

**HELLENISM AND THE FORMATION OF
COPTIC IDENTITY: 332BCE - 200CE**

**A Coptic trajectory through
a Hellenistic context**

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DECLARATION

I, Annette Margeretha Henrietta Evans, the undersigned hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.



ABSTRACT

Conflicting perceptions of the Copts exist for a variety of reasons. This dissertation seeks to examine some of the traces of their own process of interpreting and mediating the past. Hellenism facilitated this process, as did the Egyptian pharaonic cultural background. Both these influences left their mark on Coptic Christianity as evidenced for example in the Coptic language, and in the iconography of Madonna and child. In addition, examples of the presaging of Christianity in Egyptian iconography are presented. Recent discoveries, for example the Nag Hammadi Codices, have been taken into account in researching Coptic identity. Clement of Alexandria was another major force in the formation of Coptic identity. The vastly diversified area of Gnosticism is a complicating factor in understanding Coptic Christianity. Due to Clement's work in reconciling Greek philosophy with Christianity some authors associated him with Gnosticism, in spite of his making a clear but nuanced distinction between Gnosticism in general and Christianity. Several researchers have noted a similarity between the prologue of the Gospel of John and the type of Gnosticism that Clement was said to be associated with. This dissertation attempts to demonstrate that ancient Egyptian cosmology facilitated the Coptic understanding of the Incarnation of the *Logos*, but was misunderstood at the Council of Chalcedon.

The Coptic trajectory through a Hellenistic context was found to be like that of a boomerang, in that the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt represents, in the words of the current Coptic Patriarch, "a return to the apostolic father-type of leading of the church". He stresses that they aim at renewal by expressing ancient doctrine, theology and traditions in a contemporary form that is understandable to their youth.

OPSOMMING

Botsende sienings oor die Kopte is tans in omloop. Hierdie tesis het ten doel om die spore van hulle eie proses van interpretasie en oordra van hulle verlede te ondersoek. Hellenisme, asook die diepliggende Faraoniese kulturele agtergrond, het hierdie proses vergemaklik. Beide hierdie faktore het hul merk gelaat, soos gesien kan word in die Koptiese taal en in die ikonografie van die Madonna en Kind. Voorbeelde van voortekens van die Christelike geloof in Egiptiese ikonografie word ook voorgelê. Onlangse ontdekkings soos die Nag Hammadi kodekse is in ag geneem. Nog 'n belangrike faktor in die formasie van Koptiese identiteit was die werk van Clemens van Aleksandrië, wat die Griekse filosofie met die Christelike geloof wou vereenselwig. Sommige geleerdes het hom geassosieer met die Gnostisisme ten spyte van die feit dat hy 'n genuanseerde maar duidelike onderskeiding gemaak het tussen Gnostisisme in die algemeen en die Christelike geloof. Ander geleerdes het reeds 'n verband gesien tussen die inleiding van die Evangelie van Johannes en die tipe Gnostisisme wat Clemens volgens sommige veronderstel was om mee geassosieër te wees. Hierdie proefskrif wil aantoon dat die manier waarop die Kopte die inkarnasie van die *Logos* verstaan, gebaseer is op 'n Faraoniese kosmologie, maar is misverstaan deur die Sinode van Chalcedon. Die Koptiese trajek deur die Hellenisme is in hierdie tesis bevind om die van 'n boemerang te wees. In die woorde van die huidige Koptiese Patriarg verteenwoordig die Koptiese Ortodokse Kerk van Egipte "a return to the apostolic father-type of leading of the church", maar bewerkstellig vernuwings deur die oordrag van leerstellings, teologie en tradisies aan die jeug op 'n eietydse wyse.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Even by the time of the Arab conquest in 634 CE the culture of Egypt of the Pharaohs lay far in the past, ostensibly brought to an end by the entry of Alexander the Great into Egypt in 332 BCE. This had initiated three centuries of rule by the Ptolemies who occupied the pharaonic throne but lived in Greek style in Alexandria. According to early and medieval authors – only attested by a documentary find in 1958 (Smith 1992:449) - Christianity had been brought to Egypt by St. Mark by the beginning of the second half of the first century CE. A few hundred years and much persecution later, Egypt became a Christian country, together with the rest of the Byzantine empire. Today Egypt is an Arabic-speaking country, predominantly Islamic in religion; the result of 1357 years of Arab rule and influence. After five thousand years of written history, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt constitutes the only living remains of the pharaonic legacy.

It was the syncretistic tidal wave of Hellenism from the Mediterranean world that brought Egypt the last form of the pharaonic language - Coptic, and it was this that enabled Egyptian Christians to play a vital role in the definition and distinguishing of Christianity from the great variety of belief systems in existence in those first two centuries of Christianity. So effectively did the Egyptian population take on Christian identity, that after the Arab conquest the term Copt came to denote those members of the original Egyptian population who remained Christian in an Arab country (Bagnall 1993:230; Atiya 1968:16). The origin of the word Copt is discussed under 2.3.

Thus the Copts have a unique identity: inseparable from their pharaonic past yet intimately associated with the beginning of Christianity. They stand centrally at crucial issues of the church in society today, yet the manifestation of their Christianity

has remained virtually unchanged in a changing historical context over 2000 years. Their bishops and monks enliven our post-modern globe dressed in ancient garb, armed with Coptic crosses and cell-phones. Coptic men and women perform miracles of upliftment amongst the garbage collectors of Cairo, but are equally at home in a state of the art technological environment or the foremost universities of the world. This apparent paradox is a consistent theme throughout their history. They were cast out of the church establishment as heretics at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, yet they had helped form the guiding principles of the Christian Church and Theology, and stuck to them. If this were measurable one might say the Copts suffered the most severe persecution of any Christian group, on the largest scale, over the longest period. Today the Copts are a minority in their own country, (10% of a population of 60 million) ruled by Muslims, yet they have the largest Sunday school movement in the world, and their own *diaspora* has created Coptic centres in America, Canada, Australia, Central Africa, and South Africa.

The explanation of this phenomenon must start 3000 years before the advent of Christianity with the ingenuity of pharaonic Egyptians and their hieroglyphs. Kee (1983:3) has stated that when the external cultural life-world changes, then conceptual, cultic and literary forms also undergo change, but Leahy (1992:234) suggests that the pharaonic culture was able to survive for such a phenomenally long time because the Egyptians were able to adapt to their various successive overlords without losing their cultural identity.

In this regard three questions arise: what happened to the Egyptian identity when Alexander the Great ushered in a completely new cultural environment in 332 BCE? Were there some inherent elements of their ancient pharaonic culture that remained unchanged? If such fixed unchanging elements of ancient Egyptian culture do indeed exist, how did they manifest after the advent of Christianity in Egypt?

1.2 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROBLEMS

Clifford Geertz defines culture as an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embedded in symbols. (1975:89) Thus the symbol systems in terms of which life is lived in the culture and which provide meaning and value for the members of the society under investigation, must be taken into account as fully as possible. An explication that will describe the historical formation of the interrelatedness of all interaction spheres of the Egyptian culture will be striven for, with the goal that the Coptic conception of the world will make sense in terms of their own "symbolic universe", but will also be empathically understandable within the investigator's "symbolic universe". This means that rather than viewing the culture as a two-dimensional matrix, each aspect interacts not only with those that impinge upon it, but also upon the investigators who have commented on it throughout history. Not only can it look very different at different historical times of investigation, but also to different investigators.

A fresh examination of the literary and iconographical sources used in the mediating and processing of the past is necessary. The meagre collection of primary sources from the first two centuries CE in Egypt is growing, and there is a steadily increasing body of recent scholarship on hieroglyphic translation and iconography. In examining the transitions in the symbolic universe of the Egyptians three major stages will be considered:

1. Pharaonic culture
2. Pre-Christian hellenic culture in Egypt
3. Early Christianity during the Graeco-Roman period up to the end of the second century.

An attempt at lifting out fixed unchanging characteristics of Coptic identity over the entire span of these three historical-cultural stages will be considered in the context of

the following research problems:

1.2.1 AWARENESS OF THE RELATIVENESS OF OWN CULTURAL SYMBOLS

In recent years new interest in Eastern Churches has emerged in the West. In 1985 Pope John Paul said "The Church needs to learn to breathe again with its two lungs - its Eastern one and its Western one" (Roccasalvo 1992:4) At this time in South African history we are having to readjust our own sense of identity, and each ethnic group has to see itself and all the others as a valuable part of the diversity in order to form a truly united nation. Robbins has pointed out that every interpretation of a text is ideologically based (1996:192); for the symbols of a foreign culture to be empathically understood, the investigator needs to become aware of the relativeness of his or her own cultural symbols and prejudices.

Fresh insights from sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers about the social nature of knowledge and personal identity have also added to the need for re-evaluation. Consequently a wide range of generally accepted categories and historical judgements which 19th and 20th century historians of Christian origins had made and built upon have been called into question. Now it is recognised that such static entities cannot be reconstructed without taking the systems of symbolic and cognitive order of the cultural context into account. (Kee 1983:55)

1.2.2 LACK OF PRIMARY DOCUMENTATION

Clement of Alexandria lived at the end of the second century, but although he laid the foundation of theological method (Danielou 1964:130), little is known of his life. Bell (1948:86) stated fifty years ago that we are 'singularly ill-informed' about the early diffusion of Christianity in Egypt. Until recently there were very few primary documents bearing on Egyptian Christianity dating from before the end of the second Century, apart from Clement of Alexandria's writings. Coptic Christianity showed

astonishing vitality in the 4th Century, but there is as yet little explanation of how this arose, apart from Henry Green's proposal (Pearson 1986:112) that it relates to socio-economic reasons. This is unlikely to be the whole story.

Kuhrt (1997:9) warns that it is frequently in the periods for which scholars have no material that the most important changes were taking place and that the result is a tendency to compress events. From the evidence of literary papyri it is known that Christianity was already established in middle and upper Egypt in the Second Century CE, but the rarity of evidence for the first two centuries may be in part due to the necessity at that time for concealing any connection with a sect which was being persecuted, or that early Christianity in Egypt was thought to be heretical, and therefore all records were destroyed.

Another example of the complexity of interpretation is given by Snell (1997:4) and Wenig (1969:10) who point out that in Egypt people are still living where they lived 5000 years ago, along the alluvial basin, so that in those vital places excavation is hampered. This serves as a reminder that there is always the potential for fresh evidence and that no research conclusion, however convincing, can ever be the last word.

1.2.3 UNASSIMILATED RECENT DISCOVERIES

Because of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents, there has had to be a radical reappraisal of the development of Judaism and Christianity in the centuries immediately before and after the birth of Christ. There is much recent scholarship on Gnosticism which has not yet been assimilated into a coherent Coptic history. The wide range of current opinions that impinge on the early years of Coptic Christianity is demonstrated by the following statements: Roberts (1977:13) reports that 10 biblical texts or fragments from the Old and New Testaments have been discovered in Egypt that are dated as second century texts, demonstrably from a Christian community. The presence of Old Testament texts is

regarded as suggesting that that community had a non-gnostic character. According to Hultgren no gnostic texts have been discovered from so early a time as these. (1994:12)

From another viewpoint Pearson claims that there was profound mutual influence between Gnosticism and middle Platonism. (Pearson 1984:72) Currently, with the complex diversity of recent textual evidence it is recognised that the origin of Gnosticism was independent of Christianity and that Christian Gnosticism makes up only a part of the general phenomenon of Gnosticism. (Rudolph 1991:14) According to Danielou (1964:3) evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi gnostic texts confirmed that the earliest Christian Theology might have been Semitic in structure and expression, because the imagery contained in the writings is that of the dominant Jewish thought form at that time, i.e. apocalyptic.

1.2.4 THE OBFUSCATING CONCEPT OF ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

It is necessary that questions be asked about the assumptions about reality made by the main role players in the period under study. The phenomena under study must be located and related to the changing historical-cultural framework, but in addition it must be recognised that in every epoch the historical and hermeneutical approaches to earlier tradition are fundamentally affected by the cultural context of the interpreter historian. (Kee 1983:42). Kee warns that not even scientific knowledge will be free of the effects of the culture in which it arises - the scientist who supposes that he is singlemindedly dedicated to the search for truth deceives himself - he seeks system and simplicity, and "tailors truth to fit". Therefore it is also necessary to sort out the differing motivations of previous scholars.

A case in point is Von Harnack who regarded Theology as born from the union of the Gospel message and Greek philosophy. Danielou defines "Theology" in this context as "the attempt to construct a systematic world-view on the basis of the data provided by the divine events of the Incarnation and Resurrection of the Word."(Danielou 1964:2)

By equating Theology and Greek thought, Von Harnack "fell into the trap of circular thinking, because he did not take into account his own ideological viewpoint, as Deist demonstrates in his criticism of Rationalist and Idealist methodology. (Deist 1979:57).

Deist (1979:56) gives a working definition of the ideological background against which understanding takes place, based on the sociology of knowledge: the convincingness of a specific system of thought is closely related to a specific set of sociological, economic, political and religious convictions of a particular time or social group, and these mutually supporting convictions are component parts of a specific ideology. These convictions shift and change according to the rules of the dominant ideology of the time, so that the frame of reference of understanding changes. Explanation of understanding of a problem is always explanation *in terms of* 'something else', and the *acceptability of the 'something else'* must be presupposed. This presupposition is obviously based on the particular ideology of the investigator.

Rokeah (1982:10) also points up the need to look for hidden agenda and inconsistency even in such an author as Eusebius. Bauer (1934:149) also casts doubt upon his reliability and in turn suffers a similar fate. (Pearson 1986:211) Another example of how distortion creeps in is described by Ferguson (1993:489) as follows: Bauer had stated that heresy preceded orthodoxy, that variety came first, and "Orthodox" Christianity only secured the upper hand at the end of the second century, under the control of the church at Rome. In order to support this, he gave a very narrow definition of Orthodoxy, neglecting normative elements of belief in early preaching, and in doing thus he also minimized the evidences for orthodoxy in the apostolic fathers of the early 2nd C.

"How much less confusing ... if, for the historical task, such traditional, theologically loaded slogans as 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' could be eliminated from treatments of the early period except where they are used by the participants under discussion ... indeed, is there today *any* commonly accepted meaning of "orthodoxy" such as Bauer

wished to presuppose?" (Kraft & Strecker 1934:314.) Dunn (1990:1) suggests that James Robinson's alternative term of 'trajectories' - implying an organic, mobile process with direction, in combination with Dunn's own use of the concepts of unity and diversity, would be more serviceable. (Dunn 1990:2-3)

Robbins quotes Fredrik Barth's suggestion that Christianity nurtures 'attitudinal boundaries' in ways that create distinctive forms of 'ethnic identity'. (1996:4) This points to the possibility that group members in the first century nurtured strong convictions about major values or behaviours that defined them in distinction from other groups with whom they had close contact. It stands to reason that this does not mean that they did not share many other things in common with other groups. The issue is what evidence is available for where the distinguishing boundary line was drawn by whom, when, and what the real motivation was. (Robbins 1996:5-6)

1.2.5 CONFLICTING DESCRIPTIONS OF COPTIC IDENTITY

As a consequence of the problems discussed above there have been conflicting descriptions of Coptic identity. A clear definition of Coptic Christianity today is necessary to identify the unique characteristic elements that differentiate it from Western Christianity. Also necessary is a balanced and unbiased assessment of the role played by Coptic ancestors in the establishment of Christian creeds and doctrine. Atiya (1968:14) describes four main types of reporting on the Coptic contribution to the formation of Alexandrine Christianity:

1. The Protestant school, described by him as sympathetic but limited in understanding.
2. Roman Catholic scholars who have been hostile and unappreciative.
3. Native writers, all writing in Arabic, thus usually inaccessible to Western scholars.

4. Recent Western scholars concerned with dispassionate research based on original sources.

Atiya admits his own passion as one who writes as a Copt, but nevertheless claims that many aspects of the general history of Christianity will have to be rewritten in order to incorporate the steadily increasing evidence of the Coptic contribution, which has been minimised in the past. Robbins points out that it has been common practice to interpret N T literature as a 'story' that recounts the 'significant' events in terms of the great traditions of Israel, but that analysis and interpretation of the social and cultural texture of that time will give a significantly new look to first-century Christianity. (Robbins 1996:175)

1.3 METHOD

The range of social hierarchy of the people whose descendants became the Copts is represented at one end by the literate pharaonic priests and at the other the illiterate peasants. The contribution of each group to the unique whole that today is identifiable as the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt will be considered.

Because it is mainly secondary sources that are available for study, and even the few primary sources must be viewed with "the hermeneutics of suspicion" (Bagnall 1993:8; Rokeah 1982:10), the method will include looking at the pictorial record. However, even if by focusing on visual records there is a better chance of avoiding "the quicksand world of language-game" (Kemp 1989:4), the problem of understanding the context and the purpose of a visual artefact remains. This method thus involves a dialectical movement between the literary sources and the visual images, with consequent adjustment of understanding all along the way.

Kemp points out, although one wishes to remain true to the sources, it is possible to rethink ancient logic, and it is hard to know when to stop. In an attempt to retain control over the inevitable flow of interaction between the subject under investigation

and the investigator, Babour's concept of a model as a paradigmatic framework for assessing the data will be applied. (Babour 1974:38) The following questions proposed by Kee (1995:4) have been adapted to provide the structure from which the symbolic life-world of the Copts will be investigated in the context of each of the above-mentioned cultural-historical periods.

- 1 How do they perceive the essential being of God and what are their dominant symbols?
- 2 What are their power structures and their goals?
- 3 What are the key formative rituals and what genre do they use for communication?
- 4 How are the boundary lines drawn that are important for the maintenance of their identity?

To answer these questions it is necessary to go back to the beginnings of what is known of the ancient Egyptian culture to see how much of that symbolic system was carried over into their practice of Christianity in the formative first centuries.

CHAPTER 2

PHARAONIC CULTURE

2.1 EARLIEST SETTLEMENTS IN EGYPT

The earliest indications of man in the Nile valley are Acheulian tools dated to 200,000 BCE found at Abydos. (Quirke & Spencer 1992:31) By 8000 BCE a Paleolithic lifestyle was being followed at the Fayum in the North and at Elkab in the South near what 5000 years later became the great capitals at Memphis and Thebes (modern Luxor). Neolithic farming and herding appeared at Amrat and Naqada at round about 4000 BCE. (Baines & Malek 1984:30) A little to the North the Badarian culture developed. Ancient Egypt's towns and villages lay in the alluvial basin of the Nile, covered by deep layers of extremely fertile sediment. Gradually the farmers learnt to cultivate the soil so that by 4000 BCE they had extended the area of their fields and animal husbandry supplemented the subsistence farming. Underlying it all was the rhythmic, dependable munificence of the navigable and inundating Nile, which also provided wildfowl and fish.

2.2 NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND IDENTITY

Gardiner (1961:31) points out that because Egypt was hemmed in by the desert on either side of the Nile, she was largely dependent on her own resources, but that the isolation furthered the development of her own highly individual culture. Baines & Malek (1984:14) propose that "the very prodigality of the land and its water" is probably the reason for the striking lack of technical innovation in the native Egyptian culture. Quirke & Spencer (1992:34) point out that because the environment of the Nile valley and the delta were different they could be expected to have produced different life-styles, and according to archeological research, for most of the predynastic period the material culture of upper and lower Egypt had been distinct. The Delta (mainly pastoral, with a fringe population of Asiatics and Libyan nomads), and the Nile valley to the south (mainly agricultural, with more Nubians), played

different roles in the economy of the nation. However, according to Baines & Malek, the archaeological record shows that the whole region from the confluence of the Blue & White Nile to the delta may originally have been culturally similar, until just before unification. (Baines & Malek 1984:30)

The river was what tied the two lands together through transport and communication and co-operation in agriculture. The climate was very dry, so their total dependency on the rising of the Nile created three seasons: e.g. 1) Inundation, 2) Going down of the inundation (emergence of fields - cultivation and sowing, 3) Dry season - harvest. Good i.e. high flooding was anxiously kept watch for each year, with constant messages sent to the central administration from the South about the level of rising of the Nile. The importance of this information is observable as far away as Palestine during the hellenistic era and its effect in the formation of the metaphoric constructs of pharaonic cosmology was profound (Figure 1 and Appendix xv-xvi). This will be discussed further under 2.5.

From the beginning, the Egyptians had simply called themselves the *remet-en-Kemet* - the people of the black land - referring to the rich silt of the Nile valley. From the Middle Kingdom onwards Egypt was called *ta-meri* - the cultivated(?) land. (Quirke & Spencer 1992:11) The Coptic word '*merit*', beloved, comes from the ancient Egyptian word '*mr*'. The hieroglyphic demonstrative is a hoe. The dynastic Egyptians had an hieroglyphic determinative called $\text{t } \text{3}$, meaning land. The determinative represents a plot of arable land with its irrigation chambers. (Gardiner 1961: 33, paragraph 24 and pp 607,617) Breasted (1920, 96-97) alludes to the Pyramid Texts to demonstrate that Osiris is identified with the Nile: "water as a source of fertility, water as a life-giving agency. It is water which brings life to the soil, and Orisis is therefore closely associated with the soil likewise." From these associations one it is tempting to hypothesize that the land lovingly cultivated by man and regularly fertilized by the Nile was the breast that nurtured the Egyptians - they obtained not

only their sustenance but their very identity from that rhythmic and dependable lifeline (Figure 2).

Gardiner's description of the alluvial bed of the Nile as a lotus plant hemmed in by the flatness of the desert on either side hints at the underlying ecological source of their richly metaphorical language (Figure 13b) (Gardiner 1961:27). The word Copt is derived from the ancient Greek word *aiguptos*, which was used by the hellenes both for Egypt and the Nile. This word derives from the ancient Egyptian word for Memphis, *Hak-ka-Ptah*, - the house or temple of the spirit of Ptah, who was revered as the god of all creation, to be worshipped before all others in Memphis. With the suppression of the prefix and the suffix of the Greek word, the stem *gypt*, or *kaPt* remained, which was then corrupted to the Arabic *Gybt* or *Qibt* (Atiya 1968:16). The original Coptic pronunciation is *Keft* or *Kepto*.

2.3 UNIFICATION

Egypt had great material resources except in the years when the Nile did not reach flood level, and also possessed vast gold resources in the Eastern desert. Trigger suggests that attempts to control the goldfields by conquering neighbours in order to reduce competition for the gold may have been a motive for unification, but this should be seen as coming from an avowed materialist (Trigger 1993:110). Whatever the reason, around about 3000 BCE, King Menes (or Narmer) united the populations living along the entire stretch of the Nile from the Delta to the Second cataract, initiating the Dynastic Periods which were to last for two and a half millennia. Almost immediately, a full-blown hieroglyphic script emerged. Two of the king's titles, which lasted throughout the Dynastic period, were "Lord of the two lands, King of upper and lower Egypt". (Zauzich 1992:37,59,66,89) (The modern Arabic name is simply *Misr* - the land, a relic of the Hebrew word with a dual ending, *Mizraim* - the two lands). Although even in the middle Kingdom text *The story of Sinuhe* (circa 1800-1630 BCE), there is still an indication of a perception of differences between North and

South, and later regional differences in the Coptic phase of the language are also detectable in earlier Egyptian texts (Leahy 1992:226), from the time that writing appeared in Egypt (now set at 3500 BCE) Egyptian was the only language recorded. Because in lower Egypt (North) there was social equality as judged by the uniform size of tombs, whereas in upper Egypt (South) variation in tomb size and better quality of objects indicate the stratification of society, scholars have deduced that the antecedents for pharaonic civilization came from upper Egypt. (Quirke & Spencer 1992:34)

2.4 MIGRATION, ETHNIC MIXING AND CULTURAL UNIFORMITY

It has been shown that there was a steady influx of foreign ethnic groups into Egypt from the 2nd millennium on, and by the New Kingdom, all levels of Egyptian society were plural and cosmopolitan. It is possible that the Palaeolithic settlement in the South-Western delta at Merinda Beni Salami, could have arisen by way of migration (presumably from the direction of the Libyan desert), because it shows no connection with other sites. (Quirke & Spencer 1992:32) Apart from peaceful nomadic infiltration, the armed forces and slavery also contributed to racial diversity. In addition, during the 18th Dynasty the offspring of captured foreign rulers were raised with children of the Egyptian elite. However, when foreigners like the Hyksos or Nubians ruled, they assumed an Egyptian image, and even when details like foreign headgear and different burial customs sometimes crept in, these differences were obscured by the remarkable degree of cultural uniformity from the time of unification. "Its frontiers secured, the new state developed a highly distinctive culture, whose script, art and architecture are quite peculiarly Egyptian" (Leahy 1992:226).

