to the tragic death of one of the city’s last great teachers and philosophers. Hypatia’s death symbolized the beginning of the end, if not the end itself, of the golden era of philosophy in the Roman empire.

Remember that the picture painted of Cyril is one of a violent radical. He would accept no point of view but his own, and he was willing to use the violence of a gang of monks known as the corps of parabaulani – literally “one who exposes himself to danger.” In essence the group was supposed to be a humanitarian one - they distributed

¹⁸⁰ Pollard, Justin: 270; “Synesius of Cyrene” http://www.livius.org/su/sz/synesius/synesius_cyrene.html. Sept 6, 2013.

¹⁸¹ Synesius. *Letter 16*. A. Fitzgerald translator. www.livius.org/su-sz/synesius. Sept. 6, 2013.

¹⁸² Synesius: *Letters 10, 15, 16, 81, 154*; Deakin, Michael A. B: 58; Viney, Donald W: 359.

food and took care of the sick.¹⁸³ However, they were also used as militia by the patriarch. When Cyril expelled the Novations at the beginning of his reign, he was testing the limits of his power. In theory, the only man who had the power to expel a group of people was the prefect. Yet, Orestes took no action, perhaps in an effort to avoid public conflict. Cyril was emboldened by the lack of response, however, and soon turned his attention to the Jewish population.¹⁸⁴ Cyril did not approve of how some of the Jews of Alexandria celebrated the Sabbath, as large groups would often gather to watch dancing or theater. Cyril sent his agents to theaters throughout the city, apparently with the intent of creating conflict. The agents ended up at a theater attended by Orestes, whether by coincidence or Cyril's design. When the monks started a brawl, several of the theater attendees shouted to Orestes that it was an agent of Cyril that had instigated the fight. Orestes responded by having the man arrested and tortured. Cyril then summoned the Jewish leaders and berated them for troubling his agents.¹⁸⁵

Many of the Jewish population could not suffer the insults of Cyril. They used palm branch rings to mark themselves as conspirators, and one night ran through the streets shouting a local church was on fire. The Jews then murdered some of the Christians that ran out of their homes to put out the fire. The next day Cyril, attended by his militia, went to the largest synagogue in the city and ordered the expulsion of the Jewish population. Orestes was outraged and sent a letter to the Emperor, as did Cyril.¹⁸⁶ No real solution came from the ruler, he simply ordered the men to reconcile. No

¹⁸³ Viney, Donald W: 361.

¹⁸⁴ Orestes would have been greatly concerned with this new avenue of Cyril's energies. Recall that there was a large Jewish population and they must have represented a significant part of the economy. Cyril was forcing his hand, Orestes would have to choose to either side with Cyril or publicly disagree with the patriarch.

¹⁸⁵ Pollard, Justin: 274.

¹⁸⁶ Scholastics, Socrates: Book 7, Chp. 13.

reconciliation was possible however: when Orestes attempted to stop the Jewish expulsion he had set himself against Cyril. Orestes could not reconcile with Cyril without completely losing his authority. Cyril would never bend his pride enough to accept compromise with the prefect so he set out to shame Orestes into a public reconciliation.

Hypatia, then, became an unwilling pawn of Cyril. Cyril knew he could not attack Orestes directly because the prefect was popular with the citizens. However, he could attack his associates, and Hypatia was a known pagan. Soon rumors began to circulate that it was her influence which prevented the two from reconciling. Moreover, Orestes was publicly accosted by Christians who accused him of being a pagan as well. When Orestes protested that he was a Christian, someone in the crowd threw a rock and hit him in the head. Orestes' guard abandoned him, but the surrounding crowd protected him and seized the man, Ammonius, who had thrown the rock. Orestes then ordered the torture and execution of Ammonius. Cyril declared Ammonius a martyr, but this was going a bit too far even for Cyril's supporters as Ammonius had not died for refusing to refute his faith. Cyril quietly let the matter drop.¹⁸⁷

Orestes had won that battle, but Cyril could not let the matter stand. He tried again, publicly, to convince the prefect to accept an offer of friendship. When Orestes still did not accept the offer, Cyril again decried Hypatia's influence over the man as the reason. Socrates recorded that a group of monks, led by a man named Peter, stopped her carriage as it went through the streets and dragged her out of it. They then took her to a church named the *Caesareum*¹⁸⁸ where they stripped her and flayed her with ceiling tiles. After that, her body was relocated to a place called Cinaron, burned, and the ashes

¹⁸⁷ Deakin, Michael: 72.