2.5 COSMOLOGY & RELIGION – THEIR SYMBOLIC UNIVERSE

One reason for the astonishing length and extraordinarily powerful pharaonic era

which consistently viewed the Pharaoh as a divine king of upper and lower Egypt, was the self-reinforcing and regenerative character of their cosmology. The particular network of assumptions about reality and about the place of human beings within the world forms the basis for identity among those who share a world view. (Kee 1983:295, quoting Max Weber) The ancient Egyptians were extremely pious, and these mythic symbols of the cosmos and its creative forces were vital and sacred to them, as is evidenced by the overwhelming number of religious texts on monuments and papyri, and their building of temples - "huizen der eeuwigheid". (Zondervan 1998, 114)

Existentialist philosophy claims that rationalism is unable to provide a viable account of the meaning of human existence - the immediacy of living experience must be grasped existentially from within. This is how Myth functioned as ancient people's tool for ordering their understanding of the world and interpreting cosmological events - what they could not express in abstract terms they expressed by means of their mythic symbols.

2.5.1 MYTHOPOEIC THINKING - VEHICLE FOR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The unique peculiarities of Egyptian natural environment had a profound effect on their cosmology hence also on their religion. From the two rhythmic and predictable miracles of the daily rising of the sun and annual rising of the Nile the Egyptians drew their belief that Egypt was the centre of the universe and that renewed life would always be victorious over death. This was the foundational idea of their world view. The dramatic contrast between the black silt of the Nile-fertilized land and the flatness of the desert on either side meant that any exceptional feature became significant, therefore inspirited or animated. Space had a concrete orientation with emotional colour, it could be familiar or alien, friendly or hostile. Frankfort explains that for modern man the surrounding phenomenal world is primarily an inanimate "It"; for ancient man it is a "Thou". "Thou" is experienced emotionally in a personal, dynamic, reciprocal relationship. The whole man meets a living "Thou" in nature; and in myth

making, the whole man, emotional and imaginative as well as intellectual - gives expression to the experience. (Frankfort 1946:68) An example of this concept is to be found in Jos. 24:27; "Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us:"

According to Frankfort (1946:44-70) the following characteristics of mythopoeic thinking formed the core of their religious orientation.

2.5.1.1 AUTHORITY FIGURES AND CAUSALITY

To ancient men, whatever was capable of affecting mind, feeling or will was real, and they expressed their emotional thought in terms of cause and effect. They looked for the "who" when looking for a cause - a purposeful will committing an act: when the river does not rise, it has *refused* to rise. The river, or the gods, must be angry with the people who depend on the inundation. Their crucial recognition was of an invisible order of justice, and they connected this invisible order with the visible order (thus linking 'internal' to 'external').

The Egyptian attitude to authority figures was closely interwoven with this recognition, which they connected with their concept of god and king. The primary role of the king was to maintain justice and order. For instance, the official Egyptian model of relations with other peoples was governed by an ideology centred on the king; this saw subjugation of Non-Egyptians as normal and necessary because Egypt was the repository of *Maat* as originally established by the creator god. Beyond Egypt lay the forces of chaos embodied in the anarchic figure of the god Seth - the opponent of Horus. Foreign lands and gods were associated with Seth. Each successive pharaoh, as the incarnation of the god Horus - the symbol of order triumphant, had to maintain this stability. Thus the 'smiting king' represents a kind of consolidation of security for the nation, rather than aggression.

The good Egyptian ruler was not only the warrior king, judge and administrator; he was also the herdsman for his people. Chaos was seen to be caused by lack of rule - one of the earliest insignias of Pharaoh was the shepherd's crook - the origin of one of the words meaning "to rule". The definition of justice and conflict between a moral justice and the arbitrary exercise of authority were perennial issues in their bureaucracy. The earlier kings were encouraged to express their individuality as part of the divine and worldly order to which they belonged - they emphasised personal justice rather than impersonal law. When the king installed a new vizier into office he cautioned: "be vigilant concerning (all) that is done in it. Behold, it is the supporting (post) of the entire land." Warning is given that a public official cannot escape public knowledge of his actions: "authoritative utterance is in thy mouth, perception is in thy heart, and thy tongue is the shrine of justice". (Wilson 1946:99)

2.5.1.2 A PART CAN REPRESENT THE WHOLE

Because in their thinking a part can represent the whole, the original could be present in various places. For them philosophical truth was a system of complementary truths. Many different sacred localities were equated with the primeval hill, even the waters of chaos could be in several places at once. Changes were explained very simply as two different states - a transformation or metamorphosis. To the ancient Egyptians all the elements of the universe were of one substance whether physical or spiritual (Frankfort 1946:71), and the name or the idea or a representation is enough to be an effective substitute. Truth might be treated as an abstract concept or as a goddess, or as a divine being who once lived on earth. A god might be depicted as a man, or as a falcon, or as a falcon-headed man. The paradox that by manifesting the sacred any object becomes 'something else' yet it continues to remain itself for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu, is a central concept in Egyptian religion. The profound effect that this concept had on their concept of Christianity will be discussed in Chapter 6.

2.5.1.3 COSMOGONY AND POWER STRUCTURES

That the ancient Egyptians came to grips with the problem of origin and the problem of the aim and purpose of being is abundantly apparent now that their hieroglyphs are decipherable. The following is a quotation from Papyrus Bremner-Rhind:

"....the fact is that I developed as Developer. When I developed, development developed. All development developed after I developed, developments becoming many in emerging from my mouth, without the sky having developed, without the earth having developed It was out of the Waters, out of inertness, that I became tied together in them, without having found a place in which I could stand. I became effective in my heart, I surveyed with my face. I made every form alone," (Allen 1980:28) The notion of Atum's singularity before the process of development began is explicit, and confirmed by other texts that the process of creation was initiated by the source itself.

The ancient Egyptians speculated on the hierarchy of the different powers which they recognised in nature. The earth was understood to be a flat platter with a corrugated rim formed by the mountains of foreign lands. Hermopolis was the home town of certain gods who were in existence before creation - they are four couples representing the formless chaos: Nun & Naunet - (the Abyss); Huh & Hauket - (boundlessness); Kuk & Kauket - (Darkness); Amun (Amon) & Amaunet (Imperceptibility). The chief centre of the sun-god Re with his own family of gods, was at Heliopolis where the supreme council of the gods was held. According to the Book of the Dead, Atum-Re the creator - god had appeared on the hillock that was the promontory of land that first emerged from the primeval slime. (This is the symbolic meaning of the pyramids). Being all alone, he is an androgynous deity who created, differentiated into male and female, and named the parts of his body himself. They each had a separate existence and separate character, and although they accord with separate deities, the mythopoeic way of thinking in terms of any part representing the

whole is applicable here. This group, the Ennead (the Nine) contained progressive steps of cosmic order: air and moisture, earth and sky, and the beings on earth. This concept thus reveals an ingenious way of thinking about the inter-relatedness and interdependency of the various forces of nature and creates a dividing line between preceding confusion and present order. (See 5.7.1, the Nine-fold confession of Faith)

One only has to watch a chicken hatch from an egg, or a water-lily open as the sun hits it, to understand other Egyptian myths about the development of life out of the Primordial egg, or the lotus lily, which is said to have brought forth the sun-god and thereby life itself. (Morenz 1960:179) Running through the creation accounts is a secondary theme of creation by the spoken word, where Atum explains how he created the identities ("names") of his parts: "I used my own mouth - my identity is Magic" (Faulkner 1937:172-73), implying that Magic has priority over all created things, including the other forces of nature, but is subordinate and subsequent to the Creator himself. The Pyramid Texts describe how Atum spat out Shu - god of air, and Tefnut - goddess of moisture. They gave birth to earth (earth god Geb) and sky (sky goddess Nut). The latter two produced two brother-sister pairs: Osiris and Isis, who represent the fertility of the earth and of human kind as governed by order; and Seth and Nephthys, who represent their opposites (Van Dijk 1992, 1700). Later, Memphis was established as city of the god Ptah, just where the valley meets the Delta. The new Memphite theology (ca. 1250 BCE) equated Ptah with Nun, thus making him antecedent to the sun-god Re. Ptah was conceived of as the heart (conceptive) and tongue (creative) - the heart releases "everything which is completed" and "it is the tongue which announces what the heart thinks". Ptah is the bridge between the intellectual principle of creation and its material realization in the substance of the created world. This possible foreshadowing of the Logos of Neoplatonic Christianity in the prologue to John's gospel will be discussed in Chapter 6.5. Because of the way in which it was created, the world in its entirety is also the image (*tjt*) of the primordial source from which it was produced. For the ancient Egyptians this concept

was a means of capturing reality through symbols - in effect, all creation is a hieroglyphic text of the creator's original concept. Consequently, Ptah is also the patron of craftsmen in association with "in-formation" (Allen 1980:28).

The Egyptians did not limit their cosmology to the notion of Amun as one, all-powerful, pre-existing creator: he is *one* single ultimate cause of all existence, but *many* in its realization - unknowable but immanent in his creation, thus perceptible in the way in which his nature reveals itself in nature: "Manifest one whose identity is hidden" (Allen 1980:62) Three principles determine all existence:

"All the gods are three: Amun, the Sun, and Ptah, without their seconds. His identity is hidden in Amun, his is the Sun as face, his body is Ptah." (300th Chapter of the Leiden papyrus, quoted by Allen 1980:63) Each is a superhuman principle, and therefore a god in its own right, yet each too is one aspect of a broader, unified conception of deity, which is *one*. This will be discussed in Chapter 6.

2.5.1.4 THE MYTH OF DIVINE KINGSHIP

Plutarch, during the Roman period in Egypt, was the first to record a version of the myth of Isis and Osiris as a narrative. This contains hellenistic philosophical interpretations such as that the robes of Isis and Osiris symbolise access to the divine. (Kee 1995:155) Isis was originally the Egyptian goddess of the royal throne and thus the mother of Horus, the mythical representation of the living Pharaoh. Osiris became the mythical embodiment of the fertile lands of the Nile's eastern delta, which flooded every year and were thus restored to new life. His enemy, therefore was Seth, the god of the desert. Because of the death of Osiris at the hands of Seth (or Typhon), Osiris was the god of the dead, and in this way identified with the dead Pharaoh, thus representing the life of the deceased king in the world of the dead. Because Isis was the mother of Horus the living king, Osiris the dead king became her husband and the father of Horus (Koester 1982:186). The myth of Osiris and Horus reflects and hallows the institution of divine kingship; the legitimacy of the reigning king also

depends on the principle that he is both the living 'son' and the immediate divine reincarnation of his dead predecessor. The transmission of life-force (*ka*) from father to son implies the transmission of the father's office to the son and guarantees the latter's legitimacy. (Van Dijk 1992:1705-6) The king was the link between the human and divine worlds - the principle of life was the unifying factor - a blood relationship between father and son was not a prerequisite.

2.5.1.5 ISIS

Although the myth of Osiris and Isis was never written down in the Egyptian sources as a straightforward narrative (Van Dijk 1992:1697), at the shrine of the god Sokar in the temple of king Sety I (1306-1290 BCE) at Abydos there are two representations of the impregnation of Isis with the seed of Osiris. As if to eradicate all possibility of a sexual encounter and spiritualise this process completely, Isis appears as a kite or a sparrow hawk during impregnation (Figure 3). Her wings create the breath of life which revives the god Osiris sufficiently to produce semen. In this way Horus is the living son of the resurrected god, but Osiris now resides in the underworld as the Lord of Eternity and the 'ruler of the dead' (Figure 4):

"Who searched for him (Osiris) without wearying, Who went round this land lamenting, Not resting until she had found him. Who made a shade with her feathers, And created air with her wings, Who rejoiced when he revived her brother, And raised the inertness of the Weary One, Who received his seed and bore the Heir (Horus)," (Van Dijk 1992:1703)

In a Fifth Dynasty reproduction of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony Isis holds a billowing sail in one hand (the hieroglyph for wind or breath of life, and in the other hand the ankh. (Witt 1971, 39) In the iconography of the new Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE) Isis was sometimes pictured like Hathor as the "Great Cow". (Figure 5) Her early image was an African woman with black skin and Ethiopian features, seated on

a throne with the baby Horus on her lap (Figure 6). In traditional African cultures, mother and child images embodied the continuity of the life-cycle, and blackness (from the black silt (*Kemet*) brought by the Nile) was associated with fertility. (Ehrlich 1996:40)

2.5.2.6 RITUAL

Egyptian identity was connected with group belief in the existence of deities, and was acted out in liturgy and customs. The aim of ritual was to establish links with cosmic forces so as to render life harmonious and peaceful. The temple religion was esoteric in that rites, reading of spells and liturgies were privately enacted. The official cults were a series of performances for the elite except for annual massive processions such as the Valley Feast or Sokar where the families participated indirectly. (Spalinger 1998:260) Only during the New Kingdom does a whole corpus of sun hymns intelligible to the common people emerge. The public appearance of the deity at the climax of the ritual functioned to make this revelation a reality in the cultic setting. By revealing an effigy of the deity, itself still a symbol, the populace experienced an epiphany and was assured that the divine power was in fact present with them, although still maintaining the hidden nature of its true personality and character. The 'hidden' and the 'revealed' were the two opposing and complementary marks of the Egyptian gods, and these two marks were symbolised in both the mythic tradition of Egypt and in the cultic expression of that tradition. It was a dramatization intended to realize the mystery of the divine presence within the created cosmos, to effect a re-creation of the universe - a cosmic function. (Tobin 1989:29, 31)

2.6 THE TURMOIL OF THE LATE DYNASTIC PERIOD, A GREEK FOOTHOLD AND THE END OF EGYPTIAN RULE.

The history of pharaonic Egypt has been outlined as a record of cyclic states of unity and disunity of the country because the dominant themes of observable remnants of

its rulers that have come down to us are building and warfare. (Knapp 1988) This gives a very incomplete picture of the realities of life in Egypt over that period. It is generally accepted that the written records were ideologically motivated and propogandistic, but where remaining artworks can be dated accurately they give a fair indication of the condition of the culture at a particular time. The content of Egyptian art was always tied to function, and was derived from the Egyptian world view and executed according to their concept of truth. Judging by the strength of their artworks, the Napatan kings in Egypt seem to have achieved some sort of a revival even though by 1000 BCE the New Kingdom had come to an end. (Quirke & Spencer 1992:48) The Napatan kingdom was the largest ancient kingdom in Africa. Only in 671 BCE did the Assyrian king break their grip and capture Memphis, and soon after Thebes was sacked as well.

The Assyrians left Psamtjek to govern lower Egypt, and this line of Saite kings deliberately introduced Greek influence. Trade with Syrian and Carian mercenaries and the Aegean had been in progress since the third millennium BCE. A Greek city was established on Egyptian soil at Naucratis in the Delta, for purposes of trade and to settle the Greek mercenaries. In spite of his Greek allies, Psamtjek III was defeated by the rapidly expanding Persian Empire (ca. 525 BCE). Persian rule brought the Iron age into Egypt together with the Aramaic script and language, but these conquerors with their hatred of idolatry were not in sympathy with their apparently polytheistic subjects. When two centuries later in 332 BCE Alexander the Great grasped Egypt from the Persians, he was welcomed by the Egyptians.

2.7 "GENIUS LOCI" AND EGYPTIAN IDENTITY

By this time there was still no formal definition of what constituted an Egyptian, and no concept of citizenship. (Leahy 1992:232) According to Leahy, the Egyptians simply defined themselves by 1) residence in the Nile valley, 2) language, 3) religion and 4) general culture - especially burial customs. The capacity of Egyptian society to

absorb people from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds without prejudice was one of its characteristic features. The only requirement to attain Egyptian identity was a willingness to accept the above criteria; this was the vital factor in the development and long duration of Egyptian culture. (Leahy 1992:233) Although Atiya (1968:16) claims that their religion kept them from intermarriage with the successive waves of invaders of other faiths, and that the Copt's purity of race is not just legend, it is reasonable to accept that there has been an enormous amount of racial diffusion in Egypt over the millennia. The major flow of history also resulted in diffusion of intellectual activity and ideas. After all the continual intermingling, the traces of Egyptian culture observable today can hardly be ascribed to racial characteristics. The pervasive effect of *genius loci*, the "spirit of place" (Norberg-Schulz 1971:27) in forming a symbolic world-view, could be a real factor in the sense of identity of the 'people of the black land'.

CHAPTER 3

HELLENISTIC CULTURE IN EGYPT 332 - 32 BCE

The entry of Alexander the Great into Egypt in 332 BCE was the watershed that initiated a thousand years of Graeco-Roman impact on the ancient Egyptian culture.

3.1 GREEK AS LANGUAGE OF ADMINISTRATION

The immediate effect of the Macedonian victory was that Greek became the language of administration. Although this had significant effects on Egyptian culture, it did not lead to as much lasting syncretism as one would expect because even when the Egyptians learned the Greek language they were discriminated against when it came to occupying administrative posts. Some of the superior priests and a few individual Egyptians formed a kind of natural aristocracy, but in the main the Egyptians belonged to a lower class in society than the Greek settlers, and were disadvantaged economically as well. There are various literary records of their sense of inferiority and injustice.

3.2 ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

One of Alexander's first actions after conquering Egypt was the establishment of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast, which became a thriving cosmopolitan port. The prosperity of Alexandria attracted peasants from the rural areas, and although resulting in overcrowding, did provide cheap Egyptian labour. In combination with fresh Greek expertise this led to rapid growth of the economy, with Alexandria becoming the centre of industries such as textiles, papyrus, glass, oil, perfumes, wine, ivory and ebony work. However, the full potential was never realised because the Ptolemies were not interested in developing the market economy and levied enormous duties on loans (Green 1990:366). Trigger states that the early civilizations were highly complex but that there was one constant: "the production of surpluses that the upper classes appropriated through a tributary relationship" (1993:44). The estates had always been the possession of the temples, and Egypt had always been Pharaoh's

estate, managed by nomarchs, but under Ptolemy the nomarch was reduced to a minor financial official, while the Greek *strategos* became the actual governor of the nome. The nomarchs were centrally administered but with regional delegation. Manning contests Green's representation of Ptolemaic Egypt as highly centralised. At this stage it was local conditions of tenure and irrigation that were still dominant (1998:53), but with a greater variety of agriculture they flourished. However, this was not done in the traditional spirit of *Maat* (roughly translateable in this context as justice and truth), as there was an extensive system of state monopolies, including such things as the manufacture of textiles, which were exported and in that way supplied a large revenue to the Ptolemies. In addition, such revenue was further augmented by numerous taxes. Bell describes the development of Ptolemaic rule as at best enlightened self-interest. (1946:56)

The early Ptolemies were hard-headed administrators and business men, but they also aimed at stability, wealth and influence in the world. They settled as many mercenaries as possible in Egypt, where they received allotments of land all along the Nile, with the liability to render military assistance when required. This influx of Greeks brought their art, literature and traditional way of life, and they soon became assimilated to their new environment. However, the average Egyptian peasant, especially in upper Egypt, did not identify with the hellenist State and resisted any cultural assimilation. His new rulers were alien and far away; their policy was directed outwards to the Mediterranean world, and to him Alexandria was a foreign city. The declining character of the ruling line could eventually be seen in the decline of the strength and prosperity of the country as a whole (Bell 1946:56), but the independently administered, dynamic and cosmopolitan Alexandria must have been very stimulating.

3.3 ALEXANDRIA - THE INTELLECTUAL METROPOLIS

Through Ptolemy I's efforts and those of his son, by the second Century BCE Alexandria became a great cosmopolitan centre of learning. The Jewish scriptures were being translated into Greek because of the large Jewish population and the hellenization of the Jews in Alexandria had been so effective that Philo founded a Judaic philosophy formulated in the Greek language and on the model of Greek philosophic speculation. Also during this time germinal efforts were made by the Egyptian priests to devise the Coptic language, which were later taken further by Christians so that by the third century CE there was a large body of Christian literature available in the Coptic dialects, even in such distant places as Oxyrhynchus. The spreading of literacy amongst the non-priestly class of Egyptians was also subsequently helped along by the Romans who promoted middle-class ideals which valued and strove for education. One result of this was that all sorts of maverick ideas sprang up. (Baines 1996:34)

3.4 GREEK ATTEMPTS AT SYNCRETISM - SERAPIS

The insidious changes that came with the Ptolemies were masked at first by the way in which Alexander had identified with the traditional Egyptian concept of the ruling pharaoh being a god-king. The entire social structure of pharaonic Egypt had been geared towards the serving of religious requirements, and the political system had been structured in such a way as to embody the religion which in turn reinforced the political structures. But by the time that Alexander died in 323 BCE, the syncretising forces of Hellenism, both blatant and subtle, were in operation.

Inevitably, the final form of the myth of Osiris was a hellenistic product. The sacred bull Apis had been worshiped in Memphis long before the Ptolemies came to Egypt. The dead bull became Osiris, while the soul of the dying Osiris was united with the living Apis, resulting in the divine name Oserapis. When Ptolemy I brought the corpse of Alexander the Great from Memphis to Alexandria, he transferred the

Oserapis cult into Alexandria, making it the central cult of his realm and giving it Greek features, and even hellenizing its name to Sarapis. Ptolemy I had realised the necessity for religious sensitivity and on the advice of the Egyptian priest Manetho, he had selected Sarapis as a tutelary god to promote initial understanding and tolerance. (El-Abbadi 1993:46) The cult of Sarapis was designed to form a link between Ptolemy's Greek and Egyptian subjects, but was simply a hellenized form of Apis and Osiris. Though it did contain some Egyptian elements the cult and ritual of Sarapis was arranged according to Greek patterns. Sarapis was projected as a man of ideal beauty in the prime of life, like the hellenic Zeus. This god was to be the patron god of the Ptolemaic empire and enhance its prestige. Ptolemy's real motivation was to legitimise the Ptolemies as the true heirs of the Pharaohs by adopting an Egyptian god as their own deity, but Memphis was strongly associated with Egyptian identity, and a religious folk literature that reflected national aspirations originated there. (Steen 1993:31) To the Memphites Alexandria stood for foreign rule by the Ptolemies, and they did not accept Sarapis, and continued the traditional forms of the cult of the Apis bull. Worship of Ptolemy II and his sister-wife Arsinoe II was being practiced during their rule, justified by a distortion of the traditional Egyptian worship of Pharaoh's successor as god. In a dedication of a temple for queen Berenice in the 3rd Century BCE, she is called "Isis, Mother of the Gods, Berenice". This trend culminated with the sacred marriage of Marc Antony as a New Dionysus with Cleopatra VII as the New Isis. Hellenistic practices such as these whereby ancient Egyptian gods were altered to fit in with Greek concepts, fanned the flames of an indigenous resentment about this foreign influence (Figures 7a, 7b, 8, 9, 10a, 10b, 11).

Manning (1998:54) points out that there is no historical basis for Green's assertion that Egyptian peasants preferred indigenous to foreign masters, but according to Eddy (1961:271) the resistance to Hellenism was based on religious convictions. The Egyptians wanted a native Pharaoh to continue the divine kingship, and they insisted on the maintenance of justice and morality. They also claimed priority for their

religion in that they believed that Greek philosophy had been discovered by their Egyptian god Thoth, and that their goddess Isis had initiated the concept of regeneration. In addition, the chasm formed by excessive benefit to the Ptolemies exacerbated the hardship on the Egyptians and eventually various rebellions broke out. When an Egyptian army won the Battle of Raphia for Ptolemy IV in 217 BCE, there was a fresh feeling of national self-confidence, and from then on the largely peasant population of Egyptians never ceased from revolting against Ptolemaic rule.

3.5 THE UNIVERSAL ISIS CULT

During the Ptolemaic era the native Egyptian culture was maintained by the hereditary priesthood. The most learned of the priests continued to use and elaborate the hieroglyphic script. Local myths were collected by the priests, temple rituals were written down and gradually some Alexandrian scholars became interested in Egyptian religion and magic. In Egypt the cult of Osiris and Isis had always had an ethnic and national character. The notion of a universal god without national ties did not exist. There are texts which state precisely that access to temples and participation in the religious ceremonies, were forbidden to Non-Egyptians. The following translation of a letter from Memphis to the *strategos* demonstrates how difficult it must have been to be a Greek in Memphis and trying to do his duty to Serapis while on the receiving end of the Egyptian peasants' resentment:

..."Being outrageously wronged and often put in danger of my life by the below-listed cleaners from the sanctuary, (Mys the clothing seller, Psosnaus the yoke-bearer, Imouthes the baker, Harembasnis the grain-seller, Stotoetis the porter, Harchebis the doucher, Po ... os the carpet-weaver, and others with them, whose names I do not know.) I am seeking refuge with you thinking that I shall thus particularly receive justice. For in the 21st year, on Phaephi 8, they came to the Astartieion in the sanctuary, in which I have been in *katoche* for the aforesaid years, some of them holding stones in their hands, others sticks, and tried to force

their way in, so that with this opportunity they might plunder the temple and kill me because I am a Greek, attacking me in concerted fashion. And when I made it to the door of the temple before them and shut it with a great crash, and ordered them to go away quietly, they did not depart; but they struck Diphilos, one of the servants compelled to remain by Sarapis, who showed his indignation at the way they were behaving in the sanctuary, robbing him outrageously and attacking him violently and beating him so that their illegal violence was made obvious to everybody" (Bagnall, R S & Derow, P 1981:194).

Nevertheless, the universalist and syncretistic objective of Hellenism was fully realised with Isis. The Isis cult had begun to spread through the Mediterranean world as early as the fourth century BCE, carried by Egyptian sailors. By Ptolemy III's day Isis and Serapis were included, together with the deified rulers, in the royal oath. As the goddess of heaven and mother of all, she united in her person everything that was significant for the religious expectations of her time. Egyptian elements such as her appearance as Hathor in the shape of a cow, her dress and headdress, the sistrum and Anubis her constant companion actually aided her development into a universal deity, but her overall appearance and essence were now Greek, even sometimes taking on the features of Aphrodite.

Tran Tam Tinh (1982:101) points out that before the birth of Christianity the cult of Sarapis and Isis already existed in most of the countries of the eastern Mediterranean. She had developed an universal adaptability: "You, you alone, are all the goddesses evoked by the races of men each in his own language, in his own land." (Isidorus of Medinet Madi quoted by Tran Tam Tinh 1982:106) – she is saviour goddess (*soteriera*) as Sarapis is saviour god (*soter*). To a large extent, the appeal of Isis was due to the belief that she had power over fate, destiny and fortune. Greek gods were subordinated to fate, but the chief gods and goddesses of Egypt ruled over fate and could change its course. (Kakosy 1992:9). The goddess Tyche was often identified with fate as set in the zodiac, and the final, unpredictable

universality of death. The Alexandrians maintained a cult of an anthropomorphic goddess called Agatha Tyche - "Good Fortune", but she was "merely a kind of ambivalent half-way house between monotheistic thinking and the old divinely ordered cosmos" (Green 1990:401). Isis was a bridge for the hellenists between Tyche and Protagorean man. As Isis 'of the myriad names' (Tarn & Griffith 1927:357) she was mistress of Fate, her cult became a universalist doctrine with a promise of a happy life here below and in the hereafter, containing precepts of continence and abstinence, demanding an act of faith and a daily liturgy giving life to piety. (Tran Tam Tinh 1982:106, 115) The elite ritual of initiation into the Isis cult implied a dying to one's former life and the possibility of a new life in the service of the goddess, a conscious experience of being united with the deity who rules the whole world, and as such, set apart from the uninitiated.

3.6 THE LONGING FOR A SAVIOUR

It was actually the overwhelming impact of the hellenized Isis, which came with Sarapis' entourage, which became the central divine figure of a world religion. The universal longevity of her appeal is indicated by the fact that the last hieroglyphic inscriptions made are on the sanctuary of Isis on the island of Philae, and dates to the end of the 4th Century CE. (Van der Vliet 1998:104) Green comments that the quasi-abstract Tyche, the uncalculable "flaw in any rational universe they could conceive, must have seemed a truer symbolization of their spiritual dilemma than Protagorean man who had sickened of his own image".

In a typical Coptic magical aretology, Isis describes herself as filling a kind of "spiritual black hole". According to Green, (1990:630) Epicurus (ca. 306 BCE) had early on turned his back on the hellenistic world, putting his finger on a deep malaise of his age: "At a time of political instability and private dissillusionment, Epicurus saw that people like atoms are individuals and many of them wander in the void ... ' the whole world lives in pain; it is for pain that it has most capacity '." Bell also

reports a "profound spiritual malaise which marked the last centuries of paganism with a growing craving for some redemptive religion." Eddy interprets this as a yearning for a Messiah, a god or a person associated with a god who would appear miraculously for the salvation of his people. He recognised this as a spiritualization of previous historic kingship in Egypt, when in the pharaonic period kings were held to be the source of good - of order as opposed to chaos - even of life itself. (Eddy 1961:336)

3.7 ART AND LITERATURE

The full flowering of iconography had reached its peak during the New Kingdom. In the subsequent art of the early hellenistic era in Egypt the melting-pot quality is clearly perceptible. With the coming of the Ptolemaic era the classical Egyptian art with its mythological figures was replaced with a transitional phase with syncretistic characters. The prevailing features were Roman religious syncretism with Egyptian, Oriental and Graeco-Roman deities together with mythological sources. These were created for votive purposes. In addition, a completely alien naturalistic effect crept in, sometimes conveying a disturbing confusion and debasement of the masterly classic Egyptian style (Figure 12).

Literature such as the *Oracle of the Potter* promoted anti-Hellenism. (Dated by Eddy to the end of the 3rd Century BCE, but by Burstein to about 116 BCE). In the *Oracle of the Potter* the prophet hopes for the destruction of Greek rule in Egypt and predicts the return of a native Pharaoh to put an end to Egypt's suffering. (Eddy 1961:294)

"...For these things will happen when the great god Hephaistos (Ptah) will desire to return to the city (Memphis), and the Girdlewearers (Greeks and Macedonians) will kill each other as they are Typhonians (followers of Seth - the mortal enemy of Osiris). evil will be done. And he will pursue them on foot to the sea in wrath and destroy many of them because they are impious." and further on:

"Then will Egypt flourish when the ... ruler appears, the king descended from Helios (the sun god Re), the giver of good things, the one installed by the greatest Isis, so that the living will pray that the dead might arise to share the prosperity. Finally the leaves will fall. The Nile, which had lacked water, will be full" (Burstein 1985:106)

3.8 ROMAN RULE IN EGYPT

Only when Augustus Caesar came into power in Egypt in 32 BCE, did the administration of justice become highly centralised. Plato and Aristotle had first promoted the idea that only a divinely gifted individual would be able to re-establish peace, order and prosperity, - the divinity of the hellenistic ruler was based on his excellence (Nock quoted by Koester 1982:33), whereas in Egypt the divinity of the Pharaoh had been the unquestioned foundation of royal ideology for centuries and Pharaoh was divine simply because he was the Pharaoh. Another major change was that the High Priest of Alexandria and all Egypt was now a Roman civil official, and the supreme authority who controlled the details of cult and temple organization. Thirdly, the Romans introduced a regular census, taken every 14 years. This census distinguished Roman citizens and the inhabitants of the three Greek self-governing cities (Alexandria, Naucratis and Ptolemais) as well as the descendants of the military settlers, from the rest of the population, who were then subjected to a poll-tax. It was always the fiscal interest that came first, and the short-sighted exploitation that started with the Ptolemies eventually led to severe economic and social decline. The country became divided between a semi-feudal nobility and a half-servile peasantry. The combination of decadence of socio-economic factors and the disintegration of traditional religions set the stage for the welcoming of Christianity. Hellenism had created a void, and anxiety about immortality led to metaphysical questioning. According to Tran Tam Tinh, by their rites, mysteries and by the personal piety of the devotees of Isis, the people of the Mediterranean were readied for the 'quest of the new'. (1982:116).

CHAPTER 4

GRAECO-ROMAN CULTURE IN EGYPT

4.1 THE ALEXANDRIAN MATRIX

Hellenism cannot simply be confined to a straightforward historical time period - its dynamism continued to be effective throughout the Roman imperial period and beyond. Alexandria had been established by Alexander the Great at Rhakotis because it was so strategically placed for trade on the South Eastern Mediterranean. By the time that the rhythm of the Monsoons were discovered by Hippalus in the first century CE (Wagstaff 1985:138), not only goods but people moved about from all corners of the known world. In this way the common '*Koine*' Greek became spread abroad and carried with it the syncretising ideal of a universal Hellenism. Consequently the cultural soil into which Christianity was sown at Alexandria was a seething mix of extremely mobile, searching and diverse ethnic groups.

A complicating factor in an already highly complex situation was that the cultural milieu of Alexandria was different to the *Hinterland* of Egypt. An additional factor was that broadly speaking, apart from the different groups of Jews, as well as Greeks, Romans and other 'pagans', e.g. Persians, there were two distinct cultural groups of Egyptians - the Greek-speaking intellectual elite and the uneducated, disenfranchised Egyptian-speaking peasants. Griggs (1990:24) has pointed out that the oldest known fragment of the New Testament (found in 1920) may have come from way up the Nile at Oxyrhynchus and dates to about the end of the first century, so that to say that the intellectuals were in Alexandria and the peasants up-country, is to oversimplify, especially as the Nile provided such an efficient communication line. The evidence of the papyri points to early penetration of Alexandrian scholarship into middle and upper Egypt and reflects a remarkably wide range of both secular and Christian literature being read there by the end of the second century. (Roberts 1977:57-60),

McCoull (1986:42) quotes P R L Brown's comment that to know what it was like to be human in Late Antiquity one must read papyri - the material is fresh and unmediated. But texts are not always self-explanatory; they must be understood within their specific, localised, and within their larger historical and cultural context, because contextualization allows historical relativization, and only through this process can the phenomena being studied become "things in themselves". (Spiegelberg 1975:21) Hornung (1992:134) pointed out that the Egyptian recording of events was largely subordinate to the function of maintaining the cosmos, so that what is available for study is only that which the elite wished to have recorded; consequently the artefacts of pharaonic culture reflect a sophisticated ideology, because access by any other group than the elite was limited. (Baines 1996:383) The absence of different dialects from written texts of most periods is another symptom of the centralizing emphasis of Egyptian culture, with its goal of forging an ideology that underpins unity (Baines 1996:361). One may well expect that Egyptian society was more diverse than can easily be seen, because it traditionally presented itself as unchanging; and by the late Period (664-332 BCE) the textual evidence is there. (Baines 1996:381). Snell (1997:132) confirms the disintegration of this elite monopoly by presenting an example from the papyri of the hellenistic period which reflects the plurality of ethnic groups and interests. This records a striving group of capitalists renting out their land to peasants for profit.

Many peasants had migrated to Alexandria to escape the harsh poll-tax and even harsher consequences of not being able to supply what was required of their annual harvest, particularly because of drought conditions. In Alexandria they could disappear amongst the masses, and escape being taken into slavery. Betz (1992:131) attributes the marked rise of individualism during Hellenism as a reaction to the depersonalising effect of these huge cosmopolitan populations. Thus under the impact of Hellenism, and also because of the fragmentation of the economy and Roman ideology, indigenous populations and cultures broke up, and there was a rapid

increase in the voluntaristic element in religion with the result that conversion became a common feature of religious life. Persons were being converted to Christianity and to other hellenistic religions from a variety of social worlds and they would not have completely abandoned their cultural background. There were in-groups and out-groups; it is necessary to decipher what each group meant by their language use, even when they were using a common language, (Kee 1983:56) and this must be understood in relation to their mythic and other symbolic systems. For instance according to Roberts (1977:65), Origen wrote of Christian *Aiguptioi* as distinct from *Hellenes*. The derivation of the word *gypsy* confirms the meaning of the word, in that it indicated those people who, in their migration from India to Spain, arrived via *aiguptos*, thus being identified as having come out of Egypt. (Van der Vliet & Zonhoven 1998:117) It most probably denotes the majority of the Egyptians who were excluded from the privileged class in the nome capitals and gymnasia, but it did not necessarily imply an inability to understand Greek. Under the Ptolemies, members of Alexandria's large Jewish community were allowed to freely practice their faith and their own affairs, and after the Roman conquest the Alexandrian Jews were favourably treated in contrast to the humiliating treatment of the Egyptians, but only until 38 CE when a pogrom was instituted by Flaccus the prefect of Egypt. To attain Alexandrian citizenship under Roman rule, an Egyptian had to have a birth certificate proving descent from both parents as Alexandrian citizens, and a diploma from the civic gymnasium, attained at age 14. (El-Abbadi 1993:43)

Koine would have conveyed the ideas, concepts and imagery of Hellenism. (Garrison 1997:22), but other subtle counter-influences arose, for instance the invention of the Coptic language. (See 4.2.1.1) Coptic borrowed the letters of the Greek alphabet and some Greek words, but expressed the sounds and grammar of the ancient Egyptian language. Thus although the visible, apparently 'polytheistic' iconography that was underlying the demotic and hieratic script was eliminated, the rich vocabulary of Coptic still functioned as a vehicle of the intrinsic factor of Egyptian natural

environment and metaphor as originally evidenced in their ancient hieroglyphic language.

Richard Laqueur (1881-1959) regarded Hellenism as the transformation of the ethnic-national culture of Greece into an universal culture and civilization, which implied progress and held the potential for new cultural creativeness. (Betz 1992:127) The invention of Coptic is a prime example of this, where the spread of Christianity was mediated by a synthesis of Egyptian concepts and language and the Greek alphabet, but Hellenism was also automatically disseminated wherever Coptic was used. Eventually, through the invention of Coptic, literacy became more accessible because it was a much easier script than Egyptian.

4.2 EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN EGYPT

Eusebius, writing in the 4th Century, reports that Christianity was brought to Egypt by St. Mark when he came from Rome to Alexandria in about the middle of the first Century. The gist of Atiya's account (1968:18) is as follows: On his way to Rome to meet Peter and Paul, St. Mark went to Alexandria, where he made the first converts. He then continued to Rome, leaving Ananius as second patriarch of the church. He left Rome after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in 64 CE, returning to Alexandria with Barnabas two years later, where after two years of winning more converts he too was martyred.

It is apparent from Figure 13a that the sailing routes in use at that time make the possibility of St. Mark having called at Alexandria on his way to Rome highly likely, but not all the details of this tradition are accepted by all scholars. Koester, for reasons of logical sequence, discounts Eusebius' report, but does state that it is unthinkable that the Christian mission should have by-passed Alexandria for decades (1982:220), also mentioning the statement in Acts 18:12 that Apollos, the fellow-worker of Paul, was an Alexandrian Jew. Barnard points out that Mark was a relatively obscure

person in the early Church, and that silence about his presence in Alexandria does not negate the possibility of his activities there. He suggests that the connection between Mark and Alexandria should be treated with more respect. (1964:145-150) Griggs also notes a continued scholarly bias in scholarly literature against the traditional belief of Mark's role in Egyptian Christian history. (1990:21)

H L Takla (1999) states that the purpose of Mark and Barnabas' visit to Alexandria was that they had heard that Apollos was preaching an 'imperfect' gospel there. Griggs (1990:16) refers to the episode of Apollos in Acts 11, which describes Apollos as 'a native Alexandrian who was eloquent and well-versed in the scriptures.' According to the bilingual Western Text Codex Bezae (D), in Acts 18:25 he had been instructed in his homeland (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι) (Griggs 1990:16). This implies that Christianity must have initially been taken to Egypt by approximately 50 CE. The text goes on to say that Apollos was teaching accurately concerning Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of John, (which explains why it was 'imperfect'). Then in Acts 19 there is a sequel - Paul had to rebaptise some who had been 'incompletely' taught by Apollos. (1 Peter 5:13)

Griggs reports Morton Smith's discovery in 1958 of a letter of Clement of Alexandria's which states that Mark travelled from Rome to Alexandria after Peter's death. This states that Mark composed a "more spiritual gospel" in Alexandria to use for the initiation of worthy Christians in the Alexandrian church. The *Secret gospel of Mark* is not the original gospel of Mark, but it was used among the 'perfect' Christians in the church of Alexandria towards the end of the second century. (Koester 1982:223) The only surviving fragment of it is the quotation in Clement of Alexandria's letter. (Koester 1990:293) This apocryphal version may have been read in Egypt earlier than the Gospel of Mark. The problem is that it was also used in a different recension, by the gnostic sect of the Carpocratians. A statement by St. John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) exists to the effect that Mark's gospel was originally

composed in Alexandria, in the Greek language, and it is said to have appeared 12 years after the Crucifixion, i.e. in the year 45. In his letter Clement also states that the Carpocratians subsequently falsified and misused this 'more spiritual' gospel of Mark's. The ever cautious Pearson accepts the letter as genuinely that of Clement, but does not accept Smith's theories pertaining to the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. (Pearson 1986:138). He accepts that this does at least imply that the church in Alexandria was already in existence when Mark arrived from Rome after Peter's death.

Griggs lists the other biblical allusions to Egypt in the beginnings of Christianity (1990:14-17) :-

- 1 Matthew's description of the flight of the holy family into Egypt, noting that the length of time of their stay in Egypt is not given.
- 2 Acts 2 states that amongst the many people who were present at Pentecost were Jews living in Egypt. Jews had lived continuously in Egypt from the time of Psammetichus II in 590 BCE. Philo and Josephus state that there were about one million Jews in Alexandria in their time, and that the total population in Egypt outside of Alexandria was seven and a half million. Taken conservatively, one may still surmise that Egypt had a proportionately high Jewish population and may well have been fertile soil for the beginnings of Christianity in Egypt, particularly as this phase has been demonstrated to have been Jewish in character (Griggs 1990:16).
- 3 1 Peter 5:13 "the congregation at Babylon ... and my son, Mark, send you greetings." Although there have been other explanations of this text, for instance that Babylon was a pseudonym for Rome, Coptic tradition links this text to a very ancient area of modern Cairo which is still named Babylon. According to Arab historians the building of the Fortress of Babylon was begun by Persians who named it after the capital of their home country, but according to classical historians, the ancient Egyptian name of the area of Heliopolis was probably derived from the *Hap n Iwn*, i.e. the place of the God

Hapi at Heliopolis. (Fr Khalil 1985:29) See 6.1.2

The most ancient Coptic church - The "Hanging" or "Suspended" Al Moallaka Coptic Church was built on top of one of the bastions of the Roman fortress in the Jewish quarter of Heliopolis which in the time of Caesar Augustus, housed a peace-keeping force consisting of three Roman legions. The fortress wall is still visible and the Church dates to the late third century, but because murals depicting Roman pagan gods have been found under a layer of plaster, there is a possibility that it may have been a Roman temple before it was used as a Christian church. According to Jewish tradition, the nearby Ben Ezra synagogue which became the *Cairo Genizah*, also originally dates back to a synagogue of the pre-Christian era. Its proximity to one of the first Christian places of worship in Egypt affirms the intimate association of Christianity and Judaism in the earliest stages of Christianity in Egypt (Figure 14).

Two other instances of possible references to early Christianity in Egyptian documentation are a) the letter of Emperor Hadrian (who reigned from 117-138 CE) to Consul Servianus in which he makes mention of Christians in Alexandria (Griggs 1990:22), and b) Pearson (1986:134) mentions the letter of Emperor Claudius to the Alexandrians, dated November 41 CE: "Nor are they (the Jews) to bring in or invite Jews coming from Syria or Egypt, or I shall be forced to proceed against them in every way as fomenting a common plague for the whole world." It is possible, but not provable, that "Jews coming from Syria" could have included Jewish Christian missionaries from Palestine.

4.2.1 THE JEWISH CHRISTIANITY OF THE FIRST CENTURY

Chadwick (1991:18) also surmises that Christianity must have taken root early at Alexandria, but it was not until the discovery of more of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers that the process of unpicking this tapestry provided an intimation of the unsettled growing pains during the first two centuries of the early church in Egypt.

In an analysis of the complex historical tapestry of early Christianity, Ferguson

regards hellenistic Judaism as one of the major factors favouring the spread of Christianity. (1993:493). Additional factors are the good roads provided by the stable Roman government making for ease and safety of travel, the spread of the Greek language and the religious quest of the gentile world, which promoted religious freedom. Pearson (1986:216) and Roberts (1977:57) confirm that in the beginning the varieties of Christianity in Alexandria were varieties of Alexandrian Judaism.

Danielou makes the distinction that "Jewish Christianity" could designate those Jews who acknowledge Christ as a Messiah, but not as the Son of God. Alternatively, it could refer to the Christian community of Jerusalem, under the leadership of James, which was perfectly orthodox in its Christianity, but remained attached to certain Jewish ways of life, although accepting the divinity of Christ. Thirdly, the term could refer to the Pauline type of Christian thought which expressed itself in forms borrowed from Judaism (Danielou 1973:9). This is the sense in which Danielou uses it. To him its value lay in its interpretation of a tradition still in living continuity with the word of scripture. (Danielou 1973:5). However he points out that this theology suffered from serious limitations in its terminology and some of its conclusions. It was vulnerable to heresies and misinterpretations, (Danielou 1973:4) because the apocalyptic character was conceived in such terms as "the revelation of cosmic secrets; the dwelling-places of angels and demons and the souls of men; the secrets of history written beforehand in the book of God, the mystery of the Cross of glory, and the pre-existent Church".

Rokeah quotes Cyprian (ca. 250 CE) as saying "I recognise no other gods but the one true God who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them". (1982:23) These are almost the exact words quoted by the first Christians in Acts 4:24. They are also identical to the words which Jonah uses in professing his faith to the pagan sailors who turn to him for an explanation of their disaster, and respond with faith. It appears that this conception of God to which the Jews lay claim came to made

reasonable sense to Pagans and Christians alike and almost became a common denominator. This then raised the problem of what was Judaism and what was truly Christian. Betz (1992:144) describes Judaism during the Graeco-Roman period to have been diverse, without established norms - each form of Judaism understanding itself to be the true successor to biblical "Israel" therefore it was inevitable that the controversies occurring first within Judaism were continued within Christianity. Christianity became the intellectual and spiritual background against which the confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism was fought. (Betz 1992:127) Other world religions like Mithraism, the Mystery religions and Gnosticism were also seeking converts, and thus joined in the fray.

The half century from 150 to 200 was a turning point for Christianity. During this time Christianity secured a recognisable following in Alexandria, with an active catechetical school to compete with other philosophical schools, drawing students from all over the Mediterranean. The diversity of cultural influences had taken effect - there was now a new type of Christian who needed to unite the values of Hellenism and the Christian faith. Early Christian teachers, usually well-grounded in Greek philosophy, had to adapt their methods to hellenic education. Christian writers became an integral part of the intellectual world of late antiquity, and after initial Christian resistance toward the intellectual currents of antiquity, by the end of the second century CE, "Christian Hellenism" had taken root, and the Coptic language was being developed for missionary purposes.

4.2.1.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COPTIC LANGUAGE

By the fifth century BCE the simplified Demotic script had been devised for officials to use for recording purposes. It had been derived from the Hieratic script which was used only by the priests and scribes, and was a simplified version of the Hieroglyphic script. With the advent of Hellenism when *Koine* Greek eventually became the common language of everyday use, the pagan Egyptian priests were forced to

transliterate their financially profitable magical amulets into Greek characters. Because the efficacy of these was linked to pronunciation, they used several Demotic characters to denote Egyptian language sounds which were not possible in Greek. It is ironic that the Greeks had originally learned their writing system from the Phoenicians, who had possibly originally derived the idea of writing from Egypt (Whitt 1992, 2380) but then developed it into an alphabet with a far smaller number of characters, all pronounceable as consonants. The resultant 'proto-coptic' script formed from Greek letters by the Egyptian priests would then have done a round trip from Egypt via Phoenicia to Greek and back to Egypt!