¹⁸⁸ Note the name. It mostly likely is related to a temple honoring the son of Cleopatra and Ceaser.

scattered. No blame was ever put directly at Cyril's feet. Scholars note his control of the parabolon and that Orestes seemed to give him no more trouble after the murder, but the only ancient source to directly accuse the patriarch was the pagan writer Damacius.¹⁸⁹

The events seen in Alexandria during the end of the fourth century CE and the beginning of the fifth illustrate a greater turmoil going on in the Roman Empire. This was a transitional period for the Empire, as the new Christian god replaced the old Olympic gods and those of the old faiths struggled to retain their identity. This struggle would often result in violence and even those who maintained neutrality were often dragged into the fray. However, there was one movement that inadvertently reconciled philosophy, Christianity, and the Hellenized Egyptian paganism. That movement was Hermetism.

Part III: Hermes Trismegistus and Hermetism

As seen in Chapter Two, the norm in Egypt with regard to religious matters was assimilation, with the Egyptian characteristics generally holding more sway than those of the occupying people. This assimilation is found in the movement known as Hermetism. Hermetism represents a mix of all of the influences prevalent in Alexandria at the time, that is the latter-day remains of the pharaonic religion, the various sects of Christianity, and the Hellenistic philosophers.

The *Corpus Hermetica* was the basis of the Hermetic movement and the accompanying cult. It is a grouping of writings, most of which are attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, but a few of which are attributed to one or two other mythic figures e.g. Isis. One should note that most of the copies of these books that we possess today date from the second century, as many of the books were destroyed during the third and fourth centuries when some non-Christian texts were either destroyed or

¹⁸⁹ Scholasticus, Socrates: Book 7, Chapter 15; Viney, Donald W: 362.

lost, so the sources on the writings, rituals, and members is scarce. Hermes Trismegistus was a sage, sorcerer, and scientist, who according to early Christian fathers¹⁹⁰ lived around the time of Moses. During the Hellenistic and Roman Egyptian period he became a sort of hero and was viewed as a god by some.

Trismegistus, in his god state, grew out of the ancient Egyptian god Thoth, and during the Ptolemaic period he was combined with the Greek god Hermes. Thoth was a moon-god, and it was this association with lunar aspects that gave him many of his unique functions. He gained much of his authority from his role as secretary and counselor to the sun god Ra. The moon also ruled the stars and served to distinguish the different seasons, months, and years. Thus, Thoth became the lord of Time and regulated personal destinies. He was a divine scribe, invented writing, and was the lord of Wisdom; eventually seen as the lord of Knowledge, language, and all the sciences (making it easy for a philosophical movement to spring up around him). Thoth was also the guide of souls and advocate of the dead, these roles made him very popular with the common people, even during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. It is not surprising, then, that Greek settlers identified Thoth with their god Hermes, who was also associated with the moon, medicine, and shepherd to the land of the dead. Both also had a reputation for being tricksters and inventors as well as being messengers for the gods. “Hermes Trismegistus, then, was the cosmopolitan, Hellenistic Hermes, Egyptianized through his assimilation to Thoth, and in fact known throughout the Roman world as ‘the Egyptian’ *par excellence*.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ The early Christian fathers were divided about the Hermetic movement. It was considered by some to be harmless, but was decried as heresy by others.

¹⁹¹ Fowden, Garth: 22-24; Hoeller, Stephan A. “On the Trail of the Winged God: Hermes and Hermeticism Throughout the Ages” www.gnosis.org. Sept. 6, 2013.

While there was disagreement between Egyptians and Greeks over whether Hermes was a god or simply a gifted man, both attribute the writings of the *Corpus Hermetica* to him. Though in fact, not all are said to have been written by Hermes, one work is attributed to Asclepius, another to Tat, and still another is a dialogue between Isis and her son Horus. These works are divided into two categories, the technical and the philosophical. The technical *Hermetica* consists of works dedicated to “applied” ideas consisting of astrological, medical, magical, and alchemical topics, the philosophical writings are “wisdom” or “instructional” texts. Garth Fowden comments that “they set out the profane, everyday wisdom of the ancient Egyptians, aspiring neither to the status of divine emanations, nor even to secrecy.” Many historians believe the two types of *Hermetica* are irreconcilable and were used independently of each other. However, Fowden argues that the two categories can be regarded as aspects of a single “way of Hermes.”¹⁹²

This “way” consisted of a curriculum of study and contemplation, much like the process of catechism found in today’s Catholic churches. The initiate went through three stages: the knowledge of the World, next to knowledge of Self, and finally to knowledge of God. The devotee began his/her studies with the less technical *Hermetica* or listening to public speakers. The instruction was given to small groups and characterized by the study of the more philosophical works such as the *Asclepius* and *Kore Kosmou*. The second phase was imparted to one student at a time. It was a visual exercise where the student first imagined him/herself beginning a journey on Earth and moving up through the planets until he had reached a state of freedom. This process was called the Seven Spheres. *The Mystery Liturgy of Hermes Trismegistus* was the final step. It was a

¹⁹² Fowden, Garth: 33, 69, 104-107.

symbolic moment: the student is reborn as a spiritual being known as a *pneumatic* or “man of spirit.” A devotee that completed all these steps was then initiated into the sacraments of the Hermeticists, which appears to have been a form of baptism. The person was anointed with a liquid poured from a sacred vessel, one that was said to have been delivered into mortal hands by Hermes himself.¹⁹³

The Hermetic tradition of baptism demonstrates just one aspect of Hermetism that was a parallel tradition to Christianity. If one were to compare the writings, beliefs, and catechism of Hermetism with those of the Christian tradition, one would see that both movements closely resembled each other.

The Hermetic text *Poemandres, The Shepherd of Men* illustrates the similarities between the two systems. In it, the narrator is visited by a being called “Man-Shepherd”. The name given to the being is telling in itself: note that in Christianity the Lord is also referred to as a shepherd. The creation story given by the “Man-Shepherd” also has images associated with that of Genesis. That is the idea of Light from Darkness and Creation from the Word (*logos*), the “Man-Shepherd” claims to be the Light and is to be found everywhere. He admonishes the narrator to lead a pure and good life, as only through purity in Life could mortal Man hope to achieve an Afterlife. Furthermore, a fiery avenging demon would descend on any impure human after death, thus depriving him/her of an Afterlife.

The imagery and symbolism used throughout the text is very similar to that of Christianity, including the injunction against speaking the being’s actual name. Much like *Yahweh* is not the true name of the Old Testament deity, the “Man-Shepherd’s” name is to be kept silent. The being is described as one who is “unutterable, unspeakable, Whose

¹⁹³ Hoeller, Stephan A: 7-8.

Name naught but the Silence can Express.” It is also only through Knowledge of the Word that man can become one with God. These ideas are prevalent throughout Christianity, and in Gnosticism, as well.¹⁹⁴

The teachings of Hermes Trismegistus and the movement known as Hermetism represent a unique view of the philosophical/theological aspect of Egypt during this period, due to its apparent blend of all three quarters within the country. Its focus around a divine scribe, who was a combination of the Egyptian god Thoth and Greek god Hermes, lent it an air of the Hellenistic paganism of the Ptolemaic era. The writings and belief in one divine being, of the pursuit of knowledge, and the dual nature of man have their roots in the Platonic tradition of philosophy. Finally, the imagery associated with the being and creation process, the period of catechism an initiate completed, and the baptismal ceremony all bear the marks of Christianity. The movement was never officially condemned by the Christian church, but as mentioned earlier some non-Christian writings only survived destruction because they had been moved or secreted away. The writings of Hermetism were rediscovered in the fifteenth century by Cosimo de’ Medici, ruler of Florence from the Byzantine Empire, where they captured the Renaissance imagination and flourished again for a short time.¹⁹⁵

Part IV: Conclusion

Ptolemy’s decision to build the Library started as a quest to legitimize his rule in the Graeco-Roman world. However, it became much more. His search to collect knowledge simply for knowledge’s sake resulted in the gathering of such an eclectic collection that all types of scholars were drawn to its doors. The fact that it was founded

¹⁹⁴ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible; *Poemandres, The Shepherd of Men*. Verses 1-32. G.R.S. Mead translator. www.gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/TGH-v2/th202.html. Sept. 6, 2013.

¹⁹⁵ Hoeller, Stephan A: 8-12.

in Egypt, land of mystery, wonder, and knowledge encouraged that environment. So many scholars from so many schools of study created an environment of free thought that resulted in many world-changing discoveries emerging from Alexandria. The first translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew, the Septuagint, was at the behest of Ptolemy and his Librarian. Euclid changed the world of mathematics with his work on geometry, influenced by the mathematical genius of the pyramid builders. The idea of the universe being centered on the sun was first proposed, the world's shape was mapped, and the mysteries of the human body were being revealed. These are but a few examples of the scientific works that the scholars of Alexandria proposed. However, this environment, combined with uncertain tempers, led to a critical mass situation in the city.

Neo-Platonism flourished at the Museum and numerous works on the nature of human beings and their place in the Universe, as well as the ever-present question of a creator, were published. Ideas were free flowing, and for a brief time, the true Hellenistic principal was embodied. Scholars were not only allowed, but encouraged, to push the boundaries of what was known and to not only preserve the classical works, but to reinterpret them for a new world. Sadly, as that new world emerged these philosophers lost their place in it. The fight to preserve their way of life played out across the Roman Empire, but within the walls of Alexandria it grew to a fever pitch.

As Christianity gained not only acceptance, but power, within the Roman Empire, the dynamics of power often changed with the Emperor. This uncertainty created an environment of unease which often led to arguments among the different groups. In Alexandria, these arguments and confrontations frequently ended in violence. Once Christians flourished and no longer had to fear persecution, the positions of power in

which they found themselves often allowed them to persecute those whom they now controlled.