Van der Vliet (1998:118) points out that Coptic is the oldest example of language alteration as a result of interaction between an African language and a European language. Significant areas where Coptic differs from the ancient Egyptian language are the far more flexible word order and the use of conjunctives. But its rich verbal system with many different tenses hark back to the original Demotic, and are important in the conveying of nuances of meaning. This difference might have had far-reaching implications in crucial communicating situations like the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. (See conclusion)

After the Jewish Revolt in the first quarter of the second century CE, with the resultant virtual annihilation of the Jews in Alexandria, the Gnostic teachers Basilides and Valentinus became prominent in Alexandria. Possibly as a reaction to this, the Egyptian missionary Pantaenus was appointed as Dean of the Christian school of Alexandria. According to Coptic tradition, it was Pantaneus and Clement of Alexandria (who succeeded Pantaneus) who were responsible for the development of the Coptic language - "this new and easy script ... this gift of a simplified method of reading and writing".¹ (Habib El Masri 1987:15 & 20)

¹ Habib El Masri points out that some writers consider Pantanaeus as Greek, but that this is incorrect - the mistake came about simply because he wrote in Greek and was of the generation of Egyptians who were often given Greek names.

When in 189 CE Demetrius became the first Egyptian bishop of Alexandria, they embarked on a concerted drive to convert the Egyptian peasants. At the catechetical school the first attempts were made to construct a systematic Christian world view on the basis of the data provided by the divine events of the Incarnation and Resurrection of the Word. A practical problem was that the Word of God had to be written in such a way that the Greek speaking missionaries could read and the Egyptians peasants could understand, thus the Coptic script that had been devised by the priests was now put to a Christian purpose. The Christians tried to use this script for all the dialects along the Nile, but as these were too localised geographically most of the attempts were short-lived. Sahidic (the most neutral of the dialects), became the dominant form of Coptic because St. Shenouda (who was antagonistic to Greek culture) used it for his extensive writings. However, the monastic communities at Wadi n' Natrun kept Bohairic alive, and when the Patriarchate was moved from Alexandria to Cairo in the 11th Century, Bohairic, the dialect of that district, became the official dialect of the Church. (Cook 1998, Class notes)

In an understandable but short-sighted decision, the Coptic Patriarch introduced Arabic during the following century, apparently in an attempt to show the Muslims that the Copts were not antagonistic toward them. The immediate result was that Christian Arabic literature flourished, and Arabic came to be used in the churches. By the 14th C the Arabic language had made too great an inroad into the last Coptic literary stronghold - the Church. Consequently the liturgical use of Coptic declined, and the natural chain reaction led to a decrease in numbers of Copts. The last Coptic work of any importance to appear was the *Triadon*, a fourteenth century didactic poem in Sahidic in praise of the Coptic language which the author considered to be a miracle. Ironically, he had to add an Arabic version to his Coptic text to make it comprehensible to his readers. (Atiya 1968:64) Persecutions against the Copts were terribly severe, and as the Arabic language was no longer a barrier for the Copts, increasing numbers converted to the Muslim faith. Five hundred years later, in the

second half of the 19th century the Patriarch of Alexandria, St. Cyril IV the Reformer, recognising the exceedingly important role that language plays in cultural and religious identity, started a church-sponsored movement to revive the use of the Coptic language, which is today growing apace. Today Bohairic is preserved in some of the church liturgy and scriptural translations, whereas most of the extant early Christian and gnostic writings are in Sahidic. (Lambdin 1983:viii)

During the third century the aristocratic circle of Greek-speaking elite who made up the bulk of the Christian community in the first and second centuries, widened to include the townfolk and farmers who spoke only Egyptian. This dramatic spread of faith is attributed to Saint Antony, an Egyptian who withdrew to the desert on a pattern set in the middle Kingdom by workers escaping from national service. Groves makes the point that St. Anthony, born in 250 CE, had heard the gospel read in church - he knew no Greek, so it must have been in the Egyptian language at that stage - decisive evidence that Demetrius' drive at the end of the second century to expand Christianity among the original Egyptian population had succeeded. (Groves 1948:39)

4.3 ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

Origen in his commentary on the Song of Songs, 3, had said that all heretics are at first believers, that only later do they swerve from the rule of faith. (quoted by Bauer 1934:xxiii) Bauer had contested this classical idea of "orthodoxy as a single, pure faith reaching right back to the apostles with heresy as a corrupt offshoot from the true faith" in 1946. The manuscripts and other archeological discoveries in Egypt during the past century have confirmed that early Egyptian Christians did not bind themselves to a centralised ecclesiastical organization and did not have a stringent doctrinal tradition. (Griggs 1990:vi) When one considers the complexity of the milieu in which Christianity arose, Bauer's persuasive argument (sometimes from silence) for the existence of heresy from the beginning of Christianity in Egypt (Bauer 1934:59) is a reasonable deduction: the inner-Jewish problem of heresy and orthodoxy had become an inner-Christian problem (Betz 1992:144) - but should it be called 'heresy'?

Several authors have demonstrated that diversity was a characteristic of earliest Christianity, that it is in fact 'canonized' in the New Testament. (Markus 1980:7)

Dunn (1990:1) points out that 'orthodoxy' implies that a clear distinction can be drawn between truth and error. This raises the problem of interpretation - whose orthodoxy? Every group understands the concept of 'orthodoxy' in their own way. For the Jews in Acts, the Christian movement was simply another *hairesis* or sect, but for the author of Acts, the early Church was "orthodox" in both Christian and Jewish terms (Betz 1992:44). An example of the relativity of orthodoxy is that Christian apocalypticism as seen from the perspective of non-Christian Judaism, was the product of heretical developments but it became an important defence for Christianity against the threat of Gnosticism.

From a socially relativised point of view Schoedel (1979:14) quotes Marcel Simon as showing that some Christians viewed the existence of heresy not as a deviation from orthodoxy, but as a demonstration of the seriousness with which truth was pursued amongst different Christian sects. S.J. Case had written a decade before Bauer, that heresy was fundamentally a social phenomenon - implying that heretics are nothing other than the losers in a prolonged power struggle, and that full-blown orthodoxy was the end product of a complex process, and in fact subject to continuing modification (Gager 1992:78). Koester (1991:472) states that the New Testament canon was really only the result of a deliberate attempt during the early period of Christianity to exclude heretics, Marcionites, Gnosticism, Jewish Christians, perhaps also women.

It may even be that the diversity of belief-systems in the syncretistic milieu of Hellenism was eventually an advantage for emerging Christianity in Egypt in the sense that the resultant task of self-definition involves conflict which serves to strengthen group cohesion. (Gager 1992:80) Griggs (1990:229) relates the almost

inevitable emergence of the Egyptian Coptic Church as a separate identity after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 as the culmination of mounting conflict with nascent Catholicism. Early Christian conflict reaches most intensity over 1) who represents the true Israel, 2) who possesses true wisdom, 3) who embodies the authentic faith of Jesus and the apostles. (Griggs 1990:192) Already by the second century there was a distinct Coptic Christianity, both orthodox and heterodox as evidenced in Coptic writings (Danielou 1964:127). The Jewish origins were no longer apparent in either Gnosticism or Christianity.

H E W Turner (1954:476) speaks of orthodoxy as a confluence of many tributaries into a single stream - the result of interaction of fixed and flexible elements. The fixed elements distinguished normative Christianity at that time from other forms that developed in antiquity. The flexible elements are differences in idiom and in the individual characteristics of various early theologians, consequently leading to different emphases. The possibility that it was only "flexible" factors, such as cultural (symbolic world) differences in language use that were a reason for this division, will be discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

GNOSTICISM AND CHRISTIANITY

5.1 THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY

The discovery of these Coptic codices along the Nile in upper Egypt in 1946 has forced a radical re-appraisal of the development of early Christianity. In 1970 the International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices was established by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in conjunction with UNESCO. Under the permanent Secretariats of J M Robinson, the facsimile edition and translations of the fifty-two codices were published. Most of them are gnostic, but a few are unquestionably Christian, whereas others are only superficially Christianized. The writings must be seen against the background of a period when Jews, Christians and pagans searched their religious heritage for ways of interpreting their traditions in the diverse historical context of the hellenistic world.

5.2 GNOSTIC TERMINOLOGY

Wilson has stressed that terminology controls interpretation (Rudolph 1983:25) and Bruce points out that if we stick closely to the etymology of 'Gnostic' and related terms, then every form of religion which makes true knowledge of God fundamental has a claim to be called 'Gnostic' (Bruce 1973:v). Malaty gives an example of the difficulties of this terminology: "Knowing" God to Jews meant acknowledging that Yahweh was God and recognising the acts of God, for the word '*gnosis*' is used in the Septuagint to describe God as the "God of knowledge" (1Sam 2:3), whereas the word *gnosis* was used in Greek to indicate self-awareness. *Gnosticism* regards unconsciousness, not sin or guilt, as the cause of evil. Malaty (1994:126) reports that scholars made a distinction in 1966 between *gnosis* and *gnosticism*. The term *gnosticism* was reserved for the developed gnostic systems of the second century CE, while *gnosis* was meant to refer to similar phenomena prior to the second century, but unfortunately this has not generally been adhered to. The term *Gnostic* does not occur in the Nag Hammadi texts, but Irenaeus refers to a group of sectarians utilizing a

mythological system as *Gnostics*.

Wilson expressed the relation between *Gnosticism* and *Gnosis* with a monetary metaphor: "Gnosticism is being pegged at a fixed level, Gnosis is allowed to float till it finds its own appropriate level Between the two there is a sort of 'trajectory' - a process of crystallization". (Rudolph 1983:25) However, the difficulties of terminology again come to the fore in that Wilson argued for a Jewish, pre-Christian Gnosticism, (inasmuch as its origins are to be found in pre-Christian times); yet he does not want to use the term 'Gnosticism' for this, since there is no evidence of a fully developed form. This also demonstrates that a 'narrow' definition of Gnosticism will not find any conclusive evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism. (Yamauchi 1973:13) Currently the term *gnosticism* is used to designate a complex religious and philosophical movement that probably started before Christianity and flourished till about 700 CE (Malaty 1994:123), but *gnosis* is still a very imprecise term. McCue refers to Irenaeus to back up his understanding of the term '*gnosis*' as being very close to the concept of '*perfect gnosis*' as the secret or higher meaning of the same tradition that the orthodox hold onto by faith (McCue 1979:121).

5.3.1 DIFFICULTIES FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The development of Gnosticism embodies three inherent difficulties for historical research:

a) Syncretistic cultural conditions at time of development:

Hultgren supports the opinion of Koester (1982:1) that the obvious similarities between the writings of Judaism, Christianity and Gnosticism, which were of the same genre and developed almost simultaneously, must be attributed to influences of the syncretistic cultural conditions of the Graeco-Roman world in which they were being produced. Thus the only way forward is a contextualization of investigations in a dynamic, not a static system, hence the concept of a 'trajectory'.

b) Both Christianity and Gnosticism were developing at the same time:

Perkins points out that Christians and pagans worked in the same intellectual tradition

in Alexandria, and both Christians and Gnostics drew on the rich tradition of exegetical and mythological speculation that had taken shape in Judaism during the hellenistic period. (Pearson 1990:38) However, if the New Testament and gnostic traditions both developed out of the larger matrix of religious speculation and symbolism in the first century CE, it will not be possible to determine whether there is a direct, genetic link between the two movements. (Perkins 1993:19).

c) The overlapping of the two stages of gnosis and gnosticism:

Frend (1984:198) assessed gnosis to have held a worthy place both in the Jewish and in the earliest Christian scale of values, but it is essential to distinguish between pre-Christian, pre-Gnostic elements and the later fully developed system because later on the early Christian authors opposed Gnosticism. Understandably, these two stages overlapped, and that is where one of the major difficulties with Gnosticism arises.

5.3.2 REASONS FOR FLOURISHING OF GNOSTICISM

Alexandria, in being heir to Jewish traditions, classical thought and the old mysticism of 'oriental' religions was the most important centre of Gnosticism. Malaty (1994:151) puts forward the following reasons for the flourishing of Gnosticism there:

1. Between 130 and 180 CE a succession of Gnostic teachers working mainly in Alexandria, dominated Christian intellectual life. Alexandria was a central intellectual meeting point for the exchange of religious ideas and Gnosticism first appeared there as an attitude - accepted by some pagans, Jews and even Christians. According to Frend (1984:195-201) the Gnostics made a positive contribution in the following respects:

- i) They prepared the way for Christian Platonism - Christianity became a philosophical religion grappling with deep moral and intellectual problems, as well as being the Way preached by Jesus and Paul. The gnostics drew on current philosophy and poetic wisdom in their search for truth - to them myth and Scripture both had secret meaning.

They sought to unite the Christian gospel of redemption with the pagan idea of salvation as peace and security in this world and a blessed immortality thereafter free from the power of the stars. (Wilson 1958:106)

ii) The first commentary on John's gospel, by Heracleon, a pupil of Valentinus's, stimulated Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

2. At a time when there was a process of transition from the pagan systems, the pseudo-Christian Gnostic sects could offer a religious alternative, which provided the intellectual elite with a sense of superiority.
3. They tried to address the question of how there could be evil in the world, unless the matter from which it was created was irredeemably bad. If God was Goodness, who created evil? If the universe was not governed by Fate (the pagans believed it was), how did one explain calamity, sickness, and sudden death?
4. According to Malaty (1994:152) most of the founders of the Christian Gnostics were associated with Pre-Christian Gnosticism, and only added some Christian doctrines to their Gnostic foundation. They were interested in literature and wrote many apocryphal gospels, epistles and apocalypses. In order to gain popular appeal they deliberately attributed much of it to St. Mary, the disciples, and the apostles.

5.4 DEFINITION OF GNOSTICISM

Pearson (1990:6) lists the essential features of Gnosticism in order to demonstrate that Gnosticism was a definite religious movement which first developed independently of Christianity and even in its continuing development within Christian circles, ought to be seen as a religion in its own right.

- a. A negative radically dualist orientation - the cosmos was created by an inferior power - it is a dark prison in which human souls are held captive. The

human body is part of a cosmic prison from which the essential 'man' must be released. Their theology was of a transcendent supreme God beyond the god or powers responsible for the world in which we live, and it had an ethical component: withdrawal from engagement with the cosmos.

- b. The adherents of Gnosticism regard gnosis (rather than faith or observance of law) as requisite for salvation - self-knowledge is knowledge of God and a belief that all the elect will be saved and have joy in the way of salvation through gnosis.
- c. Jesus Christ is claimed as the revealer of gnosis, but actually their redeemer figure is Seth, son of Adam.
- d. Has a parasitical nature, in that it uses concepts from other religions.
- e. It has a social and ritual dimension, with a greatly varying mythopoetic element.

There is general agreement by scholars that the overriding characteristics of Gnosticism are: dualism, the human body as a cosmic prison, salvation through gnosis, and a view of Christ as the revealer or bringer of Gnosis.

5.4 THE MAIN TYPES OF GNOSTICISM

The following summary of the different strands of Gnosticism as suggested by the Nag Hammadi discoveries is derived from Koester (1982:222), and demonstrates vast differences of approach to the goal of achieving knowledge of God.

5.4.1 BASILIDES

According to Bauer (1934:232), the first certain traces of Christianity are found in the person of Basilides during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 CE). His system is difficult to reconstruct since only fragments survive. There are great differences between the accounts of his work by Irenaeus who was categorically anti-gnostic, and by Clement of Alexandria. Basilides was the first recorded gnostic Christian who attempted to expound a philosophy of religion centred on Christianity, but drawing from both

Jewish and pagan sources. The Gnostics were eager to use non-Gnostic apostolic writings in order to make converts to Gnosticism, devising commentaries that were claimed to provide the 'true' interpretation. Thus for example by having referred to some non-gnostic Christian writings which later became canonical in the catholic church, Basilides' gnosis had a special Christian character. (Pearson 1990:205) He was basically Jewish in his attitudes, but he hated Judaism as he knew it in his own time (which was between the Jewish rebellion of 115 CE and the Bar Kochba uprising in 132 CE). His followers asserted that "while they were no longer Jews, they were more than Christians." (Frend 1984:205) The groups of Jews in Alexandria represented both the educated ones like Philo, who favoured a synthesis between Hellenism and Judaism, and those more influenced by messianism and a fighting spirit. (Pearson 1986:208)

5.4.2 VALENTINUS

Ptolemy, a disciple of Valentinus saw the Torah not as evil, but inadequate - but Jewish practices were ordained according to "the image of the spiritual and transcendent things," but Judaism was only a preparation for Christianity. The Valentinians were the first to accept the logic of the Christian claim to be a 'third race', and the writer of the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* says "in the days that we were Hebrews, we had only our mother, but when we became Christians were acquired father and mother he who has not received the Lord is still a Hebrew." (Frend 1984:210)

McCue (1979:118-130) points out that the Valentinians regarded themselves as orthodox Christians, and that they regarded themselves as the few, whilst defining the Orthodox as the many. He sees Valentinism as an offshoot from orthodoxy, which simply tried to pass itself off as a truer interpretation of the ecclesiastical tradition. Valentinism originated in the matrix of orthodoxy at just that point in time when the writings of the NT were 'jelling' within orthodoxy and they regarded the New Testament books as revelatory.

Valentinus devised the system of three classes of human beings, the spiritual people - the true gnostics (πνευματικικοι); those who merely possess a soul (ψυχικοι - the ecclesiastical Christians); and those who are made up solely of matter (υλικοι). Pearson (1990:208) sees an instance of the pervasiveness of syncretism in which the Gnostics provide evidence for Christianity in the following quotation from *Valentinus*, which he suggests *Valentinus* derived from Matt 22:14 "Many are called, but few are chosen": "Therefore, many are material, (υλικοι) but not many are psychic, (ψυχικοι) and few are spiritual (πνευματικικοι)."

Valentinus may have been the author of *The Gospel of Truth* - "this marvelous work of Christian mysticism" (Pearson 1992:957), which has a marked quality of piety. The author clearly knew the Old Testament and the gospels of the New Testament and the letters of Paul very well. (Koester 1982:233)

5.4.3 SOPHIA OF JESUS CHRIST

Eugnostos the Blessed is an example of a platonic gnostic text expounding the true nature of God and the divine world, which was later adapted to a Christian form in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. The latter is a revelation discourse of the resurrected Redeemer with the twelve disciples and seven women. The original philosophical treatise is mythologised in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* from the Nag Hammadi library, by adding the myth of the fall of *Sophia* and the imprisonment of the particles of light under the archon of chaos, as well as a discourse about the role of the Redeemer. (Parrott 1977:206)

5.4.4 SETHIAN GNOSTICISM

If it can be assumed that certain types of Gnosticism originated in Syria, it follows that Syrian writings must have been brought to Egypt no later than the beginning of the second century. The Syrian *Gospel of Thomas* must have been known in Egypt by the middle of the second century. It is one of the most important documents of Sethian

Gnosticism, which was further developed in Egypt. It concludes with the appearance of Seth in the person of Jesus, who brings rebirth through baptism (regarded as a mystery rite). These concepts are drawn from Syrian gnostic mythology. In the *Gospel of Thomas* there is a striking lack of explicit references to Christian traditions and few Christian elements. It was only towards the end of the second century that Sethian Gnosticism began to modify its doctrine to accommodate it to the doctrines of emerging Neoplatonists.

5.4.5 PRE-CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

Pre-Christian Gnosticism in Egypt may have developed without borrowing from Christianity at all. During the Roman era, Egyptian manuscripts dating from the fourteenth Century BCE consisting of astrological, magical, philosophical and general religious literature, were syncretised so that the Egyptian revealer-god Thoth, was identified with "Thrice Greatest" *Hermes Trismegistus*. The work *Poimandres*, (Tractate I of the *Corpus Hermeticum*) which demonstrates Graeco-Egyptian syncretism which deals with the revelation of God to His prophet about how the cosmos was created and about salvation, was based on *Hermes Trismegistus*. This work is full of Jewish elements, and quotes Gen 1-2 extensively. It has been interpreted as gnostic by some scholars, in that it represents the 'wise Man of Primal times' sometimes identified with Moses, as a gnostic redeemer figure, but the identifying characteristic of gnosticism, - dualism, appears to be absent. Dualism is naturally expressed in terms of light and darkness, which in the beginning is distinct, but here light is mentioned first, because light *is* God. *Poimandres* identifies himself as "the mind (*νοῦς*) of the Sovereignty". According to Barrett (1956:95) it is incorrect to identify the meaning of his name with the Greek word ποιμήν (shepherd) and ἀνὴρ (man) meaning "shepherd of men". It is actually a Greek form of the Coptic "ⲡⲉⲓⲙⲉ ⲛⲁⲣⲉ" - the knowledge of the (sun-) God". Pearson does not accept this explanation and prefers the meaning of Shepherd of men (1990:140) The irony is that both these explanations would fit an ancient Egyptian content, when the pharaoh was

the shepherd of his people and his insignia was a shepherd's crook, which was associated with magic (*heka*).

The Sethian type of Gnosticism arose out of the hellenization of the Hermetic authors, who had originally derived their ideas from the pharaonic religion. (Danielou 1973:135) Wente (1992:411) contests the general impression that pharaonic religion lacked the mystical element discernable in hellenized Egyptian rites, and suggests that at least some of the spells of the Coffin Texts and Book of the Dead were available to the living for their use. Taken together with the fact that priestly initiation did exist, he maintains that there may well be a genuine Egyptian basis for Sethian gnosticism. The *paraphrase of Shem* is another example of this. The creation myth in this writing, is different from those of the Syrian-Christian types, since it knows three principles: light, darkness, and the spirit standing between them. Shem comes from an "unmixed power", but a later *paraphrase of Seth*, bears many similarities and was apparently a revision by Christians.

5.4.6 A PRE-CHRISTIAN REDEEMER FIGURE?

Bultman claimed that the Gospel of John presupposed a Primal Man myth, a figure of light, who was torn asunder and divided into particles of light, which were then distributed in the world as human souls. The powers of darkness attempt to prevent these souls from realizing their heavenly origins. God then sent a Redeemer in corporal form to awaken these souls, to liberate them from their bodies and to gather them back to their heavenly home. Bultmann suggested that the Gospel of John could only be understood in the light of the myth. Käsemann, quoted by Yamauchi, has suggested that the concepts of Sophia, Anthropos, and Logos in pre-Christian Judaism came together to make up the idea of the Gnostic redeemer, but no pre-Christian Jewish text presents an unambiguous Gnostic Redeemer myth as such. (1973:164) Yamauchi concludes in agreement with Wilson that Gnosticism arose slightly later than Christianity. (Yamauchi 1973:185)

5.4.7 MITHRAISM

This Mystery Religion, possibly the most serious rival to Christianity, was apparently brought from Persia by soldiers of Alexander the Great. Mithra was a Persian sun-god, the slayer of the bull from whose blood all earthly life had sprung, always fighting for right against wrong and the reconciler and mediator. (Witt 1975:482) The lion-headed god symbolised eternity (Vermaseren 1975:456)

The object of the Mystery cults was to secure salvation and eternal life for men. Salvation meant escape from Destiny, release from corruption and a renewed moral life, and was effected by sacramental means, resting upon the experiences of a Saviour-God. In the Mithras Liturgy, the salvation is brought by Helios, who grants immortality and a new birth, implying a new horoscope as well. (Segal 1981:354) The underlying myth was also related to the annual cycle of agricultural fertility. (Barrett 1956:120)

Mithras was known in Egypt, but although there was a Mithraeum at Memphis, Alexandria and Oxyrhynchus, Isis always maintained her superiority. (Witt 1975:483) Although the names of Mithras, Isis, Osiris and Sarapis do not occur either in the patristic sources or in the Nag Hammadi texts (Segal 1981:455), Mithraism has been suggested as another possible source for Gnosticism because of the Persian association with dualism and the redeemer myth, but Quispel differs. He stated in 1953 that Gnosticism did not have a redeemer figure, and in fact, there never was a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer, because it was Gnosis as such which redeemed. (Yamauchi 1973:166) This is another example of where a narrow definition will not find any conclusive evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism, as Yamauchi has pointed out. (1973:13)

5.5 POSSIBLE EVIDENCE OF THE EXISTENCE OF 'ORTHODOX' CHRISTIANITY BEFORE THE END OF THE SECOND CENTURY

In spite of the necessity of second century Christianity to establish boundaries, the oral tradition and local interpretations inherited from the first century resulted in both Christianity and Gnosticism remaining diverse during the 2nd Century.

Chadwick judges from surviving fragments of "*The gospel according to the Egyptians*", that the character of early Egyptian Christianity appears to have been "none too orthodox", but a papyrus find of Irenaeus's refutation of Gnosticism dating to the latter half of the second century was found at Oxyrhynchus in upper Egypt thus proving that this was being read within a very few years of its publication, which suggests there was interest in Egypt in the maintaining of orthodoxy. (Chadwick 1991:64) Irenaeus writing in about 180 CE includes the church in Egypt among "those that preserve the catholic faith with one heart and one soul" (*Haer.* 1.10.2)

Pearson agrees with Bauer in recognising the importance of the role that Patriarch Demetrius (189-232 CE) played in establishing an ecclesiastical 'orthodoxy' in Alexandria (Pearson 1990:209), but points out that this does not mean that orthodoxy did not exist in Alexandria before that. He demonstrates the difficulties of extricating the development of Christianity from the web of the important role that Gnosticism played in this process, while it too was developing (Pearson 1990:195), by referring to writings of that time, some of which later became canonical. Pearson agrees with Bauer that Valentinus, Basilides and Carpocrates were arch-Gnostics of that time, but strongly disagrees with Bauer who, using a very narrow definition of orthodoxy, proclaimed the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* to be heretical (Gnostic). (1990:197)

5.5.1 THE LETTER OF BARNABAS

The letter of Barnabas had probably been written by 117 CE (Pearson 1986:150). It was almost included in the Christian canon, and is said to be regularly read in the Egyptian church. It was frequently referred to by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 CE). According to L W Barnard (quoted by Pearson 1986:212), the author of Barnabas was a converted Rabbi who brought into Christianity the exegetical and homiletical traditions of the Alexandrian synagogue. Morenz notes that Judaism bequeathed the practice of scripture reading and delivering of sermons to Christianity, and also the concept of the canon. (Morenz 1960:215,224)

Largely as a result of the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE which resulted in the consolidation of Pharisaic Judaism, and the dissemination of the *Birkath-ha-Minim*, which excommunicated Christians from the synagogues, the final redaction of *Barnabas* now refers to Christians as "the new people of the Covenant, and the Jews as "the former people". *Barnabas* is apocalyptic and gives a specifically Christian re-interpretation of older Jewish exegetical and ethical traditions. There is little or no trace of a "logos" or a "Sophia" christology, and Pearson (1986:214) contends that *Barnabas* is anti-Gnostic.

The *letter of Barnabas* initially affirms that God has abolished the legal sacrifices to introduce the spiritual righteousness of the gospel, refers to the prophecies of Daniel concerning the ten kings and the coming of Christ, which demonstrate that Christ was to suffer as our scapegoat. Chapter VII describes the red heifer as another type of Christ, and how in the first institution of circumcision, Abraham mystically foretold Christ by name. (The symbolism of the red heifer will be discussed in Chapter 6.) Chapter IX explains that the commands of Moses concerning clean and unclean beasts were all designed for spiritual signification, and that baptisms and the Cross of Christ were foretold in imagery under the law. Chapter XII points out that the promise of God was not made to the Jews only, but to the Gentiles also, and fulfilled to us by

Jesus Christ. The Sabbath of the Jews was but an image of a more glorious Sabbath to come, and their temple, of the spiritual temples of God. The second last chapter is a summary of the way of light: what a Christian is to do, that he may be happy for ever: "Thou shalt love him that made thee: thou shalt glorify him that hath redeemed thee from death. Thou shalt be simple in heart, and rich in the spirit" The last chapter describes the way of darkness, i.e. what kind of persons shall be for ever cast out of the kingdom of God. This includes idolatry, pride of power, hypocrisy, arrogance, witchcraft and the want of fear of God.

5.6 THE CHURCH FATHERS AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST GNOSTICISM

The earliest copy of the gospel of John found consists of fragments of a Coptic copy dating to before 150 CE (Bowman 1986:185) Because it is known that the gospel of John originated in Syria, Koester deduces that missionaries from Palestine or Syria must have brought Christianity to Egypt. (1982:222) Later witnesses have demonstrated that John was a favorite book among Egyptian gnostics and Koester thus deduces that the first Christian preachers to appear in Egypt were soon after called 'gnostics', but Conzelman (1973:125) identifies the distinguishing line between orthodoxy and heresy as the orthodox belief in incarnation of the Redeemer whereas the Gnostics separate revelation from the world. Irenaeus' view was that the dualism of gnostic cosmology was incompatible with Christian faith (Markus 1974:58). Origen pointed out that salvation through Gnosis was incompatible with salvation through grace and works. The Gnostic had no doctrine of the Spirit and did not baptize in the name of the Trinity.

Pearson comments that the more deeply we go into the questions of orthodoxy and heresy, Gnosis and Jewish Christianity, the more things seem to be connected. (1986:175) According to Pearson (1990:207) there is a strong indication that Alexandrian Christianity included groups of non-Gnostic Christians as well, and there

would also have been ordinary non-Gnostic Hebrews and Egyptians, but it is not possible to know in what proportion they were at that time. At very least the presence of allusions to Christian writings in the Gnostic writings is conclusive evidence that Christianity was present in Alexandria at that time.

Bauer concluded that the gnostic heretics and their groups were dominant in Alexandria at least until the time of the Christian Stoic Pantaenus, who was Dean of the school of Alexandria towards the second half of the second century. Roberts has suggested that it was Pantaenus who purged that school of the influence of the Gnostics (Roberts 1977:54), but Pearson suggests more cautiously, that Pantaenus simply took over the leadership of the school from a Gnostic teacher. (1990:210) It stands to reason that the first native Egyptian patriarch, Demetrius, appointed in 189 CE would subsequently have attempted to bring that school under the influence of the episcopal see.

During the Egyptian Patriarch Demetrius' time the struggle among competing groups of Christians became more and more dominated by Christians loyal to the ecclesiastical establishment and its emerging standard of orthodoxy. Into this context Pearson situates two of the Nag Hammadi tractates, *The Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX:3) and *The Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII:4).

5.6.1 THE TESTIMONY OF TRUTH

This was probably written in Alexandria, and although attacking Valentinians, displays Valentinian influence. Under Demetrius, a Christian orthodoxy was in the process of being defined and imposed in the churches of Alexandria and elsewhere in Egypt. Under him, too, episcopal rule was being expanded in the Egyptian church by means of his consecration of new bishops. Pearson (1977:406) describes *The Testimony of Truth* written during the time of Bishop Demetrius (ca.190 CE), as an attempt to safeguard what for Bishop Demetrius was the true Christian teaching

(gnosis) and life (encratism). The author represents an embattled group of Christians, who together with Gnostic Christians were part of the bitter struggle going on among rival Christian groups for spiritual and socio-political power.

Pearson considers *The Testimony of Truth* one of the best examples of Christian Gnosticism, typically equating knowledge of God with knowledge of the self, and thereby salvation: "This, therefore, is the true testimony: When a man knows himself and God who is over the truth, he will be saved, and he will be crowned with the crown unfading." (44:3-45:6)

The Gospel of Truth alludes to the New Testament, but does not explicitly cite the old or the New Testaments. It interprets the New Testament as written to Christian Gnostics (McRae 1977:38).

5.6.2 THE TEACHINGS OF SILVANUS

Pearson sees the *Teachings of Silvanus* as reflecting first century tradition even though it dates to the end of the second century. It launched a polemic against those who regard the Creator of the world as an ignorant deity - a typical Gnostic doctrine (1986:212), and is explicitly anti-Gnostic. Christ is described as Wisdom and as the Logos (Silv. 106:22-24). The Logos is 'the Son as the image of the Father'. (Pearson 1986:211) As the Sophia of Wis 7:25-26, Christ is:

"...a light from the power of God,
and he is an emanation of the pure glory of the Almighty.
He is the spotless mirror of the working of God,
and he is the image of his goodness.

For he is also the light of the Eternal Light". (Pearson 1986:215)

The similarities to the concepts in John's gospel are evident. Pearson recognises a good deal of the 'speculative wisdom' encountered by Paul in first-century Corinth. Pearson concludes that this "Philo-like" Christianity characterises much of Clement of Alexandria's development of Christian theology (Pearson 1986:216).

5.6.3 THE GOSPEL OF THE HEBREWS

In fragments of a copy of the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, a Jewish-Christian gospel which was used in Alexandria and written in Greek, the Spirit is called "the mother of Jesus"; this would fit a Semitic language, where the word 'spirit' is a feminine noun. Mary is introduced as the earthly appearance of a heavenly power (Michael). This concept is derived from the Jewish wisdom myth. The Spirit in this gospel speaks like personified Wisdom, who comes into the world repeatedly, appearing in prophets and divine messengers, seeking its rest. Isis is stated by Conzelman (1971:243) to be the mother of Wisdom. He bases this on the Wisdom-song in Sir 24.3ff where at the end Wisdom is identified with the Torah, and verses 3-6(7) are clearly a hymn to Isis. Wisdom goes forth from the mouth of God - this again is derived from Egyptian cosmogeny (Conzelman 1973:235). Koester concluded that the *Gospel of the Hebrews* uses a motif from Jewish theology (also suggested by the fact that it emphasizes the authority of James), but it also has affinities with Gnosticism. He deduces Gnostic influence from the fact that Clement of Alexandria assigns what is known as the second saying of the *Gospel of Thomas*, (which is a Gnostic writing which originated in Syria and was known in Egypt by the middle of the second century CE) to the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Therefore it is assumed that the *Gospel of the Hebrews* drew from the *Gospel of Thomas*. Bauer refers to the great importance which Michael has in the Egyptian magical texts - Greek as well as Coptic and labels this writing as categorically heretical. (Bauer 1934:53) However Pearson suggests that the *Gospel of the Hebrews* was compiled for the Jewish Christians of Alexandria, and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* for the Egyptians who were predominant in Rakotis, as that was an area of early missionary activity on the part of Jewish Christians. (1986:150) This suggests that the Gospel of the Hebrews was not regarded as heretical, nor associated with the Ebionites (a Jewish-Christian sect who chose poverty as a way of life. Griggs (1991:31) confirms that the Gospel of the Hebrews was given a generally orthodox reputation by secondary sources.

5.6.4 EPISTULA APOSTOLORUM

The *Epistula Apostolorum* was probably written before 160 CE, but only found early in this century in the French Archaeological institute, Cairo, and published for the first time in 1919. It conveys an enchanting sense of warmth, intimacy and acceptance between the resurrected Christ and his eleven apostles. According to Koester (1982:237) it is pointedly anti-gnostic - the second part could be called an anti-gnostic dogmatic theology. This must have been read by the Egyptians, and it could well have influenced their orientation and identity as Coptic Christians. The following quotation from the *Epistula Apostolorum* conveys the flavour of the whole:

"Truly I say to you, I will come as does the sun that shines, and shining seven times brighter than it in my brightness; with the wings of the clouds (carry)ing me in splendour and the sign of the cross before me, I will come down to the earth to judge the living and the dead". (Hennecke 1959:200) This could possibly be the source of their most prominent symbol, the Coptic cross, which pervades every aspect of Coptic surroundings. (Fig 15 a,b)

5.7 CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA and THE DELIMITING OF THE TRAJECTORY

5.7.1 THE RECONCILING OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY WITH CHRISTIANITY

The Copts claim Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-210), who wrote in excellent Greek style even though in the *Koine* vernacular, as their own Church Father. Clement had been a pagan student from Athens, who became converted to Christianity, and succeeded Pantanaeus as head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Even though he was probably not Egyptian by birth, once he was converted to Christianity he devoted his life to the Catechetical School of Alexandria, where he worked to reconcile Greek philosophy and logic with ancient Egyptian cosmology and Christianity. He believed Philosophy had been to the Greeks what prophecy was to

the Jews - a preparation for Christ, but the truth of philosophy is mixed with error and must be refined. (Malaty 1994:286) Clement, like St. Irenaeus, saw the great danger of a hellenization of Christianity, but he also saw the value of philosophy in that "it rendered powerless the assault of sophistry against (the truth), and frustrating the treacherous plots laid against the truth, is said to be the proper fence and wall of the vineyard." (Malaty 1994:164, quoting from *Stromata 1:20:100*)

According to Pearson, Clement's own orthodoxy has sometimes been called into question, largely because of his willingness to see aspects of truth in the most unlikely sources, from pagan poets and philosophers to well-known Christian 'heretics.' He "claimed the designation *gnostikos*, thus wresting the term from people deemed by him to be 'heretics'." (Pearson 1990:212) Griggs suggests that with his belief that philosophy was capable of protecting and adding to faith, he displayed the distinguishing characteristic of Gnosticism - syncretism, and that he may only have escaped being branded as a Gnostic because Irenaeus's *Against Haereses* served as a timely warning. (Griggs 1990:60) Griggs (1990:34) states that the very thought of orthodoxy and heresy only appeared in Egypt towards the end of the 2nd century when this document arrived from Rome.

Clement of Alexandria echoes Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* in considering the heretics to have departed from "the oldest and truest Church whose chief characteristic is unity: "the one Church, which they strive to break up into many sects, is bound up with the principle of Unity." (Strom.7.17.107) Malaty quotes Clement of Alexandria to explain the difference between the goal of the philosophers' perfect life and Christianity: "St. Mark did not reveal God as *a mere idea* he believed in, but as the Saviour who redeems mankind." According to Malaty, this is the basic principle of the Alexandrian theology until today. God is known, not through theoretical discussions, but through His redeeming deeds. God bestows knowledge which is not isolated from our salvation" (Malaty 1994:19 *Paidegagogos*, Book 1, Ch 2. Section

6).

Clement's theory that Christ came to restore true philosophy which had become decayed corresponds to the intellectual movement of the day. By quotations, he proved that philosophers (Plato) and poets (Homer) had clearly taught the unity, supremacy and goodness of God. For Clement the Word of God is the source of knowledge, and manifests itself anew in Christ, but the pattern remains - the revelation of Christ simply takes the forms appropriate to the various cultures, but without any trace of syncretism.

Clement's attitude that the true Christian Gnostic - the person who enjoys the redeeming action of God - believes that Faith is the way to truth - the true philosophy is found in Jesus Christ, did not mean that Christianity could not utilize truth wherever it was found. Thus "the Gnostic (Christian believer) who has spiritual knowledge or *gnosis* is consequently divine, and already holy. God-bearing, and God-borne" (Malaty 1994:316).

This following quotation from Clement's writings could be misunderstood to be an indication of a heretical form of Gnosticism and of the occult, but this is an example of the need to examine exactly what is meant by this particular use of language. "*The Word became man so that you might learn from Man how man may become god.*" (Clement of Alexandria, *Protepticus* 1:8:4) According to Enroth (1984:788) one of the components of the occult/mystical world view and its associated religious expression is the promise of godhood - man is a divine being: "All forms of occult philosophy proclaim that the true or 'real' self of man is synonymous with God. Such views are all patterned after the archetypal lie of the serpent in Gen. 3:4, 'You will be as gods.' This confusing perception has been explained by Bishop Paul of the Coptic Orthodox Church as follows: the Copts speak of the "deification of man" in the sense of man allowing God to place himself in us by giving Him the central place in our

lives, or "God took our humanity, that man may share His Life." According to Malaty, this is Alexandrian theology in a nutshell. (1994:16)

Thus the "*Christian gnosis*" which he promotes is a superior knowledge, a penetration of the Christian mystery unavailable to the "ignorant masses". Although Clement rejects a radical view of gnosticism he views the *gnostic* as a friend of God and the equal of the angels. He sees this *gnosis* as having come from the apostles and transmitted orally, but has only reached a small number of persons. In *Stromata* he describes two conversions in Christianity: from paganism to the faith, and from faith to *gnosis*. To Clement the Logos is not hidden from anyone. He is the general light, who shines upon all. (Malaty 1994:276) Clement also uses the mystical meaning of numbers in an allegorical way.

He objected to Gnosticism in that it lay outside the church, and was offensive to human freedom of will and common sense. "We ought in no way to transgress the rule of the Church. Above all the confession which deals with the essential articles of faith is observed by us, but disregarded by the heretics. Those then, are to be believed who hold firmly to the truth." (*Strom.* 7.15.90) The above quotation from *Stromateis* indicates that the rule of the church had been firmly established by that time. (Pearson 1990:212)

The following is an example of the interwovenness of early Egyptian Christianity with Gnosticism:

Bigg (1886:38) mentions a report by Probst that the first sketch of a written liturgy existed in the middle of the second century, which is linked to Clement of Alexandria. According to an early Coptic rite of Baptism, the newly baptised person drank milk mixed with honey. Clement of Alexandria equates the honey in this rite to "the attaining of our Lord Jesus Christ who is sweet food to believers." (Malaty 1993,

quoting from *Paidegogos* 1:6). Arnold presents the earliest Coptic baptismal symbol, which is Coptic. (Arnold 1970 repr.:71) The oldest and shortest "Rule of Faith", the ninefold Confession is the basis of this baptismal symbol, and Arnold (1970:349) states that it is a summary of the thought-structure of the *Epistula Apostolorum*, from whence it is derived:

I believe

in God	the Father	the All-powerful
in Jesus Christ	the Son	our Lord
in the Holy Spirit	the Church	the Resurrection of the Flesh.

This strikes a chord with the original pharaonic conception of the creator as the Ennead, in the association of the Nine forming a unified yet separate totality concerning the Creator.

Yamauchi quotes Koester (1973:19) who notes the indebtedness of Christianity as a whole to a theological development in the diverse historical context of the hellenistic world, that bears many marks of what is customarily designated as 'gnostic'. Van Oord suggests that as a shadow provides a defining contrast to a figure, so the role of Gnosticism has from the beginning been to gradually define Christianity. (1999:lecture notes) Bowman (1986:200) reports that there has been much recent debate as to whether the gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi are not in fact closer to the original spirit of Jesus' teachings than that which catholic Christianity later became.

CHAPTER 6

THE HELLENISTIC LINK BETWEEN PHARAONIC CULTURE AND COPTIC CHRISTIANITY

6.1 EGYPTIAN COSMOLOGICAL NOTIONS IN COPTIC CHRISTIANITY

Kemp (1989:13) states that the three great infusions of outside culture - Hellenistic, Christian and Arab - effectively destroyed the indigenous Nile Valley culture of ancient times, so that modern knowledge of ancient Egypt is the result of reconstruction by scholars. A hundred years ago in this reconstructing process, Von Harnack recognised "certain cardinal traits of the old national religion" in Egyptian Christianity. From his ideological orientation he perceived this to be the result of a "grafting on to Christianity of the cravings and remnants of the Egyptian religion". (Von Harnack 1908, II:176-7).

Assmann also reports subtle traces of Egyptian cosmological notions in Christianity. He notes that "memory is not simply the storage of past 'facts', but the ongoing work of reconstructive imagination - the past cannot be 'stored' but always has to be 'processed' and 'mediated'." (1997:14) The following aspects of Coptic iconography and literature display traces of the 'processing' and 'mediating' of the cosmology of their pharaonic past and answer the methodological question posed in 1.3.1-3.

6.1.1 MAGIC VERSUS RELIGION?

The understanding of the cosmos is also associated with magic, and this then causes confusion between other disciplines concerned with cosmology. This genre of Coptic writing displays a striking syncretism as a follow on from the Ptolemaic period when pharaonic traditions were still being conveyed in common usage. (Bilde (ed) 1992:14)

Kosack supplies several magical papyri in Coptic, some of which appear to be innocuous theological discussion, whilst others are a deliberate ridiculing of the belief in magic. (1974:292) The attitude of the Coptic church was generally hostile towards magic, but there are spells written in Coptic and Christianized by invoking the Holy Family, saints and angels instead of pagan deities and demons. (Pinch 1994:171) Ritner (1993:232) lists Coptic words associating priests and scribes with magic:

ϢΑΖ Ν ΡΕΦΜΟΥΤΕ	magician scribe
ΡΕΦΜΟΥΤΕ (ΖΝΟΥ ΜΟΥΤΕ)	a man who calls (in a call)
ΡΕΦΧΕΜΤΑΥ	a man who says words
ΡΕΦΨΙΝΕ	a man who asks

Magic is conventionally defined as aiming to having power for oneself by having proper knowledge of the cosmos because if one knows who the gods really are, one has access to the energy they possess.

Quirke & Spencer point out (1992:82) that Egyptians made use of beliefs which, when restricted to words, we condone as 'prayer' but which we condemn prejudicially as 'magic' when the words combine with implements and actions. Egyptian papyri do not separate elements that we might call 'magical' from those we might call 'medical'. Most surviving Egyptian magical documents are concerned with protection or healing (Pinch 1994:162-3), and Christians also used protective charms. Mills (1990:18) supports the idea that magic and religion are two parts of one line in continuity with Roman Hellenism, and specifically in its apotropaic function (the averting of disaster). (Fuhrman 1981:89)

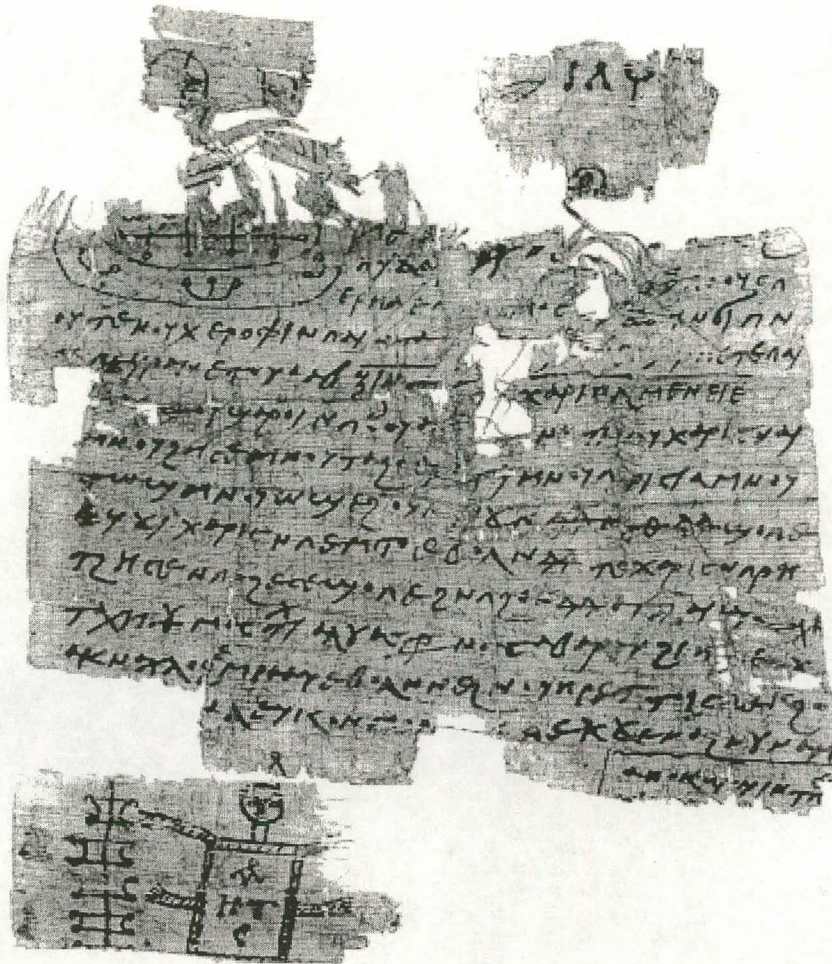


FIGURE 22:

An example of the syncretism of pharaonic religion and Christianity: Papyrus with magical text in Coptic (Jurriaans-Helle 1998:23).