The Patriarch Cyril is a useful example of a man whose power had grown to a potentially dangerous point. Whereas bishops had lived at least civilly with the pagan population to this point, Cyril would accept no one – not even fellow Christians – with differing views. He was willing to use a mob of monks to enforce his interpretation of the Word. One either agreed with Cyril or was condemned by him. When the secular governor, the prefect Orestes, tried to check his grasp for power to the religious sphere a power struggle ensued that led to many deaths. The entire Jewish population was expelled after they rioted one evening after Cyril's agents instigated a fight and the Jews retaliated with the ambush and murder of some Christians. Hypatia, the female mathematician and philosopher, lived as a neutral philosopher. She taught Christians and non-Christians alike, but her declared paganism made her vulnerable. Cyril used her association with Orestes to smear the prefect's reputation as a Christian. Ultimately she was killed by a mob of Christian monks, either at the behest of Cyril or at least with his tacit approval.

The fourth and fifth centuries were not all about upheaval and discord, however: for a brief period a movement that embodied the varied nature of Alexandria flourished. Hermetism was based on the Graeco-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus, but it also held elements of Christianity and Neo-Platonism. Hermetism taught the belief in a One Being, as did the Neo-Platonists of the day. Its process of catechism and baptism both had similar symbols to Christianity.

Many of the writings of Hermetism were lost until the fifteenth century. The movement represented a brief moment of cooperation between all three areas of belief. After the writings disappeared, there was nothing to encourage friendship between the three groups. The riots that routinely erupted tore the city apart. Whole quarters were destroyed and the Jewish population, there since the time of Alexander the Great, was expelled from the city. Alexandria represented a microcosm of what was happening in the broader Roman Empire as clashes occurred between Christians, Jews, and pagans frequently in the first centuries of the Common Era.

CHAPTER V

THE CONCLUSION

Man fears Time, but Time fears the Pyramids. This Arabic proverb effectively demonstrates how other civilizations viewed Egypt in the ancient world, as well as in the modern world. It is timeless, with its shifting sands and enduring monuments. That timelessness made it a travel destination for the ancients as it does for people today. It also allowed Egypt to exert considerable influence over the surrounding world. Before Alexander the Great invaded Egypt, the influence was political. After he conquered the country, it still exerted an influence, though it was through different spheres. Those spheres were religious and philosophical. They can be seen most clearly when one looks at Hellenistic Egyptian Paganism, Christianity and Judaism in Egypt, and Philosophy during the Hellenistic and Roman period. As a backdrop to the thesis as a whole, one has to understand the political maneuverings of both the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty and the Roman Emperors before moving to the religious and philosophical sphere.

Part 1: The Political History

In the late fourth century BCE, Alexander entered Egypt with the intent of taking the country from the Persian king Darius the Great. He was welcomed by the native population, as the Egyptians chafed under Persian rule. During the brief time that Alexander was in Egypt, he was crowned as the traditional Egyptian ruler, the Pharaoh,

in a traditional Egyptian ceremony at the temple of Ptah in Memphis. He also travelled to the temple of Ammon at the distant Siwa Oasis and marked out the lines for his new capitol of Egypt, Alexandria. Then Alexander left, never to return to Egypt.¹⁹⁶

After Alexander's death, his empire was divided into four parts. His long-time friend and general, Ptolemy, ascended to the throne of Egypt. Originally, the four men were only supposed to hold their respective countries until Alexander's heir came of age. However, most of Alexander's children were either killed or banished within a few years of his death, so Ptolemy kept his throne.¹⁹⁷ He was also crowned as a pharaoh in a native Egyptian ceremony and became Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter, and so the Hellenistic period in Egypt continued.

Ptolemy I did not establish a traditional Macedonian government in Egypt. Where the other Macedonian generals based their power on the Greek-city model, Ptolemy only founded one city, Ptolemais, in Upper Egypt. He expanded Egypt's borders as well. He was a strong king who initiated several national monopolies over important commodities, including wheat and papyrus, to fund his rule.¹⁹⁸ As for the actual governing of his new country, Ptolemy did somewhat embrace the Macedonian model. He abolished the existing rulers of the nomes¹⁹⁹ and installed a Greek *nomarch* in each instead. Ptolemy then created two separate legal systems for the two communities, Greek and Egyptian. This separation of systems was due to two different concepts of law. The Greek concept

¹⁹⁶ Lloyd, Alan B: 196.

¹⁹⁷ Fox, Robin Lane: 474-477.

¹⁹⁸ Tarn and Griffith: 181-191.