The accompanying commentary describes the drawing in the bottom left hand corner as a Christ-Bes figure. No date is supplied, and a specific interpretation is made which is dependent upon the acceptance of misspelling, (iotacism), and ignores the literal reading of the actual Coptic word written in the "Christ-Bes" figure. In some aspects an alternative interpretation is possible, which perhaps makes some sense in terms of the ancient pharaonic background of the Coptic priests who wrote the documents. Relevant aspects of the catalogue description and interpretation are reported in *italics* and then discussed as follows:

CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION:

I Λ Υ


1. These letters are read as I L Y. Van Eeten claims that this word is misspelt, and thereby equates it to the Hebrew ELOI (the plaintiff cry uttered by Jesus on the cross).

According to Gager the letters I A O, derived originally from YHWH came to be used widely on amulets and *defixiones*: it appears as well as a cosmic power in Gnostic texts. (Gager 1992:268) It is very easy to confuse the letter A and the letter L in Coptic. The partially obscured Y at the end could also be an O.

2. The 'toverkruis' alongside the figure looks like a mast with sails.

The hieroglyphic meaning of a mast with a single sail (Gardiner signlist P5) as a determinative is 'breath' or 'wind', and can take on a variety of metaphorical meanings. Gager (1992:219) quotes the 6th century Hermias's explanation of how an image is inspired: "The thing itself cannot respond to the divine, since it is lifeless; but the art of consecration purifies its matter and, by attracting - (I take this possibly to be a misprint and to have intended 'attaching') certain marks and symbols to the image, first gives it a soul by these means and makes it capable of receiving a kind of life from the universe, thereby preparing it to receive illumination from the divine." The allusion to breath or wind could be performing this function in the diagram. The symbol of the mast was developed by Hippolytus as the cross of Christ and also referred to by Tertullian (Yousif 1977-78:52), thus reflecting a continuity between the ancient pharaonic symbolism of a mast with a single sail as breath of life or wind and the use of a mast and sail as a Christian symbol in a syncretistic Graeco-Roman context. The cross itself is reported by Justin in association with a mast to be the greatest symbol of Christ's power and rule ... "for can the sea be traversed. except this trophy (τρόπαιον) which is called the mastage (ἰστίον) stand intact in the ship?" (Danielou, J & Marrou, H 1964:274)

3. The figure is described as a Christ-Bes figure with rectangular body and triangular hat. The four letters within the body H T C are again explained as an iotacistic variation on the christogram I N R I which is equated with Christ son and saviour.

- a) The letters INRI stand for Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews and is not a christogram. It is inappropriate and unrelated to the actual letters used in this context.
- b)  The first 'letter' is probably a *charaktere*. *Charakteres* were regarded as signs of great power - they represent the classic definition of a religious symbol as embodying and transmitting power from the divine realm to the human. They were intended in some sense to perpetuate the intervention of God. (Gager 1992:11) The first 'letter' could thus be serving a parallel function to the sails of the 'toverkruis' or signifying something else which is not known at present.
- c) The Coptic letters HT could be the pre-suffixal form of HTĀ, and being followed by C (the feminine third person pronoun), this could possibly read "in her womb" (or "heart").
- d) If this is indeed a mixed form, it could be appropriate because the god Bes was often associated with protection during childbirth, or of children.(Figure 7) The association of divine breath in the form of the sail alongside could also be alluding to the attracting of "cosmic power" or could be alluding to the Incarnation, especially in the ancient association of Isis with the "resurrection" of Osiris and conceiving of Horus, as well as the context of the cult of Isis during the Graeco-Roman period, when Isis was frequently titled "Mother of God".

The following ATEN HYMN contains a strikingly similar mixture of metaphor, reinforcing the recognition that Coptic magical texts have to be read both in a very precise but also in a many-layered way.

CREATION OF MAN

Thou art he who createst the man-child in woman,
Who makest seed in man,
Who giveth life to the son in the body of his mother,
Who soothest him that he may not weep,
A nurse [even] in the womb.
Who giveth breath to animate every one that he maketh.
When he cometh forth from the body,
. . . on the day of his birth,
Thou openest his mouth in speech,
Thou suppliest his necessities.

Akhenaten, translated and titled by Breasted 1920:373)

When seen in such a context this papyrus may not be representing anything more than a devout Christian prayer by someone from a rich mythological background.

6.1.2 EGYPTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

"Let none of the gods vanish. We need each and every one,
every one should matter to us, every perfected image."

Rainer Maria Rilke, quoted by Hornung (1983:17).

Hornung pointed out that the names of the 'cosmic' deities of Egypt, unlike those of Greece, are not the same as the words for the elements in the cosmos which they embody, and that this distinction between names and phenomena should warn us against hastily dubbing a deity a 'moon god' or an 'earth god' - the nature of Egyptian cosmic deities is much richer and more multifarious. (Goldwasser 1995:102) The iconography of Egyptian gods is variable and seldom reduced to a fixed canonical

form because every image is an imperfect means of making a god visible, characterising his nature, and of distinguishing him from other deities. None of these images shows the true form of a god, and none can encompass the full richness of his nature.

Kemp notes the abstracting powers of the Egyptian mind which created an ordered and harmonious myth-world from common experiences, the result of which hovers tantalisingly between reality and abstraction. He describes the characteristic of Egyptian religion whereby the names of gods became the building-blocks for expanded definitions of divinity. For instance in one version of the Book of the Dead, Osiris is defined with the names of five gods to enrich the imagery by which Osiris is to be understood. Another example is the sun-god who says "I am Khephri in the morning, Ra at mid-day, Atum in the evening." (Kemp 1989:29)

By the time that Greek religion arrived in Egypt the principle that the outward appearance of deities is distinguished by attributes that they carry in their hands was applied consistently. Before that, the hands of Egyptian deities held only the general attribute of their divinity, specific attributes were placed elsewhere: on the head or in place of a head. For instance *Hapi*, the god of the inundation of the Nile was depicted as an obese figure with a clump of papyrus on his head, carrying a laden offering table. He is described in *The Eloquent Peasant* as follows:

"You are *Hapy* who makes green the fields And re-establishes destroyed mounds." In Figure 16 he is depicted encircled by a snake in a fashion very similar to the ouroboros symbol of the cycle of eternal becoming, which Gnosis also used to characterise the cosmos. (Rudolph 1983:70).

In the mixed form both the attribute and the human, personal manifestation are combined in a complementary way to 'write' the nature and function of the deity (Hornung 1992:1714). Symbols may exhibit different meanings in different contexts,

and a major deity such as Osiris or Re was often accompanied by Isis or Maat. Subtle differences in pose sometimes have major differences in meaning, for instance submission and praise or praise and rejoicing. This is in a similar sense as when Christian saints are shown in animal form or with the head of an animal.

Both Koester and Green support the recognition that as mother goddess holding the child Horus on her lap or to her breast, Isis "with her long, rippling hair and lunar aureole supplied the essential iconography, and perhaps also some of the early liturgical material, for the subsequent cult of the Blessed Virgin." (Green 1990:412). Features of Isis also appear in the birth story of the Messiah in Rev. 12, where she is described as having the zodiac on her head and clothed with the rays of the sun.

According to Grabar (1968:xlvi) almost everything in the first Christian images was dictated by the pagan models they followed, and it was because of this that the new, Christian images were understandable to their contemporaries, and therefore effectively achieved the ends intended. Minute details became highly significant in terms of the specific Christian content, for example a Coptic icon of the Madonna and Jesus would always have the baby Jesus held by Mary in such a way that she is at his right hand because that conveys scriptural significance, but she is usually seated on a throne just as Isis would have to be (Figure 18).

Brandon (1975:172) makes a plea for more research on the evidence of early Christianity in the iconography. One of the earliest known representations of Christ although not found in Egypt, represents Christ as the Good Shepherd - a direct association with the Egyptian concept of their divine pharaoh. A pre-Constantine mosaic found under St. Peter's cathedral in Rome, depicts Christ standing in the chariot of Helios the sun god, with solar rays in radiating cruciform. (Brandon 1975:165 & 167)

6.1.3 ALLEGORY, METAPHOR, AND THE *ENERGEIA* OF EGYPTIAN WORDS

The use and understanding of metaphor is a thoroughly Egyptian characteristic. Goldwasser demonstrates that every expression of the ancient Egyptian language had more than one simple meaning - it teemed with, and thrived on its ambiguities, and should be respected for its very charged, orchestrated, culture-bound meanings. Goldwasser (1995:1) suggests that the allure of the hieroglyphic sign emanates from the appeal of metaphor, describing the process as similar to what happens in verbal metaphor, where new concepts or associations are conceived and created which may represent something that does not have a name: "The reader is carried relentlessly from literal meanings to various transposed meanings, and back to the literal." One of the sparse accounts of how human beings were created uses typical word-play: people originated from the tears of the sun-god, but the words for 'weep' (*rmj*), 'tears' (*rmwt*), and 'people' (*rmt*) sound very similar. But then other texts seem to deliberately avoid this play by using completely different terms. (Van Dijk 1992:1707)

Goldwasser describes innumerable examples of the richness of metaphor that can be conveyed through the subtleties of hieroglyphs, and points out that the use of determinants in order to organise the information more conceptually only culminated during the Ptolemaic era. Sørensen demonstrates Egyptian anxiety about the translation of Egyptian texts into Greek:

"Expressed in the original language, the tractate clearly preserves the sense of the words - for also the very character of the sound of Egyptian words has in itself the power meaning (*energeia*) of what is said. ' Preserve this tractate untranslated, lest such mysteries get into the hands of the Greeks, and lest the presumptuous and rambling and, one might say, ostentatious idiom of the Greeks dispose of the holiness and the strength and the efficacious (*energetikos*) speech of the words. For the Greeks, O king, have empty arguments fit for proofs, and that is what the philosophy

of the Greeks is: a noise of arguments. We, however, use no arguments, but sounds full of efficacy." (Sørensen 1987:42)

Allegory was not affected by the *energeia* of Egyptian words. Clement's allegorical method of exegesis was based on his perception of continuity between the Old and New Testaments, including apocryphal books and this was one of the areas where he differed from Alexandrian Judaism, and also from Gnosticism. In contrast to Gnosticism, St. Clement together with the other Alexandrian Church Fathers emphatically stressed the fundamental unity of the Old and the New Testaments. To him the greatest witnesses of all were the Hebrew prophets.

"St. Clement said the Bible looks like St. Mary the Virgin who brought forth Jesus Christ and her virginity was preserved. Thus we discover spiritual meanings of the Bible, but its meaning is still virgin, as it has many hidden spiritual meanings". (Malaty 1994:325)

After Philo, allegorical interpretation of the bible became very fashionable. One of the clearcut traditional beliefs of Coptic Christianity is the perpetual virginity of Mary, and the above comparison of the virgin meaning of the Bible actually helps to understand the manner in which they grasp this difficult concept. When one places it in the context of mythopoeic thinking about Isis' non-sexual conceiving of Horus, it starts to fall into place.

The Egyptians indicated the really sacred logos, which they kept in the innermost sanctuary of Truth, by what they called Adyta. (Assmann 1997:79) To this day in Coptic churches the icon screen, usually intricately and beautifully wrought, separates the sanctuary from the rest of the church (Figure 19). In liturgical action it symbolically marks the place where heaven and earth meet. Clement of Alexandria understood the curtain of the Jewish Holy of holies as equivalent to what in Egypt

was called the 'adyton' of the temple. According to Assmann (1997:124), what Egypt kept secret under the veil of hieroglyphs, Moses promulgated in the form - but also under the veil - of legislation. While making this connection Assmann suggests that some of the Jewish laws are in fact hieroglyphs because they relate to the symbolic values of things (Assmann 1997:73).

6.1.4 BELIEF IN CONTINUED EXISTENCE AFTER DEATH

The basis of the pharaonic funerary tradition is the belief in the reality of God. This led the faithful to try to enter into this reality, and to regard all magic as a gift of God, granted 'as weapons to ward off what might happen'. (Lesko 1992:1763) Surviving letters addressed to the dead indicate a belief in the continuity between life and the afterlife, and the expectation of reunification with family members. Even prior to written records, their burial customs clearly indicate that the Egyptians believed in life after death, but in a symbolic way, not as a replica of life on earth. In the intimate contact with which the Egyptians lived with Nature they had a deep emotional involvement in natural phenomena. They recognised the metaphysical problem of the relation between life and death - that life is eternal only through death. (Frankfort 1946:123) Osiris lived in the annual sprouting of the grain, the floodwaters of the Nile, the moon, in Orion (Figure 4). By becoming Osiris, the dead acquired immortality of a sort different to the Christian concept.

In addition to belief in the existence of divine beings, by the Middle Kingdom, judgement after death was clearly stated, with the possibility of non-existence if the heart fails the weighing test. (Van te Velde 1992:1745) The aim of their religious worship was to come into contact with the gods. From the middle Kingdom right up to the Roman Period numerous offering-chapels were set up by individuals at the temple of Osiris at Abydos to enable their souls to share in his triumph over death at the great annual festivals (Quirke & Spencer 1992:67). From second- and third-century Akhmim have come a large number of wooden mummy labels inscribed in

demotic, with a prayer to "Osiris-Sokar, great Lord of Abydos." In the Fayum people were still buried in the old Egyptian style, with representations of the funerary gods Osiris and Anubis, until late in the third century CE. (Watterson 1988:30) The god Sokar was associated with death and resurrection. (Van te Velde 1992:1740) At the shrine of Osiris at Abydos, Osiris is depicted pointing to the expected life beyond. Luckert (1991:320) suggests that a general knowledge about death and resurrection associated specifically with Osiris mythology may have prepared the ground for Christianity in the wider hellenistic world.

6.2 THE PRESAGING OF CHRISTIANITY IN PHARAONIC RELIGION

Robbins has suggested that the nearest we can get to the nature of truth is to understand the relationships things have to one another (1996:236-38) Present-day Copts such as Atiya and El Masri Habib state the corollary of Von Harnack's observation that pharaonic concepts were grafted onto Egyptian christianity (Von Harnack 1908, 177): their ancient Egyptian religion caught a glimpse of the essential features of Christianity before the birth of Christ. (El Habib 1987, ix) Atiya (1968:20-21) lists the following aspects in which Egyptian religion presaged Christianity, which answer the methodological question posed in 1.3(4) - How are the boundary lines drawn that are important for the maintenance of Coptic identity?

6.2.1 MONOTHEISM AND THE TRINITY

Practically every town in ancient Egypt possessed some kind of a triad of gods, for example Osiris, Isis and Horus. The purpose of the triads was to enhance the nature and increase the power of a low- or medium-ranking deity. This leads to the concept of unity in plurality by making three stand for plurality. The Leyden hymns to Amon read:

"All gods are three: Amon, Re and Ptah, and there is no second to them. "Hidden" is his name as Amon, he is Re in face, and his body is Ptah."

These hymns were written down during the early Ramesside period, but in Amon, Re and Ptah, the three gods whose real power surpassed that of all other gods are selected. Allusions to this triad were still being made in the Ptolemaic temple at Karnak. (Morenz 1960:144)

According to Atiya (1968:20) the concept of the Trinity was not foreign to the Egyptians, in fact, to spread the Christian message in song, St. Menas substituted the persons of the Trinity for those of an old triad in some of the most popular hymns of Egyptian mythology. A virgin cow in whom Ptah the god of creation had breathed his "holy spirit" was said to have given birth to the god Apis (regarded as the "living image" of a divinity). (Hornung 1992:1713) The earliest representations of a Coptic Madonna were reproductions of Isis suckling the baby Horus. (Atiya 1968:21) The Madonna and baby Jesus became an established feature in Coptic iconography. (Figure 20).

Atiya mentions that the Egyptians had been through the great unitarian revolution of King Ikhnoton, so that the idea of the oneness of godhead was not new to them, but Assmann, Hornung and Allen (1989:100) have stated that Akhnaton's idea of monotheism was more like autocracy - he perceived himself as the one and only god - the sun god. Nevertheless, the similarity of his hymns of praise to the sun-god to Psalms of the Old Testament is undeniable.

The hellenistic expression "God is one" (ἑπέκεινα οὐσίας, μὴ οὐσία) used by the earliest Christian communities is derived from the service of Sarapis ("One is Zeus-Serapis", which originated from the pharaonic form "one is Amon"). Pearson notes that the Greek term for the Coptic expressions ΠΑ ΤΨΑΜΤΕ, ΝΩΑΜ and ΠΙΩΜΝΤΩΟΜ is τριδύναμος and was used by Neoplatonists who were fond of triadic ontological structures. The term τριδύναμος may have had a Gnostic origin: God is triple-powerful, i.e. He has three powers: Existence, Life and Intelligence, or He is Life

(ΩΝΖ), Intelligence (ΤΜΝΤΕΙΜΕ) and That Which Is (ΠΗ ΕΤΕ ΠΑΙ ΠΕ) (Pearson 1984:66). An amulet dating from the period around 100 CE in the British Museum bears a text which reads "One is Bait, one is Hathor, one is Akori - to these belongs *one* power. Be greeted, father of the world, be greeted, God in three forms." It also contains the "God is one", which the Coptic Christians to this day repeat during prayer, just prior to saying amen. Hornung suggests that the key to understanding the monotheistic/polytheistic puzzle of Egyptian religion is that we are facing a different logic - "eine mehrwertige Logik". (Hornung 1983:125) Frankfort's description of the characteristics of mythopoeic thinking (see 2.5.1) gives an indication of the lines along which one has to venture in order to enter empathically into their symbolic world.

6.2.2 LIFE AFTER DEATH

According to Atiya (1968,20) the divinity and humanity of Jesus was expressed in Osiris, who was perceived to be both god and man. All pharaohs were regarded as deified humans, but only after death. The myth of the "resurrection" of Osiris links the Egyptian natural environment and procreation of the earth and kingship of the new Horus in terms of the creation of order and stability which entailed ruling with justice as the shepherd of his people. By the middle Kingdom the vivid Egyptian hope in life after death came to apply to the ordinary Egyptians as well. Groves records an example from Antinoe where a supposed Christian priest is depicted on the outer wrapping of a coffin holding a cup in one hand and corn-ears in the other (probably emblems of the Eucharist), with a cross on his shoulder and the boat of Isis below (Fig 21). The placing of the Eucharistic elements with the dead witnesses to a belief in sacramental efficacy before that doctrine was developed by the Church and may be due to Egyptian Gnostic sects. This is one of the features which gave Egyptian Christianity its distinctive character (Groves 1947:41).

6.2.3 VIRGIN BIRTH

Atiya states that the story of the Annunciation, the Holy Ghost and the miraculous birth of Jesus was not new to the Egyptian mind. In addition to the myth that a virgin cow in whom Ptah, the god of creation had breathed his holy spirit, had given birth to the god Apis, there existed a story that the Egyptian pharaoh, Horemheb (who ruled between the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties) had been conceived by the spirit of the god Amon and born of a virgin. (Atiya 1968, 20) Deut. 21:3 refers to a virgin cow for sacrifice. The red heifer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* may be connected with the red heifer of Numbers 19:2, "without blemish or defect, which has never borne the yoke". In the myths the ancient sky goddess, Hathor, first represented as a cow, is often interchanged with Isis. In some traditions she is the mother of Horus, but more often Isis is portrayed with cow's horns. Hathor also suckled the dead, to sustain them on their journey to the next world (Figure 5).

6.2.4 THE CROSS

For Christianity as a whole the Cross became a symbol only from the time of Constantine the Great, but it appears that the Copts had used their sign of eternal life, the 'ankh' as a Christian symbol of eternal life at a much earlier date than Constantine's vision (Figure 21). The cross is recognised by the Copts not only in the mast of a boat, but in the plough, and in the flight of a bird. Even the nine-fold confession of faith is set out to form a cross. The Copts say that the purpose of carrying the cross is to remind them of the meaning of the salvation of the Lord, and that he will never forsake them. Christianity without the cross is not Christianity. The symbol of the cross draws its power from the reality which it symbolises: in historical time it is past, but in sacred time it continues. Irenaeus says that the Cross as a plough 'hoed the uncultivated land.' Justin compares it to a wheel which 'mows, cuts, uproots'. (Danielou 1973:275) A Coptic icon screen at the Monastery of Anba St. Bishoi has a very intricate design which they call the moving cross because it is made up in the form of a wheel, to symbolise the spread of the gospel over the whole world.

6.2.5 ST GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

The frequently used Coptic iconographical theme of St. George and the Dragon is identifiable with Horus and his struggle against the god of evil, Seth.

6.3 NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND REVELATION

St. Clement of Alexandria raised the crucial question of the relation between philosophy and revelation. The answer to the question of what enabled the pharaonic Egyptians to "glimpse the Light of Christianity beforehand" (as El Masri Habib puts it) may be found in the Egyptian genius for close observation of the minuscule of nature as clearly demonstrated in their artwork and hieroglyphs. St. Paul said "Since the creation of the world, the invisible perfections of God are known through visible things." (Romans 1:20) Much of the Coptic imagery can be traced back into pharaonic religious metaphor such as the scarab beetle, and this gift of observation of fine detail in the natural environment must at least in part, be the result of living very close to a unique and remarkable natural environment. Assmann (1997:114) demonstrates the systematic iconicity of hieroglyphs. They refer to things which formed a virtually complete inventory of ecological aspects of the created world:

"what Ptah has created and Thoth has written down,
the heaven with its constellations,
the earth and what it contains
what the mountains spew out,
what the inundation moistens,
what the sun illuminates,
and what grows upon the back of the earth."

Assmann recognises this hieroglyphic structure as a kind of Platonism. Plato interprets the visible world as the infinite material reproduction of a finite set of immaterial ideas of "absolute truth - Level 1", and this same set is represented by the hieroglyphic system, which reproduces the world of things as signs. Assmann sees this as the reason why Egyptian wisdom was so attractive to the Neoplatonists of Late

Antiquity.

"Each and all things that exist in the natural world, even to the smallest single thing, correspond to spiritual things, and thence signify them." (Swedenborg 1916, 19)

Bertrand Russell sees the ethical and scientific running together in Plato (Russel 1959:310), and states that it is this dual tradition that has shaped the civilization of the West. However, the 20th century dependence on the technology of civilization has led to a revolt against the threat of science to human freedom. The effect has been the proliferation of strains of irrationalist thinking, with a return to traditional metaphysics. Renewed existentialist doctrines developed in France and Germany a hundred years ago. Henri Bergson wanted to uphold the reality of flux in experience as against the travesty of rigid form that pertains to reason and its scientific picture of the world. He pointed out that with traditional objective views of logic nothing new can arise. Influenced by Neo-Romanticism, he believed that man's intellect tends to stifle his instincts, robbing him of his freedom, and that the highest form of intellect is intuition. His contemporary A N Whitehead (1861-1947) held that in order to grasp the world, for genuine contact with the real, we need a knowing from within, a conflation of the knower and his object into a single entity. Bergson (quoted by Russel 1959:293) describes this as "a kind of bare experience which overwhelms us when we refrain from rational thought." In memory the conscious mind continues some kind of communion between the past and the present. Past and present mingle when mental activity is confused with its object, when a blurring of subject and object takes place.

This process in the Coptic tradition of keeping alive in the consciousness of their people the history of their fathers enables El Masri Habib to describe their sense of solidarity with the members of the Coptic church, past and present: "Such are we Copts - when one of us has attended, we have all attended. And there is no difference between the delegates attending (Chalcedon) in 451 or in any other year, because our

history is one whole indivisible unit. The proof of this fact is that the three first ecumenical councils, the only ones acknowledged by the Coptic Church, have decreed laws by which we still abide ..." She goes on to quote Cyrus Gordon: "When the Egyptians went to Chalcedon, they were proud of their pharaonic heritage, and rightly so; they were proud of their Alexandrian Fathers, and rightly so; they frankly told the whole world what they believed, and, when the world refused to listen, they walked out, and rightly so." (El Masri Habib 1987:viii)

Atiya states that it was the almost indiscriminate use by Cyril ("The Great") of the words *physis* and *hypostasis* (*hypostasis* literally means "substance" in Greek, but in Latin more frequently "person") that led to the Chalcedonian confusion which resulted in the so-called "Monophysite" doctrine. (Atiya1968:48). These far-reaching arguments seem to have been tragically unnecessary - it is possible that the Copts have often been misrepresented because neither the symbolic relics of their ancient past nor the part played by them in the consolidation of Christianity, have been fully understood within the entirety of their context. The Copts themselves say that the Chalcedon fiasco was based on a misunderstanding of what they were trying to say.²

At the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), Abba Dioscorus declared his faith in the nature of Christ as follows: "If a piece of iron, heated to white heat, be struck on the anvil, it is the iron which receives the blows and not the white heat, even though the iron and the white heat form one indivisible whole. And though indivisible, the heat mingles not with the iron, nor is it fused into it, nor changed by it. This same is true of the iron, and is in a measure, symbolic of the Incarnation of Our Lord where the divine and the human natures united without mixing; fusion nor change, through neither parted from the other - not even for a moment or the twinkling of an eye."

2 Bishop Paul, spokesman for the Coptic Orthodox Church, in personal communication to an ecumenical group visiting the Coptic monastery of Anba St. Bishoi at Wadi Natrun, Egypt in 1997.

This unity, the Fathers of the Alexandrian Church define as "the one Nature of God the Word made flesh". (El Masri-Habib 1987:245)

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 THE CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF HIEROGLYPHS

There are about twenty different words in Egyptian for our word 'image'. (Hornung 1992:1729) This in itself is an indication of the conceptually nuanced way in which the Egyptians understood iconography. For the Jews the canon guaranteed the retaining of the original wording right down to the counting of each of the consonants, but no such restriction existed for the Egyptians. For the Egyptians it was ritual which was of central importance. An example of how easy it is to misinterpret a text through mental set or expectation is the following excerpt from the Instruction of Ptah-hotep which had been translated to read "Take no word away, and add nothing thereto, and put not one thing in the place of another". But subsequently scholarship has shown other more subtle possibilities, so that the translation should read: "Do not say now this and now that (and) confound not one thing with another". (Morenz 1960:224) The Egyptians are known to have been prone to alter the wording of their texts through the centuries, but this by no means meant mixing up concepts. Despite the pressure to syncretise, and the multiplicity of names and forms of gods, the Egyptians attached great importance to maintaining the uniqueness of each of their deities - this prevented the gods (as concepts) from being equated indiscriminately with each other, and is possibly part of the reason why the Egyptians resented the hellenistic syncretism of their gods. These had become a travesty of the gods of classical Greece, but in addition the original ancient Egyptian deities had been syncretised with them.

With the Christian rejection of mythology and hieroglyphs there was no longer a metaphorical language vehicle available for the transmission of such subtleties. Such mythopoeic concepts as described in paragraph 2.5.1, which have great value for the understanding of Coptic Christianity, were perhaps too far in the past at that stage to

be explicable to the diverse representatives at the Council of Chalcedon. The other cultural groups that participated in the process of the mediating of Christianity into a theological doctrine did not have the benefit of insight into the hieroglyphic literature and tradition, and the syncretistic milieu of Hellenism added confusion to the understanding of the large variety of Greek gods. Unfortunately, by throwing out the bathwater the Coptic priests discarded the means that could have helped them convey their concept of Christ as both human and divine.

7.2 CONCLUSION

Luckert goes so far as to state that Christianity represents a return to Egypt by way of mythology, theology and ritual and that ancient Egyptian theology made it possible for educated hellenistic Christians to believe in an only-begotten Son who came into the world in the form of the *logos*, as the divine creative command, or the Word made visible: "in all the religious literature from the so-called hellenistic period, there is no better summary of ancient orthodox Egyptian theology than the prologue to the Gospel of John". (1991:180)

There is a Coptic comparison about the impossibility of achieving salvation without humility, as it is impossible to navigate a ship without a compass. (Till 1961:262) This is a variation on James 3:4ff about the tongue making huge claims, which has been shown to be of Egyptian origin. (Morenz, 1960:254) "To an extraordinary degree, ethnic symbolic communication is communication over time, sometimes over very long periods. Hence, the persistence of the symbol is more significant than its precise origins in the past". (Østergard (ed) 1992:37)

Hultgren supports the opinion of James Robinson and Koester that the similarities between the writings of Judaism, Christianity and Gnosticism which were of the same genre and developed almost simultaneously, must be attributed to influences of the cultural conditions in which they were being produced. In spite of this obvious good

sense historically, the evidence presented here suggests that, paradoxically, the Egyptian Christians, through all the syncretistic pressures of Hellenism, remained faithful to the wisdom of their pharaonic ancestors. With modern understanding of only very recently decipherable hieroglyphs it seems possible that certain aspects of the underlying Egyptian cosmology were indeed a presaging of the incarnation. At the very least they demonstrate the applicability or relevance of the incarnation to the most basic longings of mankind.

Although the identity of the Copts may find its deepest roots in the Egyptian natural environment, it can be seen that Hellenism forced a change which prepared them culturally for the transition to Christianity, and provided the means by way of the Greek alphabet and the seething syncretistic environment in which they were forced to thrash out their identity. In addition to these factors, whether the report in Matt 2:13 of the flight into Egypt is historically true or not, one can understand that even just by the thought alone, and its prophecy in Hosea 11:1, the Egyptians were predisposed to Christianity.

The natural environment of ancient Egypt had impacted on the Cosmology of Egypt in such a way as to find expression in a fluid uterine environment for the developing embryo of Christianity in Egypt. The hellenistic tidal wave from the Mediterranean emulsified with Egyptian cosmological notions to provide a fascinating and rich intrauterine amniotic fluid. This life-blood contained nutrients from the entire hellenistic world, but the universal truth of Egyptian cosmological notions gave it a fluxable quality that facilitated the process of mediating Christianity to the philosophically oriented Greeks. When one looks at the iconography it becomes clear that the ancient Egyptian genetic structure was still present in the intrauterine fluid that nurtured the embryo. Like their scarab, the Copts contain the seeds of perpetual regeneration of Plato's "Ultimate Truth, Level 1". The paradox that their ability to be

flexible and adaptable and yet not mix up their concepts - their straightforward resistance to differentiation like that of the scarab, has favoured survival in an evolutionary trajectory.

History is full of forgotten knowledge that returned. (Assmann 1997:43) And it is still set in an ongoing context of recreation, just as Egyptian cosmology conceived of it. It is tempting to propose that perhaps now that we can read the thoughts of the ancient Egyptians, and have witnessed the survival of the Copts in spite of their gnostic association, the decisions of the New Testament Canon which were culture bound should be reassessed. Perhaps the rest of the world is now ripe for what needed to be excluded then. However, although pharaonic and Gnostic influences have undoubtedly contributed to their remarkable spirituality, the Copts define themselves as having abided by the decisions of the first three Church Councils³ and have respected and upheld the canon. In the words of the current Patriarch in 1997: "We do not change in the essential points of faith. We represent a return to the apostolic father-type of leading of the church which does not deny the need for renewal. Real renewal is to keep the living church by the Holy Spirit as it was in the time of the holy fathers. This is not to "earlify" the faith but to keep it as received from Jesus Christ. Doctrine, theology and traditions must be put in a modern way that will be acceptable. This is done through Sunday school and youth work."

3 The Council of Nicea in 325 CE when Arianism was discussed and the Nicene creed drawn up. The Council of Constantinople in 381 CE when Arianism was condemned. The Council of Ephesus in 431 CE when Nestorianism was condemned and the Nicene Creed affirmed.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

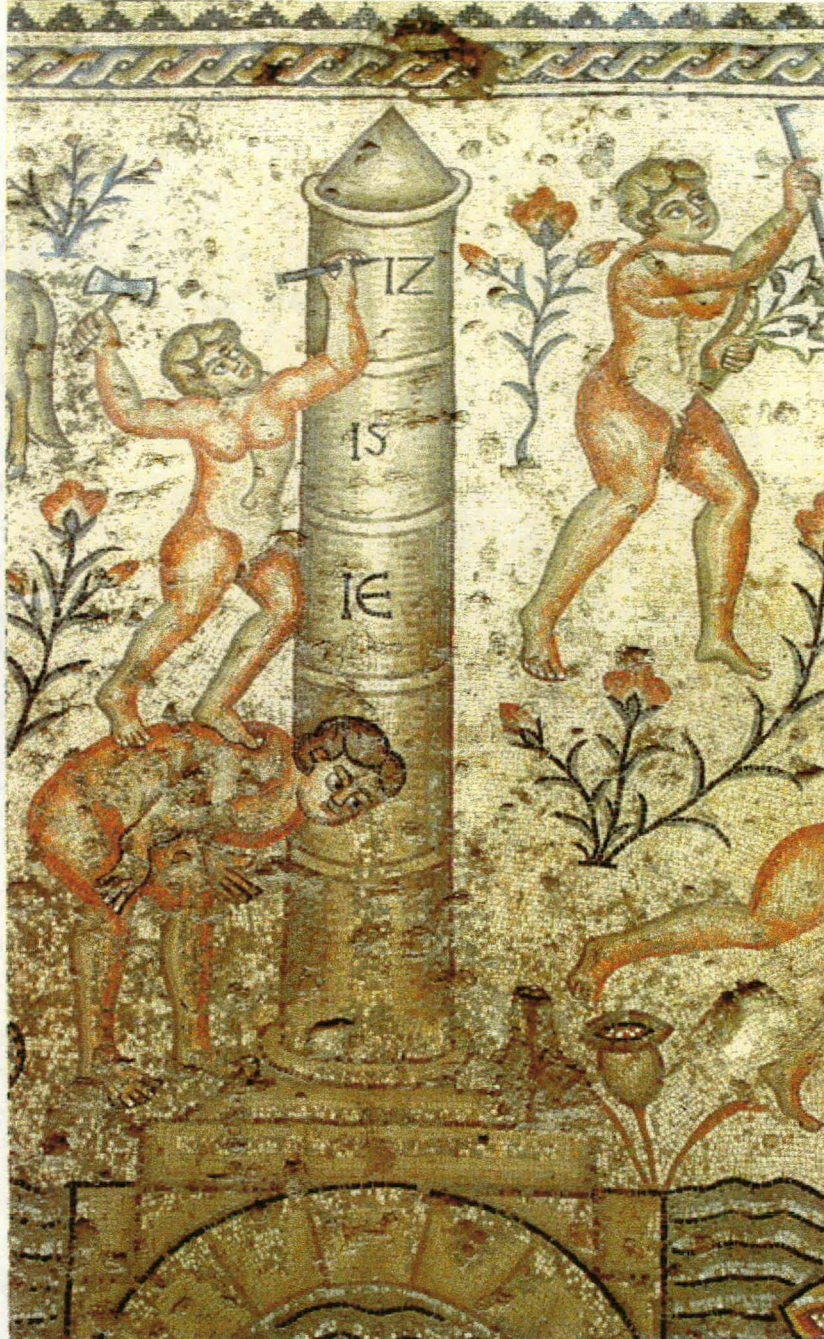


Figure 1:
Zippori, Israel – "Nile" Nilometer Mosaic with the Nilometer.



Figure 2:
Limestone relief from the pyramid temple of Wenis at Saqqara (5th Dynasty, Cairo
Egyptian Museum) (Robins 1997: 25).

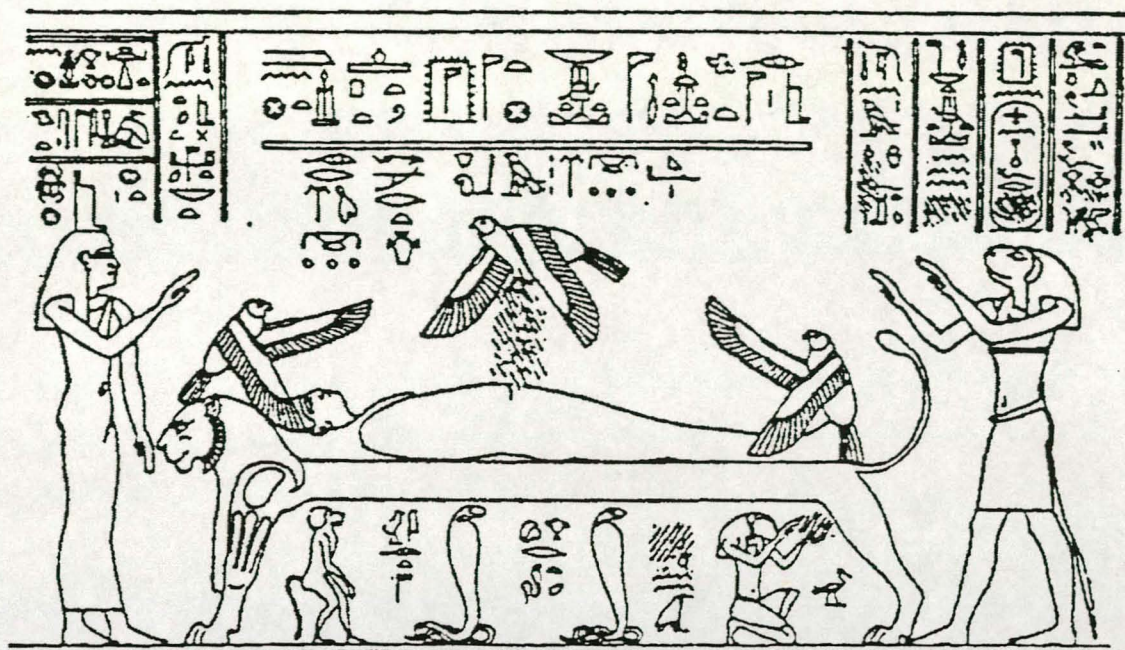


Figure 3:
Impregnation of Isis as Sparrow Hawk or Kite. (Sasson 1992: 1703).

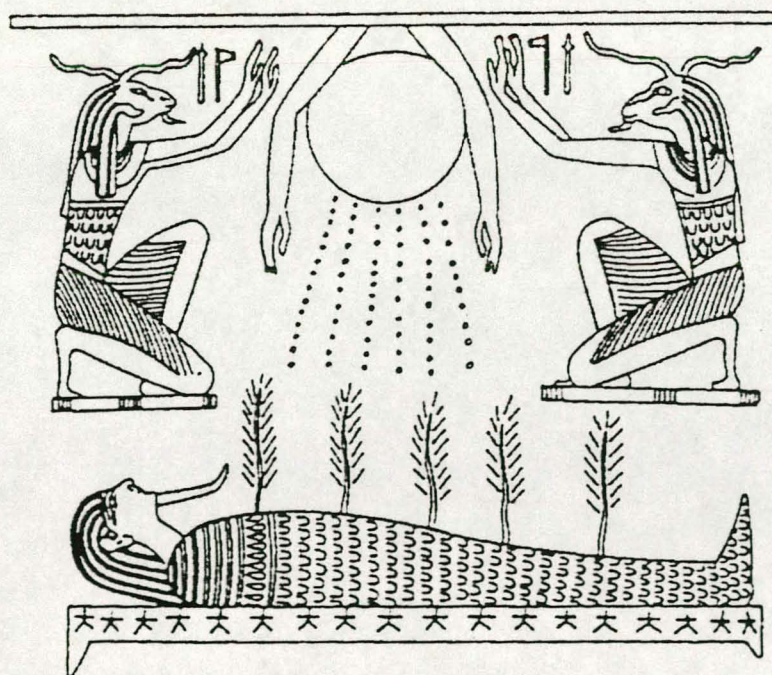


Figure 4:
The dead Osiris, raised by the rays of the sun to sprout grain. (Sasson 1992: 1718)

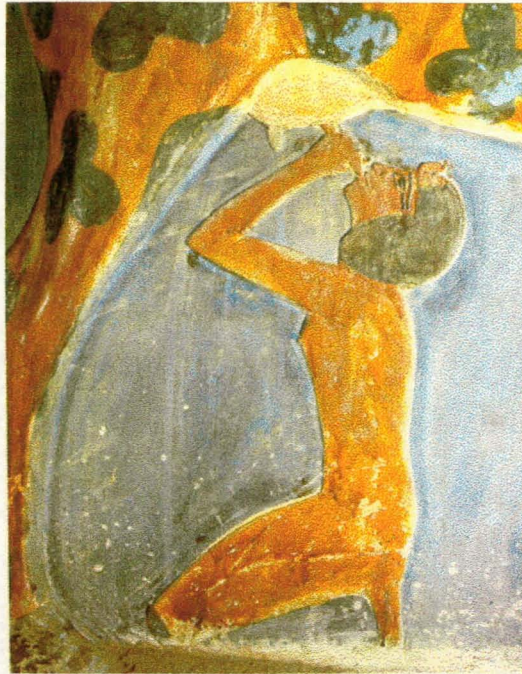


Figure 5:
Hathor as the "Great Cow" (Patrick 1972: 31).

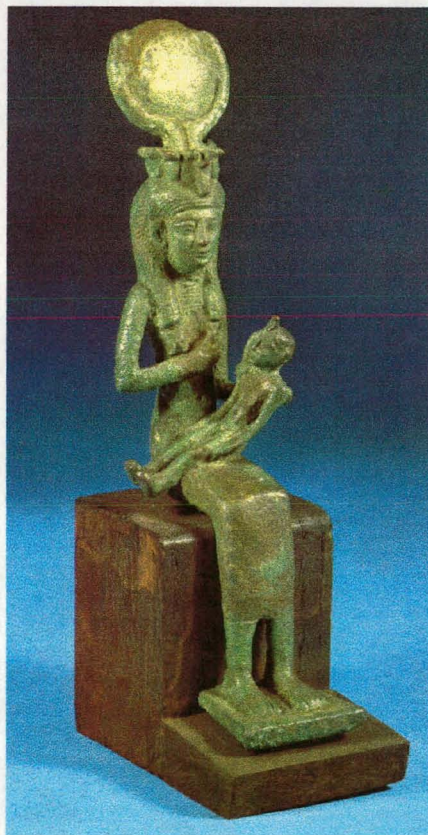


Figure 6:
Isis' early image was as an African woman with baby Horus on her lap
(Patrick 1972: 37).

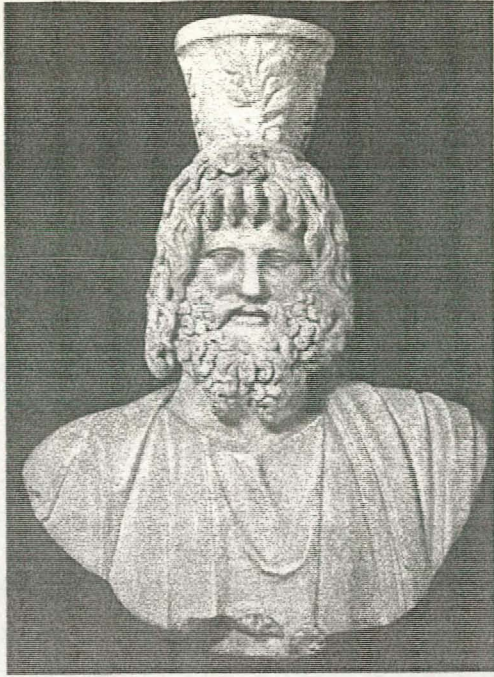


Figure 7a:
Head of Sarapis (Steen 1993, 69)

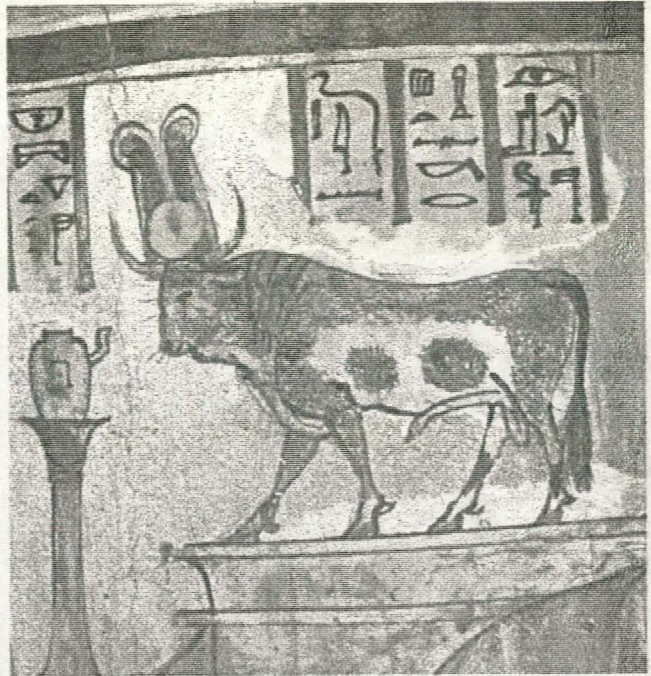


Figure 7b:
Apis (Patrick 1972: 67). Apis wears the *atef* crown - he was known as the life of Ptah, the creator god of Memphis.



Figure 8:
The original pharaonic goddess Isis holding a sistrum (Patrick 1972: 33).



Figure 9:

The goddess Isis syncretised in Greek dress. 1st to 2nd century C E. "Without any doubt, certain characteristics of this goddess passed onto the Divine Mother Mary (Wenig 1969: 54).



Figure 10a:

This statue of Isis has a Greek face except for the eyes, which, like the emblems, are Egyptian. The bust has a bull's head carved on the back, the horns can be seen, assimilating it with Apis.



Figure 10b:

Isis has been assimilated with Demeter and here holds corn ears in place of the sistrum (Witt 1971: 261)

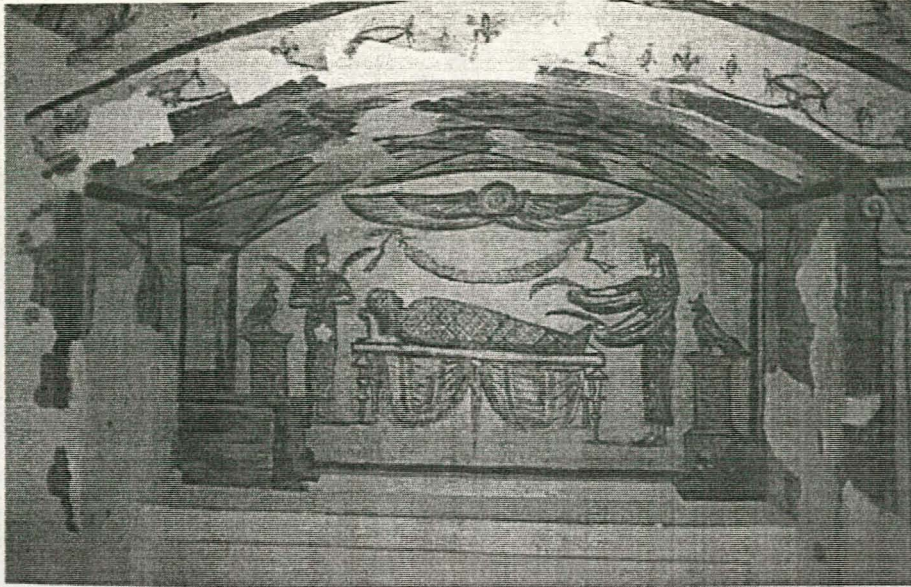


Figure 11:

Despite the fact that the upper classes of the Alexandrian population were thoroughly hellenised, the richly decorated tombs of the Roman period are dominated by the traditional motifs of Egyptian funerary art. In this scene from the second-century Tegan tomb the figures of the two mourners are connected with the goddesses Isis and Nephthys; above the bier is the winged sun-disk (Bowman 1986: 203).
cf. Mal 4:2a.



Figure 12:

A disconcerting mixture: the torso is Egyptian in style, whereas the head is of Greek design. 2nd - 3rd century in Roman Alexandria (Steen 1993: 93).