¹⁹⁹ Nomes were the various territories within Egypt, rather like the counties found in some modern American states.

was based on a personal law, whereas the Egyptian model was based on a territorial concept.²⁰⁰

Ptolemy's style of government could only function properly under a strong king who was able to keep his officials honest. The system began to go awry within a couple of generations of Ptolemy's death. Outbreaks of native unrest started to occur as the Egyptians realized just how important they were to the Greek dynasty. The Ptolemys turned to the powerful Roman Emperor for aid in quelling this unrest. Ptolemy II Philadelphus exchanged assurances of friendship with Rome early in his reign. The dynasty called upon the more secure Roman Emperor for aid several times from that time forward. By the death of Ptolemy IX Soter II in 80 BCE the dynasty was permanently indebted to Rome. Ptolemy XI Auletes fled to Rome when his life was threatened and made Rome the guardian of his two heirs, Ptolemy XIII Theos and Cleopatra VII Philopator.²⁰¹

Cleopatra, the most famous of the Ptolemaic rulers, married her brother upon her father's death. When trouble arose between the couple, it was another chance for Rome to step in. The Roman consul Caesar acted as mediator between the two, and when they accepted his settlement Egypt essentially became a Roman province. When Caesar died, Cleopatra turned to Mark Antony for assistance in keeping her throne, an act which turned out to be the downfall of Ptolemaic Egypt and led to the formal annexation of Egypt as a Roman province. However, Egypt continued much as it always had, and the fact that their Pharaoh lived in Rome had very little effect on the core of the Egyptian

²⁰⁰ Tarn and Griffith: 182, 196.

²⁰¹ Lewis, Naphtali: 12-13.

belief system. Both the Greek Pharaohs and the Romans embraced several Egyptian religious practices.

Part II: Hellenistic Egyptian paganism

Egypt wielded considerable religious influence in the ancient world before Alexander or Ptolemy became its Pharaoh. The gods of Egypt had been exported to the Graeco-Roman world long before Alexander the Great conquered the country. Ammon was one of the first of the Egyptian pantheon to travel beyond Egypt and had temples in Athens and on Delos Island. He arrived around 370 BCE via the Cyrenian Greeks. Ammon was known to both Alexander and his father, Philip. Philip had been commanded by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to sacrifice to Ammon and to hold him in special honors above all other gods. Ammon, as well as other Egyptian gods, had temples on the island of Delos.²⁰² The honors given to the Egyptian temples on Delos are important to this study because they demonstrate that the Greeks were aware of the Egyptian pantheon and had already accepted them to some degree. That acceptance set the stage for a period of syncretism during the Hellenistic era.

Herodotus had traveled throughout Egypt consulting with priests about their religion and culture. He affirmed the priests' declaration that Egyptians were the first to use the names of most of the gods, and that the Greeks had adopted their gods from Egypt, barring a few notable exceptions, including most prominently Poseidon.²⁰³ Here is another telling example of Egypt's religious influence before the Hellenistic period. That Herodotus claims Egypt as the origin of the majority of the Greek pantheon also helps to clarify why the Greeks were so willing to adopt the religious practices of the Egyptians.

²⁰² Plutarch. *Life of Alexander*; Dow, Sterling: 184, 202.

²⁰³ Herodotus: Book 2, Chps. 5, 50; Lloyd, Alan B: 388.

Plutarch's description of Alexander's trip to the Siwa Oasis is another example of syncretism. The arduous, and long, journey into the desert to visit the temple of Ammon is evidence that Alexander held the god in high regard. Here we recall that his father had been commanded to sacrifice to Ammon years before.²⁰⁴

When Ptolemy I Soter ascended to the Egyptian throne, he followed Alexander's example by adopting the title of pharaoh, and all the rituals that went with the title, as well. Each of the Greek pharaohs sacrificed to Egyptian gods, built temples for them and funded their cults. The dynasty often borrowed the naming system used by Egyptian royals for centuries. The custom of marrying one's siblings had been well established in Egypt. As this type of marriage was considered taboo in Greek culture, the reason for the Ptolemys adopting the practice had to be because of the Egyptian tradition. The Ptolemaic dynasty cooperated with the Egyptian priest caste as well, bestowing multiple honors and funds on the temples as well as following the tradition of the ruler cult.²⁰⁵

Such decrees and evidence of temple construction is important to the historian for several reasons. The decrees gave the Ptolemaic dynasty legitimacy in the Egyptians' eyes and shows that the priests were eager for the new ruler's acceptance. The benefits to both groups were evident. Ptolemy I even added a god to the pantheon, Sarapis, in an effort to draw both the Greeks and Egyptians together in a common worship.

Sarapis was a hybrid god. He was the god Osiris, as he was worshipped in bull form as Apis, with Greek elements added in. He was presented with a Greek countenance and attire, and was made the consort of Isis. He was exported to Athens and the Roman Emperor Hadrian built a Serapeum in Rome as well. Hadrian's Serapeum is an ideal

²⁰⁴ Plutarch. *Life of Alexander*.

²⁰⁵ Rowlandson, Jane: 30; Unknown. *The Canopus Decree*.

example of just how far Egypt's influence extended. That a Roman Emperor built a temple to an Egyptian god rather than a Roman one is very telling, because it was in the capital city of the Empire. The Emperor Trajan was also one of the few Emperors to visit Egypt. Two of the fourteen columns at the temple in Philae give evidence of his making offerings to the divine family, Isis, Sarapis, and Horus.²⁰⁶ There was no reason to build such a grand temple to a foreign god in the capitol unless Hadrian identified with Sarapis in some respect. Trajan also did not have to make offerings to the Egyptian trinity as he was shown doing on the Philae columns.

The most significant examples of this influence are the settlement of El Haiz near the Bahariya Oasis and tombs located in Alexandria. A temple to Alexander the Great was built on the site; inside were statues of Ra, scenes of Alexander making offerings to Ammon, and a cartouche for Alexander. Both Greeks and Romans chose it as a burial spot because of the temple. In the 1990s, a "festival of mummies,"²⁰⁷ was discovered, many of whom were Roman settlers. Their sarcophagi were gilded and decorated with Egyptian religious iconography. Tombs of Greek and Roman settlers have been discovered in Alexandria that have a mix of Egyptian and Roman gods and iconography. For a Greek or Roman to adopt so fully Egyptian funeral practices was tantamount to wholesale adoption of the Egyptian religion, as the two were closely intertwined.²⁰⁸

Isis, the Mother Goddess, became very popular during the Hellenistic and Roman period. There was not one single Graeco-Roman deity that encompassed all that she did.

²⁰⁶ Dow, Sterling: 187-192; Taylor, Rabun: 223, 251-253; Peacock, David: 415, 431.

²⁰⁷ A "festival of mummies" is a site that at which many mummies are located. The Bahariya Oasis has dozens of mummies buried at its cemetery.

²⁰⁸ Hawass, Zahi. "The Discovery of the Valley of the Golden Mummies at Bahariya Oasis". Oct 17, 2012; Venit, Marjorie Susan. "The Stagni Painted Tomb: Cultural Interchange and Gender Differentiation in Roman Alexandria" pp. 647-657; Venit, Marjorie Susan. "The Tomb from Tigrane Pasha Street and the Iconography of Death in Roman Alexandria" pp. 701-708.

This fact, combined with her inclusive nature and myth, established her as one of the most popular goddesses of her time. The closest parallel to the Isis myth was that of Demeter and even then there are significant differences between the two goddesses. Both of the cults were mystery religions. Isis was portrayed as a sympathetic goddess, a concept alien to the Graeco-Roman pantheon. It is no wonder that she gathered converts from across the Roman Empire and from all walks of life.²⁰⁹ Isis had become so popular in Rome, that in the fictional work by Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, it is the sympathetic Isis, not a Graeco-Roman goddess, who eventually rescues the antagonist.²¹⁰

The Roman mummies of the Bahariya Oasis and Alexandrian tombs represent the most concrete evidence of syncretism between Egypt, Greece, and Rome. However, the spread of the cult of Isis is also evidence for that influence. She appealed to the Greeks and Romans in a way that none of their goddesses could. A counterpart was not embraced until Christianity became popular during the Common Era. Egypt played an important part of the development of Christianity as well.

Part III: Christianity and Judaism in Egypt

Egypt is mentioned in the Bible more than 550 times. It played the role of haven and threat to both Christians and Jews in the Scriptures as well as in history. Mark the Evangelist brought Christianity to Egypt and those early Egyptian Christians played an important role in the development of the religion.²¹¹ When Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, he allowed Christianity to develop on the world stage rather than backstage where it had been practiced. In the early years of legality, it became

²⁰⁹ Case, Shirley Jackson: 8; Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*. Verses 14-20; Wortham, Robert A.: 103-123.

²¹⁰ Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*.

²¹¹ Unknown. www.archangelichaelchurch.net . April 4, 2013; Genesis 12:10; Matthew 2:13-20; Exodus 2:10, 5:1-10:31.

apparent that there were many different interpretations of the Bible. These different interpretations often led to heated debates. The debate that had the most impact on Christianity was about the nature of Jesus Christ. Arius of Alexandria believed he was made by God, not begotten and therefore was not divine. Constantine called a group of bishops to Nicaea to agree on what they believed. From that gathering came the Nicene Creed.²¹² The concept of heresy was also first developed because of the Council of Nicaea. Origen worked in Alexandria during the second century and his idea that all souls had existed before the creation and would therefore ultimately be saved stirred up another controversy. Origen also did not believe in the idea of a God Incarnate and his theology was later developed into a movement called Anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism was particularly offensive to Orthodox Christians as it attributed human characteristics to God. Origen was later condemned as a heretic.