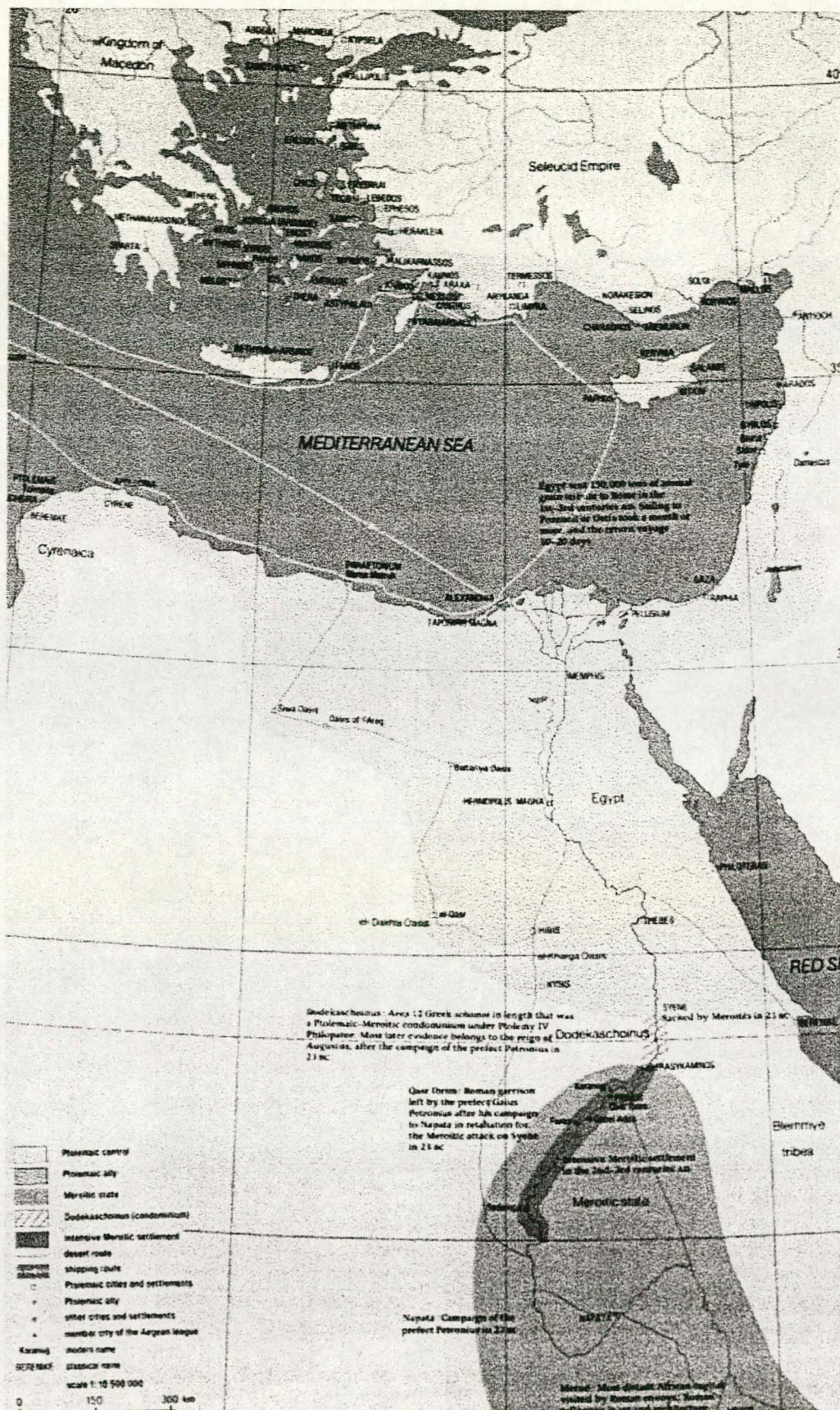


Figure 13a:
Map of the sailing routes (Baines & Malek 1984, 54).

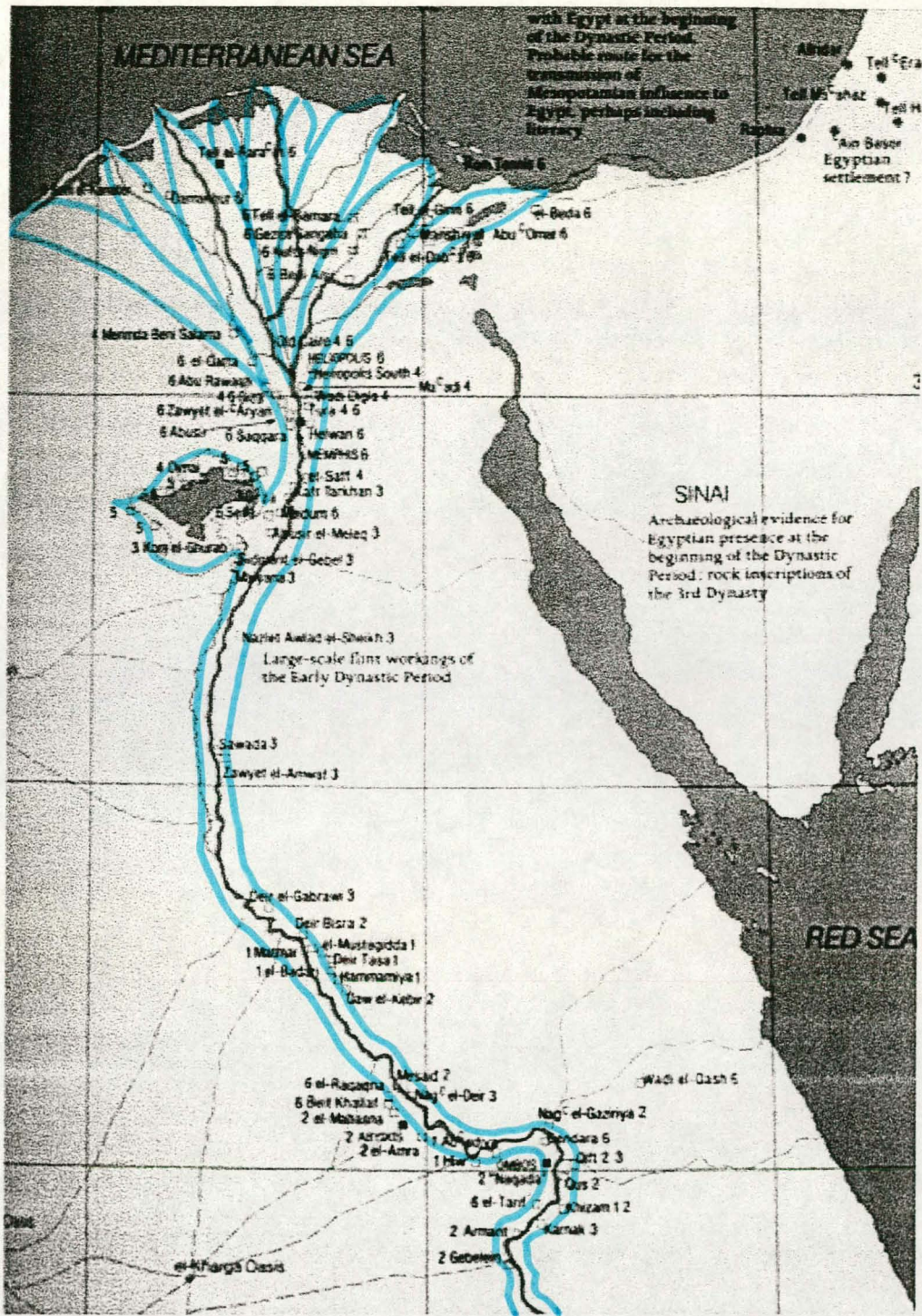


Figure 13b:
 Gardiner's visualization of the Nile as a lotus flower with the Faiyum as a bud.
 (Baines & Malek 1984: 30).

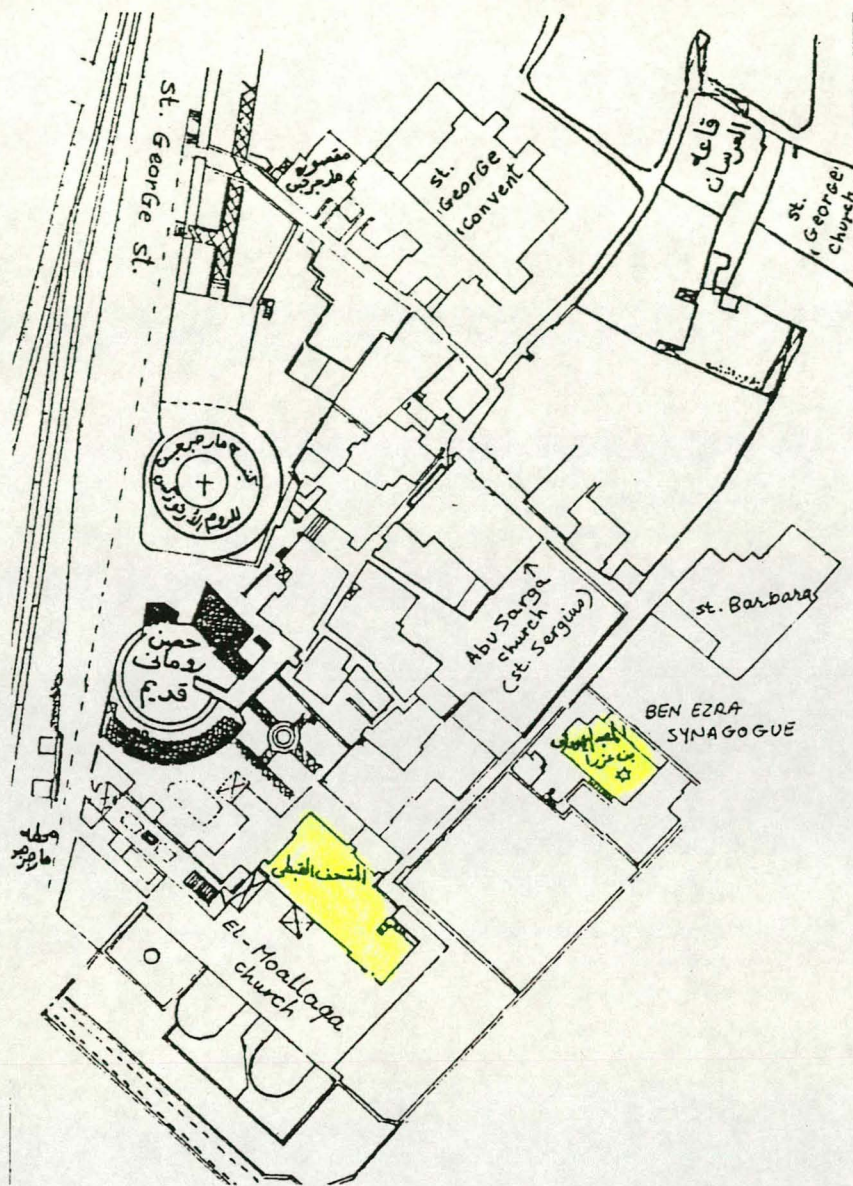


Figure 14:
Sketch map of Babylon Area of Old Cairo showing proximity of the Ben Ezra
Synagogue (Cairo Genizah) to El Moallaqa (Hanging) Coptic Church
(Khalil 1985: 32).

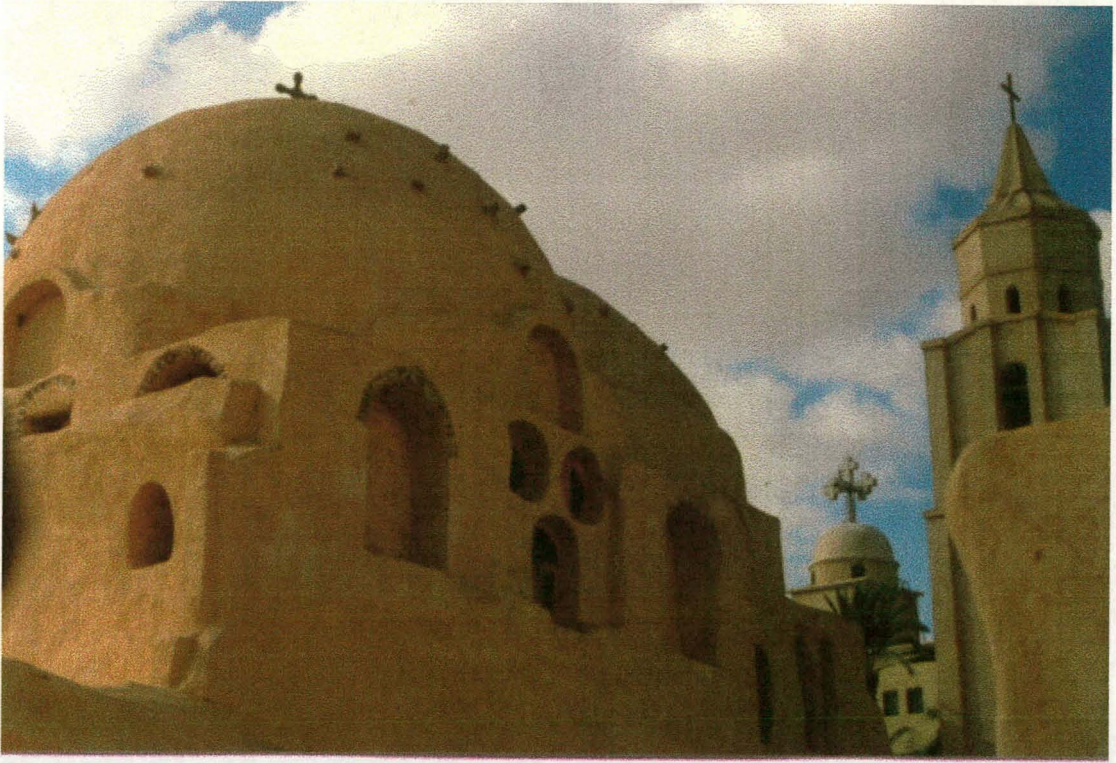


Figure 15a:
The "old" at the Monastery of Anba St. Bishoi at Wadi Natrun in the Western Desert.

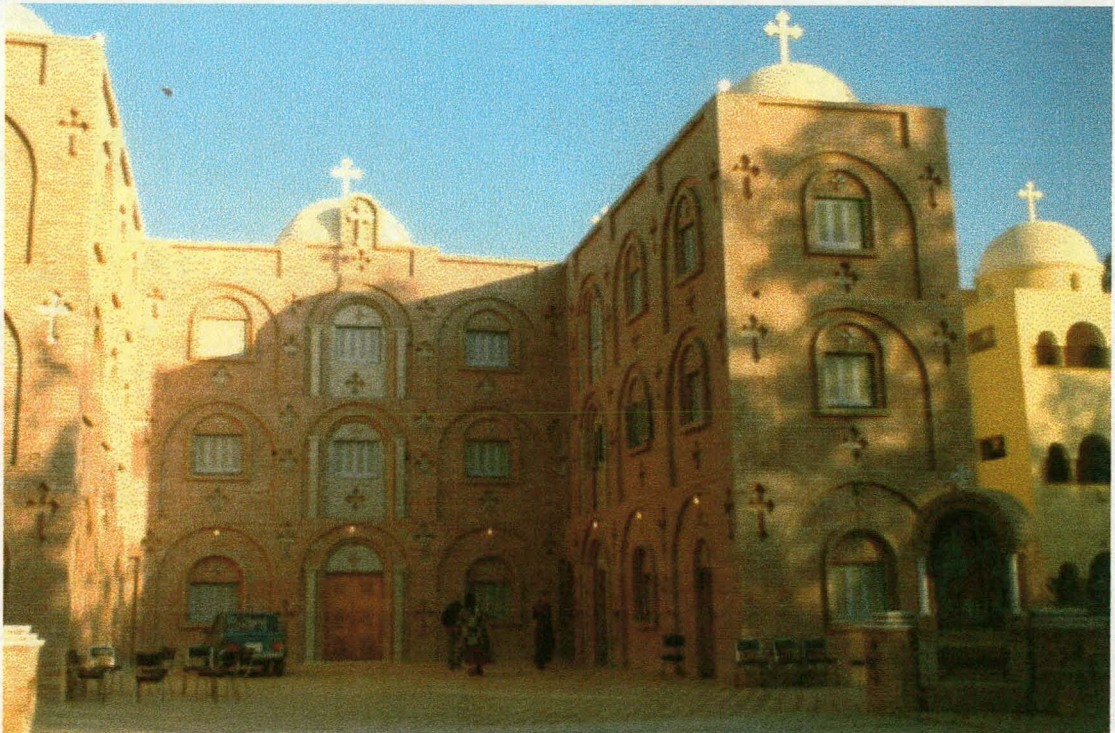


Figure 15b:
The "new" at the Monastery of Anba St. Bishoi at Wadi Natrun in the Western Desert.



Figure 16:
Hapi with a clump of Papyrus on his head.



Figure 17:
Bes (Patrick 1972: 57)

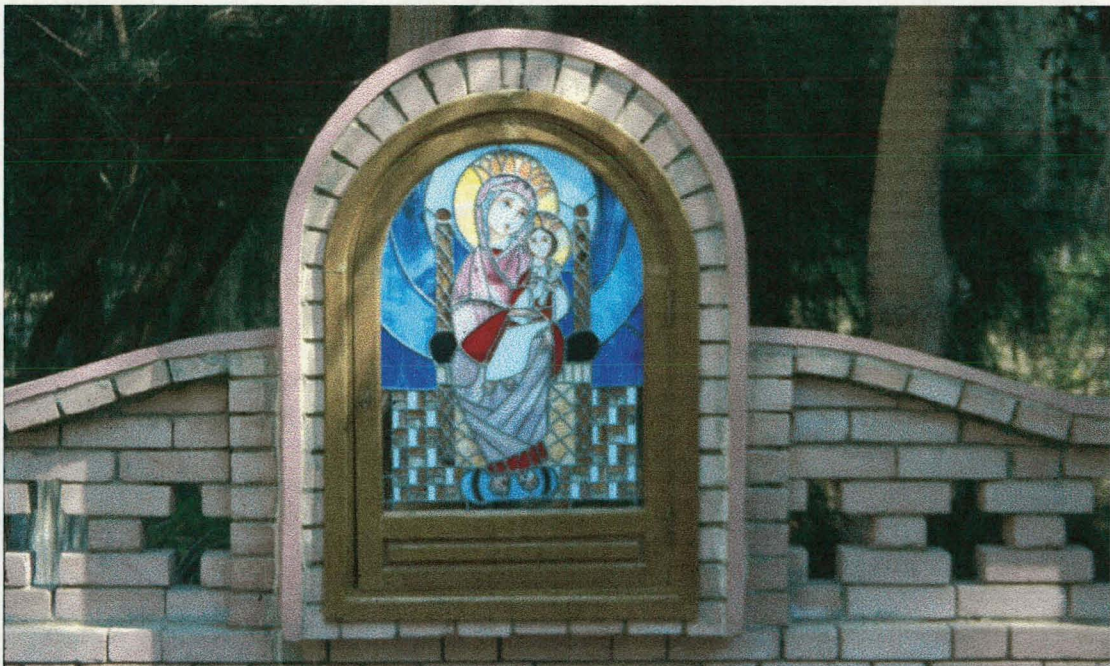


Figure 18:
Coptic icon of Mary and Jesus at the monastery of Anba St. Bishoi, Wadi Natrun in the Western Desert of Egypt.

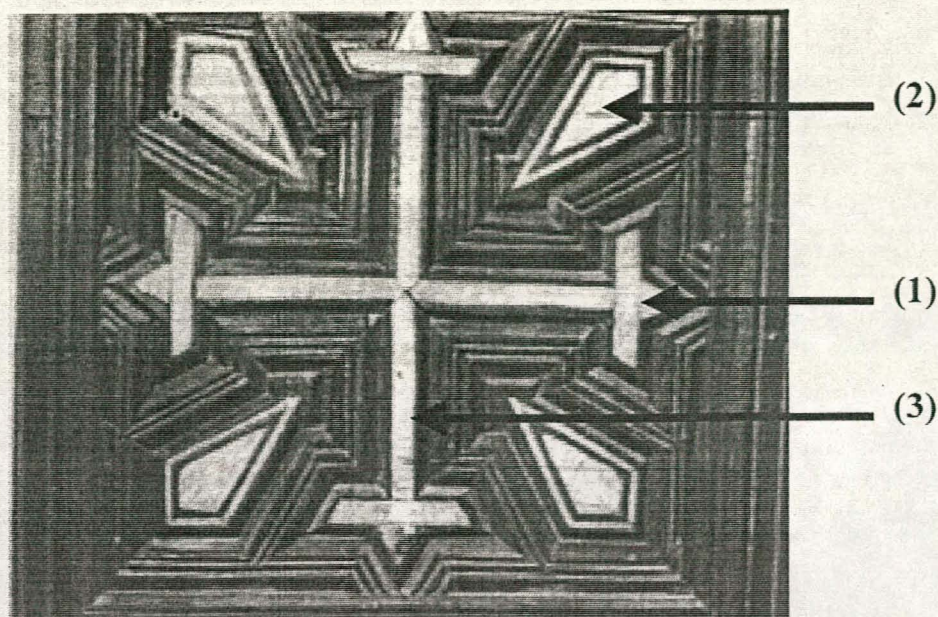


Figure 19:

One unit of the Coptic Cross on the iconostases of the "hanging" Al Moallaka Church.
(1) = 3 parts, a symbol of the Holy Trinity, and these three parts are repeated 4 times, which make them 12, a symbol of the 12 Apostles of Jesus the Christ.
(2) = Looks like a fish and is a symbol of life and eternity, it is repeated 4 times around the cross, a symbol of the 4 Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John)
(3) = The part hinted at by no. 3 is the 4 branches of the cross and is a symbol of the spreading of Christianity all over the world. (Khalil 1985: 20).

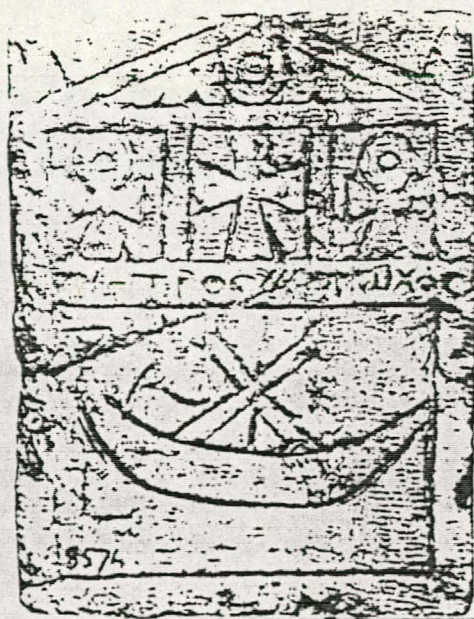


Figure 21:

As late as the Byzantine period this stela juxtaposes the Coptic cross and the traditional Egyptian *ankh* (symbol of life) (Bowman 1986: 50).




Figure 20:

"The motif of the Divine Mother nursing her child which is very current in Pharaonic art, has been transformed and taken over on the tomb stelae of the Early Christian (Coptic) period. From Medinet el Faiyum" (Wenig 1969: 54).

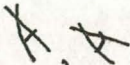
APPENDIX

I HOCH, J E 1997. *Middle Egyptian Grammar*. Mississauga, Benben Publications:




p 20 common semantic determinatives:

 irrigated land (irrigation channels seen from above)

p 21




 hoe, cultivation, hacking up


p 25 Vocab 2

 var.   t3 land, earth, ground


p 293

as above " (possibly some connection with the semitic root *tl*)


 ,  ,  t3wy the two lands (Egypt, i.e. Upper & Lower Egypt)

 Nb T3wy The Lord of the Two Lands (an epithet of the king)

p 260

 mr (n.m.) canal

p 288

 s̄ (n.m.) pool, pond, lake, garden

II QUIRKE & SPENCER 1992, 11:

"In name, Egypt remained one land, despite the dualism; from the Middle Kingdom (c.2000BC) Egyptian texts refer to it as *ta-meri*, "the cultivated (?) land", and the modern Arabic name for the country is *Misr*, 'the land'.

III MASPERO 1910, 67:

"For a long time the hoe sufficed. the plough, when first invented, was but a slightly enlarged hoe, drawn by oxen."

IV LAMBDIN 1983, 219:


(coptic) $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon$ n.f. = hoe, plough


V CRUM, W E 1939. *A Coptic Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 55b:


(coptic) $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon$ hoe, (for digging)
plough, (drawn by oxen)

IV GARDINER, A H 1927 *Egyptian Grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.


paragraph 24 (p 33):

 hoe, cultivate, hack up

 irrigated land

p 609:  cultivated lands

 cultivate

p 617:  love (vb.)

 love (n.)

V BREASTED 1920, 96-97:

By alluding to the Pyramid Texts, Breasted demonstrates that Osiris is identified with the Nile; "water as a source of fertility, water as a life-giving agency. It is water which brings life to the soil, and Osiris is therefore closely associated with the soil."