After the Council of Nicaea, Christians could be deemed heretical, including some Gnostic followers. Gnostic doctrine was one of reincarnation and the dual nature of Jesus Christ. Arius, Origen, and certain Gnostics had their impact on Christianity in that they defined what would *not* be accepted by orthodox Christians. However, the biggest impact Egypt would have on the faith was its desert monasteries and their influence on the European Christian monastery.

The deserts of Egypt belonged to Christian hermits, those ascetics who gave up all worldly possessions to live in abandoned temples/tombs, caves or crude shelters and contemplate their God. In the late third century, a man named Antony decided to embrace the ascetic lifestyle. Antony soon became famous and when others flocked to him, a community sprang up around him. Antony, then, is the father of the monastic movement

²¹² Grant, Robert M: 2-9.

and was later sainted in recognition of his contributions to Christianity.²¹³ Antony was somewhat sympathetic to pagan thought. His counterpart, Shenoute of the White Monastery on the other hand had no such sympathies. His was one of the strictest monasteries to be found, and it is likely that the Benedictine Monks of the Middle Ages based their strict monastic order on his.²¹⁴ Both Antony and Shenoute separated their monasteries by gender, and this practice was adopted by European monasteries in the Middle Ages as well. Christianity was not the leading world religion yet, however: it still had to contend with the Isiac faith.

The cult of Isis had gained popularity throughout the Hellenistic and Roman world. When Christianity was legalized and began to spread as well, the parallels between the two religions were evident. The similarities as well as methods of cult diffusion had Christ and Isis battling with each other for the hearts and souls of people throughout the Empire. The commonalities between the two start with their respective divine families. Both families consisted of Holy Trinities. The Isiac faith had Osiris (or Sarapis) as the Father, Isis, the Mother, and Horus, the Son. Christianity's Holy Trinity was the Father, Jesus the Son, and Holy Spirit. The difference lies in the lack of a Mother Goddess. However, Christianity does have a strong female figure who is a Mother, the mother of Jesus, the Virgin Mary. Both doctrines were ones of resurrection, eternal life, and judgment after death, with Horus interceding on behalf of Man in the Isiac faith and Jesus being the intermediary in the Christian one. Due to this judgment, both faiths also demanded an ethical life.²¹⁵

²¹³ Peacock, David: 431; Rubenson, Samuel: 10-11.

²¹⁴ Schroeder, Caroline: 133, 158.

²¹⁵ Gabriel, Richard A: 135-138.

The iconographies associated with Isis could be the inspiration for some of the most powerful images of Christianity. Isis is often depicted in statutory seated suckling the babe Horus at her breast: likewise the Virgin Mary is often posed with baby Jesus at her breast. Isis also carried the *ankh* which some early Christians perceived to be a precursor to the crucifix.²¹⁶ Isis often demanded absolute, unwavering, blind obedience of her devotees, as did the Christian God.²¹⁷ Isis was Egypt's foremost Mystery Religion. Christianity contained characteristics of a Mystery Religion because it emerged in the context of one.²¹⁸

Christianity and the Isiac faith set across the Roman Empire supporting similar messages and with similar iconographies. Christianity most likely prevailed because of its exclusivity and the public persecutions before it was legalized. People in the Roman Empire were also aware of a similar religion that might have made the transition easier, Judaism. Jews had lived in Egypt for centuries; therefore Egyptians were acquainted with a monotheistic religion that contained Christian elements.

Jewish soldiers had staffed Egyptian frontier garrisons since approximately the fifth century BCE. The Jews living on the island of Yeb were allowed to keep a temple alongside the Egyptian temple to the god Khum. They also had their own monastery on Lake Mareotis, near Alexandria. Jewish immigration was encouraged under the Ptolemys, especially when ironworks were introduced in Egypt, as iron had been worked in Judaea for decades. Alexandria became the most powerful Jewish settlement in the Greek-speaking world. While there were some pogroms, these were most likely motivated by political reasons rather than religious ones. Jews were rarely granted

²¹⁶ Witt, R.E: 32-33.

²¹⁷ Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*; *Book of Genesis* 22:1-18, *Book of Job*; *Gospel of Matthew*.

²¹⁸ Plutarch. *Of Isis and Osiris*; Case, Shirley Jackson: 3-16.

Alexandrian citizenship, but they did enjoy privileges in the city that other diasporan Jews did not enjoy in other cities. The Jewish population would play its part in the upheaval that was about to rock Alexandria, as all three faiths struggled to live in the same city.²¹⁹

Part IV: Center of Thought and Discord

It is not surprising that Alexandria became the focus of so many disciplines of thought during the first centuries of the Common Era. Ptolemy I set out early in his reign to make the city a center of Greek learning and knowledge. When he first ascended the throne, he legitimized his rule to the native population by embracing the role of Pharaoh. Ptolemy had to legitimize his reign to the Greek world as well, which was the motivation for the Museum and Library of Alexandria, likely finished by his son Ptolemy II. The Museum was modeled after the schools of Plato and Aristotle at Athens and attracted scholars from all over the Greek-speaking world. The Library eventually held a vast collection of knowledge from every discipline, for Ptolemy intended his institution to accept and encourage all knowledge; so, no study was discouraged.²²⁰

Many different works and discoveries were made in the free-thinking environment that was encouraged at the Museum and Library. Ptolemy I ordered the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, which was then housed at the Library. This copy became the basis for most other translations. Euclid revolutionized mathematics with his study of geometry and his work *Elements of Geometry* provides the basis for study of the topic today. Claudius Ptolemy's *Ptolemaic Theory* was used until Copernicus and he was one of the first to tackle the problem of *projection*. Eratosthenes was invited

²¹⁹ Rosenberg, Stephen G: 4-8; Kraemer, Ross S: 343-346; Gruen, Erich S: 68-71, 82-87; Pearson, Birger A: 207.

²²⁰ Lloyd, Alan B: 400-401

to tutor Ptolemy III's son. While he was in Egypt, he mapped the 36th parallel and devised a means of measuring a spherical Earth. The inner workings of the body were also first discovered by scholars working in Alexandria. Neo-Platonism also flourished in Alexandria, which encouraged many different interpretations of Plato's teachings.²²¹ All of these discoveries and philosophy flourished in Alexandria because they were *allowed* to develop, encouraged by the Ptolemaic dynasty.

During this time period, there were several different belief systems present in Alexandria, the philosophers dedicated to the classical age, Jews, and Christians. This demographic is reflected throughout the Empire and thus Alexandria can be viewed as a microcosm of the upheaval to be found in the Roman Empire. In 391 CE, the Serapeum and the Museum/Library were destroyed in a violent clash between Greek pagans and Christians when the Emperor outlawed all pagan practices. In the fifth century the clash between Cyril, the Patriarch, and Orestes, the Prefect of Alexandria resulted in the deaths of several different people, Christians and pagans alike. When the Jews reacted to Cyril's violent tactics by murdering several Christians, Orestes reacted against him. The two would not be reconciled. The feud eventually took the life of the pagan philosopher Hypatia, one of the most learned Neo-Platonists of her time.²²² While the violence in Alexandria reflected the negative aspects of three different belief systems living uneasily in one city, a Hellenistic movement known as Hermetism reflected the positive aspect of such a thing. It represented an amalgamation of all three of the belief systems, philosophy, Christianity, and Hellenized Egyptian paganism, present in Egypt at the time.

²²¹ Schodde, George H: 135-136; Pollard, Justin: 64-123; Betten: 75; Boyd: <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2594.htm>.

²²² Kaplow, Lauren: 6-7; Pollard, Justin: 263-264.

The basis of the Hermetism movement was a Graeco-Egyptian hybrid god, Hermes Trismegistus. He was a combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth, though some argued at the time that he was just a mortal man. The movement had Platonic roots in that he advocated the existence of a divine one being, encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, and claimed a dual nature in humans. However, a devotee of Hermetism went through a catechism process that was very similar to an early Christian initiation. Finally, when the devotee had achieved all other goals, he/she then went through a ceremony that is similar to a Christian baptism. The Hermetic movement flourished in Egypt because Egypt was often a fertile ground for such integration. It had a long history of adapting to new ideas as well as influencing them with its own traditions.²²³

Part V: Conclusion

Egypt's influence on the Graeco-Roman world was far-reaching and can be seen throughout its history. When Alexander conquered Egypt, its influence did not end. Indeed, it continued to act as a player on the world stage in the religious and philosophical arenas, which can be seen more clearly by examining the spheres of Hellenistic Egyptian paganism, Christianity/Judaism, and philosophy through the Roman period.

Both the Ptolemaic and Roman rulers adopted the title of pharaoh, and were often depicted in the traditional pharaonic manner and with the old Egyptian royal accoutrements. They supported the traditional priestly caste and were in turn given honors throughout the country. Egypt was a fertile ground for Christianity to grow and the monastic movement was born in its deserts. In the first centuries CE, Alexandria

²²³ Fowden, Garth: 22-24; Hoeller, Stephan A.: 8-12.

acted as a microcosm for the upheaval seen throughout the Empire. Egypt, under Rome, might not have held the political sway it once had, but it exercised an influence that went far beyond acting as the grain basket of the Empire. The search for a greater truth in Egypt shaped the world's faith and spread the old civilization's influence wherever Rome reached.

